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PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS OF PERSONAL ENGAGEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT AT WORK

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This study began with the premise that people can use varying degrees of their selves, physically, cognitively, and emotionally, in work role performances, which has implications for both their work and experiences. Two qualitative, theory-generating studies of summer camp counselors and members of an architecture firm were conducted to explore the conditions at work in which people personally engage, or express and employ their personal selves, and disengage, or withdraw and defend their personal selves. This article describes and illustrates three psychological conditions—meaningfulness, safety, and availability—and their individual and contextual sources. These psychological conditions are linked to existing theoretical concepts, and directions for future research are described.

People occupy roles at work; they are the occupants of the houses that roles provide. These events are relatively well understood; researchers have focused on “role sending” and “receiving” (Katz & Kahn, 1978), role sets (Merton, 1957), role taking and socialization (Van Maanen, 1976), and on how people and their roles shape each other (Graen, 1976). Researchers have given less attention to how people occupy roles to varying degrees—to how fully they are psychologically present during particular moments of role performances. People can use varying degrees of their selves, physically, cognitively, and emotionally, in the roles they perform, even as they maintain the integrity of the boundaries between who they are and the roles they occupy. Presumably, the more people draw on their selves to perform their roles within those boundaries, the more stirring are their performances and the more content they are with the fit of the costumes they don.

The research reported here was designed to generate a theoretical framework within which to understand these “self-in-role” processes and to suggest directions for future research. My specific concern was the moments in which people bring themselves into or remove themselves from particular task behaviors. My guiding assumption was that people are constantly bringing in and leaving out various depths of their selves during the course of

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their work days. They do so to respond to the momentary ebbs and flows of those days and to express their selves at some times and defend them at others. By focusing on moments of task performances, I sought to identify variables that explained the processes by which people adjust their selves-in-roles.

Existing organizational behavior concepts focusing on person-role relationships emphasize the generalized states that organization members occupy: people are to some degree job involved (Lawler & Hall, 1970; Lodahl & Kejner, 1965), committed to organizations (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974), or alienated at work in the form of self-estrangement (Blauner, 1964; Seeman, 1972). As previously conceptualized and measured, these concepts suggest that organization members strike and hold enduring stances (committed, involved, alienated), as if posing in still photographs. Such photographs would show people maintaining average levels of commitment and involvement over time. This perspective has offered some valuable lessons about the individual differences and situational factors that influence the psychological importance of work to people's identities or self-esteem (Jones, James, & Bruni, 1975; Lodahl, 1964), about the degree to which they consider a job central to their life (Dubin, 1956), about their willingness to exert effort for and remain part of their organizations (Mowday et al., 1982), and about the alienating effects of social systems (Blauner, 1964).

The cited research has yielded some understanding of what types of variables influence how organization members perceive themselves, their work, and the relation between the two. The understandings are general: they exist at some distance from the processes of people experiencing and behaving within particular work situations. For example, researchers have measured job involvement attitudinally with a paper-and-pencil scale asking people how much they intertwine their self-definition or self-esteem with work (e.g., "The most important things that happen to me involve my work"; Lodahl & Kejner, 1965). Often enough, employee absence from work gauges job involvement behaviorally (Blau & Boal, 1987). Both measures are broad, context-free sweeps at how present people are at work, yet neither goes to the core of what it means to be psychologically present in particular moments and situations. Doing so requires deeply probing people's experiences and situations during the discrete moments that make up their work lives. Such probing relies on studying both people's emotional reactions to conscious and unconscious phenomena, as clinical researchers do (e.g., Berg & Smith, 1985), and the objective properties of jobs, roles, and work contexts, as nonclinical researchers do (e.g., Lawler & Hall, 1970)—all within the same moments of task performances. Doing so focuses attention on the variance within the average stances of involvement and commitment that people strike over time.¹

¹ Hackett, Bycio, and Guion (1989) proposed and used "idiographic-longitudinal-analytical techniques" to achieve a similar focus.

The specific, in-depth approach used here was designed to yield a grounded theoretical framework illustrating how psychological experiences of work and work contexts shape the processes of people presenting and absenting their selves during task performances. This conceptual framework was grounded in both empirical research and existing theoretical frameworks. Conceptually, my starting point was the work of Goffman (1961a), who suggested that people's attachment to and detachment from their roles varies. In the theatrical metaphor that Goffman employed, people act out momentary attachments and detachments in role performances. Behaviors signifying a lack of separation between people and their roles indicate role embracement, and behaviors pointedly separating them from disdained roles indicate role distance. Goffman's examples show his focus on nonverbal language: a traffic policeman at a rush hour intersection embraces his role, arms dancing and whistle blowing, and a father shepherding his son on a merry-go-round distances himself from his role, yawning and mock-grimacing (1961a: 108).

Goffman's work dealt with fleeting face-to-face encounters. A different concept was needed to fit organizational life, which is ongoing, emotionally charged, and psychologically complex (Diamond & Allcorn, 1985). Psychologists (Freud, 1922), sociologists (Goffman, 1961b; Merton, 1957), and group theorists (Bion, 1961; Slater, 1966; Smith & Berg, 1987) have documented the idea that people are inherently ambivalent about being members of ongoing groups and systems and seek to protect themselves from both isolation and engulfment by alternately pulling away from and moving toward their memberships. These pulls and pushes are people's calibrations of self-in-role, enabling them to cope with both internal ambivalences and external conditions.

The terms developed here to describe these calibrations of self-in-role are *personal engagement* and *personal disengagement*. They refer to the behaviors by which people bring in or leave out their personal selves during work role performances. I defined personal 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. I defined personal disengagement as the uncoupling of selves from work roles; in disengagement, people withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances. The personal engagement and disengagement concepts developed here integrate the idea that people need both self-expression and self-employment in their work lives as a matter of course (Alderfer, 1972; Maslow, 1954).

Using these definitions to guide the research, I built on job-design research on relations between workers and the characteristics of their tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). I combined that perspective with those focusing on the interpersonal (Bennis, Schein, Berlew, & Steele, 1964; Rogers, 1958), group (Bion, 1961; Smith & Berg, 1987), intergroup (Alderfer, 1985a), and organizational (Hochschild, 1983) contexts that enhance or undermine peo-

ple's motivation and sense of meaning at work. The research premise was twofold: first, that the psychological experience of work drives people's attitudes and behaviors (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), and second, that individual, interpersonal, group, intergroup, and organizational factors simultaneously influence these experiences (Alderfer, 1985a).

Following these premises, I focused on delineating the psychological conditions in which people personally engage and disengage at work. These conditions are psychological experiences of the rational and unconscious elements of work contexts. I assumed that those work contexts, mediated by people's perceptions, create the conditions in which they personally engage and disengage. The research thus focused on people's experiences of themselves, their work, and its contexts. My aim was to map across individuals the general conditions of experience that influence degrees of personal engagement. I sought to identify psychological conditions powerful enough to survive the gamut of individual differences. This article describes and illustrates the nature of personal engagement and disengagement and the three psychological conditions found to influence those behaviors. I focus specifically on the nature of the conditions and their individual, social, and contextual sources.

METHODS

Generating a descriptive theory grounded in the behaviors, experiences, and perceptions of organization members required constant movement between theory and data: data suggested theoretical hypotheses and concepts, which suggested further data collection needs (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I thus developed the theoretical framework in one organizational context and then redeveloped it in a different context. I entered the first setting armed with the sketchy definitions of personal engagement and disengagement outlined above, the desire to identify relevant psychological conditions, and the premise that those conditions would be created at the intersection of individual, interpersonal, group, intergroup, and organizational factors.

Different research stances were taken in the two studies. In the first context, a summer camp, I was both participant and observer. In the second context, an architecture firm, I was an outside researcher. Becoming an outsider constituted movement on my part from a relatively high degree of personal engagement to disengagement. I capitalized on the difference by using myself as a research tool, much as a clinician would (Alderfer, 1985b; Berg & Smith, 1985), reflecting on my experiences of conducting the research to inform both the process of generating the theory and its substance. The difficulty was in distinguishing the general properties of personal engagement and disengagement phenomena from the specific, biased ways in which I experienced and analyzed my roles (Berg & Smith, 1985). Consulting an outside supervisor familiar with the psychological issues involved in conducting such research enabled me to work through the personal issues that crop up in and influence clinical research and to manage the dynamics of the relationships with organizations (Berg, 1980).

The two organizations were selected because of their differences on a number of dimensions. To generate widely generalizable understandings about personal engagement and disengagement, I needed to identify conceptual commonalities in widely diverging settings. The camp, a temporary system dedicated to the education and enjoyment of adolescents, had little hierarchical structure and was a total system in which work and nonwork boundaries blurred. Working there was physically exhausting for counselors, who were cast in constant care-taking and disciplinary roles. The architecture firm, a permanent system dedicated to constructing buildings, had rigid hierarchical structures and project teams and an ebbing and flowing rhythm based on projects and negotiations. The contrasts in what it was for employees to express, employ, and defend themselves as members of these two settings seemed huge. Those contrasts suggested the second setting as a counterpoint to the first.

Camp Carrib

Setting. Camp Carrib² was a six-week summer camp in the West Indies, attended by 100 adolescents, 12–17 years old, from relatively wealthy U.S. and Western European backgrounds. A staff of 22 counselors ran the camp. Counselors taught particular athletic skills such as tennis, scuba diving, and waterskiing and lived with and supervised campers. A head counselor and camp director were responsible for the general welfare of the camp and subject to the authority of its elderly owners who participated sporadically in its daily operations. The camp director was the eldest son of the camp owners; he was preparing to assume increasing ownership and control during the coming years.

Participants. Data were collected on 16 counselors, 9 men and 7 women, ranging in age from 20 to 35 years, with an average age of 25.5 years. They had been at this camp an average of two and a half summers; some were newcomers and others, eight-year veterans. They represented each camp program, from the largest (scuba diving) to the smallest (drama). The counselors were all at camp partly because they had the free time to do so. That is, they were students or teachers between academic semesters, free-lance scuba-diving instructors, or people taking summer sabbaticals from their usual lives to work temporarily as counselors. All counselors were white Americans (with the exception of one Briton) from middle- or upper middle-class backgrounds.

Data collection. I collected data using an assortment of qualitative methods: observation, document analysis, self-reflection, and in-depth interviewing. I was both a participant (the head tennis counselor) and an observer (the researcher). The camp's management agreed to my conducting the research before I joined the staff. I obtained the informed consent of the counselors at

² I have disguised the names of the two organizations and their members to protect confidentiality.

the end of the precamp orientation period, prior to the arrival of the campers; after a series of questions, clarifications, and guarantees of privacy, all counselors agreed to participate.

The first three weeks of camp involved observations and informal conversations meant to generate hypotheses and interview questions. I observed counselors in all types of situations, on-duty and off-duty, including task-related and social interactions with campers, other counselors, and camp management. Observations did not follow an explicit guide. I was looking for what I thought were examples of personal engagement and disengagement and for ways to explain those behaviors. I also sought clues in camp documents; the counselor handbook, the camp rules, and assorted camp brochures offered a sense of how the camp defined itself and the counselor role. During the second three weeks I interviewed the staff using questions based on the hypotheses I had developed. Interviews consisted of 24 open-ended questions designed to explore the counselors' perceptions of their experiences, involvements and lack thereof, roles, and the camp. The Appendix gives all questions. Probes that asked people to extend their analyses followed the questions. I taped the interviews, which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes (averaging 65 minutes).

E.S.B. and Associates

Setting. The second research site was a prestigious architecture firm in the northeastern United States. The firm, owned and operated by the principal architect (whose initials, E.S.B., gave the firm its name), was staffed by 45 employees working as registered architects, draftspersons, interior designers, administrators, and interns. The firm was highly regarded, had won a number of design competitions and awards, and was growing more or less steadily into a large corporation faced with more projects than it could comfortably handle. The firm was structured around the use of project teams that formed and reformed according to the demands of various projects in different stages of production. The firm's owner (also its president) was the principal designer for each project, and a senior architect, usually one of four vice presidents, was in charge of implementing his design concepts. As a project developed, the senior architect would form a team. At the time of the study, the firm was quite busy, working simultaneously on over 30 projects and negotiating contracts for others.

Participants. I collected data on 16 firm members, 10 men and 6 women, choosing them for the diversity of their experiences, demographic traits, and positions in the firm. The participants had an average age of 34.3 years: 7 were between 24 and 41, 5 were between 32 and 44, and 4 were between 45 and 54. They also averaged 5.8 years with the firm: 4 had been there for less than a year, 5 between 1 and 3 years, 4 between 5 and 11 years, and 3 between 12 and 23 years. These employees represented all levels and positions in the firm: I interviewed five senior architects, including the owner and the vice presidents; two designers; five draftspersons; two interns; and two support-staff members. All were white, American, and the products of

middle-class or upper middle-class backgrounds. This group represented the larger population of the firm's employees in terms of age (averaging 31 years), gender (33 percent women), and positions in the firm.³ Their average length of job tenure was higher than that of the larger population of the firm, which was sharply deflated by its high proportion of young, relatively inexperienced unregistered draftpersons.

Data collection. The lengthy process of obtaining informed consent included attending a series of meetings with E.S.B. and the vice presidents, sending introductory letters to all employees, having telephone conversations with people who had questions or reservations about the project, distributing a contract letter cosigned by E.S.B. to all employees, and contacting members who agreed to be interviewed for the study. Data collection was structured around in-depth interviews. The interview format reflected the initial theory developed from the first study, translated into what I learned of the firm's language from the entry process (see the Appendix). After warm-up questions about an individual's job and work history and the firm, I asked participants to recall four different situations in which they had felt: (1) attentive, absorbed, or involved in their work, (2) uninvolved, detached, or distracted from their work, (3) differences between how they responded to a work situation and how they would have responded if they had not been at work, and (4) no differences from nonwork behavior in how they reacted to a work-related situation. I asked participants to describe and detail each situation, their behaviors and experiences, and how they understood or explained those experiences as best they could. The tactic of asking participants to in some sense relive particular situations reflected the phenomenological assumption that understanding psychological and emotional experience requires working from experienced realities to abstracted ideas (de Rivera, 1981; Kahn, 1984). Interviews were taped and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes (averaging 54 minutes).

Analysis

Data analysis occurred in three separate phases. The first phase occurred after the camp study. I transcribed and closely read interviews to identify what intuitively seemed to be moments in which people personally engaged or disengaged at work. I culled those experiences from the rest of the interviews as long quotations and analyzed them through an inductive process in which I articulated the characteristics that defined them as moments of personal engagement or disengagement. I then analyzed each experience to induce the psychological and contextual reasons why the counselors had personally engaged or disengaged. I was left with a set of categories of data, initial concepts to explain those data, and questions to guide the second study.

³ Occupational groups at the firm, in descending order of size, were: draftpersons, senior designers and licensed architects, model builders, administrative support people, vice presidents, associate vice presidents, interior designer, and president.

The second phase of data analysis, conducted after the study of the architecture firm, again involved transcribing interviews and identifying personal engagement and disengagement experiences. I sorted these data into the existing categories. The categories needed to change, however, to accommodate the new data and provide a base for a generalizable descriptive theory. The new categories reflected the greater complexity of both data and the concepts used to explain those data. With the greater complexity came sharper definition. The continuous movement between data and concepts ended when I had defined enough categories to explain what was recorded (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The third phase of data analysis consisted of returning to the camp data and resorting and reanalyzing them in terms of the more complex categories and concepts.

In completing this cycle, I generated a collection of personal engagement and disengagement experiences. The examples were extended descriptions of moments in which people personally engaged or disengaged, pulled from the interviews and typed in their raw form on index cards. Each card included descriptions of behaviors, internal experiences, and contextual factors that described a specific moment of personal engagement or disengagement. I sorted experiences according to whether they clearly showed engagement or disengagement in terms of criteria given below. Examples that did not clearly fit either category were excluded. The collection finally included 86 personal engagement examples (40 from Camp Carrib, 46 from E.S.B. and Associates) and 100 personal disengagement examples (48 from Camp Carrib, 52 from E.S.B. and Associates). An independent coder similarly sorted a randomly selected sample of 60 experiences; there was 97 percent interrater agreement on the sortings.

These examples were used for statistical techniques that helped describe a model of personal engagement and disengagement. They did not serve to test the model; hypothesis testing relies on a stringent set of statistical assumptions that do not allow for generating and testing statistical assumptions from a single set of empirical observations (Hays, 1981). The descriptive statistics were based on my ratings of the extent to which the three psychological conditions described below were present in each of the 186 examples. Ratings were made on a nine-point format ranging from extremely absent to extremely present. An independent rater similarly rated a random sample of 36 examples, after hearing descriptions of the relevant psychological conditions and rating six practice situations. The rater was blind to whether those situations reflected personal engagement or disengagement. Correlations were calculated to determine the interrater reliability for each of the three scales. Correlations and statistics are presented below.

PERSONAL ENGAGEMENT AND PERSONAL DISENGAGEMENT

The conceptual framework presented here begins with defining and illustrating the concepts of personal engagement and disengagement that emerged from this research. Examples from the two studies and existing

theoretical frameworks elucidate the concepts. I describe pure forms of personal engagement and disengagement separately; these represent the endpoints of a continuum. People's behaviors may show mixtures of personal engagement and disengagement; for the purposes of clarity, I do not discuss those mixtures.

Personal Engagement

Personal engagement is the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's "preferred self" in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performances. My premise is that people have dimensions of themselves that, given appropriate conditions, they prefer to use and express in the course of role performances. To employ such dimensions is to drive personal energies into physical, cognitive, and emotional labors. Such self-employment underlies what researchers have referred to as effort (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), involvement (Lawler & Hall, 1970), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982), mindfulness (Langer, 1989), and intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1975). To express preferred dimensions is to display real identity, thoughts, and feelings. Self-expression underlies what researchers refer to as creativity (Perkins, 1981), the use of personal voice (Hirschman, 1970), emotional expression (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), authenticity (Baxter, 1982), nondefensive communication (Gibb, 1961), playfulness (Kahn, 1989), and ethical behavior (Toffler, 1986).

The combination of employing and expressing a person's preferred self yields behaviors that bring alive the relation of self to role. People who are personally engaged keep their selves within a role, without sacrificing one for the other. Miner's (1987) discussion of idiosyncratic jobs in formal systems offers further insight into this phenomenon. Self and role exist in some dynamic, negotiable relation in which a person both drives personal energies into role behaviors (self-employment) and displays the self within the role (self-expression). Personally engaging behaviors simultaneously convey and bring alive self and obligatory role. People become physically involved in tasks, whether alone or with others, cognitively vigilant, and empathically connected to others in the service of the work they are doing in ways that display what they think and feel, their creativity, their beliefs and values, and their personal connections to others.

For example, a scuba-diving instructor at the summer camp taught a special class to advanced divers. He spent a great deal of time with the students both in and out of class and worked to share with them his personal philosophy about the ocean and the need to take care of its resources. In doing so, he experienced moments of pure personal engagement. He described one diving expedition in which he employed his self physically, darting about checking gear and leading the dive; cognitively, in his vigilant awareness of divers, weather, and marine life; and emotionally, in empathizing with the fear and excitement of the young divers. He also expressed

himself—the dimensions of himself that loved the ocean and wanted others to do so as well—during that expedition, talking about the wonders of the ocean, directing the boat drivers toward minimally destructive paths across the coral reef, showing his playfulness and joy underwater. The counselor was at once psychologically connecting with the campers and to a task that deeply tapped what he defined as important. In doing so, he was simultaneously fully discharging his role and expressing a preferred self.

At the architecture firm, a senior designer was involved in an important project during which such moments of personal engagement occurred. In one such moment, she employed herself physically (“I was just flying around the office”), cognitively (in working out the design-construction interfaces), and emotionally (she refused to give criticism publicly, empathizing with other people’s feelings). At the same time, she expressed herself—the dimensions that hooked into the joy of creating designs both aesthetic and functional—by exhorting team members to think about how the clients would actually use the work, questioning the chief architect’s assumptions about the design, providing criticism to others in ways both constructive and gentle, and working with the client as a collaborator rather than a “hired gun.” At such moments, she behaved in ways that were both expressive of what she wanted to see acted out in the world and harnessed to the engine of task-oriented realities.

Personal Disengagement

Personal disengagement, conversely, is the simultaneous withdrawal and defense of a person’s preferred self in behaviors that promote a lack of connections, physical, cognitive, and emotional absence, and passive, incomplete role performances. To withdraw preferred dimensions is to remove personal, internal energies from physical, cognitive, and emotional labors. Such unemployment of the self underlies task behaviors researchers have called automatic or robotic (Hochschild, 1983), burned out (Maslach, 1982), apathetic or detached (Goffman, 1961a), or effortless (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). To defend the self is to hide true identity, thoughts, and feelings during role performances. Such self-defense underlies what researchers have referred to as defensive (Argyris, 1982), impersonal or emotionally unexpressive (Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), bureaucratic (Shorris, 1981), self-estranged (Seeman, 1972), and closed (Gibb, 1961) behaviors.

Personally disengaging means uncoupling self from role; people’s behaviors display an evacuation or suppression of their expressive and energetic selves in discharging role obligations.⁴ Role demands guide task behaviors without the interplay between internal thoughts and feelings and external requirements that characterize moments of personal engagement.

⁴ A different, related concept might be called “role disengagement”; this term refers to what occurs when people shed their roles as a way to uncouple self-in-role, avoid discharging role obligations, and simply be themselves.

People perform tasks at some distance from their preferred selves, which remain split off and hidden. They perform roles as external scripts indicate they should rather than internally interpret those roles; they act as custodians rather than innovators (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). They become physically uninvolved in tasks, cognitively unvigilant, and emotionally disconnected from others in ways that hide what they think and feel, their creativity, their beliefs and values, and their personal connections to others.

Another senior designer at the architecture firm provided an example of disengagement, describing a moment in which he withdrew his energies physically, by farming out nonmanagement tasks to others; cognitively, by adopting an automatic, perfunctory approach marked by not questioning others' decisions, parameters, and design assumptions; and emotionally, by not empathizing with confused draftspersons and an upset client. He defended himself by displaying little of what he thought and felt within the conduct of the role. In working with the chief architect at that moment, he said little and waited to hear the other's responses; as he noted, "I exercised less than I probably could my own responses to something at that point, and had it be more how E.S.B. would respond." The designer suppressed what he himself thought and felt about the project. Anticipating and echoing the wishes of the president involved some presence of mind, but of a type that depended on disengaging his personal thoughts from his tasks. He refrained from investing ideas, encouraging the creativity of other team members, or sharing his visions about the design and excitement about the process, all of which could have shaped the building profoundly and helped it reflect the images and principles he held.

At the camp, a counselor personally disengaged during moments of teaching a windsurfing class. She reported withdrawing herself physically ("sending them out and just laying around"), cognitively ("not telling them much or helping them out much"), and emotionally ("I was more bland, superficial, talking in flat, unemotional tones"). At that moment, she displayed little of who she preferred to be by not letting herself connect with and get close to the campers. As she noted, "I was really shut down, not letting loose or being funny or letting them get close to me by talking more about myself. I just didn't let them in, I guess." Her personal disengagement meant withdrawing and defending herself from the types of interpersonal connections that defined who she typically preferred to be in her counselor role.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS

Overview

The studies reported here focused on how people's experiences of themselves and their work contexts influenced moments of personal engagement and disengagement. My premise was that people employ and express or withdraw and defend their preferred selves on the basis of their psychological experiences of self-in-role. This premise is similar to Hackman and

Oldham's (1980) notion that there are critical psychological states that influence people's internal work motivations. Here, the focus was on psychological conditions—the momentary rather than static circumstances of people's experiences that shape behaviors. These circumstances are like conditions in fleeting contracts; if certain conditions are met to some acceptable degree, people can personally engage in moments of task behaviors.

The three psychological conditions described and illustrated below were articulated through an inductive analysis that defined the experiential conditions whose presence influenced people to personally engage and whose absence influenced them to personally disengage. I analyzed each moment as if there were a contract between person and role (cf. Schein, 1970); the conditions of those contracts were induced, generalized across all moments, and connected to existing theoretical concepts. Three psychological conditions emerged: *meaningfulness*, *safety*, and *availability*. Together, the three conditions shaped how people inhabited their roles. Organization members seemed to unconsciously ask themselves three questions in each situation and to personally engage or disengage depending on the answers. The questions were: (1) How meaningful is it for me to bring myself into this performance? (2) How safe is it to do so? and (3) How available am I to do so?

The three conditions reflect the logic of actual contracts. People agree to contracts containing clear and desired benefits and protective guarantees when they believe themselves to possess the resources necessary to fulfill the obligations generated. That logic characterizes people's agreements to place increasing depths of themselves into role performances. People vary their personal engagements according to their perceptions of the benefits, or the meaningfulness, and the guarantees, or the safety, they perceive in situations. Engagement also varies according to the resources they perceive themselves to have—their availability. This contractual imagery helped make sense of the data on participants' experiences and offered a conceptual structure within which I could link the three psychological conditions.

A look at the characteristics of situations that shaped participants' experiences of themselves, their roles, and the relations between the two will elucidate the three psychological conditions. Experiences—of benefits, guarantees, and resources—were generally associated with particular influences. Psychological meaningfulness was associated with work elements that created incentives or disincentives to personally engage. Psychological safety was associated with elements of social systems that created more or less nonthreatening, predictable, and consistent social situations in which to engage. Psychological availability was associated with individual distractions that preoccupied people to various degrees and left them more or fewer resources with which to engage in role performances. Table 1 summarizes the dimensions of the three focal conditions.

Psychological Meaningfulness

Psychological meaningfulness can be seen as a feeling that one is receiving a return on investments of one's self in a currency of physical,

cognitive, or emotional energy. People experienced such meaningfulness when they felt worthwhile, useful, and valuable—as though they made a difference and were not taken for granted. They felt able to give to others and to the work itself in their roles and also able to receive. Lack of meaningfulness was connected to people's feeling that little was asked or expected of their selves and that there was little room for them to give or receive in work role performances. This formulation reflects concepts of how people invest themselves in tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) and roles (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986) that satisfy personal (Alderfer, 1972; Maslow, 1954) and existential needs (May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958) for meaning in work and life.

The general link between personal engagement and psychological meaningfulness was explored with descriptive statistics calculated from the ratings of the 186 experiences I culled from the two studies. The statistics indicated that personal engagement was connected to higher levels of psychological meaningfulness ($\bar{x} = 7.8$, $s.d. = .84$) than personal disengagement ($\bar{x} = 3.24$, $s.d. = 1.75$; inter-rater reliability (r) = .89). These results suggest that people were personally engaging in situations characterized by more psychological meaningfulness than those in which they were disengaging.

The data indicated that three factors generally influenced psychological meaningfulness: task characteristics, role characteristics, and work interactions.

Task characteristics. When organization members were doing work that was challenging, clearly delineated, varied, creative, and somewhat autonomous, they were more likely to experience psychological meaningfulness. I induced that finding from the two studies and from previous research (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) focusing on how job characteristics such as skill variety and autonomy are a source of meaning in work.

An ideal situation for psychological meaningfulness, for example, was working on a rich and complex project. Meaningful tasks demanded both routine and new skills, allowing people to experience a sense of both competence (from the routine) and growth and learning (from the new). As a draftsman at the architecture firm noted,

The project I'm working on includes the restoration of a historical building, reconstruction of a demolished historic room, and an addition of a new building to an old one. That's a lot of complexity, and difficult as far as projects go. It's also the one that gets me excited about coming into the office.

Similarly, a scuba counselor noted,

That class was one of the more difficult and rewarding I've taught here. It was a tough dive, because of the weather, and dangerous. I had to be so aware all the time of everything: the kids and their air supplies, the compass work, the swells and currents. It was tough, but it felt great when it was over.

TABLE 1
Dimensions of Psychological Conditions

Dimensions	Meaningfulness	Safety	Availability
Definition	Sense of return on investments of self in role performances.	Sense of being able to show and employ self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career.	Sense of possessing the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary for investing self in role performances.
Experiential components	Feel worthwhile, valued, valuable; feel able to give to and receive from work and others in course of work.	Feel situations are trustworthy, secure, predictable, and clear in terms of behavioral consequences.	Feel capable of driving physical, intellectual, and emotional energies into role performance.
Types of influence	Work elements that create incentives or disincentives for investments of self.	Elements of social systems that create situations that are more or less predictable, consistent, and nonthreatening.	Individual distractions that are more or less preoccupying in role performance situations.
Influences	Tasks: Jobs involving more or less challenge, variety, creativity, autonomy, and clear delineation of procedures and goals. Roles: Formal positions that offer more or less attractive identities, through fit with a preferred self-image, and status and influence. Work interactions: Interpersonal interactions with more or less promotion of dignity, self-appreciation, sense of value, and the inclusion of personal as well as professional elements.	Interpersonal relationships: Ongoing relationships that offer more or less support, trust, openness, flexibility, and lack of threat. Group and intergroup dynamics: Informal, often unconscious roles that leave more or less room to safely express various parts of self; shaped by dynamics within and between groups in organizations. Management style and process: Leader behaviors that show more or less support, resilience, consistency, trust, and competence. Organizational norms: Shared system expectations about member behaviors and emotions that leave more or less room for investments of self during role performances.	Physical energies: Existing levels of physical resources available for investment into role performances. Emotional energies: Existing levels of emotional resources available for investment into role performances. Insecurity: Levels of confidence in own abilities and status, self-consciousness, and ambivalence about fit with social systems that leave more or less room for investments of self in role performances. Outside life: Issues in people's outside lives that leave them more or less available for investments of self during role performances.

Meaningful tasks also allowed for some autonomy and the resulting sense of ownership over the work that previous research has noted (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Such tasks were neither so tightly linked to nor so controlled by others that people performing them needed to constantly look for direction. Finally, the goals of potentially meaningful tasks were clear, allowing a good chance for success (cf. Locke, 1968). Clear goals were not always present in the architecture firm, where the ambiguity of the creative process was exacerbated by a president who would, in the words of one interviewee, offer “scribbles, bubbles, and waves” in design sketches and walk away, leaving behind more uncertainty than clarity.

Role characteristics. The data indicated two components of work roles that influenced the experience of psychological meaningfulness. First, roles carried identities that organization members were implicitly required to assume. Organization members could like or dislike those identities and the stances toward others they required; they typically did so on the basis of how well the roles fit how they saw or wanted to see their selves (Goffman, 1961a; Hochschild, 1983). At the camp, counselors both taught the campers, which required trust, and policed them, which required distrust. Counselors usually found one or the other identity—teacher or policeman—more meaningful, although at times they were frustrated by the paradox of needing to be both and found neither meaningful. In the architecture firm, there were also various identities that members hooked into psychologically to different degrees: designer, decision maker, and with clients, collaborator or competitor. Comments from the firm’s receptionist illustrated the unattractiveness of her work role:

The role I’m required to perform, sitting up here in front and smiling and typing and being friendly . . . it’s all bullshit, it’s just a role, and there isn’t any satisfaction in it for me. I’m more than that, and I want to be seen as a person apart from the work I do. This eight or nine hours is a waste, damaging, I think, to my own growth and what I think about myself.

Roles also carried status, or influence. When people were able to wield influence, occupy valuable positions in their systems, and gain desirable status, they experienced a sense of meaningfulness. The underlying dimension was power and what it bought: influence, and a sense of being valued, valuable, and needed. People search for ways to feel important and special, particularly since they generally feel powerless in the world as a whole (Lasch, 1984). In these organizations, roles that allowed people to have a sense of shaping the external world, whether in the form of kids’ experiences or concrete buildings, offered a sense of meaningfulness. As one draftsman put it, “It’s amazing for me to walk through a building and see this front entry vestibule or this stairwell, and like see me, see that I had an impact.” A scuba counselor measured his influence differently:

I have a lot of kids who ask for me as their instructor, who come up and tell me that they don't like the other instructors and want to be with me. They feel open about separating us. It's not great that that happens, but it's very gratifying for me.

Role status was important partly as an indicator to people about how central to and needed in their organizations they were. Particular activities at both organizations were less central than others and widely perceived as such, and people performing those tasks were susceptible to feeling unimportant—particularly if others treated them as unimportant. A counselor in charge of an unpopular program remarked, “I don't have my special place; I'm just not special here to the kids.” A support staff member at the firm noted that although his job was essential if others were to do their work, “It's treated as meaningless.” Roles perceived as unimportant in an organizational constellation lacked the power to offer their occupants a sense of meaningfulness.

Work interactions. People also experienced psychological meaningfulness when their task performances included rewarding interpersonal interactions with co-workers and clients. In the two studies, meaningful interactions promoted dignity, self-appreciation, and a sense of worthwhileness. They enabled relationships in which people wanted to give to and receive from others. As an architect noted,

I would say that my involvement comes from individuals. It's an immediate, initial thing that happens, a connection that I make each time when I work with someone with whom I find some common ground, some shared ways of thinking about things. If I don't have that connection, it's tough for me to get going working with them.

Such connections are an invaluable source of meaning in people's lives because they meet relatedness needs (Alderfer, 1972): they allow people to feel known and appreciated and that they are sharing their existential journeys with others (May et al., 1958).

Meaningful interactions in the two settings often involved both personal and professional elements and a looseness of the boundaries separating the two. For the counselors, this meant interacting with other staff members not simply as co-workers but as cohorts. The image that some counselors invoked was of a platoon in which individuals thrown together under extraordinary circumstances develop emotional bonds transcending the relative superficiality of the connections between typical co-workers. At the architecture firm, meaningfulness also came from interpersonal connections that to some degree tapped people's emotional lives. That tapping occurred when people felt as if they fit in some way with those with whom they interacted and when people treated one another not as role occupants but as people who happened to occupy roles (Hochschild, 1983). The distinction was important to how much dignity and self-esteem people felt at work.

Interactions with clients, whether campers or builders, were sources of

both gratification and frustration. Meaningful interactions allowed people to feel valuable and valued. They involved mutual appreciation, respect, and positive feedback. Client interactions reduced the sense of meaningfulness when they blocked the interpersonal connections allowing people to perform and enjoy their jobs. Camp counselors found meaningfulness diminished when the campers communicated a lack of care, respect, or appreciation for the counselors' work. As one counselor noted, "It's a question of whether they tap into me or not; you put the energy where it will be appreciated." Similarly, architectural clients who did not allow firm members to do the jobs for which they were trained or did not appreciate their efforts created relationships devoid of respect and meaningfulness. Organization members preferred to be psychologically absent in such relationships.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety was experienced as feeling able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career. People felt safe in situations in which they trusted that they would not suffer for their personal engagement. This association reflects a tenet of clinical work stating that therapeutic relationships (Sandler, 1960), families (Minuchin, 1974), groups (Smith & Berg, 1987), and organizations (Schein, 1987) create contexts in which people feel more or less safe in taking the risks of self-expression and engaging the processes of change. In the two studies, situations promoting trust were predictable, consistent, clear, and nonthreatening; people were able to understand the boundaries between what was allowed and disallowed and the potential consequences of their behaviors. When situations were unclear, inconsistent, unpredictable, or threatening, personal engagement was deemed too risky or unsafe.

The general link between personal engagement and psychological safety was explored with descriptive statistics derived from the ratings of the group of 186 experiences. The statistics indicated that personal engagement was connected to higher levels of psychological safety ($\bar{x} = 7.7$, $s.d. = 1.21$) than personal disengagement ($\bar{x} = 3.77$, $s.d. = 1.6$; $r = .83$). These results suggest that people were personally engaging in situations characterized by more psychological safety than those in which they were personally disengaging.

The data indicated that four factors most directly influenced psychological safety: interpersonal relationships, group and intergroup dynamics, management style and process, and organizational norms.

Interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships promoted psychological safety when they were supportive and trusting. Such relationships had a flexibility that allowed people to try and perhaps to fail without fearing the consequences. At the architecture firm, such relations were those in which members shared ideas and concepts about designs without feeling that it was dangerous to do so; they felt that any criticism would be constructive rather than destructive. At the camp, safe relationships were those enabling counselors to teach, shepherd, and discipline campers as they

thought best without needing to attend to other counselors' reactions. One counselor described that process:

It's great to teach with John. Either one of us can make a mistake and back each other up and it's not an ego problem. If I make a mistake he'll come in and without saying you just made a mistake note that it can also be done another way. We play off one another that way instead of clashing, and it lets me teach my own way.

People felt safer in climates characterized by such openness (Jourard, 1968) and supportiveness (Gibb, 1961).

People did not feel such safety when they felt disconnected from others. A support staff member at the architecture firm noted of one designer that "with a glance he became a door; he put up this 'don't bother me' sign around him." Crossing such boundaries was perceived as unsafe. The staff member describing this relationship continued:

When he puts up those walls, I know to stay away from him. But the problem is, I have to deal with him at some of those times. So we interact, but I keep it short, don't joke or anything. I did once and he went nuts. So I get monotonic, almost moronic, with him.

In such instances, threat reflects differences in position and power. Participants experienced relations among people representing different hierarchical echelons as potentially more stifling and threatening than relations with peers. Threats could be quite real. In the firm, superiors could deeply change or even end a subordinate's role. As one draftsman noted,

I'm pretty careful around Steve [a vice president], after he instilled a bit of fear in me. I'm minding my Ps and Qs. There's a testiness in his voice to me at times, and I have the sense that we're not communicating well. Because I'm in a very precarious position, I need to defer until I can figure out some better way of responding to him and working with him.

People were quicker to withdraw from potential conflict with members of higher echelons than they were to withdraw from conflicts with members of their own echelon.

Group and intergroup dynamics. The various unacknowledged characters, or unconscious roles, that individuals assumed also influenced psychological safety. Group dynamics were defined according to the unconscious plays that characterize the more conscious workings of organizations (Bion, 1961; Hirschhorn, 1988; Slater, 1966). Social systems have a mentality beyond the mentalities of individual members, connecting them by processes of unconscious alliance and collusion (Wells, 1980). In the context of a work group, members collude to act out plays that allay anxieties, conscious and unconscious. Such plays revolve, for example, around plots dealing with authority, competition, or sexuality and depend on organization members to

play informal, unconscious roles. Once cast into these roles, people vary in how much room they have to safely bring their selves into work role performances (Minuchin, 1974). In the two settings studied, different implicit roles were more or less safe or unsafe havens from which people could personally engage depending on how much respect and authority those roles received.

In the architecture firm, for example, a group dynamic cast the firm's president as a father figure. Participating in the play that the image implied, other members took supporting roles whose status, power, and safety varied according to their proximity to the "father." The data revealed, for example, two firm members who occupied "mother" and "favored son" characters in their own and others' eyes, which created spaces in which they could safely personally engage. They referred to those roles in these comments:

It's a family situation here, and I have a blind loyalty to him [E.S.B.]. I am a mother. I am the mother, here, which is hard sometimes, but it lets me interact with him and with others pretty much as I want to, within limits.

I tend to be seen as the next generation of designers that he lays out. My designs aren't questioned as much as those of others, and I think it's because I'm seen as following his tradition but in my own way.

The firm's gofer emerged as the "bad son": he wore earrings, cracked jokes, dyed his hair red, and was seldom able to engage. He was frustrated with his inability to escape from the informal role in which he was cast—with his participation—and from which he found other parts of his self, such as the artist, excluded. In the same way, some counselors found themselves relegated to unattractive, supporting roles that reduced opportunities to safely engage.

The informal characters that people played partly reflected the identity and organizational groups they consciously and unconsciously represented to one another (Alderfer, 1985a). Members representing less powerful groups are often cast into unattractive, vulnerable roles, particularly in interactions with members representing more powerful groups (Miller, 1976; Smith, 1982). In both organizations, women spoke of situations in which it felt unsafe for them to personally engage because of what they experienced as men's undermining their role performances. One female counselor gave an example:

There are times when I'm trying to get a girl camper to go to bed, and some male counselor starts flirting with the girl. It makes me look bad and undermines me incredibly. So I have to be 'the bitch.' If I didn't, and just dealt with the kids as I'd like to, they'd just hassle me and not listen to me.

Similar dynamics characterized relations between organizational subgroups. At the architecture firm, for example, people experienced differences along

the dimension of tenure at the firm. New and old members tended to define situations involving members of the other category as less safe, as the remarks of one old member illustrated:

I feel like there's a handful of us that are the old guard, and the rest are brand new. Those of us that have been here a long time have a different kind of relationship with each other than those that are just right off the street. We know each other so well, so we can be silly with one another. I am less likely to be as loose or candid with the new people as I am with the older ones.

A similar split occurred between counselors associated with the different activities. Counselors who taught different skills were accorded different status by the campers, the management, and even one another, and an informal hierarchy was established. Scuba instructors, for example, occupied the top of the hierarchy due to the perceived glamor and professionalization of their sport, and activities like drama and photography occupied the bottom, reflecting the campers' relative disinterest in them. The hierarchy influenced the psychological safety the counselors felt. A waterskiing counselor, for example, said she was interrupted and publicly corrected at a camp meeting by a scuba instructor as she described the internationally recognized distress signal:

I felt like a total jerk out there in front of everyone, and angry at him for doing that. I was still right—but I backed down, assuming that he knew more about it because he was certified and all that. They're intimidating sometimes, so I just don't want to hassle with them.

The lack of psychological safety in such situations and the resulting suppression of individuals' voices reflects the distribution of authority and power among groups in organizations (Alderfer, 1985a).

Management style and process. Supportive, resilient, and clarifying management heightened psychological safety. Leaders translate system demands and reinforce members' behaviors in ways that may create different degrees of supportiveness and openness (Louis, 1986). Like supportive interpersonal relationships, supportive managerial environments allowed people to try and to fail without fear of the consequences. In practice, this meant opportunities to experiment with new design techniques in the firm or new teaching methods at the camp. People also felt safer when they had some control over their work. Managerial reluctance to loosen their control sent a message that their employees were not to be trusted and should fear overstepping their boundaries. That fear was compounded when managers were unpredictable, inconsistent, or hypocritical. An architect offered an example of such inconsistency,

He [E.S.B.] goes over my head all the time. He'll tell me to do one thing, and I'll take care of it—like with a client or a design—and

then he'll go and change it himself. It's like he goes over his own head—it's hilarious. Like if he had the time, he'd come over and redesign anything, even while it's being built. Crazy.

At such times, it was difficult for people in both organizations to trust the constancy of their task assignments or the control given them. It was hard to feel safe enough to invest their selves at work in any one direction. People need to feel that their authority figures are competent enough and secure enough in their own visions to create paths along which subordinates can safely travel (Kahn, 1990).

Members' perceived lack of safety also reflected their discomfort with the "tones" of management. In the architecture firm, some members had difficulty with how management dealt with firm members during office meetings:

I've come away from those meetings feeling like I can ask a question as long as it's not threatening or it's a simple technical question about how the firm works. Impertinent questions will not be tolerated and are palmed off with a sarcastic response—even though they say we can ask anything.

The ambivalence with which the firm's management simultaneously welcomed and avoided openness sent mixed and thus distrusted messages to firm members.

At the camp, the tone the director set was at times similarly undermining. He occasionally took a cruel tone with the campers, and counselors observing such behavior could not help but learn the lesson taught the campers: that at times the camp was not a safe, supportive, caring system in which to be a member. One counselor directly expressed this when she said, "After seeing how Kurt rips into some of these kids, I'm pretty careful about not saying much when he's around. I just don't trust the guy." People's discomfort with the security of a managerial environment at times set limits on how safe they felt in employing and expressing their selves.

Organizational norms. Finally, psychological safety corresponded to role performances that were clearly within the boundaries of organizational norms. Norms are shared expectations about the general behaviors of system members (Hackman, 1986). People that stayed within generally appropriate ways of working and behaving felt safer than those who strayed outside those protective boundaries. In this regard, safety meant not calling into question habitual patterns of thought and behavior that ensured predictability; questioning such patterns meant being treated as a deviant (Shorris, 1981). At the camp, safety was a matter of counselors' exerting appropriate amounts of energy in different activities and being appropriately trusting or mistrusting of campers. In the architecture firm, the important norms revolved around how much time and energy to give to certain projects, how candid or withholding to be in giving feedback and criticism, and how confrontational or reticent to be with clients.

Deviating from norms and the possibility of doing so were sources of anxiety and frustration, particularly for people with low status and leverage, as deviance is in most social systems. In the architecture firm, such norms were encoded into the design parameters the president set, which were known and reinforced throughout the firm. People reined themselves in or were reined in to conform with established parameters. A draftsman described that process:

How bold you're being creates a certain amount of anxiety. If you're doing something that is somewhat removed from the parameters that you think or suspect you're supposed to be working from, you get a little nervous. When that happens, I hunt around for someone to tell me what he [E.S.B.] would like. Or someone will come around and say no, he would never go for that. That's the bottom line.

In such moments, people focus almost exclusively on the external rules or cues governing the situation that will lead them through potentially dangerous thickets (Goffman, 1959). The analogous situation at the camp involved the extent to which counselors were encouraged to trust campers. A number of counselors described situations in which they were trying to, as one noted, "give the kids a break," but were countermanded by other staff members. Recalling such an incident, a counselor remarked that he "just stopped trying to trust the kids because it was more hassle than it was worth—it's easier to be the hardass, like the camp wants me to be." Norms regulate emotional as well as physical labor (Hochschild, 1983).

In the architecture firm, the physical office space starkly symbolized the ways that overstepping the boundaries of expected behavior felt unsafe. Wide open and without walls except for four-foot partitions, the office resembled an open-air maze of public work spaces. There was also a loft that looked like a balcony. The space suggested that people were at once actors and audience. Its openness symbolically placed them on a stage in which they were constantly exposed to the scrutiny of others. There was no backstage, no place in which they could doff all vestiges of role and use their own voices (Goffman, 1961b). The camp counselors similarly occupied a stage, playing to the camper audience. Openness came from the intimacy of a small, enclosed system in which there were no secrets. The implications for the use of personal voice were the same as in the architecture firm. As a counselor noted, "So many times you'd love to share something with another counselor, something you saw going on, but for whatever reason, you just can't say it because you know it'll get around." In contexts defined by a lack of protective boundaries, people chose to guard their selves by withdrawing when they felt unsafe. In the absence of external boundaries between self and others, people withdrew as a way of creating internal boundaries (Hirschhorn, 1988).

Psychological Availability

Psychological availability is the sense of having the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to personally engage at a particular moment. It measures how ready people are to engage, given the distractions they experience as members of social systems. In this study, people were more or less available to place their selves fully into role performances depending on how they coped with the various demands of both work and nonwork aspects of their lives. Research on stress (e.g., Pearlin, 1983) has often included a measure of self-assessment of ability to engage in coping strategies. Such components implicitly measure psychological availability.

The general link between personal engagement and psychological availability was explored with descriptive statistics performed on the ratings of the group of 186 experiences. The statistics indicated that personal engagement was connected to higher levels of psychological availability ($\bar{x} = 7.48$, s.d. = 1.04) than personal disengagement ($\bar{x} = 3.27$, s.d. = 1.56; $r = .81$). These results suggest that people were personally engaging in situations for which they were more psychologically available and disengaging in situations for which they were less available.⁵

The data from the two studies indicated that four types of distractions influenced psychological availability: depletion of physical energy, depletion of emotional energy, individual insecurity, and outside lives.

Physical energy. Personal engagement demanded levels of physical energy, strength, and readiness that personal disengagement did not, as Goffman (1961a) suggested in his studies of nonverbal role performances. This requirement was clear in moments of personal disengagement in which people were simply depleted. The camp counselor role was physically demanding, given the strength of the sun on the island and the campers' unbounded energy. As one counselor said, "I'm not used to being out in the sun. For the first two weeks I took a nap every afternoon, but I was still physically blown away. I just couldn't be up with the kids the way I wanted because I was just too zonked." Physical incapacity was less common in the architecture firm, but it did occur after long hours at a drafting table. A draftsman described such incapacity:

Doing any of these tasks here means sitting down for eight hours. You're sitting down doing these very precise drawings. Your back is bent over, you're staring. Your back, your neck, your

⁵ The similarity of the patterns of rating scale results for the three psychological conditions raised questions about the extent to which they were conceptually distinguishable. I therefore examined the correlations among the three conditions using the ratings of the 186 examples of personal engagement and disengagement experiences. The correlations were: meaningfulness and safety, .32; meaningfulness and availability, .42; and safety and availability, .57.

eyes—you feel physically awful and mentally exhausted, and all you think about is going home.

At such times, people were simply worn out and unavailable to engage.

Emotional energy. Emotional ability to personally engage also influenced psychological availability. The premise is that employing and expressing the self in tasks requiring emotional labor takes a certain level of emotionality that personally disengaging does not (Hochschild, 1983). In the firm, the frustrations of trying to translate abstract design concepts into working drawings and building specifications were emotionally draining. An architect described such a situation:

It's a combination of not knowing what the answer is and trying different solutions and being totally frustrated and exhausted, so you just pull out of it. I spent a few days working out one design problem and was never satisfied with what I was coming up with. I just got worn down, got more and more distracted. I walked away from it, my mind was a mess. I just couldn't do it anymore.

At the camp, the unceasing demands of the campers for attention were emotionally draining. A counselor noted,

The kids just take it out of you after a while, and you've given them everything you have emotionally. Sometimes I just need to get away and have no demands on me to watch, to care, to give. I take walks then, down by the beach, and try to think and feel nothing.

At some point, people simply had nothing left to give and withdrew. People needed emotional resources to meet the demands of personal engagement.

Insecurity. Psychological availability also corresponded to how secure people felt about their work and their status. For individuals to express their selves in social systems, they must feel relatively secure about those selves (Gustafson & Cooper, 1985). Insecurity distracted members from bringing their selves into their work; it generated anxiety that occupied energies that would have otherwise been translated into personal engagements. One dimension of insecurity was lack of self-confidence, a particular issue for new, low-status members of both organizations. A new draftsman voiced that insecurity:

I was somewhat anxious about how the speed and quality of my work was comparing to other people at my level in the office. Was I doing it fast enough, was I doing it right enough? I think about that, being here only three months. Are they going to keep me, or throw me back because I'm too small? So at times I tend to worry more about how my work is going to be received than about the work itself.

Counselors withdrew from performing their roles as they would have liked

when they did not “want to step out of place,” as one counselor said, or, as another said, they were “not sure about how much to put into the camp all the time.” Being available was partly a matter of security in abilities and status and maintaining a focus on tasks rather than anxieties.

A second dimension of insecurity was heightened self-consciousness. When organization members focused on how others perceived and judged them—whether or not such judgment actually occurred—they were too distracted to personally engage. They would focus on external rather than internal cues (Goffman, 1959). This happened when people perceived themselves, consciously or not, as actors on stages, surrounded by audiences and critics, rather than as people simply doing their jobs. The self-consciousness preoccupied people, engaging them in the work of managing impressions rather than in the work itself. A designer offered an example of such preoccupation:

I have to appear concerned and eager to work. I am a lot of times, but if you're not concentrating on showing that, people can get the wrong impression. Communicating with people means figuring out the best way to respond to certain situations. Just thinking: What are my communications like with this person now, who can I joke with and to what extent, and who shouldn't I joke with?

The stage-like quality of the two organizations exacerbated such self-consciousness. In the architecture firm, the physical space markedly resembled an open stage, complete with balcony; in the camp, the counselors were always performing for the camper audience.

A third dimension of insecurity was people's ambivalence about their fit with their organization and its purposes. This ambivalence could preoccupy people, leaving them little space, energy, or desire to employ or express themselves in moments of task performances. Their lack of commitment to the rather wealthy campers distracted some counselors at times. Firm members sometimes struggled with their commitment to the overall tenor of the design parameters and style set by the president, which one designer characterized as “blatant post-modernism.” People struggling with their desires to contribute to the end goals of their systems became less able or willing—less available—to do so. It is difficult for people to engage personally in fulfilling work processes when organizational ends do not fit their own values, as research on organizational commitment has suggested (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). In dealing with such issues, people were already engaged in inner debates that spared little room for external engagements.

Outside life. People's outside lives, which had the potential to take them psychologically away from their role performances, also influenced psychological availability. Members of both organizations were at times too preoccupied by events in their nonwork lives to invest energies in role performances; research on work-family boundaries has attested to such distraction (Hall & Richter, 1989). Counselors involved with other counselors were dis-

tracted by those relationships; a counselor who taught sailing and was in an intimate relationship with another counselor noted, "I've been coasting a lot with the kids—my energy is just in other places right now." A variety of personal distractions similarly incapacitated members of the architecture firm. A draftsman applying to architecture schools noted, "I just don't concentrate as well because I'm thinking about that whole process."

People's outside lives could increase their availability. At times, events in their nonwork lives "charged" organization members. A camp counselor referred to how his "emotional high" from meeting a woman at an island casino gave him "amazing amounts of energy to spend with the kids." A draftsman talked about feeling confident about making a presentation because of recent successes as a graphic artist. In such cases, the looseness of the boundaries separating work and nonwork let people draw on energies generated outside their formal roles.

DISCUSSION

The grounded theory described here cuts across a number of different existing conceptual frameworks to articulate the complex of influences on people's personal engagements and disengagements in particular moments of role performances. Besides its concern with specific moments of role performances, the resulting framework has a core focus different from others currently used to explain person-role relationships. This core has a number of key dimensions: a simultaneous concern with people's emotional reactions to conscious and unconscious phenomena and the objective properties of jobs, roles, and work contexts; the primacy of people's experiences of themselves and their contexts as the mediator of the depths to which they employ and express or withdraw and defend themselves during role performances; and the self-in-role as the unit of analysis, a focus on how both person and role are enlivened or deadened during role performances. The research described here articulated and defined these dimensions in the service of moving toward a theory of people's psychological presence and absence at work.

Directions for Future Research

The grounded theory described here carries with it implications for future research that will extend its conceptual dimensions and usefulness for practice. An immediate research agenda involves three arenas: the interplay of the three psychological conditions; individual differences; and the connections of personal engagement and disengagement to concepts currently used to explore person-role relationships.

Interplay of psychological conditions. A primary aim of future research might be to develop a dynamic process model explaining how the variables documented above combine to produce moments of personal engagement

and disengagement. This exploratory research suggests that people tacitly deal with multiple levels of influences—individual, interpersonal, group, intergroup, and organizational—by examining them, at varying degrees of awareness, for what they imply about the meaningfulness, safety, and availability that characterize role performance situations. The question remains, How do the three conditions combine in particular situations to promote personal engagement or disengagement?

It seems likely that there are thresholds separating the levels of the three conditions that, taken together, promote personal engagement rather than disengagement. But how do those conditions coact to let people reach those thresholds? The coaction may be additive and compensatory: with the three conditions summed together, the strength of one may compensate for the weakness of others. Or it may involve a specific hierarchy: a person's experiencing a situation as extremely meaningful may compensate for a lack of personal availability, but the reverse may not be true. The coaction may also involve thresholds for each condition. People may have to feel minimal levels of meaningfulness, safety, and availability before their additive interplay can lead them across the threshold separating personal engagement from disengagement. Such questions, answered both qualitatively and quantitatively in future research, will offer a richer portrait of the processes by which personal engagements and disengagements are created.

Individual differences. The focus of this research was identifying psychological conditions general enough to explain moments of personal engagement and disengagement across individuals. Yet presumably, individual differences shape people's dispositions toward personally engaging or disengaging in all or some types of role performances, just as they shape people's abilities and willingness to be involved or committed at work. Presumably, too, individual differences influence how people personally engage or disengage, given their experiences of psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability in specific situations. Consider, for example, people who experience particular situations as unsafe. Although certain dispositional factors may lead someone to perceive a situation as unsafe, it is intriguing to think about the individual differences that shape what people do when they feel unsafe. Future research will focus on the courage that enables people to take the risk of employing and expressing their personal selves when it feels threatening to do so. Charting the role of courage is another dimension of developing a process model of personal engagement and disengagement.

Conceptual connections. Another direction for future research involves connecting personal engagement and disengagement to existing concepts focusing on person-role relationships. Initially, this article suggested that although concepts such as involvement and commitment reflect average orientations over time as if in a still photograph, personal engagement and disengagement reveal the variance typically hidden in those averages. Regardless of levels of involvement and commitment, people still experience

leaps (engagement) and falls (disengagement). Future research will focus on examining both quantitatively and qualitatively the connections between the relatively static levels of people's involvement and commitment and the constant fluctuations of self-in-role.

The variance that these new concepts reveal derives from the different depths of people's selves that they bring to or leave out of their role performances. In this article, I have emphasized people's expressions, employments, withdrawals, and defenses of their personal selves as the mechanisms by which they connect their depths to role performances. Future research might focus more closely on those depths and how they are plumbed in the course of role performances. Here, I have drawn little distinction between the physical, cognitive, and emotional paths along which people personally engage and disengage. It is likely, however, that a hierarchy relates increasing depths of engagement to the investment of self along physical, then cognitive, and finally emotional dimensions. Kelman (1958) postulated a similar hierarchy of dimensions regarding people's compliance with, identification with, and internalization of attitudes. Exploring that proposition further will help articulate distinguishable levels of personal engagement and disengagement and offer a way to understand the complexities of possible mixtures of personal engagement and disengagement. An individual might, for example, express and defend, or employ and withdraw simultaneously.

Conclusions

The conceptual model developed in this research has a number of components, some better developed than others. I deliberately included a wide range of factors in the model, taking seriously the multiple levels of influences—individual, interpersonal, group, intergroup, and organizational—that shape people's personal engagements and disengagements. It is at the swirling intersection of those influences that individuals make choices, at different levels of awareness, to employ and express or withdraw and defend themselves during role performances. The research approach taken here was to focus on the discrete moments of role performances that represent microcosms of the larger complexity; those moments are windows into the multiplicity of factors that are constantly relevant to person-role dynamics. Focusing on specific moments of work role performance is like using the zoom lens of a camera: a distant stationary image is brought close and revealed as a series of innumerable leaps of engagement and falls of disengagement.

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APPENDIX

Interview Schedules

Camp Carrib

1. Why did you choose to become a counselor?
2. Are you comfortable here on the island itself, and with the people?
3. Do you like being a member of a camp system as a counselor?
4. Do you enjoy being with kids generally and these kids in particular?
5. What do you like most about being a counselor here, and why?
6. What aspects of being a counselor here are personally and emotionally involving for you? What really grabs you, involves more of you than other roles you've held?
7. How would an observer like me be able to see your personal involvement? What does it look like?
8. What do you dislike most about being a counselor here, and why?
9. What aspects of being a counselor here are personally and emotionally uninvolved, that is, just turn you off so you're working automatically?

10. How would an observer like me be able to see that uninvolvement? What does it look like?
11. How do you find the demands of the counselor role?
12. How much control and autonomy do you have here?
13. How challenging do you find your role and its demands?
14. When can you coast through the work? When do you have to really stretch?
15. How do you like the way that your role is designed?
16. For what behaviors are you rewarded here, and what are those rewards?
17. How free are you to perform the role as you wish, at your own pace and style?
18. Where are you in the hierarchy? Do you feel in the center here?
19. How do you find working within your particular activity?
20. What is your relationship to the camp management, personally and professionally?
21. What emotional support systems do you have here at camp?
22. How much do you want to be personally and emotionally engaged here?
23. How is that involvement influenced by your physical and emotional energy?
24. How does the staff group influence your role performances?

E.S.B. and Associates

Warm-up

1. What is your job here?
2. How long have you worked here? What did you do before this job?
3. Who supervises you, and whom do you supervise?
4. What do you like most about working here?
5. What do you like least about your working here?

Situation 1

I'd like you to think about a time when you've been attentive and interested in what you're doing, felt absorbed and involved. A time when you didn't think about how you'd rather be doing something else, and you didn't feel bored. One example of this, outside of the workplace, is when we go to movies and get involved with them to the extent that we almost forget that we're just watching a movie: we don't think about ourselves, and the other things that we could be doing. This also happens when we're working, that we get so wrapped up in what we're doing that we forget about other things. This can be when we're doing something by ourselves, like writing or drafting, or when we're working with other people. Can you describe a particular time when you've felt like that here at work?

Situation 2

Now I'd like you to think about a time when you've felt uninvolved in what you were doing, a time when you were, say, bored, distracted, or feeling detached. We can use the movie example again, where we go to movies that just don't engage us and we are aware that it's just a movie or that we would rather be elsewhere. This too happens when we're at work, when we're doing something or working with someone, and we're not particularly involved in it for some reason or another. Can you describe a situation where this fits you?

Situation 3

Now I'd like you to think about a time when you did experience a difference between your response at work and the way in which you would have responded had you not been at work. This would be a time when you had to leave out more of who you are because you were at work. It's a time when you felt the difference between how you think you would have acted

or reacted, based on your own personal experiences and feelings, and how you actually did act or react within the work situation. Can you describe a particular time when you've felt this?

Situation 4

Now I'd like you to think about a time when you felt like there wasn't much difference between your response at work and the way in which you would have responded had you not been at work. This would be a time at work when you left out less of who you are outside of work. It's a time when you didn't feel much difference between how you think you would have acted or reacted on the basis of your own personal experiences and feelings, and how you actually did act or react at work. Can you describe a particular time when you've felt this?

Closing

Is there anything that you want to add or stress that might help me understand the influences on when you do and don't feel involved or uninvolved here?

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