



The role of career values for work engagement during the transition to working life



Florencia M. Sortheix^{a,*}, Julia Dietrich^b, Angela Chow^c, Katariina Salmela-Aro^{d,e}

^a University of Helsinki, Finland

^b University of Jena, Germany

^c University of Alberta, Canada

^d Helsinki Collegium of Advanced Studies, Finland

^e University of Jyväskylä, Finland

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ABSTRACT

The present longitudinal study examined the role of career values for work engagement across the transition from university education to working life. Finnish young adults reported on their career values (intrinsic, rewards, and security values) at the age of 23; and the degree of person–organization fit (value congruence, and congruence between one's education and the job), subjective income and economic stress two years later at the age of 25. Work engagement was assessed at both measurement points. Structural equation modeling results showed, first, that intrinsic but not rewards or security career values were related to work engagement. Second, value congruence and having a job which was related to young adults' educational field were positively associated with work engagement. Our findings suggest that along with person–organization fit, intrinsic career values are a significant factor in shaping and facilitating successful transitions from education to work.

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1. Introduction

Psychological research on work engagement has flourished in the last decade in the context of an increased attention placed on the positive aspects of human functioning (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Recent research has identified work engagement as a key research topic for career development, performance and well-being (Bakker et al., 2008; Salmela-Aro, Tolvanen, & Nurmi, 2009, 2011; Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). Work engagement is defined as a positive and psychologically fulfilling state of mind characterized by high levels of energy, involvement, and concentration in work and study situations (Bakker et al., 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Prior studies have found that higher levels of engagement predict academic (Salanova, Schaufeli, Martinez, & Bresó, 2010) and work performance (Bakker, Demerouti, & Ten Brummelhuis, 2012; Demerouti & Bakker, 2006; Salanova, Agut, & Peiro, 2005), organizational commitment (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006) and personal initiative at work (Hakanen, Perhoniemi, & Toppinen-Tanner, 2008). Given that work engagement is a critical factor to subsequent performance, it is important to investigate the extent to which personal motivation, such as career values, contributes to engagement.

Substantial longitudinal research on young adults has indicated that career values play a vital role in career outcomes, for example, working hours and job features (Johnson & Monserud, 2010; Johnson & Mortimer, 2011). Although career values are important for individuals' vocational development (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), decision making behavior (Schwartz, 1992) and career choice (Judge & Bretz, 1992), it is surprising that their potential relation with work engagement has not yet been studied.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Social Research (Social Psychology), Faculty of Social Sciences, P.O. Box 54, Unioninkatu 37, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland.

E-mail address: florencia.sortheix@helsinki.fi (F.M. Sortheix).

To fill this gap, this study aims to examine career values as an important personal resource for prospective engagement in the transition from education to employment.

1.1. Personal resources for work engagement

Work engagement is conceptualized by three key characteristics: feelings of vigor, strong dedication, and high levels of absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Feelings of vigor involve high levels of energy, mental resilience to overcome setbacks, and persistence. Dedication conveys a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge that arise from being involved in an activity. Absorption is characterized by fully concentrating and being happily engrossed in one's work. From a developmental perspective, the presence of high levels of work engagement is an important indicator of a successful transition from education to employment (see Dietrich, Parker, & Salmela-Aro, 2012). The experience of engagement indicates the adaptation to the new life situation and reflects the interplay between personal characteristics and the available resources in the environment (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003; Hakanen et al., 2006).

The job demands–resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2003; Hakanen et al., 2006) is a major framework for studying engagement. Within this model, job resources refer to the sources of support, such as job control, supervision, information and feed-back, and social climate that facilitate the experience of work engagement. Personal resources refer to characteristics and traits that allow individuals to maintain a sense of mastery in their lives, feel in control and able to impact upon their environment successfully (Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003). Personal resources include positive characteristics such as optimism, self-efficacy and self-esteem which have been shown to predict work engagement (Mäkikangas, Kinnunen, & Feldt, 2004; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007). For example, across the transition from university to work, Salmela-Aro et al. (2009, 2011) found that the ways in which university students approached and responded to academic and social situations predicted levels of work engagement even seventeen years later. In the present study, we propose that career values are important personal resources that may help young adults to cope with the challenges in the transition from education to work. Based on self-determination theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), we examine the extent to which career values (i.e., intrinsic vs. extrinsic) serve a positive function maintaining motivation in terms of engagement.

1.2. Self-determination theory perspective on career values

Career values are defined as evaluations of the desirability of different kinds of job attributes (Johnson & Monserud, 2010) and play an important role in young adults' exploration of their role as a worker (Super, 1980). The most widely used classification for career values has been the classic distinction into intrinsic career values, which are defined as the rewards derived from participating in the work tasks themselves, such as interest and autonomy; and extrinsic career values, defined as the rewards that are external to the work experience, such as income and prestige (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Johnson, 2001b; Mortimer & Lorence, 1979; Ros, Schwartz, & Surkiss, 1999). In line with most previous research on work values, we focus on extrinsic and intrinsic career values.

Self-determination theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 1985) provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for distinguishing motivations underlying career values, describing the consequences associated with different types of motivation, and outlining the conditions which may foster motivation. According to SDT, three basic human needs are crucial for sustaining and fostering motivation: the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy represents the need to be the perceived origin or source of one's own behavior. Competence refers to feelings of effectiveness in one's ongoing interactions with the social context. Lastly, relatedness refers to the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and be connected with other human beings. In fact, based on SDT perspective, the job demands–resources model has suggested that job resources fulfilling these basic human needs can foster work engagement (Deci et al., 2001; Van Den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, & Lens, 2008). Specifically, recent study showed that job resources, such as task autonomy, skill utilization and feedback were related to higher need satisfaction which in turn predicted higher vigor and lower exhaustion (Van Den Broeck et al., 2008). Similarly, support for autonomy from supervisors predicted greater satisfaction of employees' needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness, which led to increased positive psychological adjustment and higher level of work performance (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004).

In accordance with other motivational research, SDT highlights that autonomy—the behavior is volitional and self-endorsed—is central to feelings of well-being. Central to SDT is the distinction between autonomous and controlled regulations. Autonomous regulation emerges when the behavior is identified as personally important, performed out of own choice and internalized, felt in accordance with the person's own characteristics and values (see, Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). On the contrary, controlled regulation is evident in behaviors that are instrumental or done for consequences separable from the activities per se and when people act out of a sense of pressure or obligation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomous regulation is closer to intrinsic motivation of which behavior is pursued by the inherent satisfactions. As a long-term drive, it has been found that intrinsic motivation and autonomous regulation move individuals towards their goals based on interest and enjoyment (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Intrinsic motivation directs and amplifies attention towards the tasks involved in a goal and predicts the levels of investment and progress towards goals (Dietrich, Shulman, & Nurmi, in press; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). On the other hand, controlled forms of motivation have been shown to result in higher anxiety and lower well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Recently, Van Beek, Taris, and Schaufeli (2011) showed that engaged employees were driven by autonomous forms of motivation, while employees experiencing burnout had higher controlled forms of motivation. The

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