Engagement as Privilege: Deconstructing the Power and Privilege of Employee Engagement

Abstract

The purpose this paper was to critically examine the construct of employee engagement as a privileged state. Four principal questions explored were who: (a) controls the context of work, (b) determines the experience of engagement, (c) defines the value of engagement, and (d) benefits from high levels of engagement?

Research has demonstrated the numerous benefits of an engaged workforce (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Consequently, scholars have examined a host of potential variables believed to influence the positive development of engagement, in addition to the study of outcomes that result from engagement surfacing in practice. For example, several scholars point toward antecedents of engagement such as job characteristics (Saks, 2006; Macey & Schneider, 2008), perceived organizational support, and fairness (Wollard & Shuck, 2011), as well as outcomes like turnover intention (Saks, 2006), knowledge creation (Hoon Song, Kolb, Hee Lee, & Kyoung Kim, 2012), task performance and organizational citizenship behavior (Rich, LePine, & Crawford, 2010), among others. Numerous aspects of engagement have been and continue to be examined – theoretically, conceptually, and empirically – accounting for significant advances in the measurement and application of engagement to practice. This developing stream of research around engagement has been met with attention and acknowledgment.

Despite this, little research has specifically explored the unfolding of the phenomenon of engagement to the context of work as a positive psychological state. Most scholars agree that the experienced state of engagement is desired at the individual and organizational levels and research focused on the outcomes of engagement support this claim (Christian et al., 2011). Moreover, research has demonstrated that employees who experience engagement benefit from a variety of documented positive professional and personal returns, such as a reduction in stress and burnout, higher levels of psychological wellbeing and personal accomplishment (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). Engaged employees dependably report increased levels of effort and production and lower intentions to turnover (Christian et al., 2011). Moreover, as a step toward understanding the phenomenon, engagement is thought to be “predicated by access to job (e.g., autonomy, supervisory coaching, performance feedback) and personal resources (e.g., optimism, self-efficacy, self-esteem)” (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008, p. 187). Despite this, we have found no research that has examined the questions of who controls such job resources, who or what determines the experience of engagement for employees, or who controls the target of activities meant to engage and how this control affects employees and their experience of engagement. Notwithstanding, within the definition of engagement lies an implied process about how the phenomenon of engagement unfolds and under what conditions it is likely to emerge, not just what it produces and who benefits (Shuck & Rose, 2013). For example, most scholars would agree that the experienced psychological state of engagement is both positive and forward moving – defined as an active psychological state (Parker & Griffin, 2011). The implied process then concerns the juncture of cognitive and emotive energies into positive, forward moving states in ways that spur intention toward behavioral action and that identify an employee through their observable actions as engaged. While the development and surge of engagement focused scholarship has increased, the application of the construct itself could be unintentionally selective in who experiences it, either by some element of privilege, or embedded within the
environmental conditions predicated by a privileged state. If the application of the construct in practice is, in fact, selective based on context, engagement would be by definition, a privilege.

**Purpose and Guiding Questions**

The role of engagement as privilege has gone wholly unexamined in the literature. We argue that engagement may not be an equitable psychological state for all employees, at all times, and that access to this positive psychological state of work may hinge on conditions of work that are actually privileged. This frames engagement as a potentially privileged experience. Because of the potential for privilege to influence the experience of engagement, the purpose of our work was to critically examine the construct of employee engagement as a privileged state. The four main questions guided our inquiry. The four questions were: (a) who controls the context of work, (b) who determines the experience of engagement, (c) who defines the value of engagement, and (d) who benefits from high levels of engagement?

This paper unfolds in the following main sections: (a) the interplay of privilege, meaningful work, and engagement, (b) the intersection of privilege, meaningful work, and engagement, (c) an interrogation on the interplay and intersection of privilege, meaningful work, and engagement through our four guiding questions, (d) a discussion of engagement as privilege, and last (e) implications for practice.

**The Interplay of Privilege, Meaningful Work, and Engagement**

In order to explore the construct of engagement as a privileged state, we present a discussion of both privilege and meaningful work and engagement as a first step.

**What is Privilege?**

Privileges are assets, either earned or unearned, that help individuals advance or benefit over, and often at the expense of, others (Bailey, 1998). Earned privileges are “any earned conditions, skill, asset, or talent that benefit its possessor” (Bailey, 1998, p. 109). Earned privileges are often obtained through work, education, or learning how to capitalize on a particular skill set (Rocco & West, 1998). Unearned privileges are awarded by birth into a particular group, type, or classification of people. Rocco and West (1998) named eight attributes that determine privilege: (a) class, (b) gender, (c) race, (d) religion, (e) sexual orientation, (f) able-bodiedness, (g) ethnicity, and (h) age. Manifestations of privilege are “power, access, status, credibility, and normality” (Rocco & West, 1998, p. 173). These manifestations of privilege play out in simple taken for granted ways, for instance, the credibility and status of gender in the medical professions where historically most nurses are women and most doctors are men.

Both earned and unearned privileges denote social order and hierarchy and support and contradict one another. For example, heterosexual white men generally experience a great deal of unearned privilege, even from young ages. For some of these men, the additional earned privilege of being college-educated may stem in part from advantages experienced in relation to an already-privileged identity. Thus, being a college-educated, heterosexual white man may result in different outcomes than being a white woman, or a gay white man, or a person of Color in a similar situation. Further, earned and unearned privileges may become conflated. Individuals from dominant groups with unearned privileges may believe that their success came solely as a result of individual merit. An example is a white college educated male believing anyone with the same education could enjoy the same career trajectory and believing the reason others at his level are also white males is because they work hard and others do not. The benefits of privilege are often clear to those situated outside dominant groups (Bailey, 1998). Unearned privilege is context and time specific and dependent on social values, laws, geography, and demographics.
Changes in the status of characteristics that produce unearned privilege are subtle and gradual yet powerful and influential.

The higher a person’s position in an organization, the more likely they may be to be rewarded with money, status, and power. These privileges may grant greater leverage for career development and a greater sense that their work is meaningful because they feel cared for, listened to, have access to resources, and have a voice in what happens in the organization. The fact may be however that employees within their team have to act like they care, are required to listen, must give of their resources, and do what they are told. However, making it to these higher positions of power within organizational hierarchies could be easier for certain people than it is for others. It is at this intersection of privilege and meaningful work that we contend engagement itself becomes a potentially privileged state.

Employees who gain advantage, intentionally or unknowingly, from an earned or unearned privilege create states of privilege within an organization. A privileged state is an organizational condition created as a result of the collected experiences of privilege among a group of employees who benefit over, and at the expense of, others. For example, the well understood and little documented “old boys club” creates conditions of privilege that can be very challenging to navigate without access to the ‘club’. The ‘old boys club’ is therefore a privileged state. The privilege of being in the club may be both earned and unearned – some are well aware of their longstanding membership while others are unaware they even paid their dues at birth. Encountering ‘the club’ as an outsider can be disorienting and disengaging. Few would argue, we believe, that the ‘old boys club’ is not an explicit artifact of privilege.

**What is Meaningful Work and Engagement?**

In Kahn’s (1990; 2010) seminal work on personal engagement, he identified three psychological elements that an engaged employee experiences within a holistic appraisal of their wellbeing en route to bringing their full selves into work: (a) meaningfulness, (b) safety, and (c) availability. The sum of these elements is thought to elicit the phenomenon of engagement. As such, these appraisals are proportionately connected to the personal resources that an employee brings to the physical, emotional, and social space of work and are directly connected to the theory of meaningful work (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Bakker et al., 2008). An employee who feels that their work contributes to and is valued by the organization (degree of meaningfulness), feels as if they can express themselves without fear of condemnation (degree of safety), and is confident they have the resources to complete their work (degree of availability) may be more likely to both express and experience meaningful work en route to high levels of engagement (Chalofsky, 2003; Kahn, 1990).

Meaningful work has been defined in terms of three themes: (a) sense of balance, (b) the work itself, and (c) sense of self (Chalofsky, 2003). These three themes are linked together in their consideration of the holistic nature of individuals’ experiences on the job. Using these themes, we might understand the concept of meaningful work as “those working conditions that are motivating” (De Klerk, Boshoff, & Van Wyk, 2006, p. 322) and those tasks related to a sense of importance, intricacy, and personal identity (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Simply put, meaningful work has been operationalized as “the way we express the meaning and purpose of our lives through the activities (work) that comprise most of our working hours” (Chalofsky, 2003, p. 73). Thus, identifying work as “meaningful,” both personally and professionally, is a core aspect of becoming and remaining engaged in one’s work.

**The Intersection of Privilege, Meaningful Work, and Engagement**

**Who Controls the Context of Work?**
The examination of engagement as privilege is also an examination of power. In her work around power as a discourse for framing organizational incivility, Callahan (2011) suggested several kinds of power within an organizational context. Two of the most salient kinds of power for this issue of engagement as privilege revolve around “the power ‘of’ the organization” and “the power ‘over’ the less powerful” [italic added] (p. 13-14). In both instances, the issue of power is used to preserve systematic order in ways that maintain structures and constraints that detract from the possibility of engagement. For example, from the “power ‘of’ lens” increasingly organizations construct the norms of engagement and dictate what engagement should be, and feel like (Shuck & Rose, 2013). The organization states: “This is what being engaged means at this company. Do these things.” The power ‘over’ is related to positive outcomes for the performance and gives to those with status, the power to control others with less power. From a manager to an employee, it often sounds like: “You need to be more engaged.” Callahan goes on to suggest a third kind of transformational power that is useful to consider in this situation: “the power ‘to’ facilitate change.” This is the power that reframes the conversation between a manager and an employee from “You need to be more engaged” to “How can we best support the development of engagement within you?”

We can assume that employees naturally gravitate toward opportunities that are engaging. If employees naturally seek engaging opportunities, why is it some employees find it so difficult to be engaged? It is possible that a lack of engagement with work could stem from a helplessness grounded within the feelings and experiences of being powerless to control the context of work despite a natural pull toward engaging work. This is characterized by what Kahn (1990) referred to as disengagement, or the withdrawal of personal resources. We know that at times, employees are excluded—not only those with a disability, but others who are different from the norm (however that norm is defined), by race, gender, religion, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation or other attributes. organizations create the structures and conditions of work, determine who will be in positions of influence and power, and allow conditions to flourish. Because these actions ultimately determine the context of work and create the unique environmental conditions of work, we argue that those in power ultimately control the context of work. See Figure 1 for a visual depiction of this intersection.

**Who Determines the Experience of Engagement?**

In most cases, management and organizations determine the experience of engagement by providing—intentionally or unintentionally—obstacles that employees must overcome, disregard, or persist against in order to become and remain engaged with work or create organizational change initiatives designed to cajole employees into feeling engaged at work. An organization can be thought of as a macro-object, a living and breathing entity that exists in the world and whose ebbs and flows have consequences to their surroundings and the workplace conditions they manufacture (Schein, 1999). An organization has the responsibility for creating and sustaining the conditions of a workplace culture that nurtures the experience of engagement if they desire high levels of engagement among their employees. The organization creates such a culture by establishing an identity and setting standards. Consequently, the answer to who determines the experience of engagement lies at the intersection of how employees ultimately interpret an organization culture made of conditions and structures. Because employees react to conditions and structures and not the other way around, we maintain that organizations ultimately determine the experience of engagement (See Figure 1).

**Who Defines the Value of Engagement?**
Engagement is arguably valuable to both employees and organizations. This value is intrinsic and extrinsic; measured in emotional attachment, increased salary, profits, and productivity, among other things. Employees engage when organizations nurture those conditions of engagement (e.g., perceived meaning, balance of safety, and adequate resources) – there is no other way. The only power an organization truly has in this context is to create those conditions that cultivate engagement, but the organization has little power to manufacture the actual psychological state itself. The organization creates and maintains a culture where engagement can occur yet the ability to define the value of engagement lies within the individual employee. As represented in Figure 1, because only the employee can control how they interpret and perceive structures and conditions, it is the employee who defines the ultimate value of engagement.

Who Benefits from High Levels of Engagement?

There are two sides to explore regarding the question of who benefits from high levels of engagement: (a) organizational benefits and (a) individual employee benefits. Organizationally speaking, the research is clear about the benefits of engagement for the organization. For example, voluminous empirical research has indicated that organizations whose employees report heightened levels of engagement also report lower levels of turnover (Saks, 2006), higher levels of job performance, task performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Rich et al., 2010), and productivity (Christian et al., 2011).

Emerging evidence is equally strong that employees benefit from high levels of engagement, also. For example, empirical research has indicated those employees who report higher levels of engagement also experience lower levels of stress and burnout (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008) and higher levels of accomplishment in their work (Shuck, Shuck, & Reio, 2013). In sum, engagement is good for employees in a work context, but the benefits of engagement have been found to extend well beyond the boundaries of work.

Engagement as Privilege

Throughout our discussion, we have continuously framed engagement and privilege as affecting each other through institutions of power, structures, dispositions, outcomes, and antecedents, but it is possible that privilege and engagement are mutually influential. Because engagement is a psychological state within the experienced conditions of a workplace culture, the outcomes of engagement (i.e., higher performance) can be defined as a privilege for the organization. We have defined privilege in this paper as an asset, either earned or unearned, that helps advance or benefit over, and often at the expense of, others (Bailey, 1998). Because an organization nurtures the conditions of engagement, employees engage at higher levels and consequently perform better. The willingness to nurture the conditions of engagement provides a context for the outcomes of engagement to be leveraged as a privilege for an organization.

We maintain however that the organization is uniquely positioned to influence systems of privilege that enable the conditions for engagement. If organizations sincerely desire the state of engagement, those who influence organizational structures have an obligation to create the conditions of engagement by confronting manifestations of privilege such as unequal states of power, access, status, credibility, and normality (Rocco & West, 1998). Organizations should consider how to best create such conditions in ways that are inclusive, caring, and sensitive to the experiences of work for all employees, not just the privileged few. This effort must be in direct proportion to levels of engagement they are demanding from their employees.

Conclusion and Implications
The focus of our work has sought to explore the construct of engagement through a framework of privilege and power. As a result, we have highlighted the inter-dynamics of how workplace conditions, particularly those that influence positions of power and privilege, work to influence the conditions of engagement, which in turn effect the end state of engagement (i.e., workplace performance). Based on our paper, we identified two implications for practice: (a) an awareness of engagement as a privilege; and (b) recognizing the importance of becoming aware of engagement as a privilege; and (b) utilizing culturally responsive practices.

As mentioned previously, privileges are invisible to those who have them (Bailey, 1998). A critical first step for practice in engaging employees is to acknowledge how engagement is manifested as a privilege within the organization and to name the conditions of meaningful work. Organizations might start by asking leaders to examine their use of power as either, having the power of, the power over, or the power to (Callahan, 2011) and exploring the implications to their reflections. The awareness of engagement as a privilege could guide leaders and managers and those human resource professionals who work with them inevitably to consider non-traditional ways to engage those employees not influenced through traditional intervention strategies. Cultural Responsiveness consists of acknowledging the differences that people bring to a situation, recognizing that one’s identity influences how they experience their context, and making accommodations based on differences (Nieto, 2004). Organizations then should strive to create cultures that are inclusive and to find ways that engage all employees. Organizations alone cannot determine what kind of work should be meaningful to a person, but they can create the conditions for meaning and purpose to flourish (Shuck & Rose, 2013).

Our paper has researched the concept of engagement as a privilege. We explored the concept of privilege, engagement and meaningful work. It is at this intersection of privilege and meaningful work that we contend engagement itself becomes a potentially privileged state. We searched answers to four essential questions: (a) who controls the context of work, (b) who determines the experience of engagement, (c) who defines the value of engagement, and (d) who benefits from high levels of engagement? Although both individuals and organizations benefit from engagement, the organization holds the power to make the work engaging. With an engaged workforce, the benefits would extend beyond the organization.

References


Figure 1.

The Intersection of Privilege, Meaningful Work, and Engagement