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The energizing nature of work engagement: Toward a new need-based theory of work motivation

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ABSTRACT

We present theory suggesting that experiences at work that meet employees' expectations of need fulfillment drive work engagement. Employees have needs (e.g., a desire to be authentic) and they also have expectations for how their job or their organization will fulfill them. We argue that experiences at work that confirm employees' need fulfillment expectations yield a positive emotional state that is energizing, and that this energy is manifested in employees' behaviors at work. Our theorizing draws on a review of the work engagement literature, in which we identify three core characteristics of work engagement: (a) a positive emotional state that (b) yields a feeling of energy and (c) leads to positive work-oriented behaviors. These key themes provide the foundation for further theorizing suggesting that interactions at work confirm or disconfirm employees' need fulfillment expectations, leading to different levels of engagement. We extend our theorizing to argue that confirmation, or disconfirmation, of different need expectations will yield emotional experience of varying magnitudes, with confirmation of approach-oriented need expectations exerting stronger effects than the confirmation of avoidance-oriented need expectations. We close with a review suggesting that organizational contextual features influence the expression of these needs, sustaining or undermining the positive emotional experiences that fuel work engagement.

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The popular business press has grown increasingly enamored with the idea that the modern workplace is, in some structural and meaningful way, inadequate (Hamel, 2009, 2012; Laloux, 2014). Popular articles point to alarming statistics suggesting a meaningful proportion of employees in U.S. organizations report a complete lack of engagement, and even report knowingly engaging in behaviors harmful to their employer (O'Boyle & Harter, 2013). This same literature points to myriad prescriptive measures, often in the form of case studies depicting organizations where employees seem so passionate and enthusiastically motivated at work that they seem to approach euphoria (Fortune, 2016; Hamel, 2011; Laloux, 2014; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010).

These case studies vary in the ways by which organizations purport to motivate their employee population. Numerous lists of great companies to work for have emerged, most leveraging measures of employee engagement and organizational performance as evidence of the efficacy of the various practices these organizations implement to motivate employees. The Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For (Fortune, 2016), for example, points to companies whose practices include paying higher than standard wages, providing free health coverage for employees, and offering flexible and autonomous work arrangements. These companies offer various perks and benefits, ranging from bringing pets to work, offering on-campus dining and childcare, wellness programs, and even in-office recreational activities. Employees at some of these companies report that inclusive practices that embrace their distinctive characteristics make their work motivating. At some level, these organizations all engender a highly motivated workforce by creating an environment that provides fulfillment of their employees' needs.

The various practices in the organizations described in these case studies help to fulfill fundamental human needs. Some speak to enhanced safety and security through higher wages and family health coverage. Others speak to the need for self-actualization or authentic self-expression (e.g. inclusive workplaces that celebrate differences). These stories suggest that the ongoing fulfillment of needs at work is a source of motivation.

Indeed, employees come to work with a set of needs, and those needs influence their behavior at work in significant ways. Organizational scholarship has long theorized some relationship between human needs, which are generally thought to be fundamental and universal, and employee behavior, most notably in the domain of work motivation (Alderfer, 1969, 1972; Argyris, 1957; Kanfer & Heggestad, 1997; Maslow, 1943; McGregor, 1960). In fact, many existing theories of work motivation have assumed that individuals work in order to fulfill fundamental needs. These theories build on the basic logic of "humans as wanting," as Pinder (2014: 67) suggested in his review of needs and motivation. Maslow (1943: 370) went so far as to postulate that "Any motivated behavior, "must be understood to be a channel through which many basic needs may be simultaneously expressed or satisfied." Most subsequent need-based theories of work motivation also have begun with the basic proposition that needs are a motivational force—and often, with an emphasis on the idea that pain or displeasure associated with unmet needs leads to motivation (e.g. Alderfer, 1972; Locke, 1991; Maslow, 1943; McGregor, 1960; Pinder, 2014). For example, McGregor (1960) argued that "a satisfied need is not a motivator for behavior."

But the case studies reported above point to need fulfillment, rather than unmet needs, as the source of employee motivation. More fulfilling environments seem to be a major source of motivation in these cases. Further, these case studies seem to suggest that organizational practices that go beyond providing safety and security for employees, and also fulfill needs for self-expression and authenticity, have particularly powerful motivational potential. The overarching implication behind these lines of study is that positive experiences, in addition to the relatively negative experiences associated with unfulfilled or obstructed need pursuits, carry motivational power. That is, need fulfillment (as opposed to unsatiated needs) may also have motivating power.

A central question presented by these case studies is how do positive experiences at work, or, more specifically, need fulfillment experiences, lead to increases in motivation? This paper offers a foundation for a new approach to

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the study of needs at work, one that specifically aims to address this question. We present a set of theoretical arguments suggesting that experiences at work that confirm need fulfillment expectations are energizing, providing fuel for motivated behavior. The work engagement literature, which emphasizes the experience of energy as core to engagement, provides our starting point. Following a brief review of the study of work motivation and needs, we turn to an in-depth review and summary of the work engagement literature. In clarifying the key attributes of work engagement present in the literature, we make the case that the experience of work engagement is key to describing the relationship between positive need fulfillment experiences and motivated behavior at work.

Work engagement is commonly defined as a "positive, fulfilling, work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). However, different lines of scholarly study have embraced conceptually differing views of the nature of work engagement. We make three points of emphasis in our discussion. First, we argue that work engagement is, at its core, the experience of energy—effectively, the fuel of motivated behavior. Second, we argue that, unlike a positive affective state such as job satisfaction, which reflects a state of satiation, the energy inherent in work engagement may lead to positive work behaviors and outcomes. Finally, we emphasize the emotional component of work engagement. Much of the energy that employees bring to bear in their day-to-day activities at work is sustained (or undermined) through positive (or negative) emotional experiences. Thus, emotional experiences, as a source of the energy inherent in work engagement, are central to our theorizing.

Our interactions with others are the most emotion-laden experiences we have and tend to yield more intense emotions than most non-relational experiences (Elfenbein, 2007). Because work engagement is the product of employees' emotional experiences at work, interactions with others may strongly influence engagement—in fact, the effect of interactions at work may well eclipse the effect of other structural factors (e.g., job features) on work engagement. These relational interactions become the day-to-day events that sustain, or alternately undermine, work engagement.

We then discuss employee expectations of human need fulfillment at work. We argue (a) that employees compare their experiences at work to their normative expectations of work, and (b) that expectancy disconfirmation leads to persistent negative emotional experiences, whereas expectancy confirmation sustains a positive emotional state. Employees' emotional response to this expectancy confirmation (or disconfirmation) fuels work engagement.

We next draw upon research on approach and avoidance orientation to distinguish between approach-oriented and avoidance-oriented needs. We suggest that employee emotional responses to confirmed approach-oriented need expectations (e.g., authentic self-expression) will be relatively more positive than responses to confirmed avoidance-oriented need expectations (e.g. safety and security). This presents a point central to our theorizing: work engagement does not merely vary as a function of met or unmet expectations, but also as a function of the approach/avoidance nature of the expectation. Fulfillment of employee expectations around approach-oriented needs may present an opportunity for organizations to create an emotional experience that is far more fulfilling for employees than the fulfillment of avoidance-oriented expectations.

We close with a more in-depth examination of one need that we will use as an example of an approach-oriented need at work: the need for authentic self-expression (often referred to as self-actualization). Though our arguments suggest that work engagement is sustained through interactions at work, we propose that contextual features exert a powerful influence on the nature of those interactions, leading to confirmation, or disconfirmation, of employees' expectations of authentic self-expression needs.

This work is an argument for a new approach to the study of needs at work. Although needs at work have been widely studied for many decades, these traditions have tended to work within the "humans as wanting" tradition, building on the core notion that needs affect motivated behavior primarily when they are unsatisfied. Our work complements this emphasis by arguing for the motivational power of need fulfillment experiences. As such, our theorizing provides a springboard for numerous lines of further empirical exploration.

First, through our review and summary of the work engagement literature, we identify three critical features of work engagement: it is a positive emotional experience; it is an energy force; and relational interactions are a primary source of emotional energy. These features articulate the nature and practical relevance of work engagement, while distinguishing it from other work-related affective states. The experience of energy is perhaps the most critical defining feature of work engagement, and this energy is associated with positive emotional experiences. Scholars studying work engagement (e.g. Macey & Schneider, 2008) have noted a lack of construct clarity (Suddaby, 2010); we aim, with this work, to encourage researchers to cohere around a more distinct, precise conceptualization of work engagement.

Second, by reinforcing and expanding existing conceptualizations of engagement as a relationally mediated phenomenon, we open doors to research examining both the relational antecedents and consequences of engagement. Past research has suggested social antecedents of work engagement; for example, positive organizational scholars have argued that engagement flows from high-quality connections, and other empirical studies have suggested that engagement is, in part, the product of perceived social support at work (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Rich et al., 2010). We extend this line of scholarly interest by suggesting that relationships provide experiences that affirm (or disconfirm) employees' expectations of need fulfillment at work.

Third, we introduce the function of expectations as an important predictor of work engagement. We extend the general logic implied by social contract theories of work to include more general normative expectations of work. We believe that this aspect of work engagement has the

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potential to help explain varying levels of engagement across employees, performing the same work within the same organizational context.

Finally, in our theory, experiences at work that confirm employees' approach-oriented needs, such as authentic self-expression, are particularly powerful sources of energy. We thus aim to offer a theoretical foundation for the ways that organizations can facilitate the confirmation (or disconfirmation) of these important needs. In the final section of this manuscript, we summarize literature that suggests ways in which organizational features enable (or restrain) authentic self-expression at work. We hope this provides a foundation for organizational scholars and managers to begin to develop structural approaches to shaping employees' relational interactions in ways that can enable fulfillment of this, and other approach-oriented needs.

Human needs at work

The academic literature provides us with a variety of views of human needs. Motivation research, in particular, has periodically returned to the examination of fundamental needs as an explanation for motivated behavior. Maslow's (1943) theory posits a notable framework for understanding the motivational potential of human needs. Maslow conceptualized needs as generally grouped into five basic categories: safety, security, belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization. McGregor, in his seminal "The Human Side of Enterprise," similarly proposed a general human tendency to pursue needs according to some sort of logical hierarchy and also referenced five basic needs, though in slightly different terms (McGregor, 1960). McClelland (1967) argued for need pursuit as an overarching motivational theory and a view of human needs in which individuals differed as a function of which of three basic needs was dominant.

With their theory of the motivational effects of job characteristics, Hackman and Oldham (1976) launched a stream of research that was oriented toward fulfilling workers' "higher-order" needs, such as meaningfulness and autonomy (e.g., Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Roberts & Glick,1981; Sims, Szilagyi, & Keller, 1976), and was grounded in the notion that such needs carried greater motivational potential than other, baser pursuits. More recently, self-determination theorists have argued that autonomy (and, to some degree, belongingness) at work leads to intrinsic motivation for a task, which in turn enhances task performance (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Finally, Kanfer and colleagues (Heggestad & Kanfer, 2000; Kanfer, Ackerman, & Heggestad, 1996; Kanfer & Heggestad, 1997) identified motivational traits that can manifest as a need for achievement and show that the nature of this achievement need can influence employees' behavioral tendencies.

As compared with historical traditions emphasizing how the discomfort associated with unmet needs yields motivation at work (e.g. Alderfer, 1972; Locke, 1991; Maslow, 1943; McGregor, 1960; Pinder, 2014), some recent empirical exploration has emphasized a complementary idea – that positive experiences, including those related to need fulfillment, may also be motivating. Some researchers have suggested, and empirically tested, a positive relationship between subjective well-being (a proxy for life satisfaction) and positive work outcomes (e.g. Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001; Riketta, 2008; also see Tenney, Poole, & Diener, 2016 for a comprehensive review). The field of positive organizational scholarship is grounded in the basic assumption that positive experiences yield positive outcomes, including motivated and energized behavior (e.g. Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Cameron & Dutton, 2003; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Fredrickson, 2003). This work is echoed by news stories of organizations that focus on providing a positive, fulfilling workplace experience to employees, endeavors that seem to yield driven and motivated employees (Fortune, 2016; Hamel, 2011, 2012; Laloux, 2014).

Nearly all commonly accepted definitions of motivation incorporate the idea of energy (Locke, 1991; Mitchell & Daniels, 2003; Pinder, 2014). Indeed, higher energy expenditure is associated with higher levels of productivity, citizenship behaviors, and helping behaviors. And energy expenditure is generally tightly associated with motivation. Many need-based work motivation theories propose that the discomfort associated with unmet needs inspires exertion of effort or the expenditure of energy. We propose that although unmet needs might indeed inspire the *expenditure* of energy, positive need-related experiences may provide a valuable *source* of energy, effectively fueling positive work-related outcomes. Thus, the heart of any theory linking positive need-related experiences and positive work-related outcomes, such as work engagement, must begin with an understanding of the nature and source of energy.

Work engagement

A history of the study of work engagement

Scholarly interest in work engagement can be traced to the early 1970s, when researchers began studying burnout, a negative work-related state of mind characterized by exhaustion and a mental distancing from one's work (e.g. Freudenberger, 1974, 1975; Maslach, 1976; see Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993 for a review). The early research focused on characterizing the phenomenon and explained burnout as a function of feelings employees had toward their work. Scholarly findings from this era suggest that burnout is a mix of exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of ineffectiveness in one's work, although it is not empirically evident whether cynicism and lack of effectiveness are distinct experiences or derived from the more overarching experience of exhaustion (Leiter, 1993; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Driven in part by a desire for more prescriptive examinations of this seemingly widespread work phenomenon of burnout, researchers began asking questions about the more positive manifestation of employees' relationship with their work: engagement (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003). The burnout literature generally asserted that work engagement is simply the opposite of burnout. Maslach et al. (2001: 416) wrote that "engagement is

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characterized by energy, involvement and efficacy—the direct opposites of the three burnout dimensions. By implication, engagement is assessed by the opposite pattern of scores on the three [burnout inventory] dimensions." Burnout researchers consequently arrived at the conclusion that understanding and eliminating the causes of burnout will naturally lead to increases in work engagement (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1997; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003)

The "whole self"

A separate stream of research argues that engagement is a distinct and orthogonal construct, not merely the net effect of eliminating causes of burnout (Rich et al., 2010). In fact, some research suggested that sustained engagement can actually lead to burnout—an assertion that conflicts with the notion that engagement flows from the elimination of burnout (Halbesleben, Harvey, & Bolino, 2009; Kunda, 2009). The emergence of this alternate conceptualization of work engagement as orthogonal to burnout coincides with a broader organizational trend asserting the individual and organizational value of employees being psychologically present at work—of bringing their "whole selves" to their jobs (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Cameron & Dutton, 2003; Rothbard & Patil,2012). This new disciplinary niche responded to a growing recognition that employees have great untapped potential and a belief that the key to unlocking that potential was to find ways to release employees' passions (Kahn, 1992; Ulrich, 1997). In his book *Human Resource Champions*,Ulrich (1997: 125) argued that to excel in an increasingly competitive landscape, organizations must find ways to "engage not only the body but the mind and soul of every employee."

A sequential perspective on work engagement

A related line of study characterizes work engagement more precisely as a form of energy. Conceptually aligned with the "whole self" movement, this work defines the critical feature of engagement as energy. It also draws an important distinction between simply being present at work and engaging one's full energy in one's work. This literature provides two key characteristics inherent to most conceptualizations of work engagement: work engagement is characterized as (a) a positive affective state; and (b) as an experience of energy.

Schaufeli, Salanova et al. (2002: 74) provided a definition of engagement that best illustrates these two important components. They defined engagement as a "positive, fulfilling, work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption." The first half of their definition suggests that engagement is a positive and fulfilling affective state, similar to job satisfaction. The second half of the definition conveys an energized state of action. Vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort across the various dimensions of one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Dedication and absorption reflect action-oriented behavioral tendencies associated with positive organizational outcomes. Dedication refers to strong involvement in one's work and the experience of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Absorption refers to a state of high concentration and fulfilled engrossment in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulty detaching from the work (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). In sum, this construct of work engagement has three key aspects: a positive psychological experience; yielding an energized state; manifesting as behavioral tendencies oriented toward positive organizational outcomes (Kahn, 1990, 1992; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Rich et al., 2010).

In an empirical exploration of the positive effects of work engagement in two work contexts, Rich et al. (2010) generally embraced this view. But in their review of the literature, they distinguish between work engagement and a broad set of related, though distinct, lines of study, such as job characteristics (e.g. Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Hackman & Oldham,1976), reward systems, and goal setting (e.g. Locke & Latham, 2002)—all of which, importantly, focus on task-oriented outcomes. They argued for the importance of understanding and measuring work engagement distinct from other constructs measuring overall affective sentiments toward the organization. "Rather than the summation of the various energies that can be brought to a role," they argue (2010 pg. 619), "engagement reflects their commonality—a common cause of the investment of the various energies." In a number of propositions, Macey and Schneider (2008) suggested that *state work engagement* (used to distinguish the psychological state of engagement from "trait" or "behavioral" work engagement) is, in fact, an overarching psychological state and that other related constructs, such as organizational commitment, job involvement, and psychological empowerment, are "facets of" work engagement—language suggesting that each of these distinct constructs is subsumed by work engagement.

Although we stop short of asserting that work engagement is a superordinate construct, Rich et al.'s (2010) assertion that work engagement reflects a thread that runs through each of these independent constructs is a consistent theme across recent work engagement literature. The energy found in work engagement is often at least partially present in measures of other behaviorally important constructs. Rich, Lepine, and Crawford presented a three-part measure of work engagement, capturing the distinct, and combined, physical, cognitive, and emotional energy[1] one experiences at work. By combining the cognitive, physical and emotional components of an employee's energy into a single measure, work engagement represents a means of explaining the important common positive consequences of each of these related constructs (Law, Wong, & Mobley, 1998). Rich et al. (2010: 619) summarized the energized nature of work engagement eloquently, stating that through engagement,

[1] By way of clarification, though Rich et al., 2010 distinguish between physical, cognitive and emotional energy, in our view, these three possible forms of experienced energy are confined to the motivational component of our conceptualization of work engagement.

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employees "harness their full selves in active, complete work role performance by driving personal energy into physical, cognitive, and emotional labors." In sum, energy is one operative and defining characteristic of work engagement.

Affective events and the experience of energy

The energy so central to work engagement is commonly described as being fueled by a positive affective state. Rothbard (2001) found support for the hypothesis that positive affective states lead to increased attention and absorption, two of the three energized states characteristic of work engagement. Work engagement is generally described in as a "positive, fulfilling state"—suggestive of a positive affective or emotional experience (Schaufeli, Salanova et al., 2002). More explicitly, it has been defined as a "persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state" that employees experience at work (Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002: 465). Macey and Schneider (2008: 12), in their review of the engagement literature, argued explicitly that "positive affect associated with the job and work setting" are central to the conceptualization and measurement of work engagement, particularly as it relates to the sense of energy central to the experience of engagement.

Thus, affect seems to play a critical role in work engagement, though the literature is not always clear on the nature of this relationship. Some work implies that positive affect is a consequence of engagement (e.g., Schaufeli, Martinez, et al., 2002), while other work suggests that the energy reflected in the definition of engagement is a consequence of emotional experiences (e.g., Macey & Schneider, 2008; Rothbard, 2001; Rothbard & Patil, 2012) sometimes referred to as affective events. As we discuss in the next section, a broader evaluation suggests that emotional experiences are the source of the energy inherent to work engagement.

Emotion as energy vs. satiation

Although work engagement is at least moderately correlated with other affective states, such as job satisfaction, Macey and Schneider (2008 pp. 8) provide an important distinction that clearly illuminates the distinct nature of work engagement: "engagement connotes activation, whereas satisfaction connotes satiation." This distinction between satiation and activation shines a light on an important tension implicit in many motivational theories: satisfaction or satiation implies no tendency to change. Many traditional need-based theories of motivation rely on discomfort (unmet needs) to motivate behavior. "A satisfied need is not a motivator for behavior," writes McGregor (1960: 147). "Except as you are deprived [of something], it has no appreciable motivating effect upon your behavior."

Because both work engagement and job satisfaction are presumed to be the product of positive emotional experiences at work, one might discount work engagement as indistinct from job satisfaction. But as a measure of contentment with one's work environment, satisfaction is conceptually inversely related to the motivation to act. It reflects a tendency to maintain the status quo and, more importantly, acts as a psychological signal to conserve (rather than exert) energy. Rich et al. (2010) provide important empirical evidence suggesting a distinction between the two, citing in part this energy versus satiation difference between the two constructs. In one sample, they showed a moderate correlation between job satisfaction and work engagement that suggested some overlap but also meaningful distinctions between the two measures. More importantly, they show that work engagement significantly and substantively contributes to job performance (the manifestation of energy), even when controlling for job satisfaction. In short, the evidence suggests that although positive emotional experiences may lead to a sense of satisfaction and imply satiation, they may also serve as a motivational force by providing real energy.

Ample evidence suggests that positive affective states can improve performance. George and Brief (1992), for example, reviewed literature suggesting that experiencing a positive mood at work leads to active, extra-role behaviors, such as helping others, protecting the organization, forms of active and constructive voice, and self-development. Other research has shown that positive moods predict reduced absenteeism (Forgas & George, 2001) and increased variety seeking in complex situations (Isen, 2001). George and Brief (1996) presented one cognitively oriented explanation for this general relationship, arguing that emotions serve as feedback signals that guide employees in their efforts to achieve various possible selves. Reviewing evidence of the relationship between mood and motivation, Elfenbein (2007) suggested that the purely cognitive view of mood as a behavioral influence is too narrow: "affect is always a critical part of the construction of thoughts"; consequently, "it is problematic to separate affect from cognition" (2007: 352). We propose that positive affective states lead to improved performance by enhancing employees' sense of energy. Emotional experiences, which influence general affect, also influence employees' experience of energy and their consequent organizationally beneficial behavior.

This relationship between emotion and energy is central to our conceptualization of work engagement. Elfenbein (2007: 346) argued persuasively for the conceptual idea of emotions as an energizing fuel for behavior, noting "emotions are meant to move us. The origin of the term is the Latin word *promotionem*, to move forward." The concept of work engagement offers a means of explaining the experience of energy and positive behavior at work, above and beyond traditional motivational theories. The "feeling of energy" that Macey and Schneider (2008: 6) described in their review of the work engagement literature is fueled by incidental emotions. The energy reflected in the various conceptualizations of work engagement is emotional in nature: work engagement is energy derived from one's emotional experiences at work.

The view of positive emotions as energy-giving is consistent with a growing body of research in psychology. One compelling argument suggests that negative emotional experiences tend to demand energy, thus robbing the experiencer of this vital fuel required to attend to other issues of import (Fredrickson, 2013). Negative emotions

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tend to narrowly focus our energy stores on minimizing the aversive experience (e.g. Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007; Fredrickson, 2013). Positive emotions, on the other hand, serve to broaden our awareness to a wider array of thoughts and actions, effectively expanding our energy stores for a broader set of work-related activities (see Fredrickson, 2013, for a review). Fredrickson (2003) described the thought-action tendencies of positive emotions in terms evocative of energy. Joy, for example, "creates the urge to play" she wrote, while interest creates "the urge to explore . . . and to expand the self" (Fredrickson, 2003: 166). Positive emotions also help dissipate the energy-sapping effect of negative emotions, further supporting the notion that positive emotions energize (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Finally, the experience of positive emotions has been associated with a wider range of action tendencies than neutral or negative emotional states, again suggesting that the feeling of positive emotion is experienced as energy (see Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005).

This brings us back to the definition of work engagement: it is grounded in positive emotional experience and yields the experience of energy. This energy is the product of the emotions the employee experiences during interactions with others at work. Negative emotional experiences generally serve to sap an experiencer's energy, while positive emotional experiences tend to sustain and bolster the experiencer's energy.[2] The energy provided by positive emotional experiences at work fuels the positive performance associated with work engagement. Interestingly, the experience of energy resulting from positive emotional experiences at work may yield both direct and indirect benefits to the individual and her organization.

We focus primarily on the heightened effort and persistence inherent to the experience of work engagement. But because work engagement is fueled by positive emotional experiences at work, highly engaged employees are also likely to experience more rapid learning, improvement, career expansion, and personal growth. The experience of energy associated with work engagement also broadens employees' focus and attention, increasing their tendency to seek and find novel solutions to problems (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005; Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987), be more open to new information (Estrada, Isen, & Young, 1997), and explore new opportunities (Kahn & Isen, 1993; Renninger, 1992)—all of which are likely to enhance longer-term performance, innovation, and career development. This phenomenon, termed the "upward spiral" of work engagement (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003), suggests the potential of work engagement to enhance immediate task performance and to expand employees' ability to improve performance and more readily adapt to changing circumstances.

Work engagement vs. disengagement

The dominant characterization of work engagement as a positive emotional state demands one important conceptual clarification: disengagement is, in this view, a state of low or nonexistent energy. Disengagement emerges when the fuel of positive emotions is absent (or sapped by negative emotional experiences). Rothbard and Patil (2012), however, observed that dedication and absorption (two features of work engagement) sometimes correspond with negative affect, suggesting that work engagement may have both a positive and negative direction; by contrast, disengagement is a state devoid of energy—either neutral in nature, or perhaps lethargic and listless. Individuals, they suggest, may experience engagement in their work, accompanied by either a positive or negative affective state. For example, they suggest that "one can be engaged in something because it is a problem to be solved, and this can be associated with negative affect; or, one can be engaged in an activity that is joyful" (Rothbard & Patil, 2012: 60).

Although this conceptualization seems at odds with much of the work engagement literature, it is important to consider, if for no other reason than that it is also at odds with our assertion that positive emotional experiences yield energy and negative emotional experiences sap energy. We identify two key reasons why it is unlikely that a negative-affective-fueled form of work engagement exists. First, the dominant and widely accepted definition of work engagement asserts that it is a positive and fulfilling state. That is, it seems almost axiomatic that the study of work engagement focuses on understanding the outcomes associated with positive experiences at work. While it is very likely that negative affective experiences, in some circumstances, correspond with increased dedication and absorption, we simply suggest that said dedication and absorption must be of a phenomenologically different nature than that inherent in work engagement. For example, someone who is criticized is likely to feel negative affect and may expend a great deal of energy to correct the mistakes. This behavior is consistent with traditional need-based motivation theories, which assert that individuals are motivated to fulfill their needs (be it the avoidance of aversive outcomes or the pursuit of positive states).

Conversely, as argued above, work engagement as a construct is central to explaining motivational states that accompany positive affective experiences, which are often thought of as satiating (and, consequently, carrying no motivational value). We are interested in the co-occurrence of positive affect, energy, and dedication and absorption. If negative experiences at work sometimes lead to dedication and absorption, presumably aimed at correcting the cause of the negative experience, we should not be surprised—such a finding is consistent with a wide theoretical and empirical literature. This behavior can easily be explained by traditional theories of motivation as the pursuit of some alternate, desired state.

[2] We note that all negative, or positive, emotional experiences are not equal. We use positive and negative as general categories, and point to the general energizing, or energy-sapping, nature of the broader category. But we note that various discrete emotions may vary in the degree to which they adhere to this general principle. The energizing effect of the positive emotion elation is likely to differ in intensity from the energizing effect of the positive emotion calmness.

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Finally, work engagement is distinct from intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is a task-oriented experience; the positive affect it instills is associated with the task itself (De Charms, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Work engagement, on the other hand, reflects absorption in even inherently uninteresting tasks; the positive experience is not task focused, and the source of positive emotional energy need not be the task itself. Work engagement is less focused on the incidental emotions associated with a task and more reflective of the aggregate of an employee's emotional experiences at work—experiences that provide a source and store of energy, which can then be deployed even toward tasks that are, themselves, uninteresting or associated with negative affect.

We thus embrace the dominant conceptualization of work engagement as a state of high energy characterized by an overarching state of positive emotion, and of disengagement as the lack of energy generally associated with an overarching state of negative emotion. Observances of dedication and absorption not associated with a positive emotional state likely reflect some other motivated pursuit.

The benefits and antecedents of work engagement

Work engagement is generally considered a positive experience that has important positive downstream consequences. Indeed, the core experiences central to work engagement (increased energy, yielding dedication and absorption) are presumed to lead to other important outcomes. Further, as we have argued in the prior section, work engagement as a construct warrants study primarily given its theoretical foundation as a source of positive outcomes not adequately explained by traditional theories of work motivation. Indeed, our theory is, ultimately, concerned with the positive behavioral outcomes associated with need-fulfillment experiences at work. Much of the empirical research examining work engagement has focused on the benefits, as well as antecedents, of work engagement. We now turn to a brief review of each.

The benefits of work engagement

Work engagement is generally seen as a positive and fulfilling employee experience and, consequently, an end unto itself (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Rothbard, 2001; Rothbard & Patil, 2012). The positive organizational scholarship (POS) literature conceptualizes work engagement as an important construct even if only because it makes work an inherently more positive employee experience (Rothbard & Patil, 2012). In fact, the emotional energy side of work engagement is likely closely tied to employees' general well-being (Diener, 2000), with recent research even suggesting positive physiological effects resulting from enhanced work engagement (e.g. Dutton & Heaphy, 2003).

But work engagement is also theorized as a mediator of various positive organizational outcomes. In fact, historically, the dominant motivation for studying work engagement has been the prospective organizational benefits. And, indeed, abundant evidence suggests that work engagement contributes to various positive organizational outcomes, including productivity (Masson, Royal, Agnew, & Fine, 2008; Rich et al., 2010), task and overall performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Rich et al., 2010; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007), organizational citizenship behaviors (Rich et al., 2010), and even increased client satisfaction (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008).

Antecedents of work engagement

Research on the antecedents of work engagement has been more substantive than research on the benefits of work engagement. This work has focused primarily on relatively stable context-specific characteristics (e.g., job demands) or individual differences. Much research suggests that the balance between job demands and available resources leads to work engagement (Demerouti, Bakker, De Jonge, Janssen, & Schaufeli, 2001; Rich et al., 2010; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), though, as discussed above, this research generally has been conducted using engagement measures that are conceptualized as the absence of burnout. Work that employees experience as meaningful also has been shown to increase employees' work engagement (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; May et al., 2004; Rich et al., 2010), as have both person-specific attitudes and personality characteristics (Judge & Bono, 2001; Langelaan, Bakker, Van Doornen, & Schaufeli, 2006; Rothbard & Patil, 2012).

Because work engagement is fueled in part by emotion, one's day-to-day and moment-to-moment work experiences have great potential to influence one's work engagement (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). Although engagement is generally considered to be an overarching state, it is at least in part relationally conveyed. Work engagement is cultivated and maintained not merely through our interest in the task at hand or our general assessment of stable characteristics of the organization, but also through our myriad interactions with others in the organization and the ways in which those interactions confirm, or disconfirm, our expectations.

In fact, given its emotional nature, work engagement may primarily reflect the complex multiplicity of interactions an employee has had at work. Recent conceptions of work suggest that employees tend to conceptualize their work as a series of relational interactions with others (Dutton & Dukerich, 2006; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003) rather than as a group of activities. Relational interactions are among the most emotion-laden experiences individuals will have at work (e.g., Basch & Fisher, 1998; Dasborough, 2006; Elfenbein, 2007; Gaddis, Connelly, & Mumford, 2004; Mignonac & Herrbach, 2004). Interactions that inspire positive emotional experiences are energy-giving; interactions that inspire negative emotional experiences are energy-depleting (Cameron & Dutton, 2003; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Rothbard & Patil, 2012). These "everyday" relational experiences at work represent an important underexplored aspect of work engagement. Past emphasis on the structural characteristics of work and individual differences as predictors of work engagement was driven in part by measurement techniques: as snapshots of an employee's sentiments, surveys lend themselves to the measurement of relatively stable work features. But the inherently varying nature of

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employees' everyday emotional states warrants a closer look at the ways in which their day-to-day interactions at work influence the sustenance of their work engagement. The recent emphasis on discrete emotions in organizational research, and advancements in the measurement of discrete emotional events (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002; Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Elfenbein, 2007; Judge, Weiss, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Hulin, 2017; Lam, Weiss, Welch, & Hulin, 2009), compel further examination of one critical immediate consequence of these emotional experiences: work engagement.

Need fulfillment expectations and the sustenance of work engagement

The emotions that employees experience during interactions at work fuel their work engagement. But what determines how employees respond emotionally to experiences at work? Certainly, some experiences are universally positive or negative. A manager threatening job termination will be widely experienced as a threatening act and likely generate feelings of fear and stress. Likewise, a leader publicly expressing gratitude for a job well done is likely to be viewed as a positive experience, one that we expect will yield excitement or pride.

But an employee's day-to-day, and even moment-to-moment, experiences at work are far more mundane and nuanced. Indeed, Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) argued persuasively for a more microscopic study of emotions at work. How do employees respond, emotionally, to the routine normality of day-to-day interactions at work? If the majority of an employee's interactions at work are not particularly memorable, why does it seem that employees' levels of work engagement, examined broadly, are bimodal rather than, as we might expect, concentrated around some mean reflective of emotional ambivalence? The answer might be that, in practice, employees' emotional responses cannot be solely predicted by the objective characteristics of their circumstances. Rather, these responses and consequent work engagement may emerge when employees compare their objective reality to their set of expectations of work.

Employees' expectations as counterfactual realities

Employees carry in their minds a normative view of what work should be. This normative view, or set of expectations, is forged by myriad social influences, including upbringing (e.g., parental influences), education, past experiences, and even socio-economic trends. These expectations become the backdrop against which employees compare their daily experiences at work—a mentally constructed counterfactual reality that effectively informs employees' emotional reactions to their daily experiences (Roese, 1997). Ample research in psychology (Kray et al., 2010; Roese, 1997; Zeelenberg et al., 1998) demonstrates the dramatic effect one's counterfactual mental reality can wield on one's affective response to that reality. Our emotional response to our circumstances cannot be adequately explained by the objective nature of those circumstances: better objective circumstances can, at times, paradoxically yield more negative emotional responses (e.g Iyengar, Wells, & Schwartz, 2006; Medvec & Savitsky, 1997). The now-seminal research examining the emotional response of Olympic medal winners perfectly illustrates this phenomenon: though the silver medal is objectively superior to the bronze, bronze medal winners exhibit more positive emotion than silver during medal ceremonies, because silver medalists tend to engage in upward comparisons, whereas bronze medal winners engage in downward comparisons (Medvec, Madey, & Gilovich, 1995).

Employees' normative expectations become the counterfactual reality against which employees compare their day-to-day experiences. We use the term "normative" to qualify the term "expectations" for two reasons. First, people develop expectations over time through various social experiences. Second, they apply these generalized and overarching expectations to any prospective work context. These characteristics—socially granted and generally applied—are central to the cultivation of "should be" normative expectations.

Normative as socially granted

Normative expectations are strongly held mental models of what work should be, developed and honed over time through our social interactions, including education, socio-economic status, and upbringing. Given that work is a ubiquitous institution, young adults necessarily give serious consideration to what work is, should be, and could be. A person's construction of her normative expectations of work resemble her construction of her normative expectations of romantic relationships—another domain in which, incidentally, socio-economic and political forces lead to heightened expectations that, when met, yield particularly high levels of fulfillment (Finkel, Cheung, Emery, Carswell, & Larson, 2015; Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014; Finkel, Larson, Carswell, & Hui, 2014).

Normative as general and abstract expectations

Normative expectations tend to be generalized and somewhat abstract, aligning closely with broader pursuit categories, such as generalized needs. Because these expectations are general in nature, it's often hard to, ex ante, define the specific means by which the expectations should be fulfilled. A person may, for example, carry a generalized normative expectation of self-actualization into their work. This expectation substantively affects how he thinks about his interactions at work, but it is difficult, or perhaps impossible, to identify in advance the specific behaviors and interactions that the organization must take to fulfill that expectation.

Psychological contracts

Normative expectations call to mind research on psychological contracts. But, as we describe here, the means by which employers mitigate or eliminate the risk associated with breached psychological contracts cannot mitigate the negative consequences of disconfirmed normative expectations of work. The psychological

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contract research suggests that employees view their employment relationship with their organization as a contract that includes both explicit and implicit agreements (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 1990, 2004; Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993). In the mind of the employee, these implicit agreements represent binding obligations, which may be vague and uncertain, but which nonetheless become expectations (Rousseau, 2004). If an organization breaches such a contract, psychological contract theory suggests that employees will redefine the relationship in more transactional terms, responding with reduced organizational trust, decreased extra-role behavior (e.g., organizational citizenship), reduced performance, and increased likelihood of quitting (Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003).

This general pattern of behavior is conceptually similar to our argument that unmet normative expectations lead to decreases in work engagement and, in turn, to undesirable behavioral effects. In psychological contract theory, however, the undesirable behavioral effects of contract violation are driven by trust violations (Robinson, 1996; Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993). The critical feature of a psychological contract is the employee's belief that a commitment has been made. Violations of that commitment are experienced as breaches of the contract. Because employees "seek to maintain equity between the costs and the benefits" of their employment relationship, they moderate their behavior as a means of "realigning" the contract (Turnley & Feldman, 2000).

The logic underlying employee responses to contract breaches is insufficient to explain the theoretical relationship between normative work expectations and work engagement. Employees can enter a work relationship carrying a normative expectation of work, knowing full well that their current employee will never fulfill that expectation. Psychological contract theory would characterize this arrangement as a healthy and fulfilled contract because there is no breach. Consider, for example, a high school student whose counselor encouraged her to always pursue her unique passion at work, but who can only find mundane work in a fast-food restaurant. The restaurant offers no promise of passion pursuit; therefore, there is no breach of trust. Yet, we argue, because the employee views work as a domain that should provide the pursuit of passion, she experiences a state of disengagement. Clarification of the precise nature of the employment agreement is not sufficient to blind the employee to her normative expectations of work; those expectations remain a mental comparison, and consequently hold sway over her emotional response to her experiences.

In a sense, the psychological contract literature suggests that employees compare their experiences at work to a mental image of "what is agreed upon" and, upon experiencing a negative mismatch, lose trust and moderate their behavior as a compensatory penalty. Our theorizing suggests, though, that a focus on expectations resulting from employee-employer agreements is too narrow to adequately account for the full spectrum of expectations employees bring to work. Empirical evidence supports this assertion. Robinson, in a longitudinal study of psychological contract breach and erosion of trust among managers, found the predicted relationship between trust and both lower performance and intent to remain. But she also found a separate, and independent, effect (above and beyond the effect of trust) between unmet expectations and these two important outcomes. This additional effect suggests (consistent with our theorizing) a distinct, and potentially important, mechanistic pathway between disconfirmed normative expectations and subsequent performance (Robinson, 1996).

We suggest that employees, in addition to any psychological contract with a specific organization, also compare their experiences at work to a mental image of "what ought to be"—a normative picture reflecting their generalized suite of expectations of work. Violations of these generalized and normative expectations, though not necessarily yielding a decrease in trust (and the resultant undesirable behavioral effects predicted by psychological contract theories), do lead to negative emotional experiences.

Porter and Steers (1973) introduced the conceptual idea of workplace expectations, and subsequent lines of organizational research suggest a relationship between unmet work expectations and outcomes such as organizational commitment, satisfaction, turnover, and absenteeism (e.g. Greenhaus, Seidel, & Marinis, 1983; Porter & Steers, 1973; Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 1991; and Wanous, Poland, Premack, & Davis, 1992). But these lines of work, by virtue of their universal emphasis on setting realistic expectations and socialization practices, suggest that the negative effects associated with unmet expectations are specific—a conscious decision to withdraw one's effort due to a sense of betrayal or breach of trust. This historical body of work, though broad, generally ignores the emotions that flow from disconfirmed expectations, as well as the distinct effect a persistent negative emotional state may have on the energy one directs toward one's work. Though realistic job previews may eliminate the risk of breached trust and the consequent negative effects, they cannot ameliorate an employee's deep-set normative beliefs about what work should be.

Need fulfillment expectations and work engagement

Though employees may hold myriad normative expectations about work, our theory is primarily focused on employees' response to experiences that confirm, or disconfirm, their expectations around certain fundamental human needs. We expect that experiences that confirm employees' need expectations will provide the emotional fuel of work engagement. But employees' emotional response to confirmed and disconfirmed need fulfillment expectations will vary as a function of the general type of need; that is, their emotional response to confirmed self-expression and authenticity expectations, for example, will differ from their emotional response to confirmed security expectations. The varying emotional responses as a function of need type have important implications for understanding the full complexity of work engagement. We make no claim regarding the

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general superiority of one form of need over another. Rather, we rely on a distinction between needs as conceptually approach- or avoidance-oriented in nature. This distinction—along with the inherently different emotional response to confirmed and disconfirmed expectations of approach needs relative to avoidance needs—forms the foundation of our theory.

Approach and avoidance needs

Needs are often categorized as either approach- or avoidance-oriented in nature (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). Although any need can be pursued from different orientations (Brockner & Higgins, 2001), approach-oriented needs are those aimed at pursuing a positive state, whereas avoidance-oriented needs are those precipitated by the desire or drive to avoid some negative outcome. Of course, any need can be pursued from either an approach or avoidance orientation; however, some needs may be a better "fit" with one or the other orientation. That is, people may more often pursue certain needs with either an approach or an avoidance motivation. For example,physiological and safety or security needs are often directed toward avoiding harmful experiences, such as physical threats, hunger, and bodily injury. For the sake of explaining how we think approach and avoidance orientation affects needs at work, we will use safety and security needs as our exemplar for avoidance orientation. For an exemplar for approach orientation, we use self-actualization needs. With their focus on achieving positive states like authenticity and self-expression, they are a good example of a need that is likely often pursued via approach orientation.

We have argued that work engagement, and the resultant energy and positive behavioral outcomes, are a function of employees' emotional experiences at work. Logically, the positive emotional responses associated with confirmed expectations will yield higher levels of work engagement than disconfirmed expectations. But the notion of approach and avoidance needs is central to our theory, as employees' emotional experiences in response to confirmed (or disconfirmed) need expectations is likely to vary as a function of whether their expectations are approach- or avoidance-oriented. First, the specific, discrete emotions they experience in response to interactions with others at work will differ, depending on whether their expectations are predominately approach- or avoidance-oriented (see Elfenbein, 2007; and Scherer & Tran, 2003). This literature suggests, for example, that confirmed avoidance need expectations will yield experiences of relief, gratefulness, or quiescence, whereas confirmed approach need expectations will yield experiences of pride, joy, and excitement. Further, and perhaps more importantly, considering the direct relationship between positive emotional experiences and the experience of energy, the magnitude of the emotional experience will vary as a function of motivational orientation (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Idson, Liberman, & Higgins, 2000). In the following two sections, we describe the prospective differential emotional responses to confirmed and disconfirmed approach and avoidance need expectations.

Differential emotional responses to disconfirmed and confirmed approach and avoidance need expectations

We expect that more intensely experienced negative emotions will have a more extreme negative effect on the experiencer's sense of energy and consequent work engagement. The negative emotions associated with disconfirmed avoidance-oriented expectations are experienced as relatively more painful than the negative emotions associated with disconfirmed approach-oriented expectations (Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986; Idson et al., 2000). In turn, we expect that employees whose avoidance-oriented needs are disconfirmed at work will be less engaged than those whose approach-oriented need expectations are disconfirmed. Fig. 1 presents a conceptual graphical representation of the relative effect of confirmed/disconfirmed approach/avoidance expectations on work engagement. (The solid line depicts the theoretical relative engagement levels for disconfirmed approach- and avoidance-oriented need expectations.)

Notably, this is not to say that employees whose approach-oriented needs are disconfirmed will exhibit higher levels of motivated behavior. Within the regulatory focus literature, Idson et al. (2000) showed that the more intense emotional experience associated with disconfirmed prevention goals yielded greater motivated behavioral tendencies than the negative emotional experiences associated with disconfirmed promotion goals. If such processes work similarly with avoidance goals, we would expect that because the pain associated with disconfirmed avoidance oriented is so great, employees will be strongly motivated to mitigate the pain and correct the discrepancy. But that motivation will not result from the positive experience of energy characteristic of work engagement.

We further expect that more intensely experienced positive emotions will have a more extreme positive effect on the experiencer's sense of energy and consequent work engagement. Again borrowing from the regulatory focus literature, we can assume that the positive emotions associated with confirmed approach-oriented expectations are experienced as more intensely pleasurable than the positive emotions associated with confirmed avoidance-oriented expectations (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Higgins et al., 1986; Idson et al., 2000). In turn, we expect that employees whose approach-oriented needs are

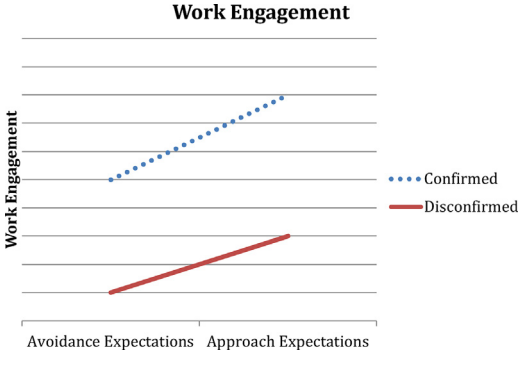

Fig. 1. Prospective effect of confirmed and disconfirmed need fulfillment expectations on work engagement.

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confirmed at work will be more engaged than those whose avoidance-oriented need expectations are confirmed (see the dotted line in Fig. 1).

Collectively, we expect that confirmed need fulfillment expectations will positively influence work engagement, but that there is a particular energy premium associated with confirmed approach-oriented expectations such as authentic self-expression. These theoretical arguments, by extension, carry further implications for organizations, particularly when considering partial confirmation of employee expectations.

Between-individual expectation differences

Employees bring varying expectations of need fulfillment to their work. As we argued above, normative expectations of need fulfillment at work are likely the product of social norms, upbringing, and perhaps socio-economic background. A central question, then, is how will employees with differing expectations of work respond to various organizational contexts?

Imagine, for example, that two employees join an organization that offers a high degree of financial and job security in an industry considered safe and with organizational leaders who work to build a psychologically safe cultural environment. In short, they join an organization where employees are likely to experience the avoidance-oriented expectations around safety and security as confirmed. The first employee has relatively narrow expectations of work that are focused on safety and security. The second employee has further expectations, namely the approach-oriented expectations of authentic self-expression. Our theory logically suggests that the second employee, though immersed in exactly the same organizational context as the first, will experience relatively lower levels of work engagement than the first employee.

Individuals are immersed in organizational contexts full of stimuli. Expectations serve as attention filters that guide information-search behaviors, effectively priming individuals to seek and focus on evidence that confirms (or disconfirms) their expectations (Elfenbein, 2007; Izard, 1993; Scherer & Tran, 2003). This insight is particularly relevant in understanding the potentially consequential effect of relatively mundane experiences at work on employee emotions and work engagement. Our expectations increase our sensitivity to interactions that appear to confirm, or disconfirm, those expectations.

By this logic, we would expect the second of our hypothetical employees—the one who brings expectations of authentic self-expression to work—to experience relatively more negative emotions than the first employee, who only brings expectations of safety and security to work. Though immersed in the same organizational context as the first employee, the second employee will have a fundamentally different emotional experience, primarily because he is attentive to, and actively searching for, experiences that confirm his approach-oriented expectations.

Similarly, we might expect organizational efforts to fulfill needs not reflected in employees' expectations of work to yield relatively marginal positive results. Because expectations focus attention and sensitize employees to confirming or disconfirming experiences at work, it is possible the organizational efforts to enable authentic self-expressive experiences may not yield the increases in work engagement for some that they would for individuals who bring expectations of authentic self-expression to work. Conversely, our review in the next section suggests various positive direct effects associated with the experience of authentic self-expression, effects independent of any effect on work engagement. It is possible that, over time, employees may come to expand their expectation set, leading to longer-term increases in work engagement.

Our theoretical reasoning brings us to the realization that approach-oriented needs have both great positive and negative potential. But in what ways do organizations confirm, or disconfirm, employees' expectations about their ability to obtain authentic self-expression at work?

Organizational features and confirmation or disconfirmation of approach-oriented expectations

Even without intending to do so, organizations often disconfirm employees' expectations. In particular, the structures and norms of many modern organizations make it particularly difficult for them to confirm approach-oriented expectations related to authentic self-expression. To the degree that employees bring expectations of authentic self-expression to work, the prospective costs associated with disconfirmation, and the benefits associated with confirmation, compel a deeper examination of the ways in which organizations disconfirm or confirm these approach-oriented expectations. In the following sections, we review evidence suggesting a relationship between structural or contextual features and the experience of authentic self-expression—the need we are using as our example of a need typically pursued in an approach orientation. We begin by briefly defining and describing work on authentic self-expression.

Authentic self-expression

Maslow, in describing the need for what he called self-actualization, refers to the human "desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow, 1943: 384). Fulfillment of this expressive need to become one's unique self and to be valued as such takes different forms for different individuals. Authentic self-expression is the fulfillment of an individual's sense of who they are in words, action, and the relational value others place on the authentically expressed self.

Authentic self-expression has been associated with increased creativity and innovation. In group settings, authentic self-expression can improve performance, activating the often-dormant benefits associated with diversity (Polzer, Milton, & Swarm, 2002). Individuals who are able to express their true self at work should experience reduced exhaustion and emotional depletion (Grandey, 2003; Hewlin, 2003, 2009). Nevertheless, relatively little has been written about authentic self-expression in the workplace, in large part because traditional organizational

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processes and structures are not ideally suited for fulfillment of this need. Concerned with minimizing variance, bureaucratic forms of organizing demand that employees conform to explicit processes, protocols, and procedures (Taylor, 2011; Weber, Henderson, & Parsons, 1947) in performing their jobs. In search of differentiation and competitive advantage, an organization encourages itsemployees to behave in ways consistent with the organization's value proposition and works to cultivate shared cultural norms and values that pressure individuals to align their thinking and behavior with the leader's vision (OReilly & Chatman, 1996; Pratt, 2000; Schein, 2010). When onboarding new employees, organizations expose them to socialization experiences that are designed to reduce ambiguity about appropriate behaviors in the workplace—and that serve to quickly and effectively mold individuals' thinking and actions to ensure uniformity and predictability (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). And, because organizations are conceptualized as instruments aimed at achieving a specific goal that employees do not necessarily intrinsically value (Barnard, 1968), organizations attempt to influence employees to internalize such goals (Kelman, 1958; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986; OReilly & Chatman, 1996).

These various organizational practices together serve to impress an organizational identity and behavioral code on individuals while suppressing their unique identities (Nicholson, 1984; Sherif, 1958). In the process, employees inevitably will experience a sense of inauthenticity, an experience antithetical to authentic self-expression (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013). There is a clear psychological cost to the enforced suppression of individuality and authentic self-expression within the workplace. People who suppress their authentic selves in deference to organizational strictures feel alienated from the self (Grandey, 2003; Roberts, 2012), can be exhausted by the cognitive effort associated with suppressing the self (Hewlin, 2003, 2009), and can even experience a sense of immorality and impurity resulting from a sense that they are being untruthful with their self (Gino, Kouchaki, & Galinsky, 2015). More generally, these relatively common organizational practices—strong socialization processes, a strong focus on process adherence, and demands for uniformity and conformity—hamper employees' ability to authentically self-express in organizational settings (Cable et al., 2013).

Organizational characteristics and authentic self-expression

The need for self-expression in service of realizing self-actualization is grounded in our human desire for distinctiveness. We desire, in part, to see ourselves as unique and distinct human beings, meaningfully different from others (Brewer, 2003). This desire for distinctiveness is likely related to our desire for a meaningful existence—to feel that we matter to the world and exist for a specific and important purpose; if we see ourselves as perfectly indistinct, we cannot credibly believe that our purpose is meaningful and valued (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013; McAdams, 2013). Our search for distinctiveness is, in part, relationally fulfilled. Our value to the world is an abstract reflection of the degree to which we are doing something important for others and are appreciated by them. In short, we need our unique self-view to be reflected within our social environment (Swann, 1983; Swann & Read, 1981).

Strong cultural norms, socialization processes, and an explicit organizational demand for uniformity serve not only to repress individuals' ability to act in authentically self-expressive ways, but also as a signal to others of an individual's social value. These organizational systems shape not only individuals' behavior but also their shared value assessment of others' non-conforming behavior. To enable the fulfillment of employees' need for authentic self-expression, organizations must create environments hospitable to diverse and varied individuals. It is not enough to simply allow individuals to be themselves; organizations must also enable interpersonal relationships that signal the individual value of a person's distinctive contribution, characteristics, and passions.

Many employees find some measure of social acceptance through collective social identity. Strong cultures, socialization processes, and inspirational, purpose-focused leadership all help employees embrace, and feel embraced by, a collective social identity. Paradoxically, individuals' social value is a reflection of the degree to which they suppress the self and exhibit collectively valued attributes. Conversely, authentic self-expression demands that individuals develop a sense that their social value as a reflection of their idiosyncrasies, not merely of their conformity to collectively valued attributes. Organizational practices such as those described above establish an organizational code (as formalized processes, uniformity norms, and socialization practices) that signals that an individual's value is a reflection of minimized deviance from that organizational code. This dominant sense of what is valued will, in turn, influence the nature of employees' relational interactions.

In short, organizational norms or expressed values can influence the degree to which employees' idiosyncrasies are embraced and accepted. Cable et al. (2013) provided a vivid example of the way in which onboarding processes provide an early experience that serves to repress employees' sense of authenticity. They showed that a simple best-self exercise, conducted during the onboarding process, leads to increased performance and reduced turnover—a function of the employee's authenticity. Similar policies and practices should serve to impress the validity and value of employees' idiosyncrasies, and decrease the likelihood that interpersonal interactions impose pressure to conform.

Discussion

We have argued here for the resurgence of the study of need fulfillment at work. Work motivation theories have well articulated how the discomfort associated with unmet needs can carry motivating potential. But multiple veins of organizational study suggest a desire for theory linking positive experiences and motivated behavior. Our theory begins with a review of the work engagement literature, which has suffered from a crisis of construct

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clarity (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Rothbard & Patil,2012). Although the literature is broad and expansive, and there exists a commonly cited definition, the characterizations of the construct are not always aligned, leading to an amorphous and indistinct construct. This opens the door to criticisms of construct overlap and leads to practical challenges to empirically examining the nature of the construct (Suddaby, 2010). We have attempted, in our examination of the work engagement literature, to capture the key distinct attributes reflected across the swath of work engagement research and to add clarity to the precise nature of work engagement.

Our review points to engagement as a construct that is central to understanding the motivational potential of positive experiences and fulfilling experiences at work. Our review of the work engagement literature points to three critical and distinguishing attributes. First, we identified the key attribute of energy that is so prevalent in much of the work engagement literature (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Rich et al., 2010; Rothbard, 2001; Rothbard & Patil, 2012) and explicit in the definition of work engagement (Schaufeli, Salanova et al., 2002). Second, we identified that positive emotional experiences are the source of the energy so key to the sustenance of work engagement, reflecting the many past suggestions that work engagement is emotionally facilitated (e.g. Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Kahn, 1990, 1992; Rich et al., 2010; Rothbard & Patil, 2012). Finally, we argued that work engagement has been systematically theorized or empirically demonstrated as a behavioral phenomenon—an experience leading to important positive organizational outcomes (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Rich et al., 2010).

Our hope is that this summary and clarified construct will motivate research across various streams. Although there is evidence of the positive effect of work engagement on job performance, we believe that a refined conceptual construct will enable more focused empirical examinations of the downstream performance consequences of work engagement. Our arguments further propose a conceptual pathway for the motivational effects of relationships—a particularly exciting line of study, in our opinion. We hope that scholars will embrace the construct of work engagement as a possible pathway through which enhancing relationships at work can yield increased performance. We also hope that this work will add to the growing line of relational motivation literature (e.g. Grant, 2007; Grant & Ashford, 2008), as well as literature expressly acknowledging the relational nature of work engagement (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Rothbard & Patil,2012).

This conceptualization of work engagement also provides an important springboard for describing the theoretical relationship between positive emotional experiences at work and motivated behavior. Specifically, the view of work engagement as an experience of energy, sourced by emotional experiences, helps to clarify the relationship between needs and positive organizational behaviors. Specifically, we have argued that employee need fulfillment expectations predict work engagement. Employees' expectations of need fulfillment at work become an ideal state against which they gauge their routine, daily workplace interactions. Those interactions serve as evidence confirming or disconfirming employees' expectations and consequently yield discrete emotional experiences, which either stimulate or drain employees' energy. We hope that these theoretical arguments and proposed relationships inspire further empirical investigation directed at confirming and extending our theoretical arguments.

This paper is also a call for further empirical research exploring the means by which organizations can more systematically confirm employees' expectations of authentic self-expression. Our theory claims particularly positive effects associated with confirmation of approach-oriented expectations related to needs like authentic self-expression; firms that can systematically enable confirmation of these expectations should inspire higher levels of engagement among their employees.

On a more somber note, our theoretical predictions point to particularly negative effects associated with disconfirmed expectations of authentic self-expression. To be sure, disconfirmed avoidance expectations will more negatively impact work engagement than disconfirmed approach expectations—there is certainly ample reason for organizations to attend to confirmation of safety and security expectations. But our theory suggests that disconfirmed approach expectations, even in an environment that provides ample confirmation of avoidance expectations, will still yield disengagement. The various expectations are not additive; an employee carrying approach-oriented expectations into an organization providing only confirmation of avoidance expectations will likely experience lower levels of work engagement than an employee in the same environment who only carries avoidance-oriented expectations into the workplace. This becomes particularly important when we recognize that many common organizational systems are, unfortunately, not conducive to confirming approach-leaning needs such as those for authentic self-expression. Managers and coworkers measure employee value, explicitly and implicitly, based on conformity to socially accepted norms, and they demand conformity to specified roles, patterns of behaviors, and norms—all of which enable a broader span of managerial control but repress employees' ability to authentically express themselves through their work.

We believe that general societal trends have contributed to a broad shift in individuals' normative expectations of work. For decades, organizational scholarship has assumed that employees might look to work as a source of more than a mere paycheck. But recent trends suggest a mounting pressure to allow employees to fulfill authentic self-expressive needs (e.g. Hochschild, 1997; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski, 2003; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Employees increasingly look to work as a domain in which to find meaning and fulfill callings—a sense, consistent with self-expressive needs, that one is uniquely and specifically intended to achieve some idiosyncratic purpose in life (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997).

We find it telling that more extreme cases of high levels of work engagement, as reported in the popular press,

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often seem to coincide with departures from traditional organizational forms. The academic literature, too, has become increasingly fascinated with atypical organizational forms, in part because many of these organizations seem intently focused on creating positive and fulfilling environments, and are marked by extremely engaged employee populations. Lee and Edmondson (2017), for example, motivate their examination of three decentralized, non-hierarchical organizations in part with the proposition that employees increasingly look for greater levels of fulfillment than traditional organizational forms can provide. We concur; as we have suggested above, employees increasingly expect work to fulfill approach-oriented authentic self-expression needs, expectations that traditional organizational forms and practices are not adequately prepared to fulfill. We hope this work will motivate further study of the structural means by which organizations can enable the sorts of interactions that confirm employees' authentic self-expression needs.

The inadequacy of traditional forms for the fulfillment of authentic self-expression at work has other important implications for scholarly study. Because of this challenge, organizations devote significant time and resources to hiring employees who are a "fit"—with the role, other individuals, and the culture and nature of the organization (Chatman, 1989; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Fit has become a critical recruiting dimension—and the desperate search for a "match" likely helps to explain the 50% surge in financial resources devoted to recruiting over the past decade (Poole & Berchem, 2014). We believe that fit is, at best, a stopgap measure. In its purest form, authentic self-expression demands the expression, acknowledgment, and validation of each individual's idiosyncrasies—a tall order for any organization. It's understandable that organizations would work diligently to find employees who "fit" well, thereby reducing the likelihood that employees are forced to act inauthentically. But unless an organization can identify all of the dimensions on which individuals might vary and value authentically, it's unlikely the organization will ever be able to find an employee population that naturally "fits" the organization. Treating the organizational context as fixed, and using a more fine-tuned lens to identify employees who inherently conform to that context, may be a fool's errand. Instead, organizations would be wise to devote their efforts to adapting organizational processes and technology in ways that validate and confirm employees' unique, authentic selves. This, of course, will not be an easy task, but the research we reviewed and ideas we proposed both point to a starting point. We hope that this work inspires further empirical examination of the means by which employers can systematically confirm employees' expectations of authentic self-expression at work.

Conclusion

We have presented a new approach to the study of employees' needs at work. Though many past researchers have explored the role of needs in motivation, little theory exists to explain the conceptual relationship between positive and fulfilling need experiences at work and outcomes characteristic of motivation. We believe this line of study offers great promise to researchers hoping to better understand how positive work experiences yield positive behavior. We further hope that our theory inspires greater scholarly interest in understanding the ways in which organizations can structurally provide experiences that confirm employees' authentic self-expression needs. We believe that confirmation of these needs has great potential to positively impact employees' experience at work, while yielding powerfully positive organizational outcomes.

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