A Contextual Account for Worker Engagement and Burnout

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PhD Thesis

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DECLARATION ON ETHICS

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Human (*1999*),* the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997)*,* the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics. Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001)*,* and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001)*.* The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (Stage 1 approval number H2205; Stage 2 approval number H2207; Stage 3 approval number H2593).

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Statement on the contribution of others including financial and editorial help

Declaration of collaboration with and assistance from others

The design of the research reported in this thesis was developed by me in consultation with my supervisor Dr Deborah Graham. All data was collected and analysed by me, however my supervisors Dr Deborah Graham and Dr David Cottrell played an essential advisory role in my data analysis.

I was assisted by the Queensland Independent Education Union who duplicated 1,000 copies of the survey for the teachers' phase in 2006. Participants were selected in a computer generated random draw of union members and received the surveys with accompanying stamped addressed envelopes in a bulk mail out of union documents. Several other organisations, including a large insurance company, provided a link to the online phase of the survey on their websites.

I received a small grant from James Cook University's Graduate Research School to attend a Structural Equation modelling course run by The Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research Incorporated (ACSPRI) in January 2007. This course provided me with additional expertise in data analysis. The university has assisted my work by providing generic thesis writing skills and advanced statistics workshops at various times throughout my candidature.

My two supervisors have been listed as co-authors on some publications arising from this thesis (Chapter 3, and Appendix B). Their contribution to these works was editorial and advisory in nature.

	10.04.08
Carolyn Timms	Date

Abstract

Worker engagement is an emergent area of organisational psychology and is thought to contribute to worker well being as well as organisational productivity. Previous research has demonstrated that worker burnout has more to do with the workplace environment than the characteristics of individual workers. It was therefore extrapolated that the same would apply to worker engagement. The current research sought to expand previous findings and tease out some commonalities in respondent experiences of engagement and burnout in the workplace.

The workplace context for respondent experience was defined by the Areas of Worklife Survey (AWS) which includes the areas of workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values. It was thought that matches or mismatches on the AWS would provide a sense of respondents' understandings of their psychological contract. Further information about the workplace was provided by responses in regard to the factors of management trustworthiness and procedural justice. A model of projected relationships of the variables predicted that favourable responses on those variables describing work context would be predictive of worker engagement, as defined by the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) and unfavourable responses would predict worker burnout, as defined by the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI). It was also predicted that management trustworthiness, procedural justice and fairness (AWS) measures would demonstrate a great deal of overlap.

The research plan involved three stages. Firstly, as most previous research had been conducted within larger organisational settings, small group interviews were conducted for people working within small and micro business settings. The second stage of the research included two phases of the same workplace survey, a pen and paper edition that surveyed teachers working in independent schools; and an online version that surveyed people representing 28 different occupational groups. Telephone interviews with 20 respondents to the survey comprised the third stage of the research.

Data analysis found that the interviews from small and micro business fitted AWS parameters well, with participants indicating that their businesses operated within very fine lines in terms of economics and staffing, yet they were rewarded in terms of control, community, and a sense of achievement. The inclusion of small and micro business categories within the subsequent survey instrument found that there were no significant differences between categories of business in regard to any of the study variables.

Statistical analyses of the data included a K-means cluster analysis of a subgroup of the combined survey respondents. This identified five groups of survey respondents based on their levels of response to burnout and engagement. The groups were: The Empowered Group; the Under Pressure Group; The Unengaged Group; The Burnout Experience 1 Group and The Severe Burnout Group. As well as demonstrating distinctive profiles in regard to the burnout and engagement measures, subsequent analyses involving the workplace context variables provided support for the research

   model. A three factor confirmatory analysis of the management trustworthiness, procedural justice and fairness (AWS) variables that confirmed these measures covered considerable common ground.

In addition, path analyses found that the AWS variables worked as predictors for engagement and burnout for three of the cluster groups, but other factors must be sought for an explanation of engagement in The Under Pressure Group and the Unengaged Group. In addition, The Unengaged Group, members of which reported ambivalence on the UWES and were not experiencing burnout, was found to consist of two subgroups: one of which reported matches on the AWS variables and the other reported mismatches. Data from participant interviews were also organised within the cluster groups. These supported the previous findings within this research and provided a great deal of insight into particular patterns of participant response, leading to refinement of the research model.

The current research found that AWS variables are important predictors of burnout and engagement and emphasises the substantial role played by management in promoting employee well being.The original contribution made by this research lay in the definition and detailed description of a middle group which represented 30% of respondents. Some of these people reported experiencing disillusionment with their chosen career paths. Others of this group were experiencing some discomfort within their work environments that had not translated into a burnout experience for them. This would indicate that further research might investigate the experiences of those that fall between the two extremes of burnout and engagement in order to better differentiate these variables in the interest of providing organisations with skills for promoting the engagement of employees.

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Acknowledgements

My PhD candidature was well beyond 'the bend in the road' when, as a High School history and geography teacher, I began to study psychology by distance education through Monash University simply because I wanted to learn something new. From those early years my husband Jim has been there, initially humouring me and explaining to me 'what the hell a standard deviation is and why the hell it is important'. Later he whole-heartedly encouraged me to continue in what has become, apart from raising my two children, the most absorbing project in my life. I have many people to thank for their assistance and encouragement on my journey. These include my family and friends who were somewhat bewildered as to what could possibly motivate a middle aged woman to forsake secure employment and undertake PhD candidature, but who nevertheless provided considerable encouragement and support. I must especially acknowledge Traylea and Tim, my precious kids and (now that they are adults) my best friends, who have been phenomenal 'cheerleaders' with heartwarming pride in their mum's achievements.

My last few years as a teacher provided an invaluable encounter with workplace breakdown that happened to coincide with my undergraduate study of organisational psychology and became the inspiration for my choice of subject. While this experience was extremely uncomfortable, it was a time of powerful learning and revelation. My extraordinary luck, after the decision to transfer to James Cook University and embark on the uncertainties that are associated with honours and then PhD, was to score Dr Deborah Graham as my supervisor. I came to her with an idea for my research and she was unreservedly enthusiastic. Deborah has continued to impart support, oomph and academic rigour throughout my candidature, making it a very happy and fulfilling experience.

I am also indebted to Dr Marie Caltabiano, my second honours supervisor and to Dr David Cottrell, my second supervisor during my PhD candidature. Marie urged me to submit a poster of my honours research to the Industrial and Organisational Psychology conference in 2005, which eventually led to chapter seven in the book *'Advances in Organisational Psychology'* in 2007. David's crystal clear thinking and

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somewhat 'direct' red ink comments have alerted me to 'wobbles' in my written communication. While the comments were not always welcome, they were always appropriate, well spotted, to my benefit, and therefore much appreciated. In addition, participants in all stages of this project generously shared their insights and willingly provided me with a snapshot of their experiences in their workplaces; without them the project would not have been possible.

One very constructive aspect of my candidature has been the opportunity for part-time work as a Senior Research Officer with Professors Neil Anderson and Colin Lankshear on the 'Girls and ICT' Australian Research Council project through the School of Education at JCU. This has enabled me to hone my research and writing skills within a different context. Concurrent work on another project was at times chaotic as my poor brain coped with analyses of two different data sets. It was, at times, extremely difficult to switch concentration to my own project when work hours ended. But the experience confirmed my love of research and academic writing and I can only thank Neil and Colin for providing me with a superlative opportunity and for their belief in me.

Other 'companions on my journey' have been my fellow students, Jane and Denise. I have enjoyed their company, support and endurance, and the 'wacky' moments we have had. Indeed, it is almost a shame finally to hand 'this thing in' as I confront yet another bend in the road.