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Public relations and zones of engagement: Employees' lived experiences and the fundamental nature of employee engagement

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ABSTRACT

While employee engagement has been primarily explored within the business, human resources and management disciplines, public relations research has more recently taken an interest in furthering its understanding and acknowledging how public relations can serve an organization's internal communication as a foundational component of the field. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how public relations can serve an organization's internal communication by better understanding how employees perceive and experience engagement. Following a phenomenological methodology (n = 32), this study utilized zones of meaning as a conceptual foundation (not a literal interpretation) to examine the process related to the complex, shifting and shared meaning of zones of engagement and how zones of meaning are products as well as drivers of engagement, which offer a new way to conceptualize employee engagement in public relations, shifting to a deeper comprehension and understanding. The findings show that employee experiences align more to Kahn's (1990) initial personal engagement model than other public relations models. The psychological conditions of meaningfulness and safety from the original employee engagement model emerged as important factors in defining the employees' shared-meaning lived experiences. In addition, this study offers a new definition of disengagement, which is similar but unique to the scholarship on negative engagement. The findings provide a framework for public relations scholars who work to further refine the understanding of employee engagement and for practitioners who develop public relations strategies for internal audiences, and advances the conceptual foundation of zones of meaning in public relations scholarship.

1. Introduction

While employee engagement has been primarily explored within the business, human resources and management disciplines, public relations research has more recently taken an interest in furthering its understanding and acknowledging how public relations can serve an organization's internal communication as a foundational component of the field. Thus, the purpose of this study is to better understand how employees perceive and experience engagement in relation to how public relations has an internal communication management responsibility, in addition to and in coordination with its external communication management responsibility, in the constitutive role by which organizations become communicative. Following a phenomenological methodology (n = 32), this study utilized zones of meaning as a conceptual foundation (not a literal interpretation) to examine the process related to the complex, shifting and shared meaning of zones of engagement and how zones of meaning are products as well as drivers of

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engagement, which offer a new way to conceptualize employee engagement in public relations, shifting to a deeper comprehension and understanding. The findings show that employee experiences align more to Kahn (1990) initial personal engagement model than other public relations models. The psychological conditions of meaningfulness and safety from the original employee engagement model emerged as important factors in defining the employees' shared-meaning lived experiences. In addition, this study offers a new definition of disengagement, which is similar but unique to the scholarship on negative engagement. The findings provide a framework for public relations scholars who work to further refine the understanding of employee engagement, and for practitioners who develop public relations strategies, in coordination with organizational communication practitioners and human resource professionals, for internal audiences. It also advances the conceptual foundation of zones of meaning in public relations scholarship.

2. Literature review

2.1. Public relations and engagement

Engagement research in public relations began over two decades ago as an embedded concept and since has been examined in relation to other concepts such as corporate social responsibility, social capital, and internal communication (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Stoker and Tusinski (2006) initially argued that engagement has the potential to be the next paradigm for the field of public relations. Johnston (2014) suggested that engagement is an important component of organizational life used to deconstruct and provide insight into the meanings and values that result from communicative interactions among diverse publics. Engagement allows organizations to become more cognizant of power dynamics and shift toward a more co-creational perspective. Botan and Taylor (2004) proposed that the co-creational approach values a setting where all organizational members contribute to the meaning-making process, while Stoker and Tusinski (2006) stated that engagement offers organizations the opportunity to honor the multivocality that comes from communicating with different audiences and provides organizations the ability to understand the differences that make diverse audiences unique.

Despite public relations scholarly calls for the potential and possibilities associated with engagement research, the concept lacks a certain robustness across the public relations literature. Taylor and Kent (2014) suggested that engagement is an ideograph or a word that is both unclear and ephemeral. Engagement seems to be easily understood, but as the term is unpackaged in research, the complexities associated with it are uncovered. One area of particular interest for engagement scholars in public relations is employee engagement.

2.2. Defining employee engagement

Within the public relations literature, employees have long been considered a key stakeholder group for organizations to maintain positive relationships for various functional, social economic reasons, including the potential for employees to affect how external audiences view their organization (Grünig, 1992; Kim & Rhee, 2011). For example, according to Heath (2011), stakeholder theory attends to the rights and obligations – both inside and outside of an organization – as power resources applied by competing interests. Regarding external stakeholders, many organizations develop and execute strategic internal communication initiatives to keep management and employees informed of key issues that affect their organization so they are capable of discussing these issues in an informed way with both internal and external stakeholders (Welch & Jackson, 2007) – a process whereby organizations become communicative.

Kahn (1990) initially defined employee engagement as the “harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (p. 694). Kahn (1992) later added the concept of psychological presence to the definition. Other scholars have used similar definitions to the original proposed definition. For example, Men (2012) defined employee engagement as how psychologically present employees are when performing organizational roles. Welch (2011) extended the original definition to what she calls “organization engagement” as “a dynamic, changeable psychological state, which links employees to their organizations, manifest in organization member role performances expressed physically, cognitively and emotionally, and influenced by organization-level internal communication” (p. 337).

The preceding definitions position employee engagement, often initiated through public relations practice and tactics, as the primary facilitator of job performances and emphasize the ways in which employees can connect with both their positions, organizations and external stakeholders. Johnston (2014) suggested that engagement is the process of meaning-making between organizations and target audiences and in this case, engagement centers on the construction of meaning between an organization and its employees. Most other definitions offer an end goal for employee engagement and provide analysis of some of its different components. However, limiting employee engagement to role performance prevents a sophisticated understanding of the concept and the meaning behind employee engagement.

2.3. Zones of meaning

One approach to understanding the meaning-making process in public relations is using Heath (1993) zones of meaning. For the purpose of this paper, the zones of meaning are complex, shifting and shared meaning that are products as well as drivers of engagement. Zones of meaning are rooted in a rhetorical perspective to better understand and explain how meaning is created. Heath (1993) developed the zones of meaning from Burke (1966) research, which explained that meaning is both created and articulated

through terministic screens. Terministic screens provide a channel for people to filter and form their interpretations of reality and exercise corresponding behaviors based on the interpretations. Once these terministic screens, or perceived and reconstructed patterns of reality, become observable through actions and discourse, Heath (1993) suggested, they have become zones of meaning and that “we no longer perceive reality without the intrusion of terministic screens” (1986, p. 85). In this case, the language used to describe engagement from interviews adds dimension to reality as people seek for expressions and terminologies that will be useable reflections of reality so people can develop vocabularies that are reflections of reality (1986).

The zones of meaning build on organizational communication scholars' understanding of organizational identity. An in-depth review of identification research is beyond the scope of this one article, but acknowledgment of the seminal identity research in organizational communication scholarship is important to the understanding of how meaning-making exists within an organizational context since that is where public relations is rooted. Identification is the symbolic development that underlies basic social interactions that leads to meaning-making (Cheney, 1983b). The process of identifying helps individuals make sense of their experiences, arrive at decisions, and establish a sense of self (Cheney, 1983a). In organizations, identification takes shape from communicative interactions with other individuals or symbols associated with the organization and serves as a reference point for organizational messages and symbols (Cheney, Christensen, & Dailey, 2014). Through communication, organizational identification develops and leads to personal meaning-making, giving organizational members the association of “I am like you” with other organizational members (Cheney, 1983b). Organizations invest in developing employee identification so when employees are forced to make a decision, the hope is that they will side with the organization (Cheney, 1983b). Identification is important to public relations scholars and practitioners since according to Cheney (1992) “public relations is in the business of producing symbols of, by, and for organizations” (p. 179). The symbols constructed by public relations practices represent the corporate image, which lead to organizational identification (Cheney, 1992). The result of the identification process is meaning-making of the organizational experience for organizational members. Tompkins and Cheney (1985) cautioned that organizational identification could lead to concertive control with employees being unaware of this unobtrusive control.

Heath's zones of meaning have mostly been applied to crisis and risk contexts (e.g., Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Palenchar & Heath, 2007) and most recently, fostering social capital (Saffer, 2016). However, this meaning-making approach is applicable when considering employees as a stakeholder group and how the reconstructed patterns of reality form zones of meaning. Saffer (2016) asserted that shared meaning is relevant to public relations practitioners by providing an approach to better understand how particular messages lead to shared understanding among intended audiences. Zones of meaning help to identify reality links of group perspectives based on collective individual experiences, which supports targeted communication efforts (Heath & Palenchar, 2000; Palenchar & Heath, 2002), such as public-relations-based internal communication campaigns and programs.

A zones of engagement approach to internal communication reinforces how researchers and practitioners thinking about employees not as a single public, which does not exist, but rather as, according to Heath (2013), “the shared knowledge, experience, preferences, motives, opinions held in the mind of some people in society” (p. 977). While not necessarily a crisis but does certainly occur during employee engagement, Heath and Millar (2004) suggested that contestable events' interpretations and narratives that best allow for co-creation of meaning or overlapping zones of meaning will frame the perceived dimension of the event.

2.4. Internal communication and employee engagement

Numerous public relations and communication scholars have addressed the association between internal communication and employee engagement, suggesting that communication is the catalyst of employee engagement (e.g. Jiang & Men, 2015; Karanges, Beatson, Johnston, & Lings, 2014; Reissner & Pagan, 2013). Internal communication fosters employee engagement by serving “internal stakeholders' core (trait) communication needs, as well as surface (state and attitude) communication needs” (Welch, 2011). Internal communication facilitates interactions in the workplace, which leads to meaningful relationships and optimized employee engagement (Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, & Lings, 2015). Specifically, internal communication that encourages employees to share their thoughts and suggestions leads to greater employee engagement, especially when prompted by an employee's direct supervisor (Karanges et al., 2015). Jiménez-Castillo (2016) offers a relational-focused framework that can be used to manage the dissemination of large volumes of information to employees, which leads to greater market intelligence. In addition, Kang and Sung (2017) found that employee engagement cultivated through symmetrical communication can lead to employee communication behaviors (ECB) like megaphoning and scouting, which produces positive internal communication behaviors. When employees are experiencing engagement, they are more likely to seek out information on behalf of the organization.

In associating internal communication with employee engagement, Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014 suggested that the role of communication is transformed into something new. For example, Reissner & Pagan (2013) conducted a real-time case study of a private-public partnership organization, with data collection using interviews and focus groups with both management and employees, to determine how employee engagement is generated through direct and discursive communication activities. The authors conclude that employees have to actively respond for employee engagement to be generated, and both the organization and the employees have an active role in creating employee engagement. Employee engagement is not a straightforward process and the process of engagement involves a give and take between management and employees through communication activities (Reissner & Pagan, 2013). Therefore, when internal communication is geared toward strengthening organizational identification and group membership, it builds perceptions of support and inadvertently leads to employee engagement (Karanges et al., 2014). Employee engagement cultivated by strategic internal communication programs will lead to greater organizational commitment overtime (Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2017).

In practice, public relations practitioners are often tasked with carrying out internal communication programs. Neill (2015) found

that although human resources still is responsible for employee recruitment and orientation, public relations and/or marketing are carrying out the creation and dissemination of internal messaging because of developed skills and education. Therefore, if employee engagement is the product of successful internal communication as previous public relations scholars have argued, then understanding the employee engagement experience is important to the both public relations practitioners and scholars. Uncovering the shared meaning of this particular experience may inform the development of strategic internal communication programs and better articulate the connection among public relations, internal communication and employee engagement.

Despite the fact that current research has identified the potential precursors to successful engagement practices, the connection between internal communication and employee engagement has not been fully developed from a theoretical standpoint (Karanges et al., 2015). The next section will further address the conceptual problems associated with the current state of public relations, internal communication and employee engagement scholarship.

2.5. Limitations of internal communication and employee engagement

Internal communication has predominantly been viewed as a management function used to communicate on behalf of the organization or management to employees (one public) with the goal of indoctrinating employees to the organization's goals and objectives (Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012). Both the organization-public relationship stream of research in internal communication and most of the early communication preferences research view internal communication from a functional perspective. From the functional perspective, communication and publics are viewed as tools or as a means to achieve an organizational end, with the dominant focus on techniques and production of organizational messages (Botan & Taylor, 2004). The functional perspective is limited in its ability to identify multiple motivations among actors, not seeing actors as powerful in their cultural settings, and focuses primarily on the cause instead of the effect (Vos, 2011).

Although public relations research has been encouraged to move more toward examining how communication serves as a meaning-making process (Botan & Taylor, 2004), internal communication still resides in the functional perspective as a command-and-control tool, where employees and communication serve as a control mechanism as a means to control to ensure the advancement of organizational goals. Additionally, internal communication from management is seen as the primary facilitator of employee engagement (e.g. Jiang & Men, 2015). Internal communication should be about facilitating the treatment of employees as having intrinsic value and not simply a means to an end (deBussy & Suprawan, 2012). The co-creational approach goes beyond achievement of an organizational goal and identifies publics as partners in the meaning-making process, which has been touted to serve as a long-term theoretical approach for public relations (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

Most public relations scholarship also views employee engagement from a function specific focus (e.g., Men, 2012; Ruck & Welch, 2012; Welch, 2011). From this perspective, employees are viewed as a means to an organizational end. The primary focus is on the production of messaging to get employee buy-in on organizational goals and objectives to advance organizational objectives. The public relations employee engagement literature does not focus on internal communication as a meaning-making process between internal audiences to develop employee engagement, but rather sees internal communication as a technical tool to produce organizational messages to achieve employee compliance (e.g. Gill, 2015; Karanges et al., 2014; Mishra et al., 2014). For example, Gill (2015) argued for the use of corporate storytelling as an approach to develop internal communication and reputation and as an employee engagement strategy to achieve employee acquiescence. Although emphasis is placed on dialogue, the ultimate purpose is for employees to take ownership of the corporate stories told by management and to pass on the information to external audiences (Gill, 2015).

Welch's definition of employee engagement also takes a functional, organizational perspective, using the term organizational engagement to articulate how management communication can influence the physical, cognitive and emotional conditions that are necessary for engagement (2011). Even though internal communication is the key facilitator of employee engagement (D'Aprix, 2009; Reissner & Pagan, 2013), internal communication still resides in the command-control approach (McKie & Willis, 2012), so it is not surprising that employee engagement has yet to move past the functional perspective, which has dominated much of the foundational public relations literature (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

Since current research continues to privilege the organization and management perspectives (e.g., Karanges et al., 2015; Mishra et al., 2014), this study seeks the unique understanding of the phenomenon of employee engagement across all organizational voices from the lens of public relations scholarship. The goal was to not limit engagement and simplify its meaning to a single zone of meaning. In doing so, this study examines many employee engagement experiences that shape organizational identification or meaning-making, which have been understudied up to this point (Cheney et al., 2014). Changing the focus and widening the "lens" to capture a myriad of eclectic organizational voices will expand public relations scholarly understanding of the employee engagement phenomenon beyond simple and singular relations with employees as a single public and beyond describing management-employee relationship traits, often type-casted as communication styles. In doing so, this study will attempt to better understand the organic nature of the engagement process rather than an investigation into how management creates formal engagement practices for employees to increase productivity. Given the gaps in the current research, this study asks one foundational research question:

RQ1: How do employees perceive and reconstruct their experiences of employee engagement?

3. Method

A phenomenological approach is the most appropriate methodology to study the perceptions and descriptions of employee engagement experiences. Phenomenology is the ideal method to build foundations of knowledge from everyday life experiences (Berger

Table 1
Participants.

#	Pseudonym	Gender	Position	Location	Years with Company	Industry
1	Katrina	F	Engagement manager	Tennessee	5 years	Entertainment
2	Shelly	F	Field Trainer	Tennessee	17 years	Entertainment
3	Jane	F	Vice President	Tennessee	18 years	Entertainment
4	Daniel	M	Account Executive	Colorado	10 months	Cloud Technology
5	Marty	M	Account Executive	Colorado	3 years	Cloud Technology
6	Amber	F	Line Manager	Ohio	10 months	Aviation
7	Joe	M	Senior Executive	Ohio	20 years	Aviation
8	Dale	M	Comm. Leader	Ohio	2 years	Aviation
9	Lance	M	General Manager	Arizona	18 years	National Retail
10	Chris	M	Transportation Manager	Florida	28 years	National Retail
11	John	M	Order Filler	Arizona	2 years	National Retail
12	Justin	M	Vice President	New Jersey	19 years	Investment
13	Tricia	F	Vice President	New Jersey	21 years	Investment
14	Catherine	F	Vice President	New Jersey	2 years	Investment
15	Jessica	F	HR Manager	New Jersey	25 years	Investment
16	Tom	M	Driver	Florida	3 years	National Retail
17	Josh	M	Senior HR Manager	Maryland	4 years	Aerospace
18	Gerry	F	Analyst	Connecticut	10 years	Aerospace
19	Harriet	F	Analyst	New Mexico	10 years	Aerospace
20	Ron	M	Engineer	Connecticut	24 years	Chemical
21	Dylan	M	Owner	New Jersey	26 years	Home services
22	Vicky	F	Software Developer	Texas	20 years	Security
23	Bart	M	Vice President	California	34 years	Security
24	Doug	M	Director	California	31 years	Security
25	Ryan	M	Manager	Maryland	36 years	Security
26	Matt	M	Vice President	Virginia	30 years	Security
27	Faye	F	Receptionist	New Mexico	6 years	Hospitality
28	Kent	M	General Manager	New Mexico	6 years	Hospitality
29	Edward	M	Internal Comm. Lead	Tennessee	5 years	Government
30	Natalie	F	Safety Lead	Tennessee	35 years	Government
31	Rebecca	F	Public Affairs Officer	Tennessee	12 years	Government
32	Dallas	M	Police Officer	Boston	28 years	Safety

& Luckmann, 1966), which in this case would be to build knowledge from the meaning-making associated with employee engagement experiences in the workplace. Phenomenology has been primarily used in healthcare and education research, yet this approach has tremendous value in public relations research, especially in understanding how employees experience organizational activities (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

3.1. Sample

Participants in the study, or the unit of analysis, are employees and defined as individuals employed in the U.S. and receive a wage from a U.S. based organization, including both for-profit and government organizations. A purposive sampling approach was used, which is a direct reflection of the study's purpose and guided the researchers in identifying participants from whom the most can be gained, often referred to as information-rich cases (Merriam, 2009). In addition to a purposive sample, a theoretical sampling approach was used, where the analyzed data guided the recruiting of additional participants (Merriam, 2009). Theoretical sampling does not require all participants to be identified ahead of time since participants are sought out concurrently with ongoing data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Merriam, 2009). It was important that the final sample included a variety of perspectives to ensure maximum variation. Maximum variation seeks diverse instances of the phenomenon by hunting for opposite or disconfirming variations (Merriam, 2009).

Table 1 offers a description of participants and includes pseudonyms, gender, position, location, years with the company and industry. The table illustrates sample variance to demonstrate the depth of the study. In total, 32 participants were involved in the study, 13 women and 19 men from 12 different organizations. Participant names are not used in the results section to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Instead, participants are referenced based on pseudonyms, which are included in the demographic information table.

3.2. Data collection

The phenomenological interview was used in data collection as an informal, interactive process with open-ended questions (Moustakas, 1994). An IRB approved, semi-structured interview guide with non-directive questions and a narrative-reconstructed format was used to elicit responses. The interview began with a social conversation to build rapport and to create a relaxed environment (Moustakas, 1994). Next, grand tour questions were used to prompt participants to share about their professional

background and to guide or educate the researchers on the participant's professional history. Following the opening grand tour questions, memorable-tour questions or "standout experience" questions were used to focus on an employee engagement experience and then describing the experience in full (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). When necessary, floating prompts were used to obtain more elaborate responses from the participants (McCracken, 1988).

3.3. Procedures

Interviews took place during summer and fall of 2016 and were conducted via phone, except for one interview conducted in person. Phone interviews were conducted at the researchers' offices, out of sight and hearing of others. Data collection took place over 102 days and ended once the data had resulted in theoretical saturation where the study's categories were fully developed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Interviews lasted between 28 and 67 min, totaling 1281 min or more than 21 h, with the average interview lasting approximately 40 min.

Of the total participants, only five of the 32 participants did not permit the researchers to record the interview with an electronic recording device to aid transcription. For those five interviews, notes were taken to capture the participants' thoughts and perceptions. The researchers transcribed the first three interviews, with the remaining interviews transcribed by a hired transcriber, who is trained in transcribing and was asked to sign the transcriber's pledge of confidentiality prior to having access to the audio recordings. Transcripts were uploaded to a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), NVivo for Mac. Using NVivo helps organize the data throughout the analysis stages and maintain the integrity of the data. The transcripts were read, which totaled 309 pages, while simultaneously listening to the interviews to ensure accuracy.

3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis began with a bridling exercise, which was conducted to identify current knowledge and biases. Bridling derives from the concept of bracketing, which provides the means for the researchers to set aside (not remove) preconceived notions about a phenomenon. Bridling exercises allowed the researchers to truly capture the experience from the participant's point of view (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

Following the bridling exercise, the researchers listened to each audio recording alongside the transcripts to check for accuracy and to have a deep understanding of the interview as a whole and the participant's individual experience. Formal coding began next, with every word, statement or sentence being treated with equal value, and those relevant to the phenomenon were given a code. Codes assign symbolic meaning to the information in a study and serve as a means to organize the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The open coding process resulted in 105 initial codes, all of which were relevant to the research question. Repetitive codes were then collapsed and paired together, which resulted in 16 codes.

The next step of data analysis included clustering the codes into themes. Six themes emerged, which were supported by textual descriptions from the transcripts to provide examples. Imaginative variation was then used to view the data from various angles and constantly see the phenomenon differently (Merriam, 2009). Last, the meanings and essences of the phenomenon develop (Moustakas, 1994). To do so, a unified statement of the meaning of the phenomenon, employee engagement, was created to articulate the complete narrative based on the participants' experiences. The findings to the proposed research question are addressed next.

4. Findings

When all of the participant narratives are taken and analyzed together, patterns of experience observable from the reconstructed narrative descriptions of actions and discourse emerge from the data, which form the *zones of engagement*. The zones of engagement derive from Heath (1993) approach to meaning, where zones of meaning are created as interpretive frames by which organizations and their key stakeholders (e.g., employees) create meaning. In this way, engagement is seen as a strategic process that results because of the zones of meaning, the places where meaning is created through communication. The zones of engagement are not intentional patterns or places where participants are purposefully acting in concert, but instead are places where meaningful experiences occur – where patterns of reality are created and articulated through symbolic actions and discourse – which provides the complexity, richness, and texture that helps to understand and interpret the essence of employee engagement. In using multiple zones of engagement, engagement is not limited or simplified to a single zone of meaning. The themes that emerged from the data to form the zones of engagement suggest that even though each employee had their own individual experience, when all of the experiences are taken together in the gestalt approach, patterns emerge. The result is six themes or zones of engagement that lead to the essence of employee engagement.

The emergent themes include the following: (1) employee engagement experiences occur from non-work related experiences at work, (2) employee engagement is freedom in the workplace, (3) employee engagement is going above and beyond roles and responsibilities, (4) employee engagement occurs when work is a vocational calling, (5) employee engagement is about creating value, and (6) connections build employee engagement experiences. Below each theme is discussed and supported by participant quotes.

4.1. Employee engagement experiences occur from non-work related experiences at work

Participants shared reconstructive narratives that focused on experiences that did not relate to the job role or function within the

organization. Most of the literature talks about job resources and the availability of those resources (e.g., work conditions, job resources, organizational reputation), with little to no mention of non-work related antecedents of employee engagement. Participants did not share or recall experiences that discussed the job resources identified in previous research. Instead, the stories shared by participants focused on experiences not related to actual work such as support during tough times, sending out holiday cards, leadership support, finding common points of interest with leadership and community service. Participants assumed the non-work related experiences to be employee engagement.

One narrative exemplifies the non-work related experience that was described as employee engagement. John shared his employee engagement experience that occurred when his mother passed away and said, “I was made aware that there were more than one set of ears in this building that were open to listening to me and supporting me and aside from that, that the company had other resources if I needed help to deal with my loss.”

Jane recalled when she initially joined the company and how her supervisor took the time to show her and her husband around the city to get them acquainted with where they would be moving. “When I first got here, after I interviewed, my husband came and my director showed us around [city]. The organization wanted your spouse to see where you are moving. After I got here, my director got me comfortable with [city]. It was very nice because he didn’t have to take that time to do that and pay that personal attention.”

These examples demonstrate that part of the employee experience is being treated as a human, not a worker or asset, and this helps lead to employee engagement. When employees felt engaged they often reflected on a time or experience when someone acknowledged who they were outside of their role within the organization. Kahn (1992) suggested that employees should be treated with care since psychological presence, fundamental to employee engagement, is a gift from employees to organizations. In other words, employees have the right to choose whether or not they share their presence with the employer.

4.2. *Employee engagement is freedom in the workplace*

Participant reconstructed narratives centered on the idea that employee engagement was rooted in having freedom in the workplace. This experienced freedom provided employees opportunities to explore and experiment with projects or assignments that related to their job responsibilities. In other cases, participants used the freedom as a means to develop projects or assignments beyond what was required of them or not even related to their actual job roles. Freedom also featured a level of trust that allowed participants to make mistakes and see these mistakes as opportunities to learn and not be punished.

Tricia shared her experience in creating an ally program for members of the LGBT community in her workplace. Part of the program offered employees the chance to place LGBT-friendly mouse pads on their desk to demonstrate their commitment to being an ally. The participant shared how this program led to employees sharing stories of how this helped LGBT employees be more open in the workplace and those employees who are parents support their children in the process of coming out about their sexuality. This whole program was beyond the participant’s roles and responsibilities in the traditional sense but was the experience she shared related to employee engagement experiences, demonstrating that the freedom to take on a passion project beyond what was asked of her cultivated a deeper sense of engagement.

The presence of trust also led to freedom in the workplace in that participants were trusted to do their work and to be successful in doing so. In other words, earned trust from management or supervisors cultivated anonymity in roles and responsibilities, which helped participants feel empowered. Vicky explained that the earned trust helped her feel like management wasn’t watching every move she made. Shelly suggested that when management trusts employees to successfully carry out work tasks, employees “will do good work for you.” Josh shared his experience of being trusted by his direct supervisor, which helped create an employee engagement experience. “I remember a point where [my boss] said, ‘You don’t need to keep coming to me and asking if it’s okay to do this and okay to do that on your projects. I trust you...’ It was almost like a pushing me out of the nest a little bit.”

This sense of freedom also created space for making mistakes. Gerry shared that the trust between her and her boss led her to be more confident in decision-making even if the decision was not the correct one. “I earned her trust. Before, there was always that ‘mother may I?’ She kind of loosened the reins a little bit and said, ‘Okay no, you go. Go ahead. You don’t need to ask before you go. I trust you to make the right decisions.’” Freedom in the workplace provides employees the opportunity to take risks in decision-making and develop passion projects. Oftentimes, the passion projects described by participants were beyond their traditional job roles and required more of their time and resources to complete them. However, since the projects fulfilled a passion, participants were comfortable putting in the extra effort. This leads to the next zone of engagement, which is going beyond roles and responsibilities and is discussed next.

4.3. *Employee engagement is going beyond roles and responsibilities*

Participant narratives demonstrated that employee engagement experiences are also when employees choose to go above and beyond the roles and responsibilities required by the job. The perception is that being engaged is the expectation that employees should be willing to do more than what is expected of them, where completing the required job responsibilities is not enough to be engaged. Participants discussed that to be engaged, an employee must be willing to do more or what Ryan referred to as “being proactive.” Tricia recalled that employee engagement is going “above and beyond in their day to day job.” Katrina talked about in the sense of “making the extra effort,” and labeled the person not willing to make the extra effort as disengaged.

Since participants suggested that being engaged is about going above and beyond what is required by the job, disengagement would be labeled as just doing the bare minimum or only the basic job requirements. Disengagement is discussed next as a sub-theme under the going above and beyond zone of engagement.

4.3.1. Disengagement

Disengagement emerged from the data in relation to the theme of going above and beyond roles and responsibilities. Just as employees who demonstrate behaviors of going beyond their job responsibilities are engaged, employees who simply do what is required of them demonstrate disengagement. From the participants' perceptions, disengaged employees do just enough to get by and do not take an initiative to take on more responsibilities than required. The disengaged employees do just enough to get by and not raise any red flags. As Doug said, "They are just coming in for the paycheck, which would be a tough existence." Tom talked about management that never goes above and beyond as being disengaged. Ryan explained that disengagement might be when employees do not contribute to meetings or find solutions to problems. "If you just bring up the problems but you don't have solutions, then you're not really helping." Justin also referred to "doing the bare minimum" as disengagement.

4.4. Employee engagement occurs when work is a vocational calling

Participants reconstructed employee engagement by using passion or vocation as a way to describe the experiences. Employee engagement is about finding passion in the work and seeing the job as a vocation, which means being engaged is not about punching a timecard and earning a living, but instead it is the transition to seeing the job as more than just a job. Doug said that employee engagement, "is passion and people wanting to be involved and people you know enjoying their work and wanting to get a sense of accomplishment. So I always look that if somebody's passionate or somebody cares about what they're doing, they're engaged." Katrina suggested that at some point the organization would not be able to pay an employee any more money or that the employee tangible rewards will somewhat max out. So for her to continue to experience employee engagement requires tapping into that passion. Passion also leads to enjoyment in the daily activities required by the job. Justin claimed that, "Enjoying what you're doing ties into if you're engaged or not. If you're engaged, you probably enjoy it. If you enjoy it, you're probably engaged. So it's sort of, to me, you can't really have the one without the other."

Having a good understanding of the mission of the organization and how the employee fits into the mission helps the employee feel like it is more than just a job. Understanding and access to information leads to the development of purpose and passion in work, which creates employee engagement experiences. Bart said, "I think it's the process of trying to make sure this is more than just a job, that people feel that they have a place in the organization, that they understand the mission."

Organizations can also have formal programing to help develop passions for employees. Tricia talked about formal, internal groups created by her employer that help cultivate opportunities for employees to foster their passions. In addition, part of the job being an actual vocation is embodying what it means to do the work. Dallas said, "I find the most effective team members, to me, are people that it's not a job, it's actually a vocation. You don't do police work. You're a police officer. That's who you are. You don't do marine infantry landings. You're a marine. You don't do social work; you're a social worker." In other words, an engaged employee takes on the identity of her or his job and this creates a reciprocal connection between the work identity and vocational calling.

4.5. Employee engagement is about creating value

For some participants, employee engagement is experienced as a process that is focused on creating value for employees. Participants suggested that value is not created from formal human resource programs, but instead happens more organically in different, individual ways. Bart said, "I hate to treat it like a formal program...it's hard when you turn it into a program and start trying to measure it by numbers because people look at it like 'Wow, that's just a number thing' and it's really not."

For some employees, value is created through tackling challenging work or being in a position that aligns with one's talents. Employees also create value from seeing the impact of their work both at an organizational level and community level. In other words, employees see how they are making a difference for their organization, contributing to its goals and objectives, and how they are potentially impacting the community in which the organization resides. When challenges, recognition and impact of work are taken together, the experience creates value for employees and cultivates moments of employee engagement.

Participants used reconstructed narratives to explain how value is created for employees, which leads to employee engagement experiences. Jessica suggested that when it comes to employee engagement, "it's really about creating value." Ron shared a narrative about how his experience in solving problems for a big client created a valuable experience for him, which in turn led to him experiencing employee engagement. "You know I felt like I was doing something valuable as opposed to just filling out sheets and some of the work processes that we have to do and you know actually helped [the customer] too. And they were appreciative."

Recognition for successfully accomplished work is another dimension that constructs value for employees. Chris said, "I need that reinforcement too that I'm doing a good job." Lance talked about being appreciated and said, "That is the spark or the gratification or the recognition that drives engagement, say 'Hey, what you do, what you're doing is important. It's appreciated and it supports what we're trying to accomplish.'" Jessica said her employee engagement experience is about being recognized because "the work is important and meaningful and impactful." Participants who were both supervisors and non-supervisions suggested that recognition from the organization, management or colleagues helped create that value, especially when it occurred in a spontaneous way.

Value is also cultivated from seeing the impact of the work both at an organizational level but also within the communities the organization resides. Gerry said employee engagement experiences are related to the fact that, "the work you are doing is making an impact and you understand how it's making an impact and you feel like you are integral to the success of the company." Justin talked about employees making a difference through their work in the communities in which they live by "harnessing the passion of [organization] employees" and wanting to "improve the communities in which we live and work." The community-level impact creates a sense of value for an employee that leads to employee engagement experiences.

4.6. Connections build employee engagement experiences

For participants, employee engagement is embedded in building connections in different areas of the workplace. Connection is an in-vivo term used by several participants and was therefore chosen to help explain this emergent theme. In-vivo terms are the actual words that participants use during the interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Connections were not described in the sense of being an intersection between two things but rather, connections enabled or created a bridge to employee engagement experiences. Edward said, “Employee engagement is all about connection and I don’t think you build connections with programs or HR initiatives necessarily.” Through the reconstructed narratives, participants described connections with the company (mission), work tasks or other employees, which created a channel to employee engagement experiences. Some participants discussed connections to one, two or all three factors, demonstrating that although building connections is a meaningful part of employee engagement, the drivers of connection that develop through employee engagement experiences are based on individual or personal preference. Gerry said, “You do need to look at everything to understand what really kind of drives that connection for each individual.”

A few of the participants discussed building connections in the emotional sense. Participants suggested that personal, emotional connections could help employees feel more engaged or enrich their employee engagement experiences. Other participants mentioned the connection to the actual company, its mission, and work tasks as part of their employee engagement experience. Catherine said that employee engagement experiences are rooted in the “close connection to the company and the work.” Matt also mentioned his connection to the work or what he calls the business, because of how exciting it is. “I think you know it’s about making sure that people are connected with what’s going on in the business to me, mostly and that itself drives them in the direction of wanting to know more, wanting to be further engaged because it’s exciting. It’s an exciting business we’re in.”

Some participants referenced that employee engagement is about building connections with other employees, and experiencing collaborations and working together as a group. Joe said that employee engagement, “is tapping into people’s spirit, tapping into their desire to be part of something greater. It’s tapping into their natural energy. They want to be a part of teams today. People want to work together.” For some participants, being able to connect with other employees contributes to employee engagement. For others, leadership plays a role in creating connection as part of the employee engagement experience. Leadership’s role in building connections that create employee engagement experiences is discussed next.

4.6.1. Role of leadership in building connections

Participants perceived the role of leadership as a contributing factor in creating personal connections. Josh spoke from a non-leadership position and said that when it comes to building connections related to employee engagement experiences, “a lot of it is your boss.” Catherine said, “Engagement is directly contingent on leadership and I know in my experience, I’ve tended to take jobs for the leaders I wanted to work for as opposed to the actual function of the job itself.” Edward had similar thoughts and expressed that employee engagement “starts from that close relationship with the supervisor.” Jane said, “How do we connect with them so that they love what they do, how do we engage them because what they do is not glamorous.” The more engaged management is with employees, the more likely connections will develop that lead to employee engagement experiences. In conclusion, connections with colleagues, leadership, work tasks and the company create employee engagement experiences. The employee engagement experience can also enrich the previously established connections, demonstrating a reciprocal relationship.

4.7. Zones of engagement

Fig. 1 illustrates a conceptual foundation of zones of engagement. The conceptual figure suggests the complexity of employee engagement and how different dimensions may be experienced in tandem, even though each zone is complex even when it stands

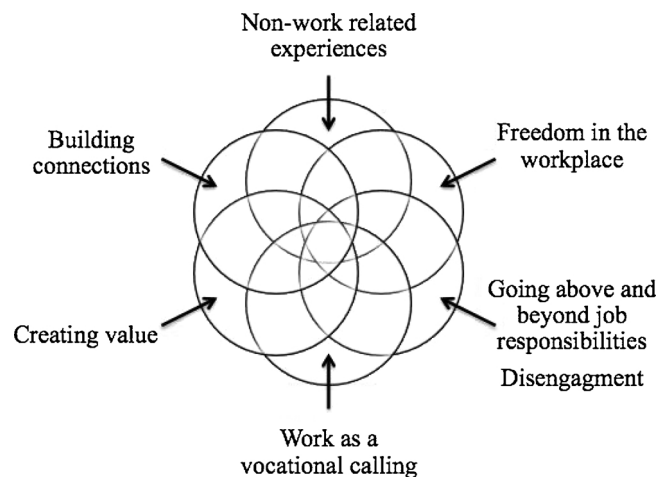


Fig. 1. Conceptual illustration of the zones of engagement complexity.

alone because each zone applies a particular zone of meaning. The zones of engagement can exist within zones – oftentimes defending zones – and in some cases challenge other zones. More importantly, by examining the patterns of language of those interviewed, this research on zones of engagement, based on Burke’s scholarship, works to demonstrate how words greatly influence perception and behavior. As such, language created through shared meaning, “form terministic screens between us and reality” (Heath, 1986).

To demonstrate how different zones work in tandem to make up the employee engagement experiences, three participant experiences in whole will be used to support the conceptual figure. Phenomenology relies on the gestalt approach in that the whole is worth more than the sum of the individual parts to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon and in this case, would be the whole transcript or experience instead of one line or one experience. First, Catherine shared a reconstructed narrative that captured three zones: freedom in the workplace, creating value through challenging tasks and connections to both the company and leadership. Second, Justin’s experience illustrated the zones of non-work related experiences, work as a vocational calling, creating value based on seeing the impact of the work, and having connections to both the organization and colleagues. Last, Katrina shared a reconstructed narrative that demonstrated freedom in the workplace, going above and beyond job responsibilities and work as a vocational calling. These three participant examples help exemplify that employee engagement is complex, where many elements reconstruct experiences as illustrated in the zones of engagement. Some experiences may be defined by one zone of engagement or more, but the zones do not operate in silos as each can contribute to the employee engagement experience. This interpretation reflects Burke (1969) dramatic theory of language where individuals are members of groups rather than groups as aggregates of individuals. It also demonstrates that engagement, as shared and co-created zones of meaning, can reach some level of concurrence that can associate differences in ways that allow for coordinated collective action – the essence of organizations and society (Heath & Palenchar, 2009).

5. Discussion

The findings from this study provide better understanding and insight into the complexities of public relations related to the employee engagement phenomenon and demonstrates that employee experiences align more to the initial personal engagement model proposed by Kahn (1990).

5.1. Zones of engagement

Numerous public relations scholars consider employees as a key stakeholder (e.g., Coombs, Grunig, Heath, Hon, Taylor). According to Donaldson and Preston (1995), stakeholder participation can be analyzed from descriptive, normative, instrumental and managerial approaches. The challenge for researchers of employee engagement is to identify what factors shape the meaning-making process among various employees within an organization and identify reality links of employee perspectives based on their employee engagement experiences.

As previously noted, the zones of engagement findings are derived from Heath (1993) approach to meaning, where zones of meaning are created as interpretive frames by which organizations and their key stakeholders create meaning, in this case the employee engagement phenomena. One of the strengths of zones of meaning in relation to employee engagement, differentiated from an emergent theme, is that this line of research is based on an understanding of public opinion but now located in the internal public sphere of an organization. A zones of engagement approach to internal communication reinforces how public relations researchers and practitioners differentiate employees not as a single public that does not exist, but rather as “the shared knowledge, experience, preferences, motives, opinions held in the mind of some people in society” (Heath, 2013), or in this case differentiated employees within organizations.

As Heath (2013) noted, “labor shares a different zone of meaning from management. Nevertheless, labor and management share some zones” (p. 977). The zones of engagement provide an opportunity to reposition the understanding of employee engagement. Each zone is an interpretive frame used to create meaning, and the approach stems from the rhetorical perspective to better understand how meaning is constructed (Heath, 1993). Although some participants valued one or two zones over another, the experience of being engaged is comprised of many zones working in tandem, recognizing that the zones fluctuate based on the individual experience. The idea of the zones of engagement also demonstrates the complexity of employee engagement. The concept is subject to numerous, context-based interpretations that are constantly changing, which makes previous research focused on measurements and mediating variables that facilitate engagement somewhat complicated (Valentin, 2014). Byrne et al. (2016) cautioned against assuming that only leaders or workplace contexts influence employee engagement, but instead that the development of engagement is impacted by a variety of variables or factors that emerge from unique, individual experiences (Shuck, Rocco, & Alborno, 2011).

Theoretical development for employee engagement has been inconclusive up to this point (Saks & Gruman, 2014), possibly because of all of the moving and unique constructs related to the phenomenon. In addition, individual differences have received less attention in the research even though they are believed to be essential for engagement (Saks & Gruman, 2014). When the understanding of employee engagement from a public relations scholarship lens transitions to zones of meaning or in this case employee engagement, complexity underscores the phenomenon and provides a better illustration of the phenomenon. For example, just as culture is often described on a macro-level to make sense of the beliefs and values, it derives from a micro-level where individual interactions and unique perspectives define how the culture is experienced (Shuck et al., 2011).

In this manner, public relations scholarship and practice is more than a functional role for employee engagement. As Mumby (1988) deliberated, “organizations are not stable, fully integrated structures. Rather, they are the product of various groups with

competing goals and interests. An organization services a group's interest to the extent that it is able to produce, maintain, and reproduce those organizational practices that sustain that group's needs" (p. 160). The zones of engagement provide a new way to conceptualize employee engagement in public relations, shifting to a deeper comprehension and understanding instead of descriptive explanations, more in line with Heath (2006) articulation of a fully functional society; albeit one that also emphasizes internal communication discourse.

The identified zones of meaning can be a useful tool for public relations practitioners, but within reason, in that practitioners need to recognize the power associated with this particular meaning-making process. Practitioners play an important role "in the shaping of society, its images and its characteristic forms of communication" (Cheney, 1992) and therefore, need to be aware of the power of their constructed symbols and how the symbols may be interpreted by individuals (Cheney). Conditions such as recognizing the zones of engagement and disseminating supporting internal communication could lead to invisible, concertive control as discussed by Tompkins and Cheney (1985). Therefore, public relations specialists are challenged with ensuring that employees are not unobtrusively controlled into practicing engagement but rather experiencing actual, genuine, individually-driven engagement.

5.2. *Extending existing definitions and redefining disengagement*

Participants proposed that employee engagement experiences are when employees choose to go above and beyond the roles and responsibilities required by the job. The perception is that being engaged is the expectation that employees should be willing to do more than what is on their job description. Previous research offers definitions that focus on the opposite of job burnout such as Schaufeli et al. (2002) who defined employee engagement as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (p. 74). Kahn (1990) defined employee engagement as the "harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p. 694). Ineffective internal communication programs that do not have leadership buy-in or release information after employees have heard it from an external source may also lead to disengagement (Neill & Jiang, 2017). Kang and Sung (2017) suggested that employee disengagement may result in negative megaphoning behaviors, where employees speak poorly about their employer to external sources.

The preceding definitions of employee engagement do address the psychological state in which one may find themselves while experiencing employee engagement, but the actual way it is carried out and demonstrated, as suggested by the participants in this study, is by going above and beyond what is required of them. This proposes that the way in which others feel this state of engagement and others can witness it is when employees are doing more than the expected job requirements. Therefore, although employee engagement is assumed to be a psychological state, the lived experience is when an employee is doing more than is expected of them. Definitions of employee engagement often refer to the impact of engagement on work outcomes (Valentin, 2014), but the findings from this study suggest that employee engagement is experienced as an actual outcome of going above and beyond the job requirements.

Disengagement emerged from the data in relation to going above and beyond job responsibilities in that employees who simply do what is required of them are assumed to be demonstrating disengagement. Wollard (2011) found only three articles out of 210 that included both the keywords "employee engagement" and "disengagement," suggesting that disengagement is a poorly defined term that scholarship knows little about. One reason for this is probably because disengagement is assumed to be experienced as job burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Kahn (1990) offered the first definition of disengagement as the "uncoupling of selves from work roles; in disengagement; they will withdraw and defend themselves physically; cognitively; or emotionally during role performances" (p. 694). However; this definition does not necessarily apply to this particular study. Instead; this research offers a new definition of disengagement that needs to be further explored. Disengagement is defined as going through the motions in such a way that an employee carries out the minimum job requirements. This definition highlights the behavioral aspects of disengagement beyond job burnout. Negative engagement research also adds to the discussion of employee disengagement; suggesting that the proposed definition better aligns with the negative engagement experience. According to Garrad and Chamorro-Premuzic (2016); negative engagement poses threats in numerous ways; including embracing the status quo; giving an unfair advantage to certain personality types; undermining the benefits of negative thinking; and pushing employees to burnout.

5.3. *The resurgence of meaningfulness and safety*

Kahn (1990) original model discussed the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability as the functions that determine whether or not someone is engaged. Meaningfulness deals with work elements that create a return on investment of the self. Safety is showing one's self without fear of negative repercussions. Availability is the physical, emotional and psychological resources necessary for investing in the engagement role. Employees try to find connection and fulfillment as requirements for bringing their whole selves into their work role (Kahn, 1990). Only a handful of researchers have empirically investigated meaningfulness, safety and availability as employee engagement antecedents (e.g., Byrne, Peters, & Weston, 2016; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). May et al. (2004) attempted construct validity for the measures and found a positive relationship between psychological safety and employee engagement. Byrne et al. (2016) found support for the Kahn (1990) definition.

When considering the zones of engagement, the conditions of meaningfulness and safety seem to be most evident in the employee engagement experience. The initial proposed model of personal engagement included meaningfulness as a psychological condition dimension, where employees assess the return on investment of committing the self to work experiences (Kahn, 1990). Employees feel meaningfulness when they are valued, challenged, given autonomy, and when goals are provided clearly and succinctly. In this

way, the findings in this study support Byrne et al. (2016) suggestion that engagement may be more accurately defined as “incorporating meaningfulness rather than being fostered by meaningfulness” (p. 1218). Seeing work as a vocational calling, creating value and having freedom in the workplace is where meaningfulness is experienced as part of the employee engagement experience. These three zones work reciprocally in that when meaningfulness is incorporated, employees experience moments of engagement, and at the same time, these moments create meaningful experiences.

Just as psychological meaningfulness emerged as a factor for participants in their employee engagement experiences, psychological safety did as well. Psychological safety is defined as the “sense of being able to show and employ the self without fear of negatives consequences to self-image, status or career” (Kahn, 1990). Previous studies have found psychological safety to have the strongest relationship with employee engagement (e.g., Bologna et al., 2015). For participants, employee engagement is embedded in the building of connections in different areas of the workplace and these connections set the foundation of psychological safety. Connections were not described as an intersection between two things but rather, connections created a bridge to employee engagement experiences. Connections and relationships are critically important to employees’ overall work experience (Shuck et al., 2011), and create psychological safety for employees.

6. Conclusion

This study offers insight into the actual lived experiences of employees and their experience with employee engagement in the workplace. In capturing employee experiences from a non-functional manner or non-binary perspective of just employee and management, this study provides perspectives and insights into the employee engagement experience that help refine understanding of public relations internal communication scholarship and established employee engagement theories, models, tenets and concepts. Specifically, the zones of engagement provide an opportunity to re-conceptualize employee engagement from a public relations scholarship lens to better explicate how meaning is created from shared experiences. This zones of engagement scholarship also illustrates how people, in this case employees, are separated from reality by shared terministic screens related to engagement among other perceptions and behaviors “by an instrument of our making that is fraught with recurring patterns of association/disassociation, the negative, and entelechy” (Heath, 1986). In a sense through employee discussions, zones of meaning are confirmed rather than challenged as products of engagement. In the same manner, zones of engagement reflect not static, literal interpretations of employees’ experiences but rather the various rhetorical positions of seeking adherents. The zones of engagement orientation further solidifies public relations turf in employee and other internal communication responsibilities.

Identifying and understanding zones of meaning broadly to employee engagement is important to public relations scholarship because words/symbols have meaning, and the interpretation and understanding of those zones of meaning as expressed by differentiated stakeholders (e.g., employees) based on their experiences, positions, job functions and their history with the organization is essential to the study and practice of public relations. This rhetorical perspective of public relations afforded by zones of meaning analysis is a critical function of public relations scholarship in identifying “competing and convergent shared social realities that can broadly be interpreted as zones of meaning” (Heath, 2006).

Since the phenomenon was examined from a holistic perspective using phenomenology, not one organization or industry was examined in depth. First, additional research is needed to continue investigating the complexity of the individual lived employee engagement experience, subject to numerous, context-based interpretations. Future research should also consider examining single cases or conducting a multiple case study within specific contexts to further understand employee engagement in particular organizations or industries. Disengagement emerged from the participant lived experiences as doing what is required of them by the organization. Future research should further investigate disengagement, including an exploration into organizations where this type of disengagement may be acceptable and considered engagement.

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