

# Different perspectives on engagement, where to from here? A systematic literature review

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## Abstract

Engagement has emerged as a significant focus in contemporary management research, widely acknowledged for its positive impact on wellbeing and performance. However, over 30 years since its introduction, the concept of engagement remains fractured with multiple definitions, ongoing theoretical debates, and inconsistent empirical evidence of practical value. This review addresses the evolving nature of work-related engagement, recognizing the need for fresh perspectives to better understand this complex phenomenon. To facilitate progressing the research agenda beyond current debates, we used a meta-narrative review as a systematic approach for synthesizing our findings and problematizing techniques to generate innovative ideas. Our review identified six distinct groups, each arguing for different conceptualizations of engagement. We illuminated opportunities for further research directions by mapping and challenging dominating narratives. Specifically, our review highlights the need to conduct research outside the predominant positivist/postpositivist perspective. It also identifies a need for additional research to understand how task-level engagement happens through the interplay of individuals and the environment. Our study makes significant conceptual contributions by offering clear boundaries of existing knowledge, an alternative conceptualization of engagement, and a platform for new directions. Contribution to literature review methodology using integrative and generative approaches is also discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Engagement research has remained a popular topic since being introduced as a work-related phenomenon (Bailey, 2022; Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; Newman et al., 2016; Saks et al., 2021). Engagement, also labelled work engagement, employee engagement, job engagement or organizational engagement, is commonly defined as a positive work-

related psychological state (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008), demonstrated through employees' commitment to their work and organisation (Saks, 2006). The general engagement literature also provides evidence suggesting that engagement improves organizational outcomes such as profitability and productivity (Bakker, 2017; Schneider et al., 2018). However, despite substantial research, the engagement literature remains fractured (Bailey et al.,

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2017; Saks & Gruman, 2014; Shuck et al., 2017) and removed from individuals' experience of work and organizational life (Sambrook, 2021).

Bailey et al.'s (2017) comprehensive meta-narrative review highlighted the disjointed nature of engagement research. More specifically, the review categorised engagement definitions under six headings and nine measurement scales, accepting that 'the literature is in fact fractured, with so many different meanings attached to engagement that it does not make sense at present to talk of engagement as one single construct' (p. 47). These findings indicate the potential for the multi-paradigmatic nature of engagement research. Previous literature reviews on engagement attempted to advance the discussion toward clarity and theory progression by focusing on convergence through construct precision (Crawford et al., 2010; Saks, 2006; Saks et al., 2021; Shuck et al., 2017), construct redundancy (Cole et al., 2011), evidence synthesizing (Bailey et al., 2017; Fletcher et al., 2020; Knight et al., 2017; Lesener et al., 2020) or construct integration (Christian et al., 2011; Macey & Schneider, 2008). More generally, most previous reviews highlight the challenges of synthesizing the evidence in an incoherent field, calling for clarity and consistency rather than accepting the presence of multiple perspectives.

Reflecting on the debates within the engagement literature, we, along with others (e.g., Bailey, 2022), are concerned with the lack of theoretical and epistemological diversity and the limited impact current research has on practice. We are not attempting to suggest non-contestable solutions to how researchers should understand engagement. Instead, our review is motivated by identifying and accepting theoretical and empirical tensions (Hassard & Wolfram, 2013) and highlighting the need for complementary research directions based on alternative underlying assumptions and underutilised perspectives.

This study is guided by the 'where to from here' question, responding to the call for more innovative conceptual contribution that offers an alternative perspective and future research direction (Alegre et al., 2023). Hence, the purpose of this literature review is two-fold: (1) to identify the current state and underexplored areas, and (2) to identify specific areas where future research should be directed. First, we aim to synthesise the current state, suggesting that multiple perspectives and underlying assumptions represent the current engagement landscape. In social science, researchers make assumptions about the nature of humans and society (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) and how to conduct research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hassard & Wolfram, 2013; Morgan, 2007). Understanding core assumptions is relevant because assumptions influence research, from formulating research questions to designing, analysing, and interpreting findings (Post et al.,

2020). Hence, focusing on challenging core assumptions can open the field to innovative research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). This approach of stepping back and examining the historical development of the current landscape outside of any specific group is critical in highlighting potential new narratives and unexplored areas (Breslin & Gatrell, 2020).

In this review, we first systematically organised the engagement field by analysing different perspectives to clarify the dominating narratives and their historical development, thus synthesizing the foundations of the engagement field. Our findings are aligned with previous observations about the diversity in conceptualizing engagement (e.g., Bailey et al., 2017). However, we suggest that the literature provides limited theoretical variations to support the views beyond the dominating conception of engagement as a positive, relatively stable psychological state explained through the motivational process.

Secondly and most importantly, using meta-narratives as a lens, we illuminated current core assumptions to suggest an alternative conception of engagement using a 'new' narrative, offering a stepping stone for theoretical progression (Breslin & Gatrell, 2020). We have shown that accepted narratives can be challenged, opening the field to research using additional perspectives or different theoretical applications. Specifically, we call to focus future research questions on how engagement happens. We argue that there is a need for research to be conducted outside the predominant positivist/postpositivist by utilizing constructionism. More generally, we also argue for a greater focus on task-level engagement and the interplay of individuals and the environment.

This literature review provides critical contributions to the discussion on engagement literature, offering a fresh and holistic view of engagement's current philosophical and theoretical foundations, an alternative conception of engagement, and an alternative future research agenda outside of dominating narratives. Overall, we argue that there needs to be an increased focus on engagement research that seeks to understand the inherent complexity of everyday work experiences, thus making engagement studies more relevant for individuals, HRM practitioners, and organisations.

## Groups and the categorizing of core assumptions

Kuhn (1970) observed that different perspectives and particular ways of viewing the world—consisting of core assumptions about rules, values, and beliefs—direct how science progresses. Guba and Lincoln (1994) referred to paradigms as the categorizing sets of core assumptions

about the nature of reality (ontological), how reality is known (epistemological), and the research approach (methodological). Categorizing based on these assumptions provides distinct epistemological orientations such as positivist, postpositivist, critical and constructionist. For example, positivist takes a realist and objective view using quantitative methods. In contrast, constructionism assumes a relativistic and subjective view using non-quantitative methods. As another example of the discussion on core assumptions, Burrell and Morgan (1979) progressed Kuhn's conception of categorizing assumptions by suggesting that all management research can fall within four distinct paradigms: functionalist, interpretivist, radical humanist and radical structuralist. Burrell and Morgan's groups are based on the intersection between core assumptions about the nature of social science (subjective vs. objective) and the nature of society (radical change vs. regulation).

While there is an agreement that core assumptions affect knowledge creation (Post et al., 2020), the nature and categorizations of the core assumptions have been a source of ongoing academic debate (Clarke & Clegg, 2000; Hassard, 2015). One of the main points of contention is that categorizing might imply incommensurability (Shepherd & Challenger, 2013)—an approach that, over time, constrains thinking, fixing disciplines with dominating assumptions consistent within a single category (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021). An investigation of core assumptions further suggests that boundaries are not always obvious and distinct (Lincoln et al., 2018). Hence, discussing categorizing core assumptions often becomes highly contentious (Shepherd & Challenger, 2013). However, categorizing core assumptions has remained influential in management studies as it provides an analytical tool to understand a field's philosophical and theoretical underpinnings (Hassard, 2015). In management research, core assumptions are only sometimes explicitly considered. The result is a need for more consistency in research questions and methods to assess the collective evidence (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003). Hence, mapping research into core assumptions is beneficial in areas such as engagement when claims for confusion and conflicts of perspectives emerge (Wong et al., 2013) or when a dominating perspective might restrict theoretical progression (Bonache, 2021; Fletcher et al., 2020).

In this review, we organise the research into groups based on their shared core assumptions on the nature of the phenomenon and their epistemological orientation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). We accept that categorizing core assumptions might be at odds with contemporary philosophical perspectives. Hence, in this review, we use the groups as a snapshot of the field's current state of theoretical development instead of a view that constrains the way

forward (Hassard & Wolfram, 2013; Morgan, 2007; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021). Accordingly, we refer to Hassard and Wolfram's (2013) concept of categorizing as groups (fields of influence) that operate in relative tension with one another, neither fixed nor incommensurable. We refer to each group as 'a coherent body of theoretical knowledge and a linked set of primary studies in which successive studies are influenced by the findings of previous studies' (Greenhalgh et al., 2005, p. 38).

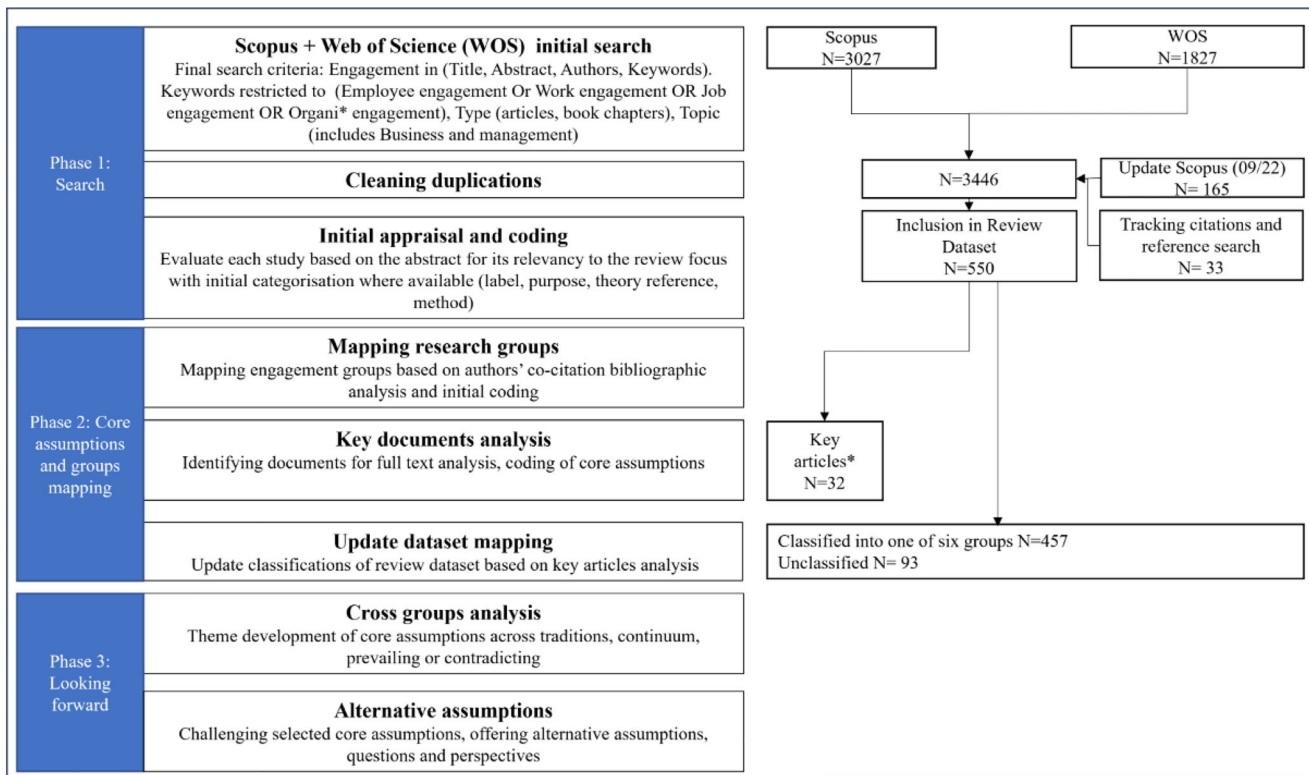
## METHODOLOGY

This review utilises meta-narrative (Wong et al., 2013) and problematizing (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020) review techniques. The meta-narrative review is 'a method of systematic review, designed for topics that have been differentially conceptualized and studied by different groups of researchers' (Wong et al., 2013, p. 998). The method is inspired by Kuhn's (1970) argument of knowledge progression. It looks historically at how research groups evolved to shape the questions and methods used. As the second aim of this review was to set an alternative research agenda, once groups were identified through analysis of shared language and internal cooperation, we progressed to use a problematizing review approach, synthesizing meta-narratives of core assumptions across the groups (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020). Complementary to a systematic review, the problematizing approach goes deep rather than broad and, rather than identifying gaps, aims at re-evaluating core assumptions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014). Combining these two approaches provides a systematic process for mapping the current literature and a generative approach for considering alternative directions (Post et al., 2020).

For this review, we followed the process outlined in Figure 1.

### Phase 1

One of the main challenges in meta-narrative reviews is identifying an appropriately broad range of articles to construct a comprehensive map of the topic (Wong et al., 2013). We systematically searched for engagement literature through major databases to address this issue. We did not restrict the year of publication, specific journals, or primary disciplines (as long as business and management were also selected as a discipline). We excluded non-academic articles as our focus was on theoretical progression. First, we searched for the word 'engagement'. Because of the more general concept of 'engagement' used outside of our interest as a work-related phenomenon,



**FIGURE 1 Literature review process.** \*Key articles mentioned in this figure are listed in Table 2, column four. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

we next restricted the search to the labels related to our topic as these appeared in the index keywords (employee engagement, work engagement, job engagement, organ\* engagement). This restriction did not exclude multiple engagement labelling as mentioned in the title or abstract. However, it did address the challenge of engagement terms used in other connotations (e.g., customer engagement, student engagement, and online engagement). The primary data extraction was performed on 16/11/2021 from Web of Science ( $n = 1749$ ) and Scopus ( $n = 3027$ ) and updated on 17/09/2022 ( $n = 165$ ). We used these databases due to having peer-reviewed, extensive and diverse coverage of business and management journal articles (Wanyama et al., 2021). These databases also included citation count, which helped identify key articles. We further updated the review dataset with relevant articles found through references when we analysed content ( $n = 33$  added). Once we merged the search results and removed duplications, we identified  $n = 3446$  articles.

As Greenhalgh et al. (2005) suggested, we reviewed all abstracts identified in the search ( $n = 3446$ ). We included articles that positively matched the questions detailed in Table 1. To answer the inclusion questions, we completed an initial categorisation of empirical articles based on abstracts (categories: research aim, label, theoretical reference, methodology, and results). We referred to the source

for conceptual articles and empirical articles with insufficient details in the abstract. As a result of this process, the final dataset contained  $n = 550$  articles (Review Dataset).

## Phase 2

In the second phase, we first used bibliographic authors' co-citation analysis (see Figure 2) to identify how articles related to each other through a visual relatedness of authors' co-citation. This step is aligned with our assumption that group members collaborate and share a common language, such as naming and defining the phenomenon (Greenhalgh et al., 2005). Authors' co-citation is when two authors are cited in the same article, indicating possible collaboration. The software determines visual relatedness based on the number of times authors are co-cited in the same article (Van Eck & Waltma, 2020). This method is used in bibliographic analysis and is particularly useful for visually mapping communities of practice through their authors (Rabetino et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

Figure 2 presents our initial findings using co-citation analysis. We identified four groups by combining this process using VOSviewer software (Van Eck & Waltma, 2020) and our initial coding of authors' labelling of engagement (e.g., work engagement). We used the group's shared

TABLE 1 Inclusion questions.

Type	Inclusion questions
Conceptual articles	Is this article part of an attempt to extend the existing knowledge of engagement through theoretical contribution?
Empirical articles	Is this article's primary focus to explore, investigate, or better understand engagement? i.e., does it go beyond description when referring to engagement, and is it the primary phenomenon under investigation?

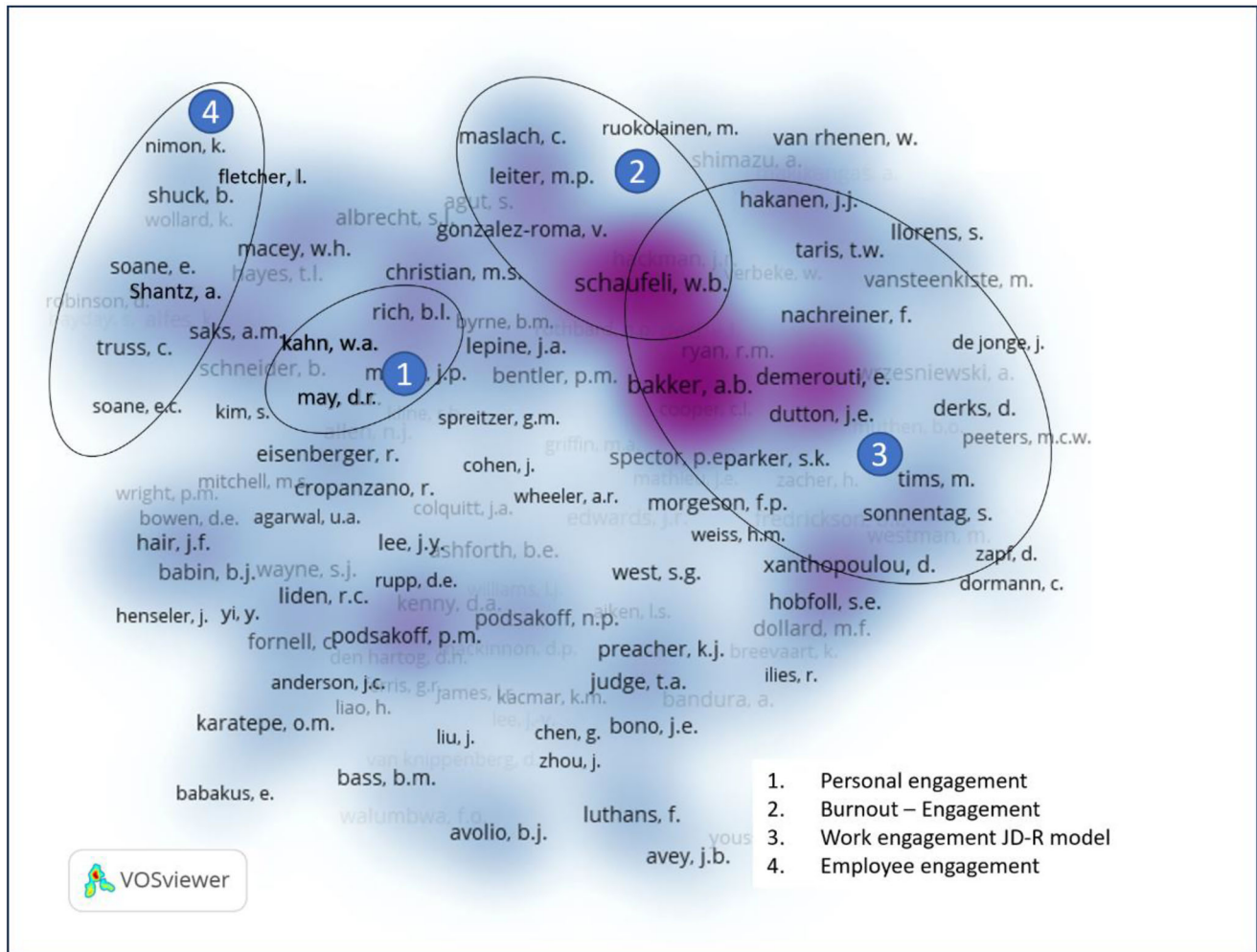


FIGURE 2 Authors' co-citation map illustrating the most visible groups within the engagement literature. \* To reduce clutter in the presentation, we included in the figure only the top 100 co-cited authors \* Overlap between groups two and three refer to authors who published initially in burnout–engagement and moved to work engagement. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

labelling of engagement as the group naming convention where possible. We noted an overlap between groups 2 and 3, as depicted in Figure 2. An overlap occurs when the same authors collaborate across more than one group. We also noted another potential group based on co-citation (located between groups one and four and includes authors such as Macey, Saks and Schneider). However, since authors in this group have used different labels for engagement (e.g., job engagement, organisation engage-

ment or workforce engagement), we did not categorise it in this initial step.

Co-citation relies on past performances of articles and is especially useful for visualizing established research groups with a more extended history of working together. However, co-citation is not optimal for identifying emerging authors and groups, so we also used subject classifications, publication titles, and our initial categorisation of labelling, definitions, and theories to identify emerging

or less prolific groups. Following this step, we identified two more groups: organisation/multi-level and communicating engagement. We also identified several critical management articles on the topic, listed as part of the pluralistic employee engagement approach.

Next, we tracked key articles within each group for complete full-text analysis, serving two purposes. First, following the problematizing review approach (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020) to identify core assumptions, we were required to take a deeper look at selected articles (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Also, key articles address groups' theoretical positioning and quality, as others have already accepted these key articles as authoritative, mostly adopting the same assumptions (Wong et al., 2013). In selecting these articles, we followed the problematizing review guideline to 'read broadly but selectively' (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020, p. 1298). Hence, we aimed to select a manageable number that best represents each of the six groups we identified. We identified these articles using four procedures. First, we used author co-citation link strength to identify the most influential authors within a group (Van Eck & Waltma, 2020). Second, we used a reference search within the groups to find the earliest or most cited articles. Third, we used other systematic and integrative reviews as recommendations for influential articles (Bailey et al., 2017; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Finally, in each group, we selected nuances to the mainstream, such as critical lenses or rarely utilised research methods (e.g., phenomenology). As a result, we selected  $n = 32$  best representing articles for full-text analysis, detailed as part of the discussion of the findings.

### Phase 3

Core assumptions are not always easy to be identified as explicit statements. However, assumptions can be gleaned from the author's use of language and the discussion about the nature of a phenomenon, findings or results (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Hence, during this phase, we referred to Lincoln et al. (2018) to provide an analytical framework for our thematic coding, analysing areas of contention, such as the aim or purpose of the research, approach to knowledge creation and accumulation, and methodological choices. We performed a sentence-by-sentence coding of each key article's introduction and background, methodology and discussion. These codes were themed under epistemological orientation (Lincoln et al., 2018) and the nature of engagement.

Finally, to ensure the consistency of our groups' categorization, we returned to phase 2, where we (re)classified each article into a selected group. We used a form of tri-

angulation (Yardley, 2015) to re-evaluate articles ( $n = 550$ ) associated with each group based on core assumptions consistency. The consistency of these assumptions, as used by other authors within a group, reassured us of our six identified groups. However, through this final step, we could not classify around 17% of articles ( $n = 93/550$ ) due to inconsistent internal assumptions (nor could these articles be classified as an emerging group). We suggest our challenge with classifying these articles might indicate that a portion of the engagement literature is unclear about the historical development of engagement research, the different groups or their theoretical constructions, or take a non-reflective approach to their assumptions.

## MAPPING ENGAGEMENT GROUPS

In this section of the findings, we address the first objective of this review by mapping the literature, describing historical evolution and the core assumptions for each of the six identified groups. The first two groups, 1/personal engagement and 2/burnout–engagement, were the first to conceptualize engagement, developed in parallel from different disciplines. The following two groups, 3/work engagement and 4/organization/multi-level engagement, first appeared in the early 2000s, sharing similar epistemological orientations. However, they hold different emphases either on wellbeing or organizational performance and are preoccupied with an ongoing debate about construct definitions and measurements. Finally, the last two groups, which emerged in the early 2010s, consider 5/employee engagement and 6/communicating engagement as organizations' engagement practices. Table 2 summarizes our findings of these groupings, highlighting their respective core assumptions.

### Personal engagement and disengagement

This group stemmed from Kahn's theory (1990) of work-related personal engagement, which was influenced by the idea of people expressing themselves in everyday lives through performing within social roles (Goffman, 1959). In his work, Kahn (1990) attempted to challenge the dominant organizational research approach of generalisability and stability by focusing on the individual's sensemaking in particular moments and situations, hence referring to his theory as personal engagement as opposed to work or employee (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014). Taking an ethnographic, grounded theory approach, Kahn developed his theory whereby engagement is defined as 'simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self', in task behaviours that promote connections to work and to

TABLE 2 Engagement core assumptions held by the different groups.

Group	Details	Key assumptions	Key articles
1/ Personal engagement Articles number: <i>N</i> = 14 First emerged (1990)	<p>Research aim: This group is concerned with understanding people's behaviours at work</p> <p>labelling: Personal engagement</p> <p>Description: Bringing or removing self from role performance</p> <p>Methodology: diverse (Conceptual = 3, mixed = 1 Quan = 6, Qual = 4)</p> <p>Theories: Kahn's engagement theory Discipline: Multi-disciplinary</p>	<p>Engagement phenomenon: subjective, momentary/situational, positive to negative continuum</p> <p>Interest: individual</p> <p>Epistemological orientation: Nonspecific/pragmatic</p>	<p>First to introduce engagement as a work-related phenomenon, conceptualizing engagement and disengagement based on ethnographic study (Kahn, 1990; Kahn &amp; Heaphy, 2014)</p> <p>Empirically testing personal engagement theory with a focus on confirming psychological conditions of safety, availability and meaning (May et al., 2004)</p> <p>Developing measurement scale, testing the role that self plays in role engagement in relationships with job performance, confirming predictor of organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) and task performance (Rich et al., 2010)</p>
2/ Burnout and engagement Articles number: <i>N</i> = 6	<p>Research aim: This group tests interventions to increase engagement and reduce burnout</p> <p>Labelling: burnout—engagement</p> <p>Description: A mental condition that is the opposite of burnout</p> <p>Theory: Burnout theories</p> <p>Methodology: Quantitative (Field/laboratory experiments, self-assessed questionnaires), Conceptual = 3, Quan = 3</p> <p>Discipline: Clinical psychology</p>	<p>Engagement phenomenon: objective or subjective, stable, positive</p> <p>Interest: individual</p> <p>Epistemological orientation: Positivist</p>	<p>Introducing engagement as the opposite of burnout (Maslach, 2003; Maslach &amp; Leiter, 2008)</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Group	Details	Key assumptions	Key articles
3/ Work engagement and the JD–R model	<p>Research aim: This group is concerned with optimal functioning at work</p> <p>Labelling: Work engagement</p> <p>Description: a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind</p> <p>Theories: Research in this group uses the JD–R model, sometimes in combination with other theories, such as the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory.</p> <p>Methodology: Quantitative (cross-sectional and longitudinal using mostly self-assessment questionnaires). Conceptual = 8, Mixed = 4, Quan = 173</p> <p>Discipline: Positive psychology/organizational psychology</p>	<p>Engagement phenomenon: objective, stable, non-contextual, positive</p> <p>Interest: Management</p> <p>Epistemological orientation: Positivist</p>	<p>Conceptualizing engagement is explained using the Job Demands – Resource model (JD–R) and measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Bakker &amp; Demerouti, 2008; Demerouti et al., 2001b; Schaufeli &amp; Bakker, 2004)</p>
Articles number: <i>N</i> = 185			<p>Identifying positive gain spirals between job resources and work engagement (Hakanen et al., 2008a)</p> <p>The article's findings suggest relationships between job resources, personal resources, and work engagement (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009).</p> <p>Using the JD–R model and COR theory to test engagement as interference with family life (Halbesleben et al., 2009)</p> <p>The article findings introduced an extension to the JD–R model with hindering and challenging demands, suggesting that challenging demands predict engagement, unlike previously claimed (Crawford et al., 2010).</p> <p>The article's findings suggest relationships between job stress and engagement (Sonnentag et al., 2012).</p> <p>The article's findings suggest relationships between job crafting and work engagement (Tims et al., 2013).</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Group	Details	Key assumptions	Key articles
4/ Organizational and multi-level engagement  Articles number: N = 58	<p>Research aim: This group is concerned with optimal organisation's level performance</p> <p>Labelling: organisation engagement, workforce engagement, engagement,</p> <p>Description: Commitment, involvement and satisfaction with the work and the organisation</p> <p>Theories used: Social exchange theory, various organizational psychology theories and models (e.g., person–job–organisation fit, work design).</p> <p>Methodology: Quantitative (cross-sectional using self-assessment questionnaires). Conceptual = 11, Quant = 47</p> <p>Discipline: Organizational psychology, Organizational behaviour</p>	<p>Engagement phenomenon objective, stable, non-contextual, positive</p> <p>Interest: management</p> <p>Epistemological orientation: Positivist/post-positivist</p>	<p>The article argues for employee engagement as a predictive model of organizational level performance as an aggregated measurement (Harter &amp; Schmidt, 2002).</p> <p>The article suggests engagement as a multi-level construct of job and organizational level (Saks, 2006). Suggesting an integrative framework of engagement as a multi-dimensional construct of trait, state, and behavioural engagement (Macey &amp; Schneider, 2008)</p> <p>The study uses meta-analysis to test engagement as a predictor of task and contextual performance (Christian et al., 2011).</p> <p>The author conceptualises collective engagement as a group phenomenon instead of an aggregation of an individual-level phenomenon (Barrick et al., 2015).</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Group	Details	Key assumptions	Key articles
5/ Employee engagement Articles number: N = 173	<p>Research aim: Research in this group evaluates the relationship between individual engagement experience, HR practices and organizational-level behaviours.</p> <p>Labelling: Employee engagement</p> <p>Description: Managing engagement to facilitate employee's wellbeing and organisation performance</p> <p>Theory: Social exchange theory and extensions of JD-R to consider for context</p> <p>Methodology: Mainly quantitative, qualitative case studies. Conceptual = 17, Mixed = 3, Quan = 138, Qual = 15</p> <p>Discipline: Human resources management, Human resources development, Employee relations</p>	<p>Engagement phenomenon</p> <p>primarily objective, relatively stable but can change over time, Contextual, and positive with a possible dark side.</p> <p>Interest: management</p> <p>Epistemological orientation: Postpositivist/critical/constructionist</p>	<p>The study explores the importance of context in engagement by examining 'hard' and 'soft' management practices of employee engagement (Jenkins &amp; Delbridge, 2013).</p> <p>The study tested the relationship between engagement and employee behaviours as mediated by the perception of HRM practices and highlighted engagement as personal and contextual (Alfes et al., 2013).</p> <p>Conceptualizing engagement as a management practice ('doing engagement'), hence the importance of organizational context (Truss et al., 2013)</p> <p>The article explored engagement within the complex context of HR practices that can be presented as either demands or resources to employees (Conway et al., 2016).</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Group	Details	Key assumptions	Key articles
6/Communicating engagement Articles number: N = 21	<p>Research aim: Research in this group evaluates the relationship between individuals' engagement experience, internal communication practices and organizational-level behaviours.</p> <p>Labelling: Employee engagement</p> <p>Description: Communicating engagement to facilitate employees' wellbeing and organization.</p> <p>Theory: This group is influenced by public relations and communication theories, Saks' (2006) organizational engagement and Kahn's engagement theory (1990).</p> <p>Methodology: emerging group, Conceptual = 4, Quan = 13, Qual = 4</p> <p>Discipline: Public Relations, communication</p>	<p>Engagement phenomenon: subjective, stable but can change over time, contextual, and positive, with a possible dark side</p> <p>Interest: management</p> <p>Epistemological orientation: Postpositivist/constructionist</p>	<p>The authors discuss the relationship between employee engagement and HRD practices and propose an emerging definition (Shuck &amp; Wollard, 2010).</p> <p>Challenging engagement research that ignores the complex reality of workers and organisations (George, 2011; Lemmon et al., 2018; Purcell, 2014; Valentin, 2014)</p> <p>Conceptualizing the role of communication in doing engagement (Welch, 2011)</p>
			<p>Doing engagement using social media, a qualitative exploratory study</p> <p>(Ewing et al., 2019)</p> <p>Exploring the complex conceptual foundation of engagement zones through insight into employees' lived experiences in the workplace (Lemon &amp; Palenchar, 2018).</p>

Note: Conceptual = Conceptual study; Quan = Quantitative empirical study; Qual = Qualitative empirical study; Mixed = Mixed methods empirical study.

\*Core assumptions present in this table are also presented in Figure 3 (nature of engagement, epistemological orientation).

others, personal presence (physical, cognitive and emotional) and active, full role performances' (1990, p. 700). Disengagement is defined as 'the simultaneous withdrawal and defence of a person's preferred self in behaviours that promote a lack of connections, physical, cognitive, and emotional absence, and passive, incomplete role performances' (1990, p. 701)

Personal engagement theory emphasizes the psychological conditions presented immediately before engaging and disengaging, the subjective process of directing energies in role performance, the degree of self within a role, and the psychological presence experienced while engaged. A later empirical study confirmed the relevance of the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability for engagement (May et al., 2004). The other studies in the group have developed Kahn's theory through the motivational process that directs energies toward task, role, and organisation performance (Newton et al., 2020; Rich et al., 2010).

The psychological aspects of engagement are the main focus of research that uses personal engagement. However, the social aspects, such as relationships, interactions and role identity—critical aspects of Kahn's theory—are mostly ignored (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014). In the several studies that use an increased awareness of the relational aspects of engagement, these are still studied mainly as variables such as trust and care (Francis & Keegan, 2018; Holland et al., 2017) rather than focus on individual experiences, processes and interactions.

Although Kahn is often attributed with introducing work-related engagement, the literature focus shifted from the momentary, subjective process of engaging to a more general, motivational-based psychological construct (Bailey et al., 2017; Shuck et al., 2017), ignoring critical aspects of personal engagement theory.

## Burnout–engagement continuum

Burnout has a rich research history, originating from clinical psychology studies. The concept first emerged in the 1970s, capturing the phenomenon of burnout through people's work experiences (Schaufeli et al., 2010). Traditionally, burnout studies focused on individual-level interventions addressing stressors. However, pertinent to the focus of this current review, these have been extended to explore interventions focusing on resources to increase engagement and reduce burnout levels (Maslach et al., 2001). Seemingly unaware of personal engagement, burnout scholars rephrased burnout as an erosion of engagement, providing a more complex view of a person's relationship with their job, labelling engagement as the opposite of burnout (Maslach, 2003). In this group, authors

refer to burnout–engagement as opposites, with engagement being assessed using the reverse-scoring measures of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2008).

Soon after introducing burnout–engagement research, it was redirected to focus on engagement as a distinct psychological state characterised by a high level of activation and enjoyment (Demerouti et al., 2001a). Cole et al. (2011) argued in their meta-analysis against the shift away from burnout–engagement opposites, claiming that 'construct redundancy is a major problem in understanding and advancing burnout-engagement research' (p. 1576). In reflecting on the development of engagement research, Maslach (2011) argued that the separation between burnout and engagement research is because the concepts do not have shared foundations. Before developing a theoretical framework, burnout research emerged from exploring people's experiences and meanings through interviews and observations. In contrast, the dominating conception within engagement research started with a theoretical concept, leaving unanswered questions about everyday life engagement experiences.

Recent developments in work engagement have started to address the disconnect between engagement and burnout. For example, Crawford et al. (2010) suggested two types of demands to clarify how engagement and burnout might relate. Others started exploring the relationship between engagement and burnout using the concept of heavy work investment as related to engagement and workaholism (e.g., Shimazu et al., 2015). Interestingly, because of the impact of COVID-19 on the world of work, there is a renewed interest in burnout–engagement research related to sectors that were most impacted by the pandemic, such as health and hospitality (e.g., Gómez-Salgado et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2021).

## Work engagement, the Job Demands–Resources model (JDR)

In 2001, researchers from Utrecht University, including authors such as Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli, suggested work engagement as a new concept in positive psychology. Focused on 'mental wellness' (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008, p. 187) with roots in stress and burnout studies, work engagement is considered as related, rather than the opposite, of burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001b; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Work engagement is 'a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption' (Demerouti et al., 2001a, p. 280). Consistent with the positive lens, low levels of engagement (e.g., disengagement) were not defined. Research in this group focuses on identifying favourable work conditions (resources) that enable work

engagement and promote worker wellbeing. Work engagement assumes ‘a persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behaviour’ (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, p. 295). The primary assumption of persistence and pervasiveness was confirmed through longitudinal empirical studies (Hakanen et al., 2008b; Mauno et al., 2007) despite other studies suggesting daily or even task-level fluctuation (Breevaart et al., 2014; Kühnel et al., 2009; Sonnentag et al., 2021). Work engagement is explained using the Job Demands—Resources (JD—R) model. Job demands are the characteristics of the job that require sustained effort or skills. Job resources are relevant to achieving work goals or reducing job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Early work in this area focused on operationalisation using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) as a self-reported questionnaire measuring vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). The extensive research that followed based on the JD—R model and using the UWES, focused on evaluating the relationships between resources as antecedents and outcomes of engagement.

In response to a position article published on engagement (Bakker et al., 2011a; Bakker et al., 2011b), the research on engagement was further developed in several areas, continuing to use the JD—R model. These areas include work engagement and its relationship with performance (Albrecht & Marty, 2020; Salanova et al., 2014), the role of personal resources (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), challenging and hindering demands (Van den Broeck et al., 2015), types of wellbeing (Hakanen et al., 2018), and the role of job crafting (Tims et al., 2014). Following the ever-increasing variables being evaluated, Schaufeli and Taris (2014, p. 55) reflected that ‘rather than being an explanatory model, the JD—R model is a descriptive model that specifies relations between classes of variables without providing any particular psychological explanation’. Several researchers using the JD—R model refer to other theories in explaining the underlying processes of engagement and burnout. For example, researchers have been using the JD—R in combination with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2011). Researchers used COR theory through quantitative longitudinal and experimental methods to explain how engagement is maintained through gain and loss spirals (Weigl et al., 2010), and crossover between work, home, other individuals or teams (Hakanen et al., 2008a; Halbesleben et al., 2009).

Work engagement conceptualization has been challenged by early groups, such as personal engagement and burnout—engagement and later groups, such as employee engagement. As discussed earlier, even researchers within the group questioned the JD—R model’s theoretical power in explaining engagement in a complex and dynamic environment, suggesting further theoretical development is required (Kibatta & Samuel, 2022; Schaufeli & Taris,

2014; Shimazu et al., 2015). Notwithstanding the above criticisms, the group’s comprehensive empirical research has contributed significantly to the current engagement understanding by consistently using the JD-R model and assumptions of objectivity, stability, and generalisability.

## Organization and multi-level engagement

In addition to work engagement, we identified other variants of engagement across the organizational psychology discipline. While work engagement is a relatively unified group, organization and multi-level engagement vary in labelling, definitions and measurements. We found that most core assumptions are similar or at least complementary across all the engagement variants associated with organizational psychology as a discipline. However, work engagement suggests engagement outcomes are task effectiveness and individual wellbeing, while focusing on the organization level means effectiveness at the organizational level. In this group, researchers assume reciprocal relationships between the employees and the organization (Saks, 2006) based on the social exchange theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017). The theory helps to explain why people engage as they aim to exchange their resources (e.g., commitment to stay) for the resources provided by the organization (e.g., support and HR practices).

Measuring engagement outcomes at the organization level is underdeveloped (Schneider et al., 2018). The lack of focus on organizational-level measurement is caused by an implicit assumption in organizational psychology that ‘almost everything we do at the individual level of analysis is that it has organizational consequences’ (Schneider et al., 2018, p. 4). However, organizations are interested in measuring at an aggregated level. The Gallup scale is a commonly used tool for measuring organizational antecedences and outcomes at an aggregated level (Harter & Schmidt, 2002). However, the Gallup scale was challenged for measuring antecedences, such as management practices, rather than engagement per se (Saks & Gruman, 2014). In recent developments, Barrick et al. (2015) suggested aggregating a shared perception of others’ engagement. Finally, Schneider et al. (2018) suggested an aggregating measure of individuals’ state engagement reported through their relationship with their organizations. These findings highlight that more empirical studies are needed to link individual engagement and organizational-level outcomes.

## Employee engagement

The employee engagement group considers engagement through employee-focused management practice, and

researchers are interested in the relationship between employees and their organisations (Shuck et al., 2017). Research in this group first appeared in the early 2010s, focusing on the human resources department's role in facilitating engaged employees. The group is characterized by more diverse researcher backgrounds and methodological preferences than previous groups. However, it provides limited theoretical development beyond existing conceptions of engagement (Conway et al., 2016; Eldor, 2016). Employee engagement researchers tap into different and sometimes multiple conceptualizations, mainly referring to social exchange theory (Saks, 2006) and as a facilitator for wellbeing and performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Researchers in this group are also influenced by consultancy and policy work such as the Gallup engagement survey (Harter & Schmidt, 2002), the employee engagement initiative of the US Office of Personnel Management (Hameduddin & Fernandez, 2019) and the UK government engagement initiatives (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009).

This group investigates employee engagement using either a unitarist or pluralist approach. A unitarist worldview in which employees and employers share similar goals guides a straightforward approach to engagement, focusing on implementing initiatives to maintain a positive work environment. In contrast, a pluralist approach is focused on better understanding and managing the employment relationship within specific contexts, accepting the complexity of real-life tensions and conflicts (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2013; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013; Purcell, 2014). Studies taking a unitarist worldview follow a similar epistemological orientation as the work and organization engagement researchers. For example, research assesses the impact of high-performance HR practices on employee engagement (Zhong et al., 2016). Other examples include evaluating the impact of context variables such as trust (Holland et al., 2017; Ugwu et al., 2014) or psychological safety (Idris et al., 2015) on the levels of engagement. Studies also examined the relationship between engagement and preferred behaviours, such as turnover intentions and extra-role behaviour (Alfes et al., 2013; Eldor & Harpaz, 2016). Studies taking this unproblematic approach are focused on antecedents and outcomes that are prominent in the specific sector, such as care in nursing (Bishop, 2013), interpersonal conflict in police (Brunetto et al., 2017), or customer service in hospitality and tourism (Karatepe, 2013; Menguc et al., 2017). Overall, the unproblematic approach to studying employee engagement can be seen as an extension of the organizational psychology conception with probable future convergence.

Alternatively, other human resource management and development (HRM/HRD) scholars focus on studying the practice of engagement (Truss et al., 2013), taking into

consideration the dual role of HRM in caring for employees and performance (Keegan et al., 2018). These studies often use more in-depth case-study designs to understand practice, meanings, and change. For example, Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) examined the cultural context of two companies in enabling or impeding management's ability to deliver employee engagement. Also, Francis and Keegan's (2018) study demonstrated the complexity of engagement experiences in which workers face competing demands. Thus far, case studies of engagement initiatives are rare and have yet to inform other groups. However, these case studies all highlight the importance of context and the complexity of engagement interventions in dynamic environments (Fletcher et al., 2020). A recent meta-analytic study also suggested that while interventions positively affect engagement, their long-term effect is unclear (Knight et al., 2017). Our findings indicate that employee engagement researchers are starting to challenge two of the dominating core assumptions across the literature, the notion of non-contextual and positive engagement, but yet to influence theoretical development (Sambrook, 2021).

## Communicating engagement

Internal communication focuses on employee engagement practices at the organizational level. Employees are considered organizations' stakeholders (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018), suggesting that communicating engagement promotes awareness, understanding of organizational goals and commitment (Welch, 2011). Underpinning this assumption is the belief that managers can achieve better recruitment and affect employees' commitment to stay by managing how they view their organization-related identity, like organizational branding and consumer relationships (Chawla, 2020; Kashyap & Chaudhary, 2019; Yadav et al., 2020). Employee engagement might be considered a straightforward way of achieving organizational goals, with communicating engagement viewed as primarily a top-down approach (Ewing et al., 2019; Karanges et al., 2015; Men et al., 2020). However, Reissner and Pagan (2013) found that communicating engagement is more complex, requiring constant dialogue between management and employees. Lemon and Palenchar (2018) offer a different, more sophisticated understanding of the engagement concept and the role of internal communications. Using a phenomenological approach, researchers interpreted engagement as zones of shared meanings, such as freedom in the workplace, connections, depth of relationships, calling, purpose, and creating value. The focus on understanding people's experiences also raises considerations of engagement's dark side when used as a

management tool to manipulate or control employees' behaviours (Lemon, 2019). We view this group focus as similar to the pluralist approach to employee engagement in HRM/HRD, accepting the tension between a management view of employee and organisation relationships and individuals' views. However, we suggest that since this group is emerging from a different theoretical background, it is well-positioned to diversify employee engagement research in new directions with more sociological and socio-psychological theories.

In summary, we identified six groups, each having a different (at times contradictory) understanding/conceptualization of engagement. As mentioned, these are not exclusive groups -there are similarities in underlying assumptions across most of the groupings.

## IDENTIFYING DOMINATING CORE ASSUMPTIONS

In the previous section, we mapped engagement research into six groups, characterizing each by the core assumptions that guide their research. We described groups with well-developed and extensive research, where core assumptions are coherent and are used consistently (e.g., work engagement). We also described other groups as emerging, taking more diverse research approaches across a growing body of knowledge (e.g., employee engagement). In this section, we synthesized core assumptions across the groups to identify assumptions worth challenging. To achieve that, we analysed the narratives associated with core assumptions identified earlier and organised these narratives across continua. The first continuum of core assumptions relates to researchers' ontology, epistemology and chosen methodology. The second continuum relates to the nature of engagement, objectivity, stability, context and positivity. Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the groups positioned against their epistemological and the nature of engagement assumptions.

The most prevalent core assumptions in the engagement literature stem from a positivist/postpositivist epistemological orientation and consider engagement objective, stable and positive. Because most engagement research is undertaken within a positivist/postpositivist orientation, less attention is given to individuals' engagement experiences and subjective meanings (Francis & Keegan, 2018; Loon et al., 2019; Purcell, 2014; Shuck et al., 2021). That said, we have identified a handful of empirical studies using a variety of qualitative methods that aim specifically at understanding engagement from the viewpoint of the actors who are performing the work (Banihani & Syed, 2017; Fletcher, 2017; Lemon, 2019; Lemon & Palenchar,

2018; Medhurst & Albrecht, 2016; Shuck et al., 2011). These case studies provide new insights into areas such as the relational nature of engagement, the relevance of organizational culture, and the impact of resource availability and accessibility, and they extend our understanding within existing groups. We also note that Kahn (1990) took a pragmatic approach to his study of personal engagement, using grounded theory to develop his theory and philosophical foundations associated with interactionism (Goffman, 1959). We placed his epistemological orientation somewhere between postpositivist and constructionist (Maxcy, 2003).

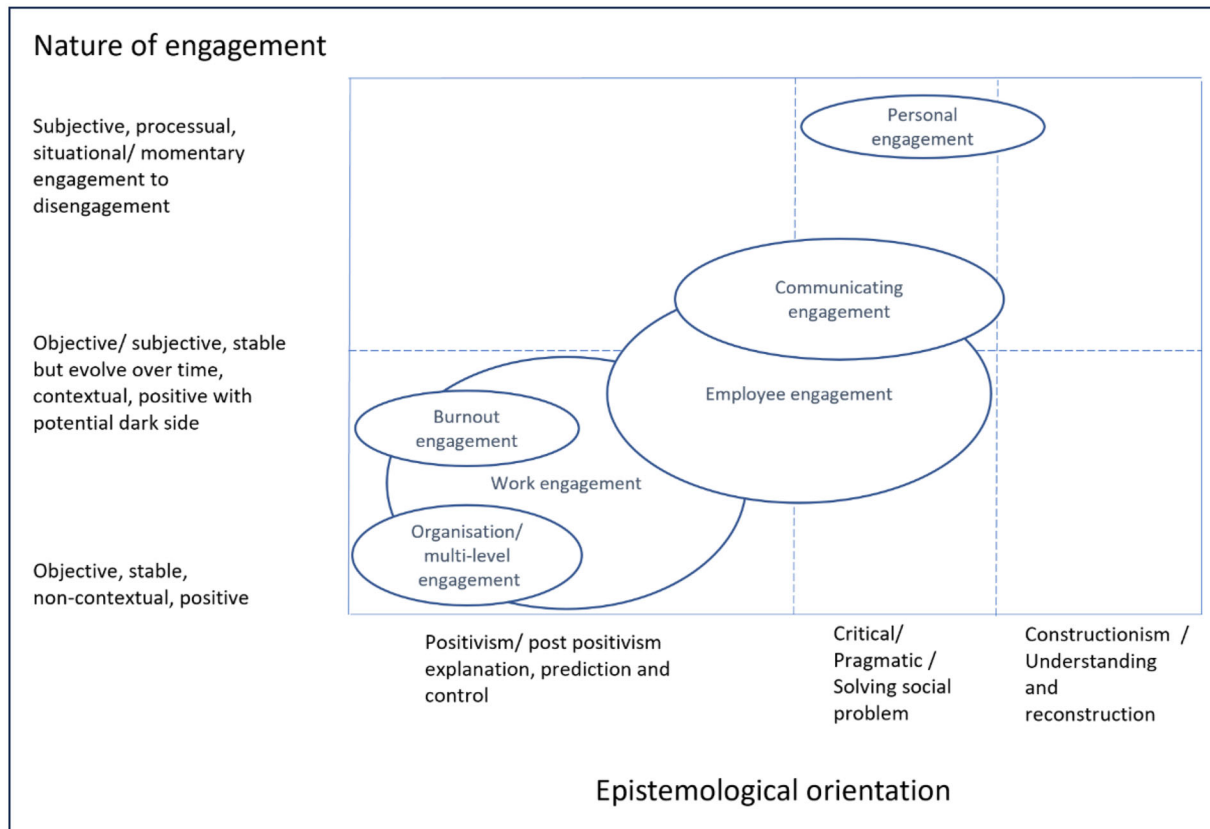
In the following sub-sections, we further discuss the current three predominant core assumptions associated with the nature of engagement.

### Engagement is objective and relatively stable

The research in our data set utilised the JD–R model as a theoretical framework, considering engagement as a function of relatively stable, generic working conditions, personal characteristics, and behavioural strategies (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Engagement studied as a relatively stable state might neglect considering the dynamic and changing nature of individuals, work and organisations. To understand change, researchers might require adopting a process lens, asking how a phenomenon emerges and changes over time (Langley et al., 2013) and understanding individuals' everyday subjective experiences. We identified only a handful of empirical studies that set out to study change and its interplay with employee engagement, suggesting that engagement is a complex phenomenon requiring ongoing maintenance. These researchers proposing change should be part of future theoretical developments as it is fundamental in understanding work (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2013; Davis & Van der Heijden, 2018; Francis & Keegan, 2018; Kane-Frieder et al., 2014; Lemon, 2019).

### Engagement is non-contextual

As presented in Figure 3 and discussed under 'employee engagement', most engagement studies consider engagement as a non-contextual approach that 'objectifies, generalizes, and reduces the employment relationship' (Fletcher et al., 2020, p. 9). Hence, studies are rarely located in social, cultural, political or economic space. For example, engagement studies assume traditional conceptions of occupations, industries, and employment, ignoring multiple and growing compositions of people and work that



**FIGURE 3** Mapping engagement research in the different groups. \*Note: The size of bubbles is not representative. For the number of articles in each group, see Table 2. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijmr.12361)]

are not necessarily permanent employment or traditional organizational structures. This gap might be explained by the generalizability consideration of engagement and the traditional conception of work relationships as tied to legal employment arrangements (McKeown & Pichault, 2021). For example, we were able to identify only a handful of studies on workers' engagement that consider contexts such as alternative work arrangements, remote, hybrid or distributed work, and temporary arrangements such as projects (Ding et al., 2017; Lopes & Chambel, 2017; McKeown & Cochrane, 2017; Warr, 2018; Webster & Edwards, 2019). These few studies highlight the potential differences in experiencing engagement between different groups of workers based on the nature of their relationship with work and the organisations they work with. As another example, our findings suggest that engagement studies are neutral on areas such as social categories. However, when social categories are taken into consideration, findings raise questions about the problematic aspects of engagement, such as discriminating in accessing resources as antecedences for engagement (Banihani & Syed, 2017; Dillard & Osam, 2021; Lemmon et al., 2018). When ignoring context, we limit our understanding of why people might engage and disengage (Sambrook, 2021).

## Engagement is positive

One of the most pervasive assumptions in the literature is that engagement is positive for individuals and organizations. The positive notion of engagement is embedded in the most used definition as 'a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind' (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008, p. 209). The dominating narrative suggests that individuals who report being engaged also report being happier and healthier, have higher energy levels, and can mobilize resources to improve their performances (Bakker et al., 2008). Hence, to achieve strategic advantage, organisations desire engaged employees (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; Saks et al., 2021). The focus on positive engagement is aligned with organizational psychology's desire to reorient itself to wellbeing (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). However, empirical studies suggested that engagement has negative associations, such as a heavy workload like workaholism (Di Stefano & Gaudiino, 2019; Shimazu et al., 2015; Taris et al., 2020). Also, research findings suggest interference with life outside of work (Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2009; Bakker et al., 2016) and sensitivity to resource availability and organizational climate (Van den Broeck et al., 2012). The dominating assumption of engagement as positive

might have limited studies intended to explore these possible dark sides.

Authors suggest that the focus on engagement as a positive phenomenon might be explained through the managerial idea of engagement as a win-win, neglecting evidence of costs to the employees by doing engagement (Francis & Keegan, 2018). George (2011), Purcell (2014), Truss et al. (2013) argues that organizations that measure engagement focus on engagement as positive rather than potentially harmful. This bias results in a 'distorted and misleading mirror' (p. 244) for work and workers, because fully engaged employees in these surveys are 'a rare breed' (p. 243). Since engagement is good, the lack of engagement is viewed as wrong. Most employees will be in the wrong category, putting pressure on HR policies to increase engagement regardless of employees' situations. This notion was reflected in Lemon's (2019) case study, cautioning that overemphasizing the positive side of engagement increases the adverse effects of long-term discretionary effort and turns engagement initiatives into management exercises of ticking the box rather than investing in positive change.

## CHALLENGING CORE ASSUMPTIONS IN SEARCH OF AN ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH AGENDA

In this section, we re-evaluate the meta-narratives discussed above, assuming engagement is an objective, stable, non-contextual, and positive psychological state, and propose an alternative to each of the assumptions, opening the conversation for new research questions and directions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020).

### Engagement is subjective, processual and relational

If we assume engagement as subjective and processual, we challenge the widespread assumptions of engagement objectivity and stability. These alternative assumptions invite questions of how engagement emerges, maintained and changes over time and as experienced in everyday life. Considering how engagement happens can address questions, for example, of how long or short-lasting the phenomenon is and the longer-term effect of interventions, providing opportunities for employee engagement theoretical development away from current static conceptions (e.g., Arrowsmith & Parker, 2013). These alternative assumptions might also stimulate a shift from the management point of view to understanding people's lived experi-

ences in everyday work, exploring the micro-processes of engaging and disengaging (e.g., Reissner & Pagan, 2013).

Assuming engagement to be subjective and processual calls for greater attention to the relational nature of engagement rather than the psychological state because relationships determine how work is being done and, hence, the context for engaging and disengaging (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014). Focusing on the relational aspects of engagement can encourage research on individual levels and related social phenomena, such as team engagement (Truss et al., 2013).

### Engagement is socially situated

When considering the relational side of engagement, we should also challenge the underlying assumptions that engagement is a product of generic conditions (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) or an individual choice (Alfes et al., 2013). We can challenge these contradicting assumptions by suggesting engagement is a privilege, a choice for some and not for others. Shuck et al. (2016) argued that privileged employees would have better access to resources, making them more likely to become engaged and giving them additional power to gain further resources. Lemmon et al. (2018) similarly asserted that ignoring the work context and who controls it, ignores how certain groups gain and maintain the engagement experience. We suggest that more empirical studies are needed to understand what engagement means to distinct groups of workers. Who is advantaged or disadvantaged by being engaged and disengaged? What role do organizations play in the engagement choice process?

An emerging line of inquiry explores engagement and the context of restricted access to resources, challenging the assumption that engagement is non-contextual or neutral. For example, Banihani and Syed (2017) demonstrated that work engagement is gendered since women are disadvantaged in significant job opportunities, experience unfair treatment, and are restricted in how they can express themselves. All these limitations result in barriers to engagement conditions of meaningfulness, availability, and support, compared with men. More broadly, Dillard and Osam (2021) found that identity, determined by social categories such as race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nation, shapes the conditions leading to engagement and how engagement is experienced.

### Engagement has a dark side

The assumption of engagement as a positive phenomenon has not surprisingly led researchers to ask what

predicts engagement and how we can have more engaged employees. However, what if we assume that engagement can be problematic? As a psychological state, this alternative assumption provides further legitimacy to explore the implications of a highly involved active state. While engagement is claimed to contribute to wellbeing and performance, more empirical research is needed to assess this claim. For example, research can provide insights on better understanding the relationship between engagement, workaholism and burnout, as a concept of over-engagement, lack of engagement or co-existence of engagement and negative phenomena such as burnout. For organizational and employee engagement groups, challenging the most dominant assumption in engagement is aligned with a 'more contextually and critically minded when researching/practising engagement' (Fletcher et al., 2020, p. 40). Problematizing engagement should consider the persisting workplace tensions and complex reality (Keegan et al., 2018; Purcell, 2014) and provide a space for critical and pluralist lenses (Sambrook, 2021). Questions should be directed to the contested managerial approach to engagement, who benefits from that and how.

Assuming engagement, having both negative and positive sides, should also challenge reciprocity, as discussed in 'organisation engagement' (Saks, 2006). Challenging reciprocity as to why people engage (Valentin, 2014) means that engagement is not necessarily an expression of loyalty and commitment or even a response to favourable work conditions but, for example, is constructed through the relationship with others (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014). Challenging reciprocity promotes an interest in engagement in the context of different types of relationships between workers and the organizations they work with, as well as situating engagement within social life, promoting the question of why people engage or disengage (Sambrook, 2021).

## DISCUSSION: RECONSTRUCTING (DIS)ENGAGEMENT AS SUBJECTIVE, PROCESSUAL AND SITUATIONAL

Thus far, we have mapped the existing literature, organised it into six groups based on their core assumptions, identified meta-narratives across these groups, and challenged these to offer an alternative narrative. We start this discussion by illustrating in Figure 4 below the current blind spots in engagement research, as the upper side of the nature of engagement and right-side sections of epistemological orientation. These blind spots obscure our understanding of why and how engagement happens. While our analysis, similar to previous authors (e.g., Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; Fletcher et al., 2020; Sambrook, 2021),

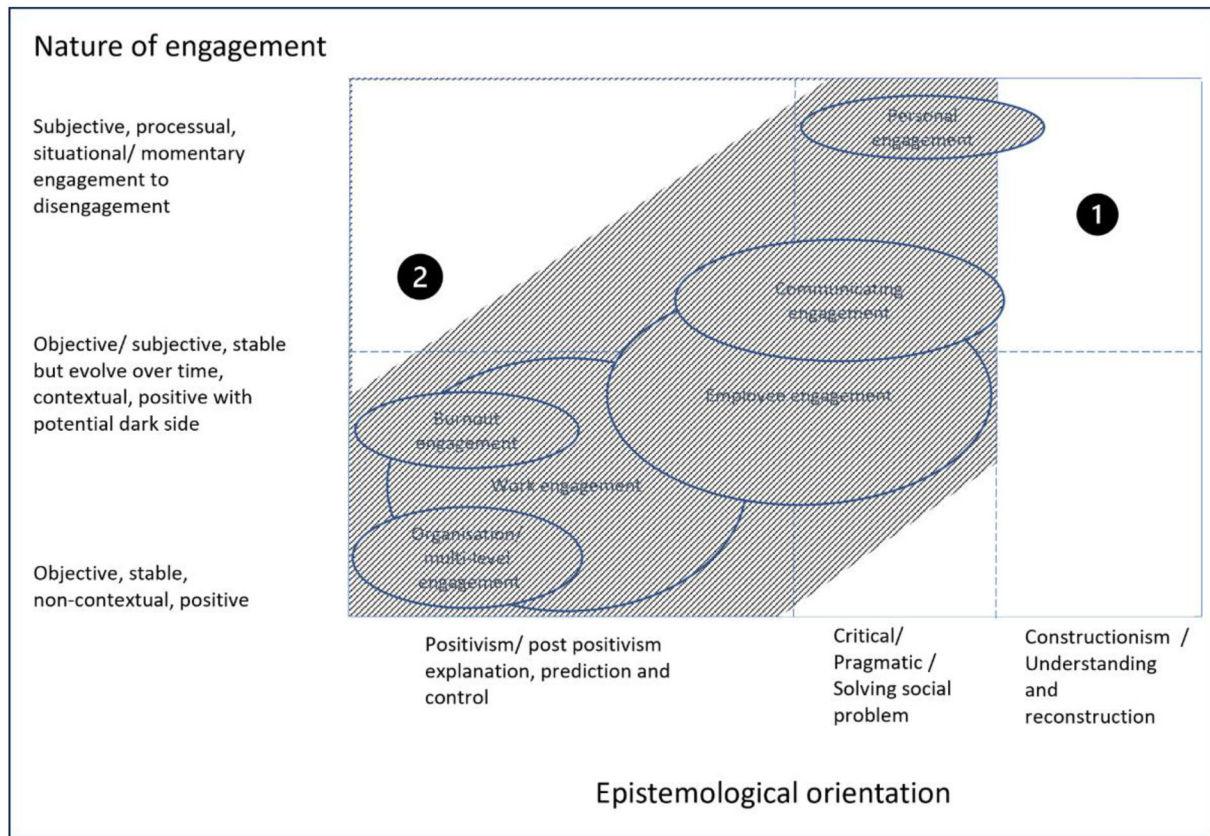
suggests that there is value in exploring each alternative assumption individually within existing groups, research prospecting outside the current field boundaries using alternative conceptualization and epistemological orientation offers a greater likelihood of significant theoretical and practical progression (Breslin & Gatrell, 2020).

In previous sections, we demonstrated how the dominating conception of engagement can be challenged based on contradicting empirical findings to suggest that engagement is subjective, processual, situational, and multi-directional. This alternative conception of engagement brings future research closer to Kahn's (1990) original concern with 'the moments in which people bring themselves into or remove themselves from particular task behaviours' (p. 692). However, this concern was left unanswered since it did not fit with the dominant positivist/postpositivist that uses quantitative methods to take a realist and objective view. Hence, we discuss exploring engagement utilizing the alternative conception of (dis)engagement as subjective, processual and situational/momentary combined with constructionist epistemological orientation (point 1, Figure 4).

Promoting research to advance in more than one direction, we also discuss how more task-level engagement research adopting the alternative assumptions within a positivist/postpositivist orientation can facilitate a more holistic understanding of individuals' work experiences (point 2, Figure 4).

Constructionism covers a wide philosophical and methodical spectrum but shares a set of core assumptions, a qualitative interpretive methodology and a focus on micro-level social processes (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2018; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Gergen, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). First, constructionists assume that (1) reality is socially constructed—individuals construct realities, making sense of and giving meanings to the world based on their first-hand experiences of everyday life; (2) while countless realities are technically possible, people tend to construct shared meanings through social interactions; (3) since the researcher is part of the social world, new realities are jointly constructed through the interaction between the researchers and their participants; and (4) these joined constructions are interpreted by identifying patterns of actions and meanings mainly through analysing the use of language. Based on these core assumptions, constructionist research explored situated and situational aspects of engagement within and around unique social contexts. It is particularly suited for questioning why and how social phenomena are constructed by targeting everyday experiences and actions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008).

Constructionists operate within a framework that rejects realism, a central pillar of positivist research (Lincoln et al.,



**FIGURE 4** Future research directions. \*The grey area represents the location of existing knowledge. \*Points 1 and 2 are underexplored areas creating blind spots in our understanding of why and how engagement happens. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

2018). This fundamental difference means, unlike positivist research, constructionist research focuses on thick, rich, contextually embedded descriptions of individuals' experiences within 'normal' day-to-day life (Gergen, 1985). Due to the inductive/abductive nature of constructionist research, it can offer a more comprehensive and coherent view of a phenomenon already inductively developed (e.g., Kahn, 1990) or even suggest a new meaning, changing our current understanding of engagement. Inductively developed theories also have the potential to have a flow-on effect, stimulating research using other research perspectives (i.e., positivist) where new theories can be 'tested' deductively.

Exploring engagement using constructionism can be applied through a broad spectrum of philosophical and methodological variations aiming for new insights and theoretical developments. However, here we focus our discussion on three possible (but not exclusive) conceptual directions of applying constructionism to existing conceptions of employee engagement, personal engagement, and critical employee engagement. First, we suggest adopting various social and social-psychology frameworks that focus on giving meaning (e.g., Blumer, 1986; Weick, 1989)

to develop more nuanced or even new theoretical comprehension of why workers (dis)engage while responding and making sense of change, culture, HRM policies or relationships.

Secondly, exploring personal engagement as an everyday experience through behavioural and conversation analysis (e.g., Garfinkel, 1996; Goffman, 1959) can further develop Kahn's (1990) original conception of engagement as an everyday expression of a person's preferred self while interacting with others. Moreover, by taking this unique and unexplored approach of theorizing the different processual logics of how engagement is (re)produced and interacts, we might find that the logic differs from what is currently assumed in the existing conceptions. Lastly, understanding engagement as everyday experiences within diverse groups of workers provides insights into macro and structural challenges as topics concerning critical research (Burbank, 2010). In this context, critical research can apply their perspective to empirical data in exposing the forces, such as access to organizational resources, which prevent individuals and groups from shaping the decisions that crucially affect their engagement.

Our main discussion appeals to constructionism as an alternative perspective to be used in the engagement field. However, as highlighted in point 2 in Figure 4 above, using the alternative conception of (dis)engagement as subjective, processual, situational and momentary to further explore task-level engagement (Newton et al., 2020; Sonnentag, 2017) combined with the interplay of individual characteristics and the environment and using observations and field interviews, can reconnect constructionist research insights with already existing engagement research rooted in burnout studies, workers' wellbeing and, and individual-level interventions (Maslach et al., 2001). In specific, this research focus can address open questions about engagement stability and interplay with wellbeing (Maslach, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

In this literature review, we traversed and questioned the extensive field of engagement research. For the first time, we focused on synthesizing and challenging the core engagement assumptions, as these were reflected in different engagement conceptualizations. We discussed prevailing assumptions of engagement as an objective, stable, non-contextual, and positive psychological state (as typically understood within a positivist/postpositivist orientation). We challenged these assumptions by suggesting that (dis)engagement is subjective, processual, and situational. We argue that engagement research has accumulated significant knowledge of what might constitute engagement. However, it has provided little progression in understanding why and how engagement happens in everyday life, in and around work and organizations. Hence, this review advocates prospecting outside the existing research field using alternative research epistemological orientations and focus diversification.

This study delves into the broad spectrum of engagement researchers' questions, epistemological orientations, and methodologies used. Distinguishing itself from prior literature reviews, it advances the use of meta-narratives as a lens for theoretical progression. Through a critical examination of the core assumptions shaping the field, our approach provides a richer understanding of engagement. Rather than consolidating existing knowledge, we focus on uncovering underexplored theoretical and methodological opportunities. Using meta-narratives, we challenge established knowledge, offering an alternative conception of (dis)engagement as subjective, processual, situational and momentary.

Moreover, not being constrained by the current narratives, we contribute novel insights to the engagement field, offering alternative research directions. This future

research contribution is pivotal as it reconsiders the concept of engagement within the evolving dynamics of individuals, work and organisations. Our review aims to enrich the scholarly dialogue by expanding theoretical and methodological horizons.

Specifically, our study makes significant conceptual contributions by offering clear boundaries of existing knowledge, an alternative conceptualization of engagement and a platform for new directions. First, our review comprehensively maps current engagement research into groups based on the commonality and differences of the research's underlying assumptions. This map opposes recent calls for consolidation, suggesting that engagement is not one construct but a complex phenomenon with multiple, sometimes contradicting, interpretations. The map also highlights that despite the seeming diversification, current engagement research is dominated by a positivist/postpositivist perspective and conceptualizing engagement as a positive, objective, stable and non-contextual psychological state.

Second, our review analysis offers an alternative conceptualization of engagement as a specific path for addressing current research blind spots, opening the field for innovative research and theorizing. We conceptualise (dis)engagement as subjective, processual and situational. We further highlight that answering questions of why and how engagement happens is best studied using a constructionist epistemological orientation.

Thirdly, by setting clear boundaries of what is already known, challenging the existing literature dominating meta-narratives and offering an alternative one, we create a platform for future research, guiding researchers in locating future studies outside the existing research domains and providing greater opportunities for significant contributions. While we appreciate the current research agendas and the dominating perspective, our future research strategy, while heavily grounded in existing literature, opens the door to possible new insights from expected and unexpected fields.

This study also speaks more to methodological and practical contributions. In this review, we used an under-represented combination of integrative and generative approaches (Post et al., 2020), which is particularly useful for literature reviews looking for opportunities to step outside of existing terrain through alternative narratives (Breslin & Gatrell, 2020). We suggest combining these methods to help overcome the limitations of using only one approach by synthesising diverse research both broadly and deeply.

Lastly, and more generally, our agenda offers a practical contribution by creating a unique opportunity to reconnect engagement with people's experiences at work, thus

assisting with identifying effective interventions at the individual and organizational levels.

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