

The social psychology of work engagement: state of the field

Arnold B. Bakker

*Center of Excellence for Positive Organizational Psychology,
Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, the Netherlands and
University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa*

Abstract

Purpose – Research on work engagement is flourishing and shows important links between work engagement and career success. However, a systematic account of the social-psychological origins of engagement is largely lacking. In the paper, the author develops a theoretical model and discusses how employees actively influence and are influenced by employees' leader's, colleagues' and partner's work engagement.

Design/methodology/approach – The author integrates literatures on emotional contagion, team work engagement, leadership, proactive work behavior and work-to-family spillover. This results in a model of the social-psychological processes involved in work engagement.

Findings – Work engagement is the result of various social-psychological processes. First, work engagement is contagious – colleagues, leaders and the intimate partner can be important causes of engagement. Second, work engagement emerges at the team-level when team members collectively experience high levels of vigor, dedication and absorption. Team members of engaged teams synchronize their activities well and perform better. Third, leaders may influence employee work engagement through fast (unconscious) and slow (conscious) influence processes. Fourth, employees may use social forms of proactive behavior to stay engaged in their work, including job crafting and playful work design. Finally, work engagement may spill over and enrich the family domain. The social-psychological model of work engagement shows how leaders, followers and family members provide, craft and receive (i.e. exchange) resources and facilitate each other's work and family engagement.

Practical implications – Organizations may increase work engagement by using social-psychological interventions, including training sessions that foster fast and slow leadership, team-boosting behaviors and (team-level) job crafting and playful work design.

Originality/value – Whereas most previous studies have focused on job demands and resources as possible causes of work engagement, the present article outlines the state of the field regarding the social-psychological processes involved in engagement.

Keywords Emotional contagion, Job crafting, Leadership, Teams, Work engagement

Paper type Conceptual paper

Over the past 25 years, work engagement has become so popular that it has taken over the central role of job satisfaction in the organizational psychology literature. Whereas job satisfaction is a positive and low activation form of employee well-being, work engagement is a positive and highly activated form of employee well-being (Bakker and Oerlemans, 2011). Engaged employees feel energized and enthusiastic and are often completely immersed in their work activities (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010). Work engagement enables individuals to invest considerable effort in their work and to be highly focused (Hopstaken *et al.*, 2015). It is, therefore, not surprising that work engagement is a better predictor of job performance than job satisfaction (Christian *et al.*, 2011), which partly explains the increased popularity of the work engagement concept.

Research has shown that individuals are most likely to be engaged at work when they are confronted with high job challenges combined with high job resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Under these conditions, people seem best able to thrive and perform well. However, throughout one's career, job demands and resources may show considerable fluctuations. In order to maintain person–job fit and work engagement, it is, therefore, vital to continuously adapt to the work environment (Savickas, 2005; Tims and Bakker, 2010).



Indeed, [Xie et al. \(2016\)](#) found that employees with higher levels of career adaptability (e.g. tried to prepare for their vocational future and explored possible selves at work) were more likely to be engaged at work and satisfied with their careers. Moreover, in their meta-analytic review, [Ng and Feldman \(2014\)](#) found that work engagement was one of the most important correlates of subjective career success. When employees feel vigorous and enthusiastic while working, they thrive and continuously develop themselves ([Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008](#)) – which contributes to career satisfaction. In a recent study, [Hakanen et al. \(2021\)](#) showed that work engagement also has important implications for *objective* career success. The authors found that work engagement had a positive impact on future wages and the probability of rising in occupational rankings and a negative impact on future unemployment and disability pensions.

These findings indicate how important work engagement is for career success. In this 25th anniversary issue of *Career Development International*, I will first briefly outline what we know regarding work engagement and then contribute to the literature by analyzing engagement from a social-psychological perspective. What is the role of co-workers and leaders in the emergence and development of work engagement? I will argue and show that employee engagement may result from various social processes, including social influence, emotional contagion and modeling. I will also discuss two proactive work strategies employees may use to increase their own engagement, namely job crafting and playful work design. Finally, while research has less often focused on the implications of work engagement for family functioning, I will explain why and how work engagement may spillover to and enrich the family domain. The social-psychological model of work engagement is of interest to career scholars because it shows how leaders, team members and family members provide, craft and receive (i.e. exchange) resources and facilitate each other's engagement – which has repercussions for career adaptability and career success.

Work engagement: state of the field

The concept of work engagement was first introduced in the literature by [Kahn \(1990\)](#), who used role theory and qualitative research to define engagement as a state of active energetic involvement in a work role in which individuals vigilantly express their thoughts and feelings. He argued that through such personal engagement, people can be authentic, empathic, playful and creative while at work. In the years that followed, [Schaufeli and Bakker's \(2010\)](#) quantitative engagement approach became more popular, also due to the wide use of the Utrecht work engagement scale (UWES). Accordingly, work engagement refers to a motivational and fulfilling state characterized by high levels of mental and physical energy, enthusiasm about and dedication to work and complete absorption in work activities. On the days employees feel engaged, they are best able and most willing to invest high effort in their work activities, resulting in increased performance ([Bakker and Xanthopoulou, 2009](#); [Borst et al., 2020](#)). Paradoxically, research has provided evidence for both the stability and the variability of work engagement ([Xanthopoulou and Bakker, 2021](#)). Whereas the person approach has shown that some people – for example, those who are more conscientious and extravert – are generally more engaged in their work ([Young et al., 2018](#)), the situation approach has shown that vigor, dedication and absorption fluctuate as a function of daily job demands, available resources and proactive behaviors (e.g. job crafting and playful work design; [Bakker and Oerlemans, 2019](#); [Breevaart and Bakker, 2018](#); [Scharp et al., 2019](#)). This means that engaged individuals also have days on which they feel disengaged and that in order to be engaged, it is important for all organizations, teams and individual employees to continuously optimize the workplace conditions that contribute to engagement.

Job resources – either provided to employees by the organization or actively pursued by employees – are the most important antecedents of work engagement (Bakker *et al.*, 2014). Job resources may take various forms (e.g. physical, emotional and social) and are located at the individual, group or organizational level. According to job demands–resources (JD–R) theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), resources have motivating potential, because they help to (1) reduce the impact of energy-depleting job demands, (2) achieve work-related goals and (3) learn and grow as a person. Thus, when employees have access to more social support, more opportunities to use their strengths and/or have higher levels of autonomy, they are usually more engaged in their work. Job resources are particularly predictive of work engagement when they are needed – for example, when work problems are rather complex or when the workload is very high. Consequently, employees feel most engaged in their work when challenging job demands are combined with abundant job resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Employee work engagement, in turn, is predictive of creativity (e.g. Demerouti *et al.*, 2015), task performance (Borst *et al.*, 2020), organizational citizenship behavior (e.g. Matta *et al.*, 2015), financial results (e.g. Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009b) and career success (Hakanen *et al.*, 2021).

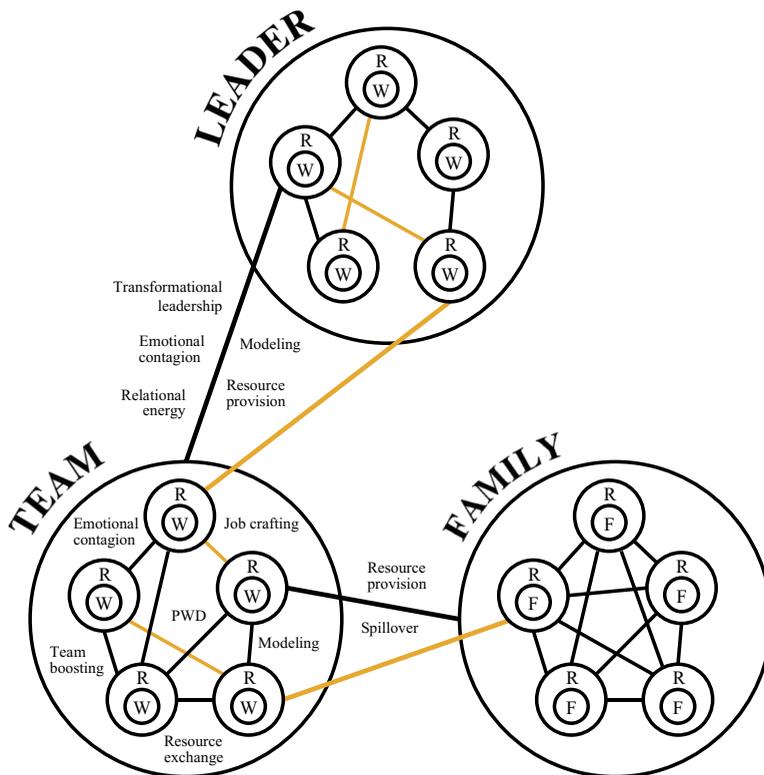
When individuals work in a resourceful environment, they have the means to actively cope with their job demands. However, personal characteristics may also play an important role in protecting or increasing work engagement. According to JD–R theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), personal resources can alleviate the negative impact of, for example, workload and emotionally demanding clients on employee well-being. Personal resources refer to subjective beliefs regarding how much control individuals have over their environment, such as optimism, self-efficacy and self-esteem (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009a). These beliefs are malleable through experience and training, and when employees have increased their personal resources, they feel more vigorous and engaged in their work (Bakker and Van Wingerden, 2021a; Knight *et al.*, 2017). Stable personality traits have also been related to work engagement. A review by Mäkikangas *et al.* (2013) showed that the big five factors of personality, particularly extraversion, emotional stability and conscientiousness, were able to predict unique variance in work engagement. Extraversion and emotional stability most likely influence the perception of job demands and help to manage a variety of job stressors. For instance, individuals scoring high on extraversion find interpersonal relationships more rewarding. Because of their continued social interactions, they become really good at gaining social support and feedback from colleagues. Thus, their social behavior increases their job resources, reduces their job demands (Bakker, 2015) and helps to stay engaged. Furthermore, conscientious individuals are generally well-organized, careful and hardworking (Costa and McCrae, 1992), which helps them to be enthusiastically involved in work and achieve important organizational goals.

Although previous studies on work engagement have occasionally used a social-psychological lens, an overview of this research is largely lacking. It would be informative to know how – next to job design and personal characteristics – important referent individuals or groups, such as the leader, the work team, colleagues and the intimate partner, have a unique impact on employee work engagement. How important is the social context when it comes to work engagement?

The social psychology of work engagement

Social psychology focuses on social interactions between individuals and groups. It develops and applies psychological theories of how individuals' thoughts, feelings and behaviors influence others – and are influenced by others (Allport, 1985). Important topics in this field of psychology are social influence, conformity, social norms, leadership, power and group dynamics. Since the products and services delivered by organizations are the result of the

effort invested by all its members, analyzing individual behaviors and interpersonal interactions is important for understanding employee work engagement and productivity. In this article, I will analyze work engagement from a social-psychological perspective and discuss various processes that play a role in employee engagement. While doing so, I will develop a social-psychological model of work engagement showing how leaders, followers and family members provide, craft and receive (i.e. exchange) resources and facilitate each other's work and family engagement (see Figure 1). Specifically, I will first discuss how employees may influence each other through the process of emotional contagion. How do emotions such as happiness, enthusiasm and excitement cross over from one employee to the other? How contagious is work engagement and what are the conditions that facilitate such contagion? Second, I will explain how work engagement may emerge at the group level and discuss the processes that are responsible for shared experiences of vigor, dedication and absorption – including observational learning and modeling, coordination and cohesion. I will also discuss how individual members of the team can take the role of “team booster” and positively influence the engagement of the team as a whole. Third, I consider the role of leadership – how do leader behaviors inspire and help individual employees to feel engaged at work? Fourth, I will discuss two social strategies individuals may use to increase their



Note(s): R = Resources; W = Work engagement; F = Family engagement. Black lines indicate strong ties within or between networks, whereas orange lines indicate weak ties

Figure 1. Model of social-psychological processes involved in work engagement

own work engagement through others in their environment, namely job crafting and playful work design. Fifth and finally, since home is no longer just a place to detach from work and relax – but rather also a place to attach and work – the boundaries between work and home have become increasingly blurred. Research has shown that work roles may, therefore, interfere with or enrich roles in the home domain. I will discuss how the state of work engagement may enrich the home or family domain.

Emotional contagion

One social-psychological process through which individual employees can become engaged in their work is emotional contagion – “The tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally” (Hatfield *et al.*, 1994, p. 5). When individuals mirror another person’s expressions of emotion, they start to feel similar emotions and start to act in similar ways. Emotional contagion is important to relationships because it fosters interactional synchronicity. When individuals feel the same way, their verbal and non-verbal communication becomes more predictable. This may facilitate basic information processing at the individual level and bonding at the dyadic level (Hoehl *et al.*, 2021).

There is considerable evidence for emotional contagion. Lanzetta *et al.* (1985) conducted a lab experiment in which individuals were filmed and questioned while they were watching a speech of President Reagan. The results showed that Republican supporters shared his happiness when he was telling something happy and reported tension when he was telling something fearful. Although the Democratic opponents reported negative feelings during the whole speech, their facial expressions were in harmony with those of Reagan. Moreover, an analysis of the galvanic skin responses of supporters and opponents showed that both groups were less stressed and more relaxed during the happy messages than during the disturbing messages.

Barsade (2002) used an experimental design to test the transfer of positive emotions among people in a group setting. Business school undergraduates were randomly assigned to teams of two to four participants plus a confederate. They participated in a leaderless group discussion that was video-taped. In the simulated managerial exercise, participants were requested to act as managers on a salary committee negotiating the allocation of a limited sum of bonus money to their employees. The confederate served as the stimulus initiating the contagion process. The findings offered clear evidence for emotional contagion. The self-reported and observed emotions of participants who were with a pleasant confederate became more positive over time, whereas the emotions of participants who were with an unpleasant confederate became more negative. In addition, consistent with the notion that emotional contagion fosters interactional synchronicity, Barsade found that teams in which members influenced each other with their positive emotions reported a smoother collaboration and fewer conflicts. Positive teams also performed better on the managerial exercise. For a recent review of emotional contagion research, I refer to Barsade *et al.* (2018).

What about the evidence for emotional contagion in organizational life? Since work engagement is a form of highly activated positive affect (Bakker and Oerlemans, 2011) that can be well observed by others (Elfenbein, 2014; Grabovac *et al.*, 2016), work engagement is an excellent candidate for emotional contagion. Individuals who are highly engaged in their work are evaluated by others as more communicative, charismatic and creative (Bakker and Xanthopoulou, 2013). Seeing another person really excited and enthusiastically talking about his/her work can make you feel engaged about your own work because of unconscious mimicry of the other’s vivid expressions and actions. In addition, taking the perspective of the energizing and enthusing interaction partner may make you aware of the importance of your own work and its impact on others (Bakker *et al.*, 2011). In Figure 1, this emotional contagion

process is shown by the links between the leader's work engagement and team work engagement (the whole group), the links between the various team members and the links between the individual employee and their family members. Several organizational studies have provided evidence for the contention that work engagement is contagious.

Bakker *et al.* (2006) investigated the transference of work engagement among more than 2000 military police officers working in 85 teams. On the basis of emotional contagion theory, they hypothesized and found that team-level work engagement was related to individual team members' engagement (vigor, dedication and absorption). Thus, individual police officers were more likely to be engaged about their work when they were part of engaged work teams. Importantly, the contagion effects were approximately equally strong for each of the three work engagement dimensions (vigor, dedication and absorption) and continued to be significant after controlling for team levels of burnout and a range of individual-level job demands and resources. Although survey studies cannot establish causation, these findings have high-ecological validity and indicate that work engagement clusters in certain work teams. Engaged workers seem to spread their energy and inspire colleagues with their optimism and enthusiasm, creating a positive team climate.

Using a quantitative diary design in which workers from various occupational backgrounds were followed across five working days, Bakker and Xanthopoulou (2009) tested the hypothesis that employees influence their colleagues with their daily energy and dedication. Participants (referred to as "actors") were requested to ask one of their colleagues ("partners") with whom they worked closely to take part in the study simultaneously. The findings indicated that co-workers influenced each other with their daily work engagement, but they did so only on the days they talked frequently with each other. On these days, the actor's work engagement was predictive of the partner's job performance through the partner's work engagement. These findings show that when employees discuss their work with each other and do so in an enthused way, they vividly communicate their personal involvement which triggers work engagement and improves performance in others. In the team shown in Figure 1, this emotional contagion process is most likely when the social ties between colleagues are strong (black lines) rather than weak (orange lines).

Team work engagement

Direct evidence for the contention that work engagement is influenced by social processes can be found in studies showing that work engagement exists at the team level. Costa *et al.* (2014) defined team work engagement as "a shared, positive and fulfilling, motivational emergent state of work-related well-being" (p. 418). Team work engagement is functionally equivalent to individual work engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010) and exists when team members reach consensus that they collectively perceive high levels of energy (team vigor), strong involvement in work and enthusiasm about what needs to be accomplished (team dedication) and immersion in work activities (team absorption). Team members of engaged teams coordinate and synchronize their activities well and dynamically interact to reach common work goals. Since team members are interdependent and communicate regularly with each other, emotional contagion and emotional convergence is highly likely (Bakker *et al.*, 2006; Bakker and Xanthopoulou, 2009). Moreover, since team members usually have the same leader, have access to the same job resources and often share the same workplace, clients and events, they are likely to have similar affective experiences (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996).

Indeed, in their study of 62 teams from 13 Spanish organizations, Torrente *et al.* (2012) found evidence for the hypothesis that work engagement clusters in teams. Team work engagement was highest in the teams with a supportive team climate, strong coordination and well-defined work goals. In addition, leader-ratings of team performance were highest in the teams with highest work engagement. In a similar vein, Costa *et al.* (2014) found

considerable agreement among members of more than 200 Portuguese teams. Team work engagement was higher in teams with more team-level psychological resources (collective efficacy and group potency) and in teams where members identified strongly with the team. Moreover, [Costa et al. \(2014; Study 2\)](#) found that teams high on team work engagement that participated in a five-week management simulation made better investment choices for their virtual company and created more value (a higher stock market price).

In the section below on social strategies to increase work engagement, I will show how individual employees can proactively optimize their job demands and resources so that they achieve a better person-job fit and higher work engagement. Research has shown that this proactive behavior also bears fruit at the team level. In their study among more than 500 Dutch occupational health services professionals working in 54 teams, [Tims et al. \(2013\)](#) showed that occupational doctors, nurses, consultants and support staff optimized their work challenges and resources collaboratively, which resulted in higher levels of team work engagement. Moreover, they found evidence for modeling and contagion effects: individual doctors, nurses and consultants were more likely to craft their jobs and be engaged if they were member of a highly engaged team in which job crafting was the norm (see [Figure 1](#)). A Finnish study among 46 rehabilitation teams showed that team job crafting was more likely in teams that were supervised by an engaging leader and felt efficacious regarding teamwork ([Mäkikangas et al., 2017](#)). Moreover, in this particular study, team job crafting was more likely when (1) teams had a shared vision and clear goals, (2) team member interactions were collegial and psychologically safe and (3) there was support for innovation.

Team work engagement signals the positive atmosphere and psychological climate in a team which is communicated to all members. However, recent research suggests that expressive and energizing individual team members with a social focus can also influence the engagement of the team as a whole – a bottom-up effect. [Fortuin et al. \(2021, p. 4\)](#) looked at the role of team-boosting behaviors – defined as “[...] mood-enhancing, energizing, and uniting behaviors, directed towards other team members.” Team members engaging in mood-enhancing behaviors are good at perceiving social dynamics, use humor and try to change negative team events into something positive. Energizing behaviors include initiatives to organize and participate in team activities, whereas uniting behaviors refer to connecting and building relationships between team members. Members engaging in uniting behaviors frequently have informal conversations with everyone in the team and try to involve all team members in joint social activities. In two independent studies, [Fortuin et al. \(2021\)](#) showed that team-boosting behaviors can be found in work and sports teams. In addition, they investigated the predictive validity of team-boosting behaviors using 120 Dutch teams working, among others, in retail, education, finances and business administration ([Fortuin et al., 2021; Study 3](#)). Results showed that team-boosting behaviors were positively related to a pleasant team climate (i.e. a positive atmosphere) as well as leader-ratings of team proactivity. Moreover, team-boosting behaviors were positively related to team work engagement and leader-ratings of team optimism and performance.

Fast and slow leadership

Leaders are important for employee work engagement because they can provide the job resources needed to manage job demands (see [Figure 1; Tummers and Bakker, 2021](#)). However, leaders may also have their influence in more direct ways by motivating people to work together collaboratively to reach organizational goals ([Vroom and Jago, 2007](#)). Effective leaders initiate structure by communicating performance expectations and enhance interpersonal harmony in a group ([Judge et al., 2004](#)). Moreover, when leaders are charismatic, they may inspire followers to perform well beyond their capabilities. Theories of social influence make a distinction between two major routes to influence, the central route

and the peripheral route (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). When leaders have their impact through the central route, influence will likely result from followers' *slow* processing and thoughtful consideration of the leader's vision, arguments and behaviors. In contrast, when leaders have their impact through the peripheral route, influence results from followers' automatic, *fast* and non-conscious processing of what the leader communicates and does. Kahneman (2011) refers to these two systems of information processing as System 1 (fast thinking) and System 2 (slow thinking). I will now discuss some studies showing that leaders may have their impact on followers' work engagement through what I call fast and slow leadership.

Owens *et al.* (2016) conducted a series of studies showing that effective leaders transfer their energy in a fast way during interpersonal interactions. The authors defined relational energy as "a heightened level of psychological resourcefulness [motivation, vitality, stamina] generated from interpersonal interactions that enhances one's capacity to do work" (p. 37). When followers were with leaders that showed energy, followers felt motivational arousal – they experienced positive emotions, were cognitively stimulated and felt energized through behavioral modeling. Owens and colleagues showed that relational energy was positively related to employee work engagement and indirectly contributed to job performance. This effect is illustrated in Figure 1 by the black link from the leader to the team. The model also suggests that leaders who are energized and enthusiastic (i.e. engaged and transformational) may influence follower job crafting and resource exchange. Recent research has provided some first evidence for such effects (Hetland *et al.*, 2018; Wang *et al.*, 2017; Zeijen *et al.*, 2020), but little is known yet about how leaders may encourage resource exchange between co-workers and facilitate the crossover of work engagement within teams.

Using crossover and contagion theories and thus testing fast leadership effects, Ten Brummelhuis *et al.* (2014) investigated the influence of New Zealand leaders' family life on their followers' work engagement. Results indicated that when leaders experienced a rich family life in which they were fully involved, they were more likely to be engaged at work. Leader work engagement, in turn, was related to follower work engagement. Additional analyses suggested that this effect could not be explained by increased social support provided by leaders but rather by increased positive emotions expressed by leaders. In their study of a large telecom company, Wu and Wu (2019) showed that leaders' active positive emotions (e.g. excited, inspired and attentive) were positively related to employees' work engagement and innovative behavior through employees' positive emotions. As a final example, Rofcanin *et al.* (2019b) conducted a study among Chilean employees and their leaders working in retail and financial services. Their study showed that leaders' work engagement was a predictor of employee work engagement after controlling for the impact of organizational support. The results also suggested a trickle-down effect of leader work engagement on employee job performance through employee work engagement.

Several studies have shown the impact of slow leadership on work engagement, where followers seem to carefully process the message communicated by their leader. Tims *et al.* (2011) found in a daily diary study that on days leaders used transformational leadership behaviors (e.g. stimulating followers to solve work-related problems themselves, emphasizing the importance of an assignment), followers felt more resourceful (particularly optimistic) and consequently were more engaged on these days. This process is graphically illustrated in Figure 1. Breevaart *et al.* (2016) showed that weekly transformational leadership behaviors such as intellectual stimulation and individual consideration predicted work engagement and indirectly contributed to leader-ratings of job performance – particularly in weeks followers felt a strong need for leadership (e.g. when work problems were complex). In the weeks followers experienced a *low* need for leadership, self-leadership and personal initiative turned out to be more important predictors of work engagement. Furthermore, in his synthesis of the servant leadership literature, Van Dierendonck (2011) showed that servant leadership behaviors may increase employee work

engagement by providing direction and by empowering and developing followers. By fostering a proactive and self-confident attitude among followers, servant leaders create trust and eagerness which helps followers to be engaged and perform well. Indeed, [De Clercq et al. \(2014\)](#) showed that servant leadership was positively related to work engagement, particularly under conditions of high-goal congruence and repeated social interaction between leaders and followers. Finally, [Lesener et al. \(2020\)](#) tested the differential relationship of group-level, leader-level and organizational-level job resources with work engagement using meta-analytic structural equation modeling. Results showed that leader-level (i.e. social) job resources, including social support from supervisors, feedback and quality of the exchange relationship between leader and followers had small but unique effects on changes in employee work engagement over time.

Social strategies to improve work engagement

In this section, I consider how employees may proactively change the demands and resources in their workplace or their approach of work in order to be engaged. Meta-analytic research has shown that proactive work behaviors such as voice, role expansion and networking have several beneficial outcomes, including role clarity, optimism, team effectiveness and career success (e.g. [Thomas et al., 2010](#)). Here, I discuss the effectiveness of two proactive work behaviors that have a strong social component, namely job crafting and playful work design.

Job crafting

Job crafting is a form of employee proactive behavior that is aimed at making work more meaningful by creating a better fit with one's personal abilities and preferences ([Tims and Bakker, 2010](#); [Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001](#)). According to Wrzesniewski and Dutton, job crafting can take one of three forms: task crafting, cognitive crafting and relational crafting. Whereas task crafting refers to changing tasks and the content of one's work, cognitive crafting refers to changing one's perceptions of work to create more meaning. Most important for the current analysis is relational crafting – proactively changing with whom one works or the frequency of interaction with others at work. This could, for example, mean that an employee actively approaches colleagues with whom they get along very well or active involvement in social activities (e.g. welcoming new employees or attending office parties, network activities, mentoring younger employees and increasing contact with beneficiaries). [Slemp and Vella-Brodrick \(2013\)](#) found that employees, who more often used relational crafting, were more enthusiastic about their work and more satisfied with their job. Using a weekly diary study, [Rofcanin et al. \(2019a\)](#) found that employees were more engaged in their work in the weeks they crafted their relationships, and this indirectly contributed to other proactive behaviors as well (i.e. voice). In another study with a similar design, [Geldenhuys et al. \(2021\)](#) found that weekly relational crafting was predictive of same and next-week extra-role performance – suggesting that when employees craft their work to gain social resources, they are inclined to reciprocate by providing resources to others (see within-team processes in [Figure 1](#)).

[Tims and Bakker \(2010\)](#) proposed a JD-R approach of job crafting that is different from the one above. Accordingly, job crafting may take the form of proactively increasing challenge job demands, decreasing hindrance job demands, increasing structural job resources or increasing social job resources. Regarding the latter dimension, which includes proactively asking for support and feedback, meta-analytic research ([Rudolph et al., 2017](#)) has shown that increasing social job resources is positively related to job satisfaction and work engagement. Although crafting social resources was also a positive predictor of (other-ratings of) task performance and contextual performance, a relative weights analysis indicated that increasing challenge job demands and increasing structural job resources were more

important for these outcomes. Note, however, that the analysis indicated that those who crafted social resources also often made their own work more challenging, and this overlap may partly explain why crafting social resources seemed less crucial for performance. We can conclude that social forms of job crafting can be used to increase work engagement and may indirectly contribute to task and contextual performance.

Playful work design

Playful work design is another form of proactive behavior that is not aimed at changing the design of the job itself but rather at changing the approach of work tasks and the personal experience of work (Bakker *et al.*, 2020; Scharp *et al.*, 2019). There are two forms of playful work design, designing fun and designing competition. Examples of designing fun are using funny names for new projects, making compliments to individuals who contact you and making jokes during team meetings. Examples of designing competition are challenging yourself to go through 50 e-mails in one hour or recording the time needed to finish a task and trying to continuously improve the “record time”. Although designing fun may also imply using fantasy to make work a better experience (e.g. by coming up with stories behind the people you meet during work), it often includes the use of humor in social interactions. Scharp *et al.* (2021) conducted a diary study in which participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they were confronted with daily interpersonal conflicts, social isolation at work or emotional job demands. The results showed that these daily hindrance job demands were negatively related to work engagement, but that this statistical relationship became weaker on the days employees used playful work design. By proactively redesigning their tasks to be more fun (e.g. by using humor and by creatively making a connection with others) when work offered limited opportunities for interpersonal support and connection, employees provided themselves with the companionship that the activity lacked. In this way, employees increased the probability of experiencing affiliation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) and managed to maintain their engagement and performance levels (Scharp *et al.*, 2021, Figure 1).

A range of studies has shown that individuals who are playful by nature and who score high on openness and proactivity are more likely to use and profit from playful work design (for an overview, see Bakker *et al.*, 2020). There are some first indications that playful work design can be trained and that playful work design can satisfy the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Bakker *et al.*, 2021). When employees redesign their work to be more fun and more competitive, they improve the meaning of their work. A recent study also suggested that playful work design (particularly designing fun) can buffer the undesirable impact of rumination about COVID-19 on exhaustion and depressive symptoms (Bakker and Van Wingerden, 2021b). In short, proactive work behaviors seem to help employees to manage social and life stressors and facilitate their work engagement.

Work engagement spillover

In the past decades, research has documented convincing evidence for the hypothesis that experiences in the work domain can have an impact on the family or home domain. Most of this research has focused on negative spillover effects, e.g. showing that work pressure and job responsibilities can interfere with responsibilities at home (e.g. cooking dinner and child care). However, work can also have positive spillover effects on family life, e.g. when personal accomplishments at work and the related enthusiasm and happiness help to be a more loving and supporting parent at home. According to the work–home resources (W–HR) model (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012), psychological resources such as positive affect, self-efficacy and optimism that are built up in the work domain can be used and have a positive impact on own and close others’ feelings and behaviors in the home domain (see Figure 1).

Clark *et al.* (2014) conducted a two-wave study among 340 working adults in the USA to examine positive spillover effects of work engagement on the home domain. Consistent with

the W–HR model, they found that work engagement was related to improved functioning at home through positive emotions such as feeling proud and self-confident. In a similar vein, using a diary study design, [Culbertsen et al. \(2012\)](#) investigated the link of daily work engagement with family functioning. County extension agents were asked to complete two daily surveys over the course of two workweeks. Questions regarding work engagement were assessed immediately after finishing work, whereas the home survey was completed just prior to retiring for the day. The results showed that on the days the extension agents experienced more vigor, dedication and absorption (i.e. work engagement), they felt more positive emotions at home which helped them manage personal and practical issues at home. Moreover, as predicted, interpersonal capitalization (i.e. the propensity to talk about positive work events) moderated the positive relationship between daily work engagement and work–family facilitation. This relationship was stronger for those who were more (vs less) inclined to discuss positive work events.

Whereas these two studies used self-reports of work-to-family facilitation, [Bakker et al. \(2012\)](#) tested the direct spillover effects of work engagement among couples. Their study included 267 Greek teachers and their partners who both filled out questionnaires. The results showed that teachers' work engagement was indirectly related to their partner's well-being (reduced depressive complaints) through active investment of the teacher in the intimate relationship. Specifically, teachers who were more energized by and enthusiastic about their work were more likely to invest effort in the relationship with their partner (i.e. provide resources; see [Figure 1](#)), which made the partner feel better (i.e. less depressed). [Aw et al. \(2021\)](#) used the W–HR model to guide their hypotheses in a study among Chinese bank employees and their spouses. They tested the impact of helping behaviors at work (organizational citizenship behaviors) on family performance through personal resources. Results showed that T1 helping behaviors were indirectly related to T3 spouse-ratings of family performance (e.g. engaging in household tasks, such as meal preparation, doing the dishes and taking out trash) through T2 feelings of personal accomplishment – offering further evidence for the W–HR model and the social dynamics of work engagement.

Research using crossover or contagion paradigms has shown that happiness as well as work engagement can also cross over from one intimate partner to the other. [Bakker and Demerouti \(2009\)](#) showed that wives brought their work engagement home and influenced their husband's work engagement. Moreover, wives' engagement indirectly contributed to their husband's work performance (as rated by their husband's colleague). The crossover effect was particularly strong when husbands adopted the psychological perspective of their wife. Cognitive attunement serves the goal of understanding the other's work-related attitudes and feelings and, therefore, strengthens the impact of the other's work engagement (see also, [Tian et al., 2017](#)). Using a spillover-crossover perspective, [Shimazu et al. \(2020\)](#) showed that Japanese working parents' work engagement was associated with their children's psychological well-being. Their study among more than 200 dual-earner couples with pre-school children showed that for both fathers and mothers simultaneously, work engagement was positively related to work-to-family facilitation, which, in turn, was positively related to happiness. Fathers' and mothers' happiness, in turn, was negatively related to their children's emotional and behavioral problems. These findings suggest that the work engagement of parents can even have a positive impact on children's well-being (see link between employee work engagement and family resources and engagement in [Figure 1](#)).

Discussion

In this article, I reviewed the state of the field of work engagement using a social psychology perspective. My review of the literature, which was necessarily selective, clearly shows that work engagement is the result of various social-psychological processes. A first important

observation is that engagement is contagious and that colleagues, leaders and the intimate partner can be important causes of work engagement. The energy that is radiated and the work enthusiasm that is communicated in interactions with others may also have ripple effects and impact job performance and family functioning (e.g. Bakker and Demerouti, 2009; Bakker and Xanthopoulou, 2009; Ten Brummelhuis *et al.*, 2014). These findings clearly indicate that work engagement emerges in a vibrant social context that organizations and their management may wish to cultivate. Future research should expand this literature by a closer examination of the conditions that moderate emotional contagion. It is conceivable that work engagement and its crossover among employees can be fostered by team-boosting behaviors, such as initiatives to organize joint social activities – to connect team members and build strong relationships (Fortuin *et al.*, 2021). Can those with a natural tendency to show team-boosting behaviors be trained to strategically influence team work engagement? Does the crossover of work engagement also occur in virtual teams? These are important questions that should be answered to reap the benefits of our knowledge regarding the social dynamics of work engagement. When teams as a whole become more engaged in their work, they show better coordination, collaboration and performance (Costa *et al.*, 2014).

We have seen that leaders also play an important role in work engagement. We qualified leadership as a social influence process in which leaders can either have fast impact through relational energy and emotional contagion (Owens *et al.*, 2016; Wu and Wu, 2019), or slow impact through initiating structure, individual consideration and by transforming followers to be a better version of themselves. It is important to notice that slow and fast forms of leadership have largely been studied separately. Therefore, it would be particularly interesting to look at combined effects of slow and fast leadership on work engagement in future studies. Scholars may want to look at the effectiveness of intellectual stimulation if leaders are not engaged themselves or when they do not use vivid non-verbal communication. What happens if the messages communicated through fast and slow leadership contradict each other? It would also be important to investigate the effectiveness of alternating forms of leadership across (short periods of) time (cf. ambidextrous leadership; Rosing *et al.*, 2011). Is fast leadership in the form of high leader work engagement more influential if the leader has used slow leadership at a previous occasion – for example, has taken the time to outline her vision?

Employees may also use social and proactive strategies to stay engaged in their work. Relationship crafting and redesigning work to be more playful seem effective in gaining social and personal resources (Geldenhuijs *et al.*, 2021; Scharp *et al.*, 2021). Future research may expand this literature by testing the effectiveness of training interventions to increase playful work design – including social and cognitive elements. Scholars may also want to look at the possibility to increase other possible social strategies that facilitate work engagement, such as prosocial behavior (Zeijen *et al.*, 2020) and the use of social character strengths (e.g. emotional intelligence; Pekaar *et al.*, 2018). In the spirit of this article on the social psychology of work engagement, it would also seem relevant to investigate team-level manifestations of strengths and strengths use (Van Woerkom *et al.*, 2022), as well as team-level efforts to be proactive and improve work engagement (e.g. Tims *et al.*, 2013) – also through team-level playful work design.

Caveats and practical implications

There are a number of caveats of the present analysis. First, although there is a firm theoretical basis for the proposed model, the literature review was necessarily selective. The present paper should be seen as a position paper rather than a systematic review, since journal space is limited and I tried to creatively connect literature instead of systematically meta-analyzing previous studies. The model may be used to inspire new research, and future

research should try to test the validity of the propositions generated above. Second, a social psychology of work engagement may also want to focus on negative social phenomena, including toxic leadership, interpersonal conflicts as well as groupthink and impaired decision-making. Indeed, previous research has shown that abusive supervision and conflicts do undermine individual and team work engagement (e.g. Barnes *et al.*, 2015; Scharp *et al.*, 2021). In addition, although earlier studies clearly suggest that activated positive affect generally leads to more elaborated, flexible and responsible ways of thinking (Isen, 2008), it is conceivable that high levels of team work engagement may make individuals prone to *avoid* managing certain job stressors, such as interpersonal conflicts and bureaucracy. Such an undesirable effect of work engagement may have important consequences for team functioning and performance over time. Issues related to negative social-psychological phenomena and their links with work engagement may be explored more fully in the years to come.

Practical interventions using the current position paper may start with informing leaders and followers about the social psychology of work engagement. As outlined above, there are several opportunities for interventions, including training interventions at the team and individual level. Whereas research has shown that job crafting interventions are generally effective (Oprea *et al.*, 2019), little is known yet about leadership interventions aimed at improving fast leadership. Also, it would be important to test the impact of leader- and team-level interventions aimed at improving job crafting, playful work design and resource exchange. The proposed theoretical model would suggest that leaders can be equipped to facilitate follower job crafting and playful work design and that teams as a whole will profit considerably from training interventions aimed at increasing proactive job redesign behaviors and social exchange. The present conceptual review suggests that such interventions may not only improve work engagement and performance, but will also have a positive impact on employees' family lives.

Conclusion

In this article, I have developed a social-psychological model of work engagement. The model shows how leaders, followers and family members provide, craft and receive (i.e. exchange) resources and facilitate each other's work and family engagement. The unique hypotheses that follow from the theoretical model should be tested in future research among leaders, teams and employees' families. Increased insight in the social-psychological processes that are involved in work engagement will help to better understand how people function in organizations and develop over the course of their careers.

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Corresponding author

Arnold B. Bakker can be contacted at: bakker@essb.eur.nl

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