A SURVEY OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

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by

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APPROVAL PAGE

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the graduate school, have examined the

dissertation entitled

A SURVEY OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Presented by Karen Wilson,

A candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy, and hereby certify that, in their

opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

I would like to thank my closest friends and my family for their support throughout this process. They expected me to succeed and their unwavering high expectations made me believe that it was possible. A special thanks to the central office staff of the study agency. The support of this agency played a crucial role in my success. I owe the biggest thanks of all to Dr. Greg Holliday. Dr. Holliday approached me with an offer of assistance. He volunteered to be on my committee and he pointed me in the right direction for choosing a topic and completing my research. He sat through countless meetings with me to discuss my project. He showed me the path of least resistance and shared his knowledge, wisdom, and sense of humor. I would have struggled to complete this degree without his help and to him I dedicate the finished product.

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined the overall level of engagement for employees of a public rehabilitation service agency, and the extent to which demographic and work life variables such as gender, office location, job title, and years of service contributed to their levels of engagement. Engagement was examined as a positive social work construct and was compared to the negative concept of burnout (Freeney, Y. & Tiernan, J. 2006 & Schaufli, W. B. & Bakker, A. B. 2004). The researcher utilized a cross sectional internet survey to survey 308 employees of a state-wide rehabilitation agency located in the Midwest region of the United States, using a purposive non-probability sampling strategy. She queried respondents to collect data on their levels of engagement in aggregate and anonymous form. Analysis was conducted using t-tests and correlations. Results indicate no differences in engagement scores for males and females, for individuals working in rural versus urban office environments, or for years of service in the agency. Participants who supervised at least one other person scored higher than individuals who did not supervise anyone.

Chapter One: Introduction

Staff members in human service occupations work closely with the individuals they serve. They are a vital link in the chain of services provided to our nation's weak and vulnerable populations. However, working in the field is demanding, and employee emotional exhaustion is common (Maslach, Schaufelli, & Leiter, 2001). Not surprising then, human service workers have been identified as an occupational class with above average risk for burnout (Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt, & Warg, 1995). Consequently, researchers have been studying correlates and consequences of burnout for decades. It is further understood that burnout has a negative impact not only upon individual workers but upon entire organizations, including other agency staff as well as the clients they serve (Garner, Knight, & Simpson, 2007). This study proposed that consideration should be given to the concept of "engaging" workers in a rejuvenation effort intended to alleviate the negative and costly effects of burnout in the field of human services.

It has not always been popular to study what might be considered "positive" states of human functioning (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). In fact, traditional research has focused on weakness, malfunctioning, and the study of negative states such as burnout. Recently, however, there has been a shift in the focus of studies away from negative conditions, towards research on human strengths and optimal functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This shift aligns with the National Association of Social Worker's (NASW) code of ethics, which states that "A defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual wellbeing in a social context and the wellbeing of society" (NASW Code of Ethics). Because the profession clearly values human wellbeing and empowerment, this shift to studying positive states, such as engagement

with one's work, is long overdue for social work researchers. Research into such predictors of positive states as work engagement could foster the development of new practice strategies designed not to correct a deficit, but rather to foster an individual's capacity to maximize his/her own functioning.

Although employee engagement is a new term in social work, it has been familiar to those in the management community for almost two decades (Hobel, 2006). Engagement is more than simple job satisfaction and high retention rates. Fully engaged workers are those who are physically energized, emotionally connected, mentally focused, and feel aligned with the purpose of the agency (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003). Engaged employees have a bond with the organization. These individuals feel empowered and in control of their fate at work. They identify with the agency mission and are willing to commit the necessary emotional and personal energies necessary to excel in their work. In short, engaged individuals willingly help achieve agency goals and are emotionally involved in the tasks of their organization (Buhler, 2006). Having an engaged workforce in the human services field is vitally important because research shows that engaged workers help organizations reap benefits such as increased efficiency, higher levels of customer satisfaction, higher productivity, and lower turnover rates (Buhler, 2006). However, although there is a growing body of business-oriented literature that describes how engaged employees contribute to the overall success of an organization, little academic and empirical research in the human services field has been conducted on the topic. More research is needed to determine levels of engagement for workers in the human services field, to describe the benefits of engagement, and to identify what factors may predict it.

Conceptual Framework

W. D. Kahn (1990) is credited with conceptualizing the major components of employee engagement. His model proposes that engagement differs from basic job involvement, in that it focuses not on worker skills but, rather, on how one commits him/herself during the performance of the job. Engagement entails the active use of emotions in addition to the simple use of cognition while completing work tasks (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). The major propositions of the model are that people express themselves cognitively, physically, and emotionally while performing their work roles. The model proposes that, in order for individuals to fully engage with their job, three psychological conditions must be met in the work environment: meaningfulness (workers feeling that their job tasks are worthwhile), safety (feeling as though the work environment is one of trust and supportiveness), and availability (workers having the physical, emotional, and psychological means to engage in their job tasks at any given moment) (Kahn, 1990).

Another major proposition of the engagement model is that these three key psychological conditions are, to some degree, within the control of agency management. Employee engagement is also something that is changeable, and can vary widely from one workplace to another (Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002). Studies indicate that workers are, to some extent, a reflection of the administrators of an agency. Low or conversely high engagement scores have been traced back to the organization's leadership, from top to bottom (Townsend & Gebhardt, 2007). Therefore, the results of engagement studies should have considerable applicability to the social work field. For instance, leaders in human service agencies could utilize data from engagement studies

to create and implement strategies that would increase staff engagement, thereby decreasing the potential for burnout and maximizing successful outcomes for the agency and for the clients they serve.

Need for the study

Highly engaged employees make a substantive contribution to their agency and may predict organizational success (Saks, 2006). But the reverse holds true as well. Disengaged employees can be a serious liability. Ayers (2006) compares disengagement to a cancer that can slowly erode an agency. Customer satisfaction, employee retention, and productivity are all at risk unless burnout and disengagement can be controlled.

Unfortunately, some studies show that workers in general are not engaged with their jobs. Frauenhiem's (2006) review of a recent Sibson Consulting Firm survey found that satisfaction scores with all major categories of work in the U.S. have dropped, and just over half of the respondents in the study rated themselves as engaged, or highly engaged. This lack of engagement affects large and small organizations all over the world, causing them to incur excess costs, to under perform on crucial tasks, and to create widespread customer dissatisfaction (Rampersad, 2006). Disengagement can affect the financial solidarity of an agency as well. Ayers (2006) explains the potential monetary impact by estimating that if an organization has employees who are only 30% to 50% percent engaged then 50% to 70% of the payroll is an ineffective expenditure of agency resources. And not only are these disengaged staff members taking up resources in pay and benefits, they also work against the best interests of the agency and can actually turn committed employees against the organization (Ayers, 2006).

To further emphasize how widespread this problem is and how critical it can be, consider a recent Gallup study (Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002) in which hundreds of companies were surveyed. Results from their surveys showed that 54% of workers were not engaged and 17% were actively disengaged. In other words, the companies surveyed were operating on only a fraction of the resources that should be available to them.. In this study, the most engaged work groups were noted to be the most productive and the rest were shown to be mediocre or, in some cases, destructive (Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002).

It is not only the management and business literature that note a decrease in worker engagement. Recent research also suggests concerns about rehabilitation professionals' job satisfaction rates. A 2004 national study conducted by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) indicates that the average salary across the nation for counselors is four to six thousand dollars below salaries in other human service professions (Chan, 2004). The national study also notes that 26% of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Counselors are considering leaving their agency to find better pay (Chan, 2004). In addition to pay disparity, other factors in counselor satisfaction or dissatisfaction are equally disconcerting. For instance, research indicates that students who graduate with a master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling perceive VR counselors to be overworked, underpaid, and overloaded with paperwork (Chan, 2004).

Published studies then provide clear indications that disengagement is a major problem for many types of organizations. This study was designed to help social service administrators understand and foster the positive state of staff engagement in their agencies. An engaged workforce may provide a buffer against the costly effects of

disengagement and burnout, and may prove to be a critical element in achieving

successful outcomes for agencies as well as for their individual clients.

Statement of the Problem

Despite evidence of how destructive employee burnout or disengagement can

be, studies from the human services field on the opposite condition, engagement, are

limited. Surprisingly little academic and empirical research has been conducted overall,

and a large portion of it comes from the business management community (Saks, 2006).

Additionally, studies do not differentiate human services staff from workers in other

industries. To address this problem, more research that focuses specifically on the

engagement levels of workers in human services occupations is necessary. Empirical

data are needed so professionals can better understand employee engagement and use

what they learn about it to develop managerial interventions and alternative strategies

that foster engagement for human services workers.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study will provide insight and information for administrators,

practitioners, and researchers about employee engagement in the human services field.

Administrators from the agency that was evaluated may benefit from the survey

feedback, and could implement strategies for change that address participant responses.

Administrators in other agencies can also benefit by understanding how critical

engagement is, and that as a positive construct, it can be measured easily in a variety of

settings. Once the level of employee engagement is measured, administrators can

develop and implement change strategies that would actually improve staff engagement

in their organization, thereby potentially increasing the overall effectiveness of the agency, and possibly decreasing levels of burnout.

Practitioners may benefit by understanding engagement and coming to realize that they will be more successful in serving clients and, at the same time, at less risk for occupational burnout, if they are working at a job in which they can fully engage. Additionally, practitioners who function in supervisory positions may benefit by understanding that staff usually adopt the characteristics and attitudes of their leaders, making it difficult for staff to be engaged unless the managers are (Kerfoot, 2008). Supervisors should, therefore, work toward creating a work environment that lends itself to engagement from themselves and from the staff. Finally, researchers can use the information to conduct similar studies that will contribute to the knowledge base about staff engagement in human services workers. Researchers should attempt to further determine what similarities in engagement levels may exist across occupations in the field, what factors may predict engagement, and what the specific benefits of engagement are for human services agencies.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that predict levels of engagement for employees in a state-wide public human services agency located in the Midwestern United States. Demographic and work life variables were examined to determine if they impacted scores on the employee engagement scale. The exploratory research questions and hypotheses were developed following a review of the literature and the completion of a pilot study. As will be explained in Chapter Two, work life variables are thought to be related to levels of employee engagement. However,

empirical studies on work engagement are limited and the literature is unclear as to

which variables are the strongest predictors. No identified studies have examined

workers specifically in the human service fields such as social work, psychology, or

rehabilitation. Therefore, variables for this study were chosen by reviewing the limited

data that are available regarding work engagement, followed by examining factors

related to burnout. The assumption of this study is that if a factor predicts burnout, that

same factor may have an opposite relationship to engagement. The factors which were

explored for this study include office location, employee's years of service to the

agency, gender, and whether or not the employee's job function includes supervising

other staff.

<div align="center">Research Questions</div>

The research questions deemed most important for this study were narrowed

down to the following four:

1. To what extent do employees in rural and urban office locations differ in their

   report of engagement?

2. To what extent does an employee's years of service effect reported level of

   engagement?

3. To what extent do male and female employees differ in their report of

   engagement?

4. To what extent does performance of supervisory duties impact employee's

   reported level of engagement?

Research Hypotheses

This study tested the following four hypotheses:

1. Respondents from rural office locations will report lower engagement scores than those from urban office locations.

2. Respondents with more years of service will report lower engagement scores.

3. Male respondents will report higher levels of engagement than female respondents.

4. Respondents with supervisory job titles will report higher engagement scores.

Variables

The Dependent variable in this study was the employee's total score on the eight item employee engagement scale. The Independent variables were the employee's number of years of service in the agency, the location of the employee's office, his or her gender, and supervisory job duties. Type I cutoff was set to .05.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following words and phrases are defined as follows:

Employee Engagement. Engagement is more than simple job satisfaction. It can best be described as a harnessing of one's self to his or her roles at work. In engagement, people express themselves cognitively, physically, and emotionally while performing their work roles (Kahn, 1990).

Disengagement. In disengagement, people withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally while performing their work roles (Kahn, 1990).

Burnout. Burnout is a psychological syndrome that results from dissatisfaction with one's job and involves exhaustion, cynicism, detachment from the job, and ineffectiveness (Maslach, 2003).

Human services workers. Individuals who are employed in a wide variety of fields, including social work, psychology, or rehabilitation. They provide direct client services or supervise and administer client services programs.

Office location. For this study, office location was defined by the participating agency as (a) Urban: Those offices in the Kansas City, Missouri, or St. Louis, Missouri, region, and (b) Rural: Those offices outside of the Kansas City or St. Louis regions.

Assumptions, Limitations and Delimitations

A major assumption of this study was that all participants would answer the survey questions truthfully. Anecdotal comments from participants in the pilot study noted that the instrument was simple and took only minutes to complete. It therefore was assumed that a significant number of those surveyed would respond. Additionally, it was assumed that the various offices of this agency operate in a similar manner with respect to policies and practices despite the fact that they are located in geographical areas that span the state.

There are notable limitations to this study. It is understood that biases may be inherent in self-reported information, for instance. Additionally, the perceptions of the employees examined in this survey are specific to the rehabilitation field and may differ from the opinions of staff working in other disciplines; therefore, caution is urged regarding external validity. Because the survey was conducted using an internet-based

program, there is the possibility that participants will be concerned about the privacy or confidentiality of their responses, causing fewer to participate fully (Couper, 2000). One typical limitation associated with internet surveys is the obvious factor that not all households have internet access (Norusis, 2006). However, in this study, the survey was sent to the employee's work site and, in this setting, every employee has access to a computer with internet service, thus making this one of the delimitations of the study design. An additional delimitation is noted in that participants were given permission by the administration of the agency to answer the survey during working hours. Also, the survey was in a simple, easy to follow format and took only minutes to complete.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

This chapter focused on the overall purpose and direction for this study. Chapter Two will highlight the key research in this study area with a review of the pertinent literature. The following Chapters Three, Four, and Five will provide a detailed description of the study, its findings and a discussion of its implications for policy, practice, and research in the field of human services.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Although there is abundant social services research on burnout, empirical data on employee engagement are limited (Freeney &Tiernan, 2006). Most of what has been written has come from consulting firms and those practicing in the field of management (Saks, 2006). The following review of the literature will discuss the evidence on burnout, including its costly negative effects and how it is now being compared to engagement. Highlights from previous studies on employee engagement will also be reviewed. Additionally, studies which examine predictive factors for burnout and engagement will be explored.

Evidence on Burnout

The relationship that people have with their work and the difficulties that can occur if that relationship goes awry have long been recognized as a significant social problem and the term "burnout" is now routinely used to describe this phenomenon (Maslach et al., 2001). Numerous studies on burnout have been conducted which conclude that job burnout is a psychological syndrome that can develop in response to chronic stressors at work (Maslach et al., 2001). It is also understood that burnout can negatively impact individuals and agencies in many ways.

Maslach et al. (2001) divided the negative consequences of burnout into two categories, job performance and individual health. Job performance burnout is associated with absenteeism, intention to the leave the job, and actual staff turnover. Researchers have reported that there is a negative monetary impact from staff turnover. In some organizations, the price of recruiting and training new workers can be more than $50,000 per employee (Yoon & Kelly, 2008). When staff that experience burnout

choose to stay in their respective jobs, their productivity and effectiveness decreases. Additionally, people who are burned out can cause personal conflicts on the job site and may disrupt the job tasks of their co-workers. In other words, burnout is contagious and can perpetuate itself on the job. There is also some evidence that burnout can spillover into an employee's home life. Finally, the health component of burnout is correlated with stress-related conditions and illness -- substance abuse, anxiety, depression, and decreased self-esteem have all been associated with burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

Although burnout has been studied for decades, it continues to be a major problem for all types of organizations (Ayers, 2006). Levels of burnout do not appear to be decreasing and may be on the rise. A recent Conference Board survey in the United States cited that fewer Americans are satisfied with their work. In 1995, 56% of those surveyed were satisfied with their vacation policies, for instance, and ten years later only 51% were. Satisfaction with physical facilities also showed a decline over the 10 year study, from 56% down to 52%. Moreover, age and income did not seem to affect employee satisfaction, either. The noted trend was simply all downward (Baldwin, 2005). In addition, the Sibson Consulting Firm recently conducted a survey of 1,200 US employees. It found that, in general, satisfaction scores with all major categories of work have dropped, and just over half of the respondents to their study rated themselves as engaged or highly engaged (Frauenhiem, 2006).

Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina (2002) indicate that, in general, employees start out energized, engaged, and ready to take on the responsibility of the job. However, over the first six months of employment only 38% remain engaged and after ten years engagement drops to about 20%. This is a particularly alarming statistic when one of

the most important characteristics for any human services agency is the quality and effectiveness of its personnel (Ewalt, 1991).

Another recent area of concern and possible factor in high burnout levels is the increased demand for services with a subsequent decrease in federal and local revenues to provide programming. As a result, administrators and program managers are focusing more on efficiency, effectiveness of services, and increased accountability of direct service providers which, in turn, can increase stress and dissatisfaction among staff (Ritchie, Kirche & Rubens, 2006). Additionally, human services workers are operating in an increasingly bureaucratic system which, in many settings, limits the effect a staff member can have on a client's life. This bureaucratization allows for better control and coordination of large numbers of workers in one location, but is also increases the division of labor. As a result, worker isolation, fragmentation, and de-skilling of workers is going on (Arches, 1991).

A majority of the previous research on burnout has focused on identifying its antecedents and outcomes. Only in recent years have researchers started to pay attention to the opposite state of burnout: employee engagement (Gonzalez-Roma, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Loret, 2004). Now studies are being conducted which seek to compare the positive construct of engagement with the negative state of burnout. The proposition is that an understanding of engagement could yield perspectives about how to alleviate burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). It is believed that, in the process of building an environment where employees are likely to become engaged, many of the problems associated with stress and dissatisfaction in the workplace will be overcome (Freeney & Tiernan, 2006). This requires a focus not only on burnout prevention, but also on

developing strategies to foster energy, involvement, and effectiveness in employees (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

Researchers in these recent studies have investigated staff engagement to determine if it is the polar opposite of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001, Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, Gonzalez-Roma, et al. 2004, Freeney & Tiernan, 2006). So far, research findings support the proposition that engagement is the antithesis to burnout (Freeney & Tiernan, 2006). Engagement is said to be characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, whereas the core dimensions of burnout are described as exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Gonzalez-Roma et al. 2006). Burnout and engagement are further reported to be opposite in that they have different consequences and different predictors (Schaufli & Bakker, 2004).

Kahn (1990) compared burnout with disengagement and said that disengaged employees are ones who withdraw from the job physically, emotionally, and cognitively which, in turn, likens it to the state of burnout (Freeney & Tiernan, 2006). An important distinction between engagement and burnout is that burnout relates specifically to job demands. Engagement, on the other hand, is indicated by job resources such as job control, the availability of learning opportunities, access to necessary materials, participation in the decision-making process, positive reinforcement, and support from colleagues (Freeney & Tiernan, 2006).

Maslach and Leiter (1997) conducted burnout profiles with staff in two hospital units. Employees in one unit displayed typical burnout profiles, scoring unfavorably across six areas of measurement; by comparison the other unit scored favorably on factors related to engagement, including workload, control, fairness, and

meaningfulness. One of the most interesting findings of the researchers was that patients in the units where staff were engaged were significantly more satisfied with the level of care than those who were treated in units where the staff was burned out (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

Recent research indicates then that the conditions of engagement and burnout are unquestionably linked, or indeed opposites of one another. It should be understood that an engaged employee will not be burned out, but an employee who is not burned out is not necessarily engaged (Freeney & Tiernan, 2006). The comparison research between burnout and engagement is an important contribution to the field and should be continued. However, it does not look specifically at workers in the human services field and does not identify indicators and consequences of engagement in human service occupations.

Previous Studies of Employee Engagement

The most comprehensive study to date of employee engagement has come from The Gallup Organization's research using the Q12 instrument. For more than 50 years, the Gallup poll has been questioning customers and employees on a variety of workplace topics. Their surveys attempt to find out more than simply how satisfied persons are with their jobs. It addresses the extent to which employees needs are being met and examines the emotional ties they have to their employment. According to Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina (2002), results of this Gallup research have shown that business units in which employees score in the top half on employee engagement have, on average, a 56% higher success rate with customer loyalty, a 44% higher success rate

on staff turnover, a 50% higher success rate on productivity outcomes, and a 33% higher success rate on profitability outcomes.

One key component of the Gallup Q12 instrument is that it includes items that Gallup researchers have found to be under the influence of the manager. This allows for practicality of change based upon the survey results. Over a period of time, Gallup consultants have educated managers and have partnered with companies to implement change strategies. Between the first and second year of implementing changes those companies have, on average, scored one-half standard deviation higher on employee engagement and sometimes as much as a full standard deviation or more of growth after three years. Current evidence from the Gallup 12 studies has demonstrated that, to some extent, employee engagement is influenced by the manager, is changeable, and can vary widely from one workplace to another (Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002).

Kahn's research sought to identify the psychological conditions necessary to explain moments of personal engagement and personal disengagement among individuals across different situations at work (Kahn, 1990). His work used the methods of observation and interviewing to conduct a qualitative study of personal engagement among 16 camp counselors and 16 architectural firm members. Kahn found that people draw upon themselves to varying degrees while performing work tasks and they can commit themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in the various roles they perform. Or, they may choose to withdraw and disengage from their work roles and work tasks. Results of Kahn's study suggest that there are three psychological conditions that shape how people perform their roles -- meaningfulness, safety, and availability.

Kahn's identification of the these three psychological conditions now serves as a framework for the study of employee engagement. Specifically, Kahn (1990) describes the state of meaningfulness as one in which workers feel worthwhile, useful, and valuable, and that they are making a difference and are appreciated for the work they do. Safety is described as an environment in which people feel an ability to act as what would be normal for the individual without fear of negative consequences. Safety is found in situations in which workers trust that they will not suffer because of their engagement to their work and where they perceive the climate to be one of openness and supportiveness. Availability is defined by Kahn (1990) as the sense of having the personal physical, emotional, and psychological means with which to engage with their job tasks at any particular moment. This model acknowledges that personal coping mechanisms and factors in life outside the job can impact a workers engagement to the job. Kahn's (1990) work also concluded that people have dimensions of themselves that they prefer to use and express in the course of role performance. If they can match their preferred actions with the psychological conditions existent in their work environment and work roles, then they will engage with the job (Kahn, 1990).

May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) conducted a field study in a large Midwestern insurance agency. Using a survey format they explored why some individuals fully engage in their work while others become alienated or completely disengaged. Results of this study confirmed that engagement differs from simple job satisfaction. They agreed that engagement actually entails the active use of emotions and behaviors in addition to cognitions. Overall, study results supported Kahn's earlier work in that psychological meaningfulness and safety were positively linked to employee investment

in work roles. Additionally, job enrichment and role fit were positively related to psychological meaningfulness. Having a supportive supervisor and good relations with co-workers were related to feelings of psychological safety on the job.

Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002) completed a meta-analysis of prior studies on employee engagement that were conducted by the Gallup Organization. The researchers examined the relationship between employee satisfaction-engagement, and the business-unit outcomes of customer satisfaction, productivity, profit, employee turnover, and accidents. Harter et al. (2002) noted that one of the defining elements of employee engagement is the actionable quality of the measured concepts. In other words, employee engagement is related to meaningful business outcomes and many of the core issues of engagement are ones over which managers can have substantial influence. High levels of satisfaction and employee engagement were positively correlated with customer satisfaction, profitability, productivity, and safety outcomes. On average, business units that had employee scores in the top quartile range on the engagement scale had a one to four percent higher profitability. Additionally, businesses who scored in the top quartile on engagement boasted lower turnover percentage rates (Harter et al., 2002).

In a 2006 cross national study, Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006) surveyed 14,521 employees in various occupations, using a self-report questionnaire that measured work engagement. The researchers found that engagement is not only the opposite of burnout but that it has its own characteristics, which were labeled vigor, dedication, and absorption. The researchers concluded that engagement is similar to burnout in that it is a stable, non-transient state that increases slightly with age.

Additionally, blue collar workers were less engaged than managers, educators, and police officers. Engagement did not seem to differ systematically between genders (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Saks (2006) surveyed 102 employees in a variety of industries and in one study tested a model of antecedents and consequences of job and organizational engagement. Saks (2006) differentiated job engagement from organization engagement and concluded that organizational engagement is a person's attitude and attachment to his/her company, whereas employee engagement is the degree to which an employee is actually absorbed in the performance of his/her own individual job role. Saks drew from Kahn's earlier work and from the burnout literature to pose a model of employee engagement in which the antecedents of engagement are identified as (a) job characteristics, (b) perceived organization support, (c) perceived supervisor support, (d) rewards and recognition, (e) procedural justice, and (f) distributive justice. In this same model, the consequences of employee engagement are identified as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to stay on the job, and organizational citizenship behavior (Saks, 2006). Results of the survey showed that the psychological conditions leading to organization and job engagement, as well as the consequences of each, are different. The study results also showed that perceived organization support predicted job and organization engagement; by comparison, particular job characteristics predicted individual job engagement. The researchers concluded that procedural justice predicted organization engagement and that job and organization engagement are both related to employee attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. In particular, job and organization engagement predict job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, and

intention to quit. Overall, the results of the study suggest that workers who perceived higher organizational support were more likely to reciprocate with greater levels of engagement to their individual job roles (Saks, 2006).

Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, and Xanthopoulou (2007) surveyed 805 Finnish teachers to investigate the role of available job resources in mitigating the negative effects of disruptive student behavior upon a teacher's engagement with his or her job. The researchers discovered that, while disruptive student behavior was negatively related to a teacher's job engagement, job resources such as supervisor support, innovativeness, appreciation, and organizational climate were important factors that helped teachers cope with demanding and disruptive students. In other words, even when faced with difficult students, the availability of job resources could lessen the negative effects. In fact, job resources were discovered to be the strongest predictor of all the work engagement dimensions studied (Bakker et al., 2007). One of the most innovative contributions this study makes to the literature is the discovery that job resources are particularly important to workers in highly stressful working conditions. Conversely, job resources could be less important to employees who are not experiencing a significant amount of stress (Bakker, et al., 2007).

<center>Predictors of Burnout and Engagement</center>

Because researchers are only now beginning to define and explore the phenomenon of workplace engagement, the specific factors which might predict it are still unclear. However, comparison studies of burnout and engagement suggest that the two conditions are related in the sense that they may be on opposite ends of a continuum. Therefore, in order to begin to understand what may predict engagement, it

is logical to examine factors associated with burnout and appropriate to assume that those factors would have the opposite relationship to work engagement.

Some studies have sought to determine if the practice location, as in a rural versus an urban setting, may influence levels of burnout. Rholand (2000), for instance, surveyed Iowa mental health center directors to determine if individuals working in rural locations would have higher levels of burnout. The study proposed that rural work settings were likely to have certain negative conditions not typically associated with urban practices. These conditions included running an agency with fewer employees, smaller budgets, and having to provide more direct client care. Even after exploring the above noted factors, results from the sample indicated that burnout was not significantly different for individuals working in rural settings when compared to their urban colleagues.

In a more recent study, Sprang, Clark, & Whitt-Woosley (2007), examined the relationship between burnout and practice location. Their results differed from the Rholand findings in that burnout levels were shown to be increased for individuals working in rural areas. This study utilized the Professional Quality of Life Scale to study patterns of compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction, and burnout in a sample of 1,121 mental health providers. Analysis of the data indicated that respondents who worked in the most rural areas of the state had higher levels of burnout than those who worked in urban areas. This study proposed that the increased burnout levels could be attributed to factors associated with rural practice, such as chronic shortages of mental health professionals, limited resources, geographical isolation, and highly demanding caseloads. The researchers concluded that the general duties, burdens, and stressors of

rural work appear to generate burnout (Sprang, Clark, & Whitt-Woosley, 2007). Watt

and Kelly (1996) also indicated that isolation can be a problem for rural social workers.

They reported that problems in urban areas are usually noticed by the public and the

profession. However, difficulties for individuals in rural communities are often not

acknowledged by the public until a crisis, such as floods or farm foreclosures, have

occurred. This neglect of the persons in the environment can leave rural social workers

feeling marginalized or less important than their urban counterparts. Isolation was also

noted by Kelly and Lauderdale (1996) who indicated that because there are fewer rural

human service practitioners they tend to be isolated from others in their profession and

have less access to the contacts and supports that are necessary for them to stay current

in their field. Other studies have also characterized rural practice settings as having

more stressors than their urban counterparts. Problems such as professional isolation

(Waltman, 1990; Watt & Kelly, 1996), decreased availability of formal resources

(Davenport & Davenport, 1982), confidentiality issues, and difficulties with

transportation (Ginsberg, 1998) have all been noted.

Previous burnout studies differ somewhat in actual results, but a number of them

agree that there are negative factors inherent in rural agency or practice settings that

could contribute to increased levels of burnout. Operating from this assumption, it is

expected that rural workers might also be less engaged with their job. Because the

sample population for the current study worked in locations that span a midwestern

state, including very rural as well as highly urban areas, office location as it relates to

level of engagement was examined to determine if it might be a factor for this

population.

The amount of work experience is another variable that has been studied for its association with burnout. Research findings on the subject are conflicting. Some studies indicate that individuals new to their jobs score higher on measures of burnout while others indicate no relationship between years of service and burnout. Yildirim's (2008) study in which 214 Turkish school counselors were surveyed, using the Maslach Burnout Inventory, found that individuals with one to three years of service scored higher on depersonalization than did individuals with more years of work experience. In a different study, Schwartz, Tiamiyu and Dwyer (2007) sampled 1,200 social workers to find out if social work clinicians decline in hope or exhibit increased burnout over the course of their careers. They discovered that burnout seemed to decline with increasing years in private practice but remained mostly unchanged for those in public practice settings. While some studies on burnout agree that individuals with less years of service are likely to report higher levels of burnout, the opposite is thought to be true of engagement. Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina (2002) report that, in general, workers start off energized and engaged with their jobs but tend to drop off in as little as six months, and significantly decline in engagement after ten years of employment. Therefore, an individual's "years of service" to the agency was examined in this study to see if participants' scores do indeed decline over the course of their career.

Researchers have often considered gender as a possible predictive factor in levels of burnout for human services employees. In their study of 1,121 mental health professionals, Sprang, Clark, and Whitt-Woosley (2007) found support for a gender influence as females in the study were found to have a greater risk of suffering from burnout. However, in the Turkish study of school counselors conducted by Yildirim

(2008) results showed that levels of burnout did not differ significantly between males and females. While actual results vary, some studies suggest that females are more vulnerable to stress and, therefore, tend to report higher levels of burnout than do their male counterparts (Sprang, Clark, & Whitt-Woosley, 2007). Similar results have been noted in engagement surveys. In the Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova study (2006) the Belgian, German, Finnish, and Norwegian men scored slightly higher on the three engagement dimensions than did women in the study. In examining whether or not men will score higher on the instrument used in this study, gender will be compared to the participant's total score on the engagement scale.

The literature on work engagement suggests that levels of engagement are influenced by the agency's management staff. Because employees tend to reflect or imitate the characteristics of their leaders, it may be difficult for them to engage if the leaders of the organization do not demonstrate positive behaviors associated with engagement (Kerfoot, 2008). If this theoretical assertion is accurate, studies should show that supervisors would report at least as high, if not higher, levels of engagement than do the staff of an agency. This study will explore levels of engagement for individuals who supervise other staff with the assumption that their reported levels will be higher than for workers who do not supervise others.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

This review of the literature shows that job burnout and disengagement are a continuing social work concern. Conversely, studies on employee engagement clearly demonstrate the benefits of having an engaged workforce. Research indicates that by better understanding engagement, new strategies could be developed that would

increase levels of employee engagement, thereby possibly decreasing the costly

negative effects of burnout for employees in the human services field. Unfortunately,

research that examines staff engagement specifically in the human services field is

extremely limited. Additional research is needed to further our knowledge of

engagement in human services settings and to identify what the predictors and

consequences of engagement might be. A thorough study of engagement in human

services occupations should lead to the development of specific strategies that could

increase engagement for the staff of other human services organizations.

Chapter Three: Methods of Study

Participants

To examine employee engagement in this study group, a web-based survey was conducted in April 2008 among a group of 308 employees of a statewide public rehabilitation agency located in the midwest region of the United States. Approval for conducting the project was received from the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board and from the assistant commissioner of the study agency. With approval from the assistant commissioner of the agency, an email was sent to every employee prior to the survey encouraging participation and giving all employees permission to complete the instrument during their work hours. The survey was sent to every employee of the study agency. Participants were sent an email that included information about the survey and requested their informed consent. Upon giving consent, participants could access a link to the survey. After accessing the secure website they could point and click to complete the eight survey questions and the accompanying demographic information.

Instrument

This web-based Employee Engagement Survey (See Appendix) was conducted for the purpose of studying engagement in human service employees and to further develop and refine an instrument that gathers engagement information pertinent to the human services field. Web surveys are gaining in popularity as they allow researchers to obtain large amounts of data without hiring interviewers or paying for paper and postage. Additionally, web surveys allow data to be collected and downloaded into statistical software without additional data entry (Witt, 1998). However, web surveys

are not without limitations. Even well designed surveys can be overwhelmed by the

mass of other data-gathering activities on the web. Participants may tune out the survey

or base their responses on the visual effect and entertainment value of the instrument

(Couper, 2000). Additionally, research shows that web surveys fail to meet the response

rates of traditional mail surveys (Couper, 2000).

After consideration of the above noted benefits and potential limitations of

utilizing web surveys for empirical research, the researcher determined that sufficient

controls were in place to negate the potential difficulties and elected to utilize a web-

based survey format. The Survey Monkey tool was chosen to host this study because it

met the needs of the researcher. The program was both easy to use and economical. A

professional subscription was obtained for a minimal fee per month and allowed the

researcher to send up to one thousand surveys with an unlimited number of questions.

The questionnaire was sent via email attachment, which provided an easy and

immediate means of response for the participants. The results were delivered in

aggregate and anonymous form and the data remained private but could be shared with

others given the researcher's consent (Survey Monkey, 2008).

The web-based questionnaire entitled "Employee Engagement Survey" was

created and pilot tested with a similar group of employees before its use in this study.

The pilot instrument was designed to evaluate employees' level of engagement with

their current jobs. Items were first gathered by reviewing the Gallup Organizations 12-

question instrument designed to measure employee engagement (Thackray, 2001).

Gallup conducted numerous focus groups and completed thousands of interviews with

workers in order to identify the key areas that measure engagement. Having been used

with approximately 1.5 million employees, Gallup's tool makes an ideal instrument

from which to model the survey questions for this study (Thackray, 2001). Also

reviewed was the Decisionwise Employee Engagement Survey. This instrument, found

at http://www.decwise.com/employee-surveys.html, was chosen for review because it

measures concepts that are driven by frontline management and focuses on employee

performance and actionable feedback, all of which are key propositions of the

engagement model. Finally, the Baldrige "Are We Making Progress" questionnaire that

had been conducted in the study agency in previous years was obtained and reviewed in

an effort to determine what other types of satisfaction surveys these employees had

participated in (http://www.baldrige.nist.gov/PDF_files/Progress.pdf).

The major components of the model for employee engagement were considered

when choosing questions for the pilot survey. This model proposes that in order for

individuals to fully engage with their jobs, the three psychological conditions of

meaningfulness, safety, and availability must be met in the work environment (Kahn,

1990). Questions were developed with these constructs in mind. Questions one, three,

and five addressed the condition of meaningfulness. Questions two, four and seven

addressed the condition of safety. Questions six and eight addressed the condition of

availability.

Another major proposition of the engagement model is that the three key

psychological conditions are to some degree within the control of the management of a

given agency (Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002). Therefore, the survey questions

were created using items of measurement that are, to some extent, under the control of

agency managers. Thus, based on survey results, actionable strategies for increasing

engagement could be developed and implemented by leaders of the participating agency.

Once the pilot survey was developed, face validity was addressed by conducting interviews with five professionals in the field. They were chosen based on their positions within the study agency or their years of experience in human services. Among these professionals was the assistant commissioner of the agency, several current employees of the agency, and a professor of Social Work at the University of Missouri. Input from these individuals reinforced the selection of the items for the survey. The result was an original instrument consisting of seven questions designed to evaluate respondents' engagement with their jobs. Also included in the survey were seven demographic questions which would give information about the respondents and which were believed to be possible predictors of engagement. One open-ended question was included to allow for feedback from participants.

The reliability of the instrument was tested during the pilot study, conducted in March 2007. The pilot survey contained only seven questions and was sent to 267 public human services staff members who worked for a similar agency. Question eight has since been added to the survey in order to further measure availability needs of the participants and to examine potential turnover rates among staff. The data from the pilot study were gathered and, using "employee engagement" as the single construct to be measured, Cronbach's Alpha, a measure of internal consistency, was conducted. Cronbach's Alpha is used to determine if all the items within the instrument measure the same thing. The closer the alpha is to 1.00, the greater the internal consistency of the items being measured (George & Mallery, 2006). The marker of an acceptable

reliability coefficient is generally 0.7. However, even lower thresholds are sometimes

reported in the literature (Nunnaly, 1978). Results, shown in Table I, confirmed that the

instrument used in the pilot study was reliable with a Cronbach's score of .773. The

scale means indicated that the item contributions were all fairly correlated except for the

question about having friends at work. However, even without deletion of this question,

the instrument met the acceptable level of reliability and was determined suitable for

use with the current study.

Table I

Reliability Measure of Pilot Study Data

	Cronbach's Alpha .773	N of Items 7		
	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
job recognition supervisors	28.71	15.439	.666	.703
concern	28.21	16.026	.669	.703
agency mission	28.29	18.166	.542	.735
friends @ work	27.82	21.645	.207	.790
ideas & opinion	28.69	16.902	.577	.726
tools and equip	28.19	19.319	.383	.766
co-workers	28.01	20.385	.395	.763

Procedure

An email was sent to the agency email address for each employee of the public

service agency. The email included information about the survey, a request for

informed consent, and a link to the secure survey website which was hosted by

http://www.surveymonkey.com. Once participants clicked on the link they were able

to complete the instrument online. Participants were given 10 days to complete the

survey. Results were sent to the researcher via the Survey Monkey tool in aggregate

and anonymous form and were downloaded into the SPSS program for analysis.

Chapter Four: Results

Chapter One established the need for empirical research that would determine the levels of staff engagement specific to a human services agency. Chapter Two focused on the literature related to the negative effects of burnout and examined how burnout is now being compared to the positive state of engagement. Predictive factors of burnout and engagement plus highlights and results from previous studies on employee engagement were also reviewed in Chapter Two. Chapter Three described the methods and procedures used to determine the overall level of engagement for staff in the study agency and to determine the extent to which demographics and work-life variables such as office location, job title, gender, and years of service impacted engagement levels. This chapter will describe the participants in the study and the results of analyses used to examine the research questions.

Characteristics of Sample

To examine employee engagement, an electronic survey was sent via email to a complete enumeration of employees in a public statewide human service agency located in the midwestern region of the United States. Of the 308 employees in the agency, 211 (n = 211) completed and submitted the survey, an overall response rate of 68.5 percent. There are no populations to compare this sample to because no other studies have examined employee engagement specifically among human services workers. However, the sample is similar in make-up to the population that completed the pilot study survey. Both populations, the pilot and the current study sample, were employed by a public state agency and were housed under the same state department. The offices were statewide, with office locations in geographic regions around the state. The work

assignments for the two groups were similar in that both populations served individuals with disabilities.

Of the respondents to this survey, 80 percent (n = 167) were female and 20 percent (n = 42) were male. Seventy-eight percent categorized themselves as non-supervisory staff (n = 162) and 22 percent (n = 46) said they supervised at least one person. When asked to indicate their positions within the agency 74.3 percent (n = 156) responded as professional staff, whereas 25.7 percent (n = 54) reported themselves to be support staff. Number of years of service in the agency varied among respondents with 26.1 percent (n = 55) having been employed zero to five years; 22.7 percent (n = 48) employed 6 to 10 years; 19.9 percent (n = 42) employed 11 to 15 years; 9.5 percent (n = 20) employed 16 to 20 years; and 22.3 percent (n = 47) employed for over 20 years with the agency. Sixty-nine percent (n = 145) of the sample indicated that they worked in a non-urban, rural area and 31 percent (n = 64) said they worked in an urban office setting. Ten respondents did not answer each of the eight engagement scale questions; therefore, their surveys were dropped from the statistical analysis, leaving a sample of 201 respondents. Additionally, some of the respondents did not answer all of the demographic questions so their surveys were dropped only from the statistical test for questions which addressed the missing variable.

Results

The survey instrument was designed to measure participants' levels of engagement with their jobs. Once the responses were collected, Chronbach's Alpha was conducted to test the reliability of the instrument. The resulting score of .798 from

the instrument used in this study was similar to that of the pilot study and is considered to be within the acceptable range of reliability (Nunnaly, 1978).

As noted in the Appendix, participants had the following six choices when answering each question: strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree, agree, and strongly agree. Strongly disagree was coded as one point, whereas strongly agree was coded as six points. Therefore, the minimum score possible was eight and the maximum score possible was 48. Scores ranging from 32 to 48 would indicate a greater degree of engagement than those ranking below 32. The majority of the respondents reported themselves to be engaged with their jobs (M = 39.29, SD = 4.83). Table II describes the sample responses to each of the eight items on the engagement scale, and Table III describes the sample's overall engagement score.

Table II

Descriptive Statistics from Engagement Scale

Descriptive Statistics – Engagement Scores

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Q1 recognition	201	5.00	1.00	6.00	4.6517
Q2 concern	201	5.00	1.00	6.00	5.0398
Q3 mission	201	4.00	2.00	6.00	5.0100
Q4 friends	201	4.00	2.00	6.00	5.1493
Q5 ideas/opinions	201	5.00	1.00	6.00	4.7114
Q6 tools/equip.	201	5.00	1.00	6.00	4.8557
Q7 co-workers	201	5.00	1.00	6.00	5.0846
Q8 intent to stay	201	5.00	1.00	6.00	4.7910
Valid N	201				

Table III

Participant's Total Engagement Score

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Total Score	201	16.00	48.00	39.2935	4.83409

Hypothesis One: The relationship between office location and participant's level of engagement. The purpose of this study was to determine levels of engagement for

staff in a human services agency and to examine the extent to which work-life and

demographic variables impact engagement scores. Hypothesis one states that

respondents from rural office locations will report lower engagement scores than those

from urban office locations. The independent samples T-test was chosen as the

statistical measure for this question. The T-test was used to evaluate the difference in

means between two groups and assumes that the variables are normally distributed

within each group and that the variation of scores in the two groups is not reliably

different (Wienbach and Grinnell, 2007). Results of the Levene's test indicated that

equal variances could be assumed and an alpha level (a) was set to .05 to limit Type I

error or falsely accepting the null. In this sample, the mean score for rural participants

was 39.5145 (SD = 4.74), N=138, whereas the mean score for urban participants was

38.7869 (SD = 5.06), N=61, thus indicating that rural respondents reported higher levels

of engagement than those who worked in urban areas. However, the score showed no

statistical significance between the rural and urban employees' total engagement scores

and the hypothesis was not supported (t -.977, 197 df, p = .330).

Hypothesis Two: The relationship between years of service to the agency and

participants' level of engagement. Hypothesis two states that respondents with more

years of service will report lower engagement scores. Bivariate correlation analysis was

used to examine this question and to determine the degree of relationship between years

of service and level of engagement. Because the data in this sample are not at the

interval or ratio level of measurement, the Spearman's Rho Correlation was chosen. The

Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality indicated the total score and years of service

variables were not normally distributed, thus further substantiating the use of

Spearman's Rho. Spearman's Rho produces a correlation coefficient that is either

positive or negative and has a numerical value between -1.00 and +1.00 (Wienbach and

Grinnell, 2007). For the purpose of this study, the generally accepted .05 rejection level

was used to determine if the hypothesis could be supported (Wienbach and Grinnell,

2007). Results, as shown in Table IV, do not substantiate any significant correlation

between engagement and years of service.

Table IV

Total Score and Years of Service Correlation

Correlations

			Total score
Spearman's rho	Years of Service	Correlation Coefficient	.084
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.119
		N	200

Hypothesis Three: The relationship between gender and participants' level of

engagement. Hypothesis three states that male respondents will report higher levels of

engagement than female respondents. The independent samples T-test was chosen as

the statistical measure for this question. Results of the Levene's test indicated that equal

variances could be assumed and an alpha level of .05 was chosen for this test.

In this sample, the mean score for male participants was 40.5366 (SD = 4.18), N= 41,

whereas the mean score for female participants was 38.9747 (SD = 4.93) N= 158.

Although males did score higher on the instrument, the difference was not statistically

significant and the hypothesis was not supported. (t 1.800, 197 df, p = .064).

Hypothesis Four: The relationship between supervisory job roles and participants' level of engagement. Hypothesis four states that respondents with supervisory job titles will report higher engagement scores. The independent samples T-test was again chosen as the statistical measure for this question. Results of the Levene's test indicated that equal variances could be assumed and an alpha level of .05 was chosen. Results indicated that the mean score for supervisors was 40.6591 (SD = 3.77), N = 44, whereas the mean score for non supervisors was 38.9675 (SD = 5.04), N = 154. Supervisors scored significantly higher on the instrument than did workers who do not supervise any other staff, supporting this hypothesis (t 2.063, 196 df, p = .040).

Chapter Five: Discussion

The intent of this chapter is to summarize the key findings of the study, present

conclusions drawn from the results, and pose implications for future policy, practice,

and research. The first section summarizes the key findings about the impact of

demographics and work-life variables on employees' levels of engagement with their

jobs. The second section discusses and draws conclusions about the results of the study.

The last section suggests policy, practice, and research implications for measuring

employee engagement in the social work field and for determining what factors may

predict levels of engagement.

Summary of Key Findings

Results of scores on the Employee Engagement scale for a sample of 201

employees of a state-wide human services agency were analyzed to determine each staff

member's level of engagement with his/her job. The research questions for the study

were based on the assumption that work-life variables and demographics impact levels

of employee job engagement. The following are the key findings for each hypothesis:

1. *Differences in report of engagement by employees working in rural vs. urban*

office settings. In this sample, the mean score for rural participants was 39.51, whereas

the mean score for urban participants was 38.78, thus indicating that rural participants

reported slightly higher engagement levels. However, the results were not proven to be

statistically significant at the .05 level and the hypothesis was not supported. There are

no similar populations to compare these findings to, but the results from this study agree

with those in the Rholand (2000) study in which burnout was not higher for individuals

working in rural areas. Even though the agency for this study is spread out over multiple geographic areas, the employees reported equal engagement. An explanation for this finding may be that there was continuity of supervisor training and of the implementation of policies and procedures, thus creating similar work atmospheres across the multiple office locations. A positive implication from this study is that agency policies and practices are fostering an environment that is conducive to engagement regardless of whether the office is located in a rural or urban area.

2. *Differences in report of engagement by employees in relation to their years of service to the agency*. Results show no significant relationship between years of service and participant engagement scores. Thus, workers with over 20 years of service to the agency can be just as highly engaged as those with less than five years of experience. This finding differs from the theoretical assumption of work engagement which says that engagement will decrease over time (Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002). However, the finding lends further support to the theoretical concept that engagement is not tied directly to issues such as pay or seniority but instead is a construct that is related to employees' sense of empowerment and control of their fate at work (Buhler, 2006). Additionally, findings from this study are similar to Yildirim's 2008 burnout study, which found no relationship between burnout and years of service. One explanation for the study findings is that the agency was providing the environment necessary for staff to engage, regardless of issues such as pay, seniority or years of service in the organization. An implication from the finding is that the agency should continue to enforce policies that promote staff engagement, regardless of how many years they have been on the job.

3. *Differences, based on gender, in report of engagement*. The mean score for male participants was 40.53, whereas the mean score for female participants was 38.97, giving some indication that males were more engaged. However, the difference was not found to be statistically significant and the hypothesis was not supported. This finding is similar to results from two previous studies, in which it was discovered that engagement and burnout did not differ significantly between genders (Schaufeli et al., 2006; Yildirim, 2008). However, the scores in this study differed from a previous burnout study which reported that females have a greater risk of suffering from burnout (Sprang et al., 2007). The implication from the findings in this study was that males and females are given equal opportunities to engage with their job in the agency.

4. *Differences in report of engagement based upon supervisory job duties*. The mean score for supervisors was 40.65, whereas the mean score for non supervisors was 38.96. In this sample, supervisors were more engaged with their jobs than were employees who did not supervise anyone and the research hypothesis was supported. This finding was similar to the findings of Schaufeli et al. (2006) who discovered that blue collar workers were less engaged than managers. An implication from the findings in this project was that the study agency should examine policies that could separate direct line staff from those in management positions to ensure that agency practices are not creating an environment that contributes to disengagement in certain workers. However, the agency should also be aware that having a management staff that is more engaged than other workers is a positive finding. If the management staff is continually supported in its efforts to engage, the rest of the staff will be more likely to follow suit. The implication is supported by the theoretical assumption that engagement is

dependent upon the management of an agency, and that the attitudes and behaviors of supervisors can directly influence engagement levels of the staff.

Discussion and Conclusions

Recent research and literature demonstrate an increased interest in the topic of employee engagement, and studies show that engagement by employees is directly related to positive organizational and business outcomes. However, there is no research that looks specifically at workers in the human services field. Therefore, this study was designed as an exploratory measure of the engagement of employees in a public human services agency and to examine the effects that work-life and demographic variables had on participant scores. This project also served to further develop and refine the "Employee Engagement" instrument (see Appendix).

This study examined the overall level of engagement of a group of employees who work for a public human services agency. The instrument was designed so that scores ranging from the mid point of the total possible score and above, indicated at least average engagement. Therefore, a score of 24 or above would indicate engagement and scores of 32 and above would indicate significant engagement. It was discovered that, in this sample, the majority of the respondents reported themselves to be significantly engaged with their jobs. The overall mean engagement score of 39.29 out of a possible maximum score of 48 places the group, as a whole, in the upper range of engagement. When considering the significantly high engagement rates of the study population, readers should consider the possibility that human services workers, as a group, may be more engaged than workers in other industries. The nature of human service work implies that workers may inherently care more about their job because

they believe in the mission of their organization. Results from this study need to be compared with other human service populations to see if these rates are high, or if they are similar to other like populations.

Employee Engagement theory would suggest that in an agency such as the study site, where the workers are significantly engaged, production outcomes would be high and customer service would be exceptional. A review of the annual report from the study agency indicated that the study agency met or exceeded the standards and indicators for the fiscal year in which the study was conducted. In fact, the agency reported a 67.1% success rate for outcomes with clients (source not identified to protect confidentiality of the agency). Further, agency reports showed that 98% of the 1,900 clients surveyed reported that they were treated with respect from the staff, and 93% of clients said the agency services were readily available to them. Therefore, a major finding of this study was that the high staff engagement levels may have some correlation with the agencies' high production outcomes and quality customer service reports. Further research is suggested to explore the possible connection.

<center>Instrument</center>

The instrument used in this study was created by the researcher (see Appendix). It was developed for the specific purpose of measuring the engagement of individuals working in the human services field. The length of the survey was conducive to simple, quick completion, and therefore encouraged a high participation rate. It was designed to measure the key concepts of engagement and allowed the researcher to examine demographic factors and work life variables against levels of engagement. The instrument was pilot tested and found to be reliable with a Cronbach's Alpha score of

.773. After adding one question, the Cronbach's Alpha score for the current study was .798, again demonstrating acceptable reliability. A major conclusion of this study was that this instrument is reliable and effective for measuring employee engagement and could be a useful tool for researchers who want to study engagement levels of human services staff. The Employee Engagement Survey should now be utilized in more studies with employees in the human services field to further develop its usefulness and to determine which of the measured demographic factors are most correlated with high engagement.

One explanation for the overall high level of participant engagement among those taking this survey is that the study agency was providing the three key psychological conditions of engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability to their employees (Kahn, 1990). In this survey, questions one, three, and five addressed the condition of meaningfulness. According to Kahn (1990), meaningfulness can be described as a feeling that one is receiving a return on one's investment of oneself in one's work. Staff members experience meaningfulness when they feel worthwhile, useful and valuable (Kahn, 1990). Survey question one asks participants if they have received recognition for doing their job well. Eighty seven percent (n = 184) of respondents answered "slightly agree to strongly agree," thus indicating that staff in this agency felt that they were receiving a return on the investment of themselves into their job tasks.

Question three asked participants if the mission of the agency made them feel like the work they did mattered. A resounding 96% (n = 201) of respondents gave a positive (slightly agree to strongly agree) answer. This implies that the mission of this

agency was made clear to the staff and that the employees felt positive about the work the agency did.

Question five asked participants if their ideas and opinions were taken seriously. An answer in agreement to this question would indicate that the employee felt valued, and as though he or she made a useful contribution to the agency. In this study, 93% (n = 195) of respondents indicated agreement with the statement.

Kahn (1990) describes safety as another key psychological condition for engagement. His research indicates that employees feel a sense of safety in climates of openness and support, and when they feel connected to others. Safety occurs in environments where individuals are free to express themselves without fear of negative consequences, and in settings where the boundaries are clear and organizational norms are known (Kahn, 1990). Question two on the "Employee Engagement" scale used in this study asked participants if their supervisors seem concerned about their welfare. Responses were positive in that 94% (n = 197) agreed with the statement, indicating that employees in this agency felt as though they were supported by management, and felt a connection to their superiors.

Question four addressed the issue of having friends at work. Participants agreed with the statement in that 97.5% (n = 202) chose an answer of slightly agree to strongly agree, indicating that workers in this agency felt a sense of support and connectedness with their co-workers, and that they were free to express their true selves. Finally, question seven asked participants if their co-workers did a good job. Responses showed that 96% (n = 201) agreed with the statement, indicating that participants felt that they were working toward a common goal with other staff in the agency, and that the role

definitions were clear and consistent and fell within the normal boundaries of the organization (Kahn, 1990).

The third and final key psychological factor of the engagement framework is availability. Kahn (1990) describes availability as the sense of possessing the physical, emotional and psychological resources necessary to invest oneself in one's role at work. Question six of the survey asked participants if their agency provided the tools and equipment they needed to do their jobs. Again, the overall response was positive in that 90% (n = 189) of employees said they agreed at least slightly with the statement, indicating that the study agency was providing the tools the staff perceived they needed to do their jobs, thus leaving them more likely to engage in their designated roles. Finally, question eight asks participants if they will still be employed by the agency two years from now. Although the response was basically positive, fewer of the participants, 72% (n = 180), agreed with this statement.

Kahn's (1990) model of engagement states that not only are there key psychological conditions related to engagement, but that those conditions are, to some degree, within the control of the management of an agency. The aforementioned scores from this study indicate that the management staff of the study agency may be making a positive contribution to the engagement of their workers. It is noted that the study agency implemented a leadership development initiative three years prior to the survey. This initiative focused on empowering supervisors and on training management personnel how to be effective leaders. The program employed a variety of strategies, including required attendance in leadership training, assigned readings, and the development of a formal leadership plan for every person in a supervisory role. It is

reasonable to assume that this initiative may have had a positive impact on survey

scores. An important implication from this finding is that the agency should continue to

invest in its leadership initiative and other related programs in an effort to maintain

high staff engagement levels. Directing resources toward this objective would appear to

be an effective investment for this agency.

<div align="center">Implications for Social Work Policy</div>

Because the key psychological conditions of engagement are to a degree within

the control of the management of the agency, engagement studies should be of

particular interest to social work policy makers. As noted previously, research indicates

that engaged workers help agencies reap benefits like increased efficiency, higher levels

of customer satisfaction, higher productivity, and lower turnover rates (Buhler, 2006).

Therefore, findings from engagement surveys conducted within an agency could inform

policy makers on areas of need, and specific strategies could be developed to target

those areas. Leaders within agencies should continually focus on implementing policies

that increase the engagement of management and staff which, in turn, could be expected

to increase the overall productivity of individual workers and the agency as a whole.

Implications for Social Work Practice

This study informs practitioners about the significance of engagement in the

work place. Practitioners should understand the psychological conditions of

engagement, and how engaged staff members benefit an agency. They should strive to

become engaged with their jobs so as to maximize their effectiveness with clients and to

develop themselves as more effective change agents. Results from this study indicated

that the overall engagement rates for the staff were high. It is therefore presumed that

the practitioners within the agency are motivated, emotionally connected to their jobs, and willing to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get their work done. The success rate of the agency on meeting proscribed outcomes also reflects the high overall staff engagement.

<div align="center">Implications for Social Work Research</div>

Previous to this study, no identified research projects had looked specifically at engagement rates of workers in the field of human services. Therefore, this exploratory study was conducted to determine the engagement rates of employees specifically in a public human services agency. The findings indicated that, overall, the sample population was significantly engaged with their employment. Implications were that the study agency was providing the key psychological conditions necessary for their staff to fully engage with their job. Further studies should now be conducted across the spectrum of human services agencies to examine similarities or differences in staff engagement rates. More research is needed to determine which work-life factors or demographic variables are correlated with high engagement rates. Research projects using the "Employee Engagement" scale designed for this study should be repeated to further document the reliability of the instrument, so that comparisons can be made between results from a variety of human services agencies. Additionally, studies should be repeated on a regular basis, or after major changes in the organizational structure of the agency, to determine the stability of employee engagement rates. If an agency has implemented change strategies designed to increase staff engagement, the survey should also be repeated so as to determine the effectiveness of the imposed strategies.

Conclusion

Results from this study contributed to the limited empirical research on the topic of employee engagement. Specifically, it contributed the first statistical information about rates of engagement among staff in a human services agency. Because employee engagement is now understood to be a critical component of successful organizational outcomes, it needs to be closely examined in the social work field, if for no other reason that agencies are held increasingly more accountable for outcomes, and funding is often tied to success rates. An engaged staff can contribute significantly to reaching positive outcomes. Therefore, the engagement concept should be at the forefront of social work research and policy implementation.

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Appendix

Employee Engagement Survey

Please check the box that best describes how you feel regarding each statement.

1. I have received recognition for doing my job well.

Strongly		Slightly	Slightly		Strongly
Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Agree	Agree

2. My supervisor seems concerned about my welfare.

Strongly		Slightly	Slightly		Strongly
Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Agree	Agree

3. The mission of the agency makes me feel like the work I do matters.

Strongly		Slightly	Slightly		Strongly
Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Agree	Agree

4. I have friends at work.

Strongly		Slightly	Slightly		Strongly
Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Agree	Agree

5. While on the job, my ideas and opinions are taken seriously.

Strongly		Slightly	Slightly		Strongly
Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Agree	Agree

6. The materials, tools and equipment that I need to do my job are supplied by the

agency and made readily available to me.

Strongly		Slightly	Slightly		Strongly
Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Agree	Agree

7. The people I work with do a good job.

 Strongly   Slightly   Slightly   Strongly

 Disagree   Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Agree   Agree

8. I will still be employed here two years from now.

 Strongly   Slightly   Slightly   Agree   Strongly

Disagree   Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Agree

Would you like to give additional information about your responses? If so, please add

comments below and include the number of the statement you are writing about.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Demographic Information:

How many years have you worked for the agency?   0 to 5 years_____
                                                              6 to 10 years_____
                                                              11 to 15 years_____
                                                              16 to 20 years_____
                                                              Over 20 years_____

Indicate your section: DD Section   _____
                                           VR Section   _____

Is your office located in: Kansas City or St. Louis   _____
                                        Other _____

 Indicate your position: Professional Staff _____
                                      Support Staff   _____

Do you supervise anyone?   Yes_____   No_____

What is your age?   18 – 23 _____

                    24 – 29 _____

                    30 – 35_____

                    36 – 41 _____

                    42 – 47_____

                    48 – 53_____

                    Over 53 _____

Male _____   Female_____

VITA

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