Releasing the pressure valve: workplace relationships and engagement in a context of disruption

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Abstract

Purpose: I aim to understand how informal relationships at work provide a supportive context for individuals and contribute to their engagement in an environment of disruptive change when they are likely to be stressed.

Design: The research was conducted in three UK public service organizations during pre-Brexit disruption. An app was used to capture 400+ transient emotions, reactions and diary entries of employees about their interactions with co-workers, colleagues and close colleagues. This was followed by 25 interviews to reflect more deeply on those relationships documented in the app.

Findings: Interactions with co-workers, colleagues and close colleagues are shown to contribute in different ways to emotions felt and different aspects of engagement. Closer relationships, less transactional and more emotional in nature, contribute to feelings of trust, significance and mutual reliance. A typology of four close colleague relationship types also emerged variously driven by the depth of the relationship and sense of shared mutuality.

Value: This research documents employees' lived experience during disruption to show that relationships provide support for the meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability aspects of personal engagement. It maps the process of developing supportive workplace relationships that form the relational context with four sub-contexts, distinguishing work and personal engagement by their different foci. Practical and social implications are discussed.

Keywords: Workplace relationships, personal engagement, psychological safety, relational context, context of disruption.

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'I never thought about, until this exercise, how important it is to have close colleagues at work, I can't imagine how isolating it would be not to ... they are the very best people to go to when you have a work-based problem because you don't have to explain the context, the background as they are in the same environment, they already understand it. I think not having any friends at work would be awful.' (Jude, 2019)

When most people join organizations, their main interest is in the work that they are going to be involved in and the rewards that will accrue. We seldom consider the impact that our relationships with our colleagues may have on how we feel about our work and how we are able to execute our work roles until an unexpected event brings it to our conscious mind. This chapter presents a story of informal workplace relationships and their role in supporting engagement especially in a time of disruption. The research it represents is also a story of connections and support that resulted in a study in two phases that looks at the experience of the impact of relationships on engagement in almost real time alongside more reflective history of close relationships.

The purpose of the study behind the chapter was to explore the context of workplace relationships, particularly informal relationships, or the relational context (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014) in supporting personal engagement, in an environment of disruptive change. The chapter contributes in a number of areas. *First* it adds weight to our understanding of social relationships at work in underpinning personal engagement, in particular highlighting the role of psychological safety, which supports the work of Kahn (1998) on relational support, and context (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014). *Second*, the chapter proposes a typology that maps different

close colleague relationships as they evolve from a relational into an emotional level and the different contexts in which relationships provide support. This brings out the importance of context at different levels. *Lastly* the chapter illustrates a dual method, two stage research design examining different 'conscious selves' (Connor& Barratt, 2012) when interacting with others using the different types of knowledge that come from experience using diaries and reflection in interviews.

The research question 'how do workplace relationships support engagement in times of disruption' is timely. Turbulent issues impacting organizations' context at the time of the study ranged at a global level from issues such as clashes between the US under Trump and China to the power of the large global tech companies and changes in work such as precarious employment for the individual, while the impact of the Global Financial Crisis was still a recent memory. Regionally the study took place in the UK in the run up to Brexit at the end of January 2020 in a period of great uncertainty, with a divided society and political upheaval. The importance of relationships at work has also been brought into even sharper focus since the first quarter of 2020 with the global pandemic and many employees suddenly finding themselves working from home away from their normal support systems and still expected to be engaged. The contextual factors threatened many individuals' engagement as they impacted their work, their imagined futures and became more reliant on their workplace relationships for support and making sense with others facing the same challenges.

Disruption also provided the opportunity to explore how relationships supported engagement at a time of high exposure to potential disengagement, particularly the availability of personal and psychological resources to counteract distraction. Therefore context appears important at different levels: firstly at the relationship level which Kahn and Heaphy (2014) suggest shapes the context for engagement, the focus for this chapter;

secondly at an organizational level with influences such as culture and sector; and thirdly the external global context which shapes not only people's work lives but also their home and social lives.

Engagement has been considered a key objective in successful people management for organizations since the beginning of the millennium which has been followed by growing scholarly interest over the last twenty years. This chapter will use personal engagement as first described by Kahn in 1990, where the focus is on the individual and creating the conditions for engagement of meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability. This approach considers the person in context beyond rational and cognitively driven relationships, assumed to be purely in the service of work, to also include emotional subtexts and attachments or detachments where engagement can flourish or fade, impacting how work is achieved and experienced (Kahn, 1998: Kahn & Heaphy, 2014). The main alternative approach of work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2002) focuses on work rather than the individual, their being engaged in the task with vigor, dedication and absorption, directed at achieving organizational goals, and this approach has become well recognized in research. The two approaches have different underlying theoretical bases with Kahn using role theory to explore individuals bringing in or leaving out 'their personal selves during work role performances' (1990, p694) while work engagement builds on job demands - resources (JDR) theory focusing on individuals' ability to perform depending on them being able to balance resources supporting achievement of work performance against demands depleting their efforts (Schaufeli et al, 2002). The focus on engaged individuals working in 'ways that display what they think and feel, their creativity, their beliefs and values and their personal connections to others' (Kahn, 1990, p700) suggests that personal engagement is more appropriate for this study and its focus on the role of supportive relationships in engagement.

The focus of much relationship research in organizations has been within formal work relationships with managers and team members, both positive and negative, including behaviors such as bullying and incivility or developmental and mentoring within those relationships. This study conceptualizes workplace relationships on a continuum from co-workers formally exchanging information to more intimate friends that share a deep level of trust, reflecting Karm and Isabella's (1985) information to special peer relationships. It is these more informal deeper 'special peer' relationships, usually the one or two close relationships that can become enduring friendships, is the focus of the second part of the results reported in this chapter. Friendship and similar positive relationships have been less well researched in the management literature until recently with increasing interest in their role from growing general concern about mental health and wellbeing in the workplace especially after the outbreak of Covid-19.

The study builds on the concept of the relational systems (Kahn, 1998) or relational context that Kahn and Heaphy (2014) suggest as providing the environment needed for Kahn's original concept of personal engagement (1990) to take place. Kahn and Heaphy 2014, p.82) use the metaphor of the nervous system of organizations for the relationships that are the source of complex social interactions that form the relational context. This chapter responds to their concern that employee engagement research has not explicitly explored workplace relationships that provide the relational context for engagement.

This chapter starts by introducing the concepts from the literature that underpin the thinking behind the study and its design before outlining the two-stage research strategy. The findings presented are initially based on the diary study of interactions in the workplace (stage one) followed by interviews (stage two) to explore and map how relationships form, which then leads into discussion and conclusions from the analysis and next steps for research.

Relevant literature

This section provides the overview of the three main conceptual areas behind the research strategy and objective to explore the role of workplace relationships in providing the supportive context needed for engagement and wellbeing in disruptive times: Kahn's personal engagement (1990) to set the context of engagement; leading in to the relational context from Kahn and Heaphy (2014) that provides the emotional and supportive environment; followed by workplace friendship and relationships to introduce Kram and Isabella's (1985) peer relationship framework. The study is set in the context of the informal social structure (Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013) and 'the emotional waterways connecting and disconnecting people' underneath the cognitive and rational task processes (Kahn, 1998:40) so often ignored by organizations, despite decades of motivation theory highlighting the social and relational needs that must be met.

Personal engagement and disengagement

Rumens (2017) argues that although workplace relationships are an established field of study, most of the research has been focused on improving organizational outcomes such as productivity and performance, reflecting Kahn & Heaphy's point of the assumption that people behave rationally in pursuit of the organization's goals (2014). Kahn's original research and interest in role theory and people's social interactions led to his theory of personal engagement (1990) based on people playing roles, leading to personal engagement as the 'simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presences (physical, cognitive, and emotional)', (Kahn, 1990: p.700). This has also been expressed as authentic self (Bailey et al., 2017) which influenced a following of practitioner and consultant interest ahead of a research base and literature.

Kahn's person-based approach of engagement (1990), underpinned by the conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability including physical, emotional or psychological resources, emerged at a similar time to positive organizational scholarship. While positive psychology focuses on aspirational phenomena such as flourishing and vitality coming from positive emotions, negative phenomena seem to have more influence leading to the problem focus of much psychological research and practice (Cameron et al., 2003). For instance, Schaufeli's work engagement, emerging a decade later out of their work on stress and burnout based on job demand and resources theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli et al., 2002) demonstrates an opposite impairment perspective (McBain & Parkinson, 2017). Schaufeli et al. (2002) defined the antipode to burnout, work engagement, as a 'positive work-related state of fulfilment' characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption focusing on individuals and their relationship to their work, using the Utrecht work engagement scale (UWES). By contrast, Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) work shows work engagement as predicted by factors opposite to engagement such as lack of job resources, stress, burnout, or job demands. Like work engagement, wellbeing research started from an impairment perspective (Oguz et al., 2013; Warr & Inceoglu, 2018) however similar to personal engagement it encompasses examples such as the 'upwards spirals' that come from positive emotions in building personal resources (Fredrickson, 2003) reflecting the links to positive psychology.

Although engagement as a construct has existed for more than 30 years it is still being refined after the different approaches have been compounded by misunderstanding and misuse (Shuck et al., 2017). For instance, consulting organizations and practitioners conflate personal and work engagement into a general employee satisfaction approach which includes elements of involvement, organization commitment, and satisfaction (Bailey et al., 2017; Schaufeli, 2014), with a focus on performance outcomes. Other definitions and typologies

have further led to the concept of engagement being 'stretched' and 'bent' to meet different

agendas (Truss et al., 2008). Thus, work and personal engagement are alternative approaches

focusing on different aspects of engagement driven by their theoretical bases, disciplines and

ontologies.

Studies concentrating on outcomes of work engagement pay scant regard to the

formation of engagement and the interdependent cognitive and emotional appraisals of

experiences involved (Shuck et al., 2017). While cognitive appraisal of context and transient

events ascribes meaning and value to them, affective appraisals constantly monitor those

experiences in the moment identifying and appraising internal resources (Atkins & Parker,

2012) unconsciously or not depending on level of impact and emotional response. An

individual using affect appraisal may use verbal and non-verbal cues as feedback in

interactions with others such as noticing suffering and responding with compassion (Atkins &

Parker, 2012) or their own engagement and emotional response whether they withdraw or

engage, feel threatened or safe, feel energized or overwhelmed. The focus on interpersonal

interactions and relationships, part of the emotional and cognitive elements in Kahn's

personal engagement, is seen by Shuck et al. (2017) as under researched. This is in contrast to

work engagement with its focus on outcomes and engagement as a state rather than transient,

reflecting different levels of engagement simultaneously with different facets of work life.

A perceived limitation of work engagement is that it is contextual, which potentially

reduces application of the theory to practice (Purcell in Bailey et al., 2017; Fletcher et al.,

2020). Context and appraisal processes (Shuck et al., 2017) and issues such as the impact of

specific policies in the public sector (Fletcher et al., 2020) potentially benefit from insights

from a personal engagement approach. Context operates at different levels from incorporating

the external global or sectoral level (Fletcher et al., 2020), to internal from organizational to

team level demonstrated by Hakanen, Bakker and Turunen (2021) with team empowerment

providing an energizing and supportive environment, referred to as their social work context. The next section explores the level of relationships between individuals through social interactions and task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others (Kahn, 1990), defined as supportive or relational contexts (Kahn, 1998; Kahn & Heaphy, 2014).

Relational contexts, holding environments and workplace relationships

Kahn's definition of personal engagement (1990) is underpinned by emotional elements, a key difference to work engagement and its measurement through UWES (Parkinson & McBain, 2013). Individuals have to fit into an "emotionally charged" organizational life using "calibrations of self-in-role" by "pulling away from and moving towards" relationships with others as a coping mechanism (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Kahn and Heaphy (2014) recognize the importance of being able to express emotions and support them with 'acts of compassion involve caring for others, physically and emotionally enabling them to feel connected to, personally cared for and invested in by others" (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014, p. 86) to create the 'genuine intimacy' authentic relationships require. Workplace relationships are likened to 'holding environments' to establish safe spaces where emotions can be enacted (Cronin, 2014), a sense of identity and belongingness (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014), or encouraging and promoting wellbeing (Winstead et al., 1995). Game, West & Thomas (2016) also suggest that the same acts of care giving and support provide leadership attachment for interpersonal relationships and wellbeing.

Kahn and Heaphy's (2014) focus recognizes the difference that sets of relationships make to engagement thriving and importance of the relational context, which includes co-workers, teams, departments and hierarchical and peer relations in shaping how people in engage. Relational contexts provide a secure base or attachment (Game et al., 2016), a 'holding environment' for adults feeling anxious or threatened by increasingly difficult

workplaces, experiencing rapid environmental change and complex competing demands (Kahn, 1998). This provides empathy, warmth, respect, regard and practical assistance to help the individual cope with a threatening situation through an anchoring relationship in the form of co-workers, managers or special peer relationships or mentors (Kahn, 2001; McBain & Parkinson, 2017; Ragins et al., 2017). The relational context of workplace relationships and friendship affect the same three psychological conditions of meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014).

Meaningfulness has two aspects in relational contexts, allowing people to feel worthwhile and valuable and a heightened sense of belonging. Feeling worthwhile can be found in caring for others, supporting their growth (Kahn, 2001). Feeling they are making a difference requires interactions with their relationship systems, their team, leaders for their wellbeing, development and meaningfulness (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Lastly feedback provides affective appraisal monitoring (Shuck et al., 2017) to reach 'a momentary state depicted by an intensity of energy directed toward a work target within a context that an individual experiences as meaningful (p. 267)'. Belongingness and frequent interaction enable people to feel connected and not alone in their endeavors (Heaphy & Dutton, 2003; Kahn & Heaphy 2014) to reinforce the importance of positive human connections that lead 'to mutually reinforcing upward spirals of meaningful experience and extraordinary performance.' (Cameron et al., 2003, p. 364).

The second dimension of psychological safety is discussed here as safe spaces that reflect Winnicott's (1965, in Kahn, 2001) holding environments,

> 'safe places in which people may express and examine their experiences in startling
> situations [where] people demonstrate care and concern for others in particularly
> skillful ways' (Kahn, 2001, p.265).

This builds on attachment theory with Kahn and Heaphy, (2014) sharing the idea of organizational caregiving with Game et al. (2016) for feeling safe, relying on interpersonal relationships with colleagues and co-workers often in groups and teams. Holding environments encourages people to go beyond simple care and concern in caregiving to their colleagues. Ragins et al. (2017) outline Kahn's (2001) dimensions of holding behaviors and contexts: *containment* offers a safe space to share experiences, emotions and reactions; *empathetic acknowledgement* enables accepting and validating feelings and sense of self; *enabling perspective* creates the context for the other to make sense of the situations, to set aside emotions and engage in rational action.

Meaningfulness and psychological safety are interlinked with availability, the third dimension, by contributing to the personal and psychological resources in terms of energy, emotional capacity to empathize and connect to others. Cameron et al. (2003) cite research findings that negative events have a greater impact on emotions and behaviors than positive, which emphasizes the value of high-quality relationships, feedback and social support to mitigate emotional exhaustion and burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Energy generated by relationships affects the ability to engage either positively or negatively, they provide the feelings of vitality, aliveness and positive energy (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003) that energize and motivate engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Kahn & Heaphy, 2014). Relationships also provide resources, the social support that mitigates stress and leads to higher commitment and productivity (Halbesleben, 2012) and wellbeing (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Kahn's availability provides a similar concept of resourcing and depletion to work engagement, based on job demands-resources theory, joins personal engagement.

This part has referred to workplace relationships which are seen as distinct from workplace friendships. Workplace relationships go beyond the instrumentality of rationally driven task focused relationships (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014) but may include other relationships

such as manager subordinate, formal mentorship and high-quality connections (Pillemer &
Rothbard, 2018) and fellow team members. They are also similar to friendships but limit
commitment to a work context, enabling people to be fully present in holding environments
in the knowledge that they do not need to become bound up in each other's lives more than
they wish, intuitively knowing when to limit depth of their interactions (Kahn, 2001).
Workplace relationships may also develop into friendships as Kram and Isabella's (1985)
work on peer mentoring shows as they evolve their support, through collegial into special
peers or friends 'encompassing concern for each other that extends beyond work itself to the
total human being' p118. Workplace relationships are also embedded in other contexts such
as groups, organizational culture and structure (Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013), the wider
environment (Heaphy et al., 2018) at one level but individual decisions to connect to others
are shaped by the context peoples' self image, social identity, or intergroup relationships
(Kahn, 2001).

Relationships and Friends at Work

> 'friendship is, at its finest, open ended: People make commitments to care about one
> another and invest in one another's growth with the possibility of doing so across time
> and space' (Kahn, 2001, p.265)

The importance of social structure and networks of relationships is increasingly
recognized as leading to beneficial organizational outcomes from communication and
information sharing to team effectiveness (Berman et al., 2002) also people's experiences of
work, especially in improving satisfaction and reducing intention to leave (Morrison &
Cooper-Thomas, 2013). The changing nature of work and breaking down formal structures
provide better opportunities to work together with the potential for strong voluntary
personalistic relationships or friendship (Winstead et al., p. 1995) as opposed to often weak

acquaintances of the past. These changes from formal relationship to informal friendship are reflected in stages or continua in relationships starting from transactional expressed at the weaker end by Kram and Isabella (1985), as an information peer with a focus on information sharing, mirrored by Ferris et al. (2009) as instrumentality in social exchanges, to one with affect and respect. These move through four stages to gradually acquire loyalty, trust and accountability. Kram and Isabella (1985) further extended their stages functionally with collegial peers providing feedback, friendship and career strategizing and special peer relationships including emotional support, all three studies exclude non-inclusive relationships characterized by romantic intimacy.

Networks of friendships are seen as part of the informal organization structure (Barney in Riordan & Griffeth, 1995), otherwise described as the 'white spaces' in the organization chart (Sias et al., 2012) or Cronin's intersubjective spaces' (2014), where emotions and cognitions are woven together into what Kahn et al. (2013) see as the organization's nervous system, which ultimately supports engagement and disengagement.

Workplace friendships, according to Sias (2009, p. 90) have the advantage of being unique in that first they are voluntary and not imposed and second, unlike other workplace relationships, they have a personalistic focus where work friends will communicate with each other as 'whole persons,' not simply as occupants of job roles. They have the mutual trust, shared interests and reciprocal liking arising out of the emotional support and intimacy (Berman et al., 2002) leading to genuine attachment and compassion (Boje & Jorgensen, 2014), providing safe spaces (Cronin, 2014, Rumens, 2017) and concern for another's wellbeing (Winstead et al.,1995). Cronin (2014) suggests that friendship is triggered by an instant interpersonal 'click' to provide a sensed connection or emotion resonance that is picked up by Boje and Jorgensen's (2014, p. 38) 'friendship is first and foremost something

that is felt – a genuine attachment, sympathy and compassion among people… a love of life, instead of being guided by desire to dominate, by fear of treating others with mistrust.'

Research that has emerged from a managerialist perspective has focused on relationships as 'disembodied from the social realm' (Rumens, 2017, p.1151) and different from other informal workplace relationships, requiring more work from social and personal perspectives as well as the practices of work friendships to provide a 'sociology of friendship', echoing Truss's (2015) call for taking a more sociological perspective to engagement research.

The research presented in this chapter explores the emotional, informal side of the workplace which Kahn's (1990) personal engagement, with its conditions of meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability, satisfies as an appropriate approach rather than formal, rational, task focused behavior that informs work engagement. The conditions, particularly of meaningfulness and psychological safety, are extended by Kahn's parallel development of the role of relational support or context, building on Bowlby's attachment theory (1998) and Winnicott's holding environments. This supports the importance of psychological safety, alongside meaningfulness and availability (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014), creating an additional dimension to personal engagement. While Kahn's work with relationships has drawn mainly on groups and individuals in work settings, the workplace friendship literature has drawn more specifically on interpersonal relationships to bring out their role in forming the informal structure in organizations, as well as relationship continua between distant, instrumental and closer more intimate relationships (Berman et al., 2002; Ferris et al., 2009; Kram & Isabella, 1985).

The friendship, personal engagement and relational context literature share interests in areas such as trust, emotional support and connection often expressed by feelings and

emotion. Existing approaches to engagement research focused predominately on measurement approaches for work engagement or disengagement (Schaufeli et al., 2002) missing the opportunity to examine social relationships at work. This research sets out to explore the energy intensive, emotional, social encounters (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) with the interpersonal importance of emotions in Kahn's relational context by understanding how engagement is supported by 'the streams of relationships and emotions that do much to shape how people think, feel and act at work' (Kahn, 1998, p.71).

Method

Research strategy

The objective was to understand the phenomenon of workplace relationships as part of a relational context for engagement (Kahn, 1998; Kahn & Heaphy, 2014) from the experience of participants. As Kahn and Heaphy (2014) comment existing studies on engagement focus on the work itself, neglecting the details of the setting or context, and the contribution of relationships as part of delivering engagement. This is partly explained by the tendency to use positivist and quantitative approaches to measure outcomes or antecedents. The 'qualitative turn'(Rumens, 2017) has been seen to benefit the more neglected social setting of workplace relationships thus, using a constructivist approach (Schwandt, 1998) with its roots in naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) using the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) similar to that of Kahn's (1990) original work on engagement. This is also reflected other interpretivist approaches taken to the friendship literature such as Boje and Jorgensen's (2014) narrative, storytelling approach, Sias et al.'s (2004) creating synopses and Cronin (2014) using friendship maps as well as other qualitative work to explore the interactions between people at work.

Studies in the related areas of friendship and emotions have made use of diaries (Breevaart & Tims, 2019; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2018) to collect data while others use experience sampling methodology (To et al., 2015) for recording responses in real time. The design of this study builds on the recommendations of Connor and Barrett (2012) who examined different means of self-reporting momentary experiences to record events directly, rather than record them later, relying on memory. Their work discussed three different selves operating consciously over time, the first, the experiencing self, reacting 'in the moment', a remembering, retrospective self that makes decisions after reflection and the believing self that works on maintaining a sense of identity using narrative (Connor & Barrett, 2012). The design also combines their recommendation of using ambulatory self-report sensitively with that of Balogun and Johnson (2004) that diaries be used in conjunction with other methods to build in reflection after experiencing by following up with interviews.

The initial pilot explored all three selves (Connor & Barrett, 2012) using a document diary to record and reflect on experiences of interactions with colleagues and interviews to allow the remembering and believing selves to be explored. Participants were asked to record who the interaction was with, colleague, co-worker or close colleague, based on Isabella and Kram's (1985) peer relationship criteria, type of interaction, and how they felt after it, based on Kahn and Heaphy's (2014) psychological conditions of meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability. This was followed by reflections at the end of day, week and study and then an interview to bring in the remembering and believing self from the diary. Following the pilot it was recognized that an app would be advantageous to aid immediate recording of experience and simplify the research process but maintain two stages of data collection, diaries for the experiencing and reflecting selves and interviews for reflecting and believing selves without the additional reflection at the end of the day and week.

Collaborating to make it happen

The study required two major collaborations firstly from a practitioner-based consortium, who facilitated the research. Their membership included a number of governmental departments and utilities, both global and UK based as well as private companies. They supported the project with three member organizations volunteering to take part in the research. There were opportunities to meet with the participant organizations through their forum members over several months as the research was presented and modified, which included presentations to senior managers and participants in all three organizations prior to the launch. The second collaboration was with two senior hospital clinicians who had designed the 'happy' app, in conjunction with their employees, to enable them to monitor mood, give voice to employees and feedback to management in real time in order to improve engagement and ultimately to contribute to minimizing retention issues (Frampton et al., 2017).

The app was adapted for the research topic and final design. The adaptation allowed participants to record how they felt (using happy, neutral or sad emojis) after an interaction with a co-worker, colleague or close colleague, based on Isabella and Kram's (1985) peer relationship criteria of information, collegial and special peer relationships respectively. This was followed by an optional comment allocated to a theme based on aspects of meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability from Kahn and Heaphy's (2014) relational context (see Figure 1). Available at all times on a website or smartphone during the study period of about three weeks, the app allowed participants to add entries in real time or when convenient for them and to contribute 'likes' to other participants' comments. The overall mood was immediately visible with comments published once moderated by the research team for confidentiality.

Figure 1 about here

Into the field

The sample consisted of two government departments and one utility in the UK which meant potential involvement of some 200 employees from policy, project and senior management roles, all knowledge workers. The research was conducted during a very busy period in the run up to Brexit and just after implementing major change. This timing influenced the research. The app still yielded over 400 diary entries and likes despite the heavy impact of Brexit planning with imminent changing legislation, implementing a major restructure and holiday or sick leave affecting 25% of the sample led to many feeling too busy to contribute. Both government departments were ones where Brexit had a heavy impact, the senior ministers had both left during this period meaning major change in priorities as the new minister brought forward new projects abandoning their predecessors' plans. This was a time of constant protests outside parliament, the Supreme Court ruling on the government proroguing parliament and votes defeating Brexit legislation at the last minute, leaving civil servants with changing deadlines and urgencies. Many were exhausted and suffering from burnout with departments having to bring in counselling support. This was balanced by quiet periods during parliamentary summer recess, holidays and run up to a general election for interviews.

Interviewees were recruited via the organization to provide a purposive sample representative of their department and some volunteered following the earlier presentations or requests on the app. This resulted in 25 interviews, mostly at project manager, policy maker

to senior management level, predominantly people in their late 30s and 40s, with over 10 years' service and two thirds women. As the organizations were public or ex-public sector they had longer serving employees than many private sector organizations possibly due to prosocial public service values of employees (Fletcher et al, 2019) and the engagement that comes from being at the heart of government. The interviews took place during the month after the diary entries, all but two were by video or phone and recorded and transcribed.

The focus of this chapter is on the app comments about their interactions and engagement and one interview question which asked interviewees to relate the story of a close colleague relationship, how it formed and its impact. Other questions explored workplace relationship experiences in retrospect with questions about: their organizational and role context; different types of colleague relationships; culture of the organization, experiences of positive and negative workplace relationships and their contribution to their personal and work experience; their support to engagement relating to meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability and negative experience of relationships. The interviewer had the advantage of exploring a subject that was of interest to all interviewees and although there may have been a potential power imbalance (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019), everyone had been briefed in the consent and confidentiality process following the university ethics process. Many had volunteered after information sessions or using the app and the conversational style of the interviews had been designed with regular checks that they were comfortable. Most interviews were remote where interviewees were in their natural environment and wanted to be helpful.

The transparency of the app was also its limitation. It had been designed with total confidentiality, holding no personal data apart from diarists' organizations, this had the advantage that people felt comfortable to post how they felt, especially after reassurance in the briefings and they were also senior enough to be confident in their roles. However it

meant that there was no data on how distributed the comments were, whether it was a few diarists posting often or many posting a few comments on their interactions. The interviews suggested that it was likely to be the latter as most reported having posted just a few comments when there was something about an interaction that prompted them to record it.

The findings that follow focus on the relational support for engagement from the experiencing self in the moment of an interaction and the close colleague relationship history builds on the remembering and believing selves (Conner & Barratt, 2012).

Analysis and Findings

The study took place at a busy and distracting time for most participants, but they still contributed over 400 comments and 'likes' to the diary under the themes of engagement conditions, both positive and negative, by the type of relationship they had with the person with whom they were interacting. The visibility of the comments in the app enabled an initial level of awareness of additional themes emerging. The themes provided thematic analysis in Excel and Atlas-ti at the end of the first stage of data collection, before the interviews and provided an insight into how diarists interpreted the constructs behind meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability. Most comments that had not been categorized by the participant could be coded into original themes and the remaining were emotions: frustrated, annoyed/angry and enjoyment. A majority of comments were seen by participants as involving positive emotions when deciding on the appropriate emoji for how they were feeling, perhaps as might be expected when people were interacting with others in work exchanges, although nearly a third of these involved neutral or negative emotions.

The interview stage finished in late January 2020 followed by transcription and analysis using Atlas-ti to code thematically with in vivo coding for some question areas as in

the close colleague history explored here, this was followed by a form of conceptual mapping and axial coding using magnetic hexagons on a magnetic whiteboard. The findings presented first in this section are from the analyzed diary comments focusing on the different colleague relationships and their impact on Kahn and Heaphy's (2014) three conditions for engagement almost as they were experienced. These illustrate the importance of friendship and relationships in the relational context for engagement. This is followed by a focus on the specific interview question on the history of a close colleague relationship, how it was initiated and progressed, allowing participants to use their 'remembering and believing selves' to reflect on their experience of their relationship which often brought out an emotional response in the interview.

Colleague relationships

Building on Kram and Isabella's (1985) peer relationship framework, the data from the diaries recorded by interaction, categorized by relationship type the participant thought they had, helped to provide a view of these different types of relationships in the workplace. The perceived relationships are used as the attributions for comments from the diaries and where appropriate the theme used by the participant, whereas names, which have been anonymized, are used for quotations from the interviews.

The diaries included comments on interactions with those seen as external to the workplace such as clients and suppliers as well as the continuum from co-worker to close colleague. They all had the potential to evoke emotions including from those outside the organization whether happy or anxious and distressed similar to those within the workplace:

'Call from a customer to say a big thank you. It was so good to receive… made a difficult task with lots of problems come to a happy ending' (*other, appreciated*)

'Another organization changing arrangements for an event with short notice and passing details on that I need to pass on to others' (*other, challenged*)

Co-workers: The participants defined a difference between the three relationships suggested by the diary as part of the continuum between strangers and close friends at work. The most remote from them, co-workers, as those they interact with at work but do not know well personally, can be a positive source of sharing experiences and achievement but also challenging and frustrating. Co-worker and Other relationships attracted the most negative mood responses.

'Great to hear and see collaboration starting to take shape as we work more closely' (*co-worker, helpful*)

'Someone who thinks they know better and fails to understand their impact on people' (*co-worker, challenged*)

Colleagues: These are the people participants work and share ideas with, fundamental to what they do, that participants grow to like, but the relationship remains predominantly transactional and work focused and make them more difficult to distinguish from co-workers. They learn from and help each other with their work to achieve joint outcomes. Good relationships set the background to feeling positive and making progress.

'Really good meeting with like-minded colleagues. Plenty of discussion and ideas' (*colleague, energized*)

'Sitting with this person… really opened my eyes to the process and I learnt so much; and the impact my work was having' (*colleague, making a difference*)

'Felt friendly and generally set a good tone for the work discussion' (*colleague, connected*)

Whilst interactions with colleagues were generally positive there were some more neutral emotions reflecting the work-related nature of interactions.

'Kind of positive... but also some worrying feedback about a key piece of work' (*colleague, neutral*)

Close colleagues*:* These are the special relationships, often two or three, that sustain people through difficult times as well as good. The majority of the comments were about close colleague interactions and this relationship in particular was explored in more depth in the interviews.

'Just had a nice Monday morning call with a colleague which has taken away the Monday morning blues and we have put the worlds to right' (*close colleague, energized*)

Comments suggested that close colleague relationships are characterized by: openness and honesty, 'open and honest without fear of being judged'; significance '[being] noticed and valued'; reciprocity 'I can rely on them and they me'; sharing both personal and work-related issues 'helping each other solve problems' and 'practical help'. These comments demonstrate the importance these relationships have in making others feel supported as well as significant. Close colleagues also feel privileged to be able to be caregivers as much as receivers of support.

'heard a colleague having a difficult conversation on the phone. asked if they was ok. sat and listened. ended up having a joke and making them a brew' (c*lose colleague, making a difference*)

'I am honored he feels like he can speak with me [about personal situation] as he is a very private person' (*close colleague, helpful*)

The focus was on mutuality, these were relationships where people shared concerns, gave each other feedback, talked through issues and offered a different perspective. Individuals felt understood and genuinely concerned about each other. Outcomes included feeling connected to the bigger picture and in it together.

'Even when everything is hard, we come together as a team' (*close colleague, connected*)

Engagement and relational context

The initial analysis of the comments relating to engagement provided evidence to support the presence of the relational dimensions of engagement, meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability, across all three types of relationship interactions as shown in Table 1. This highlights some differences in the nature of engagement when interacting in different colleague relationships particularly with negative aspects.

Table 1 about here

Psychological safety: For several conditions there appears to be little difference between interactions with different types of colleagues such as in psychological safety, seen here as trust and appreciation, and especially with work-based topics, suggesting it is the human interaction that is important in energizing and motivating people.

'Our views sought on an approach to a new piece of work. Felt trusted, appreciated and energized' *(colleague)*

'Manager is covering my normal role. Just had a really positive conversation with him as he is appreciating the difficulties' *(co-worker)*

'Always feel appreciated and what I say is trusted.' *(close colleague)*

As might be expected colleague and close colleague interactions draw on teams to a greater extent than with the more distant co-worker, particularly for feeling understood, supported and 'held'.

'engaged with team … the feedback was constructive and accurate… and the dialogue helped me understand their support and take on the outputs' *(colleague, understood)*;

'Another supportive action by a colleague that shows how flexible and caring he and the team is' (*close colleague, safe/supported*).

Close colleague interactions are more orientated to one-to-one or groups of close colleagues including a more social element as well as work related purposes. This suggests more of an emotional connection, with predominantly positive emotions and providing a holding environment or safe space for each other (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014).

'call from someone feeling a bit down in the dumps but by the end of the call we had had a giggle and they said they felt much happier' (*close colleague, making a difference*)
'feels lovely to have really honest non censured conversation. Helping each other solve problems and understand our world' (*close colleague, understood*)
'happy that another person shared that frustration and was able to support me to clarify how we could work it out and make a positive change (*close colleague, happy*)

Meaningfulness: for close colleagues meaningfulness starts with belongingness and people connecting with each other, checking in on how they are, discussing the issues of the day before starting work knowing that however hard it is it can be talked about and worked through: 'know you belong and are connected'; 'we can find a way through and talk about really difficult stuff ... feel very lucky'. This was similar for colleagues' personal

connections who had more of a formal work focus in teams in terms of knowing where others were, but not the same difficult discussions: 'before we started talking work we chatted about his holiday'; 'the team asking about his health [sick parent] and offering to support my work was very comforting'; 'everyone said where they were with their work'; 'all on the same page'. There were very few comments about personal interactions with co-workers to build a sense of belonging, highlighting the role of a relational connection in closer relationships rather than these more transactional ones: 'conversation in the margins of a meeting'; 'message exchange with whole team' although 'felt useful and connected to my work and colleague after this particular email conversation'.

The connections with each other provided the setting for work with a sense of purpose, mostly taking place following interaction with close colleagues which included receiving feedback or being asked for support that made them feel valued and making a difference. For colleague interactions there was less of a feeling of being valued personally but seeing where others were making a difference and even less interaction was involved in co-worker exchanges although wanting to contribute to improvement:

'all completing our actions and making a difference to the objective. We feel aligned and work well together' (close colleague)

'it is apparent when they know they are helping others' (colleague)

'some great progress and examples of acting on our feedback. Excited on the changes we are making' (co-worker)

'it has made us feel valued, and started a conversation about what we value in each other, and the pride we have working in our team' (close colleague)

'I was able to positively contribute and help my team' (colleague)

There were a number of negative experiences reported involving all levels of colleagues, themed under challenged and confused or alienated, which stemmed from barriers to being able to make progress which in close colleagues seemed to involve people, whereas for colleagues and co-workers it was technology or other people's ability to use it.

'the tensions between trying to balance self, team colleagues and organizational demands… finding the person who can help your perspective is hard.' (close colleague)

'Unable to raise a purchase order as current framework agreement has expired' (colleague)

'a very positive meeting … when it came to me having to "share" this… rapidly changed to quite stressed as to date I've never posted anything on social media' (co-worker)

Availability: participants reported being energized and motivated through interacting with others, sharing understanding or concerns or 'putting the world to rights' especially when this was supported by appreciation especially from senior management. This aspect of feeling psychologically available also had an emphasis on connection and was often work related:

'I always feel full of energy after I have spoken to this person they are always so positive about everything' (colleague)

'Had a joint team meeting and met new people - they were all lovely. Feel more connected and motivated about the future when you know who you will be working with.' (other)

'Really good meeting with likeminded colleagues. Plenty of discussion and ideas' (colleague)

'Able to share concerns and left feeling energized despite the uphill struggle in front of us which at times can feel overwhelming and insurmountable.' (close colleague)

The helpful and energizing element of availability was also underpinned by connecting with people and predominantly about work-related issues and reflected giving and receiving of help and support in all the interactions types. Within close colleagues relationships however there were examples of it being more personal beyond work concerns 'helping a friend with some career advice', 'supporting a colleague with an issue at home'.

On the negative side comments about feeling overwhelmed were predominantly focused on resource issues either at the team or individual level: 'too many things coming in today' (co-worker), 'Not many people in because of leave and holiday but the work still has to be done' (colleague), 'too many work items to deliver and insufficient staff... something is going to fall over soon...probably me' (other). The feeling of being enervated or drained was more personal 'one person did all the talking in a team meeting to discuss priorities' (colleague), monthly feedback chats really draining, especially as whatever I say is challenged '(co-worker).

In negative situations interactions seem to have more dramatic and emotional reactions '*feel like I'm failing at everything*' (co-worker), '*I don't think I've any more to give*' (colleague), '*left bewildered and confused*' (colleague) that reflects Kahn's disengagement as the withdrawal and protecting of self (1990) which brings an emotional flavor but also reflects grounding work engagement in burnout and stress (Schaufeli et al., 2002). This is also picked up by close colleague interactions which are often more about personal situations rather than almost exclusively work related such as missing '*true conversations*', *'feeling sad and a little guilty*' about not being there for them, helping a colleague cope with '*troubles at home*' and tinged with emotion. This leads into understanding more about the difference between the different workplace relationships, which is developed further below with close colleagues.

Overall these comments relating to availability mirror the job demands resources model (JD-R) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) can also be seen to be expressions of work engagement. The belonging and connected elements of meaningfulness create the setting or context for engaging in the task. This could be about collaborating with others, especially with those with a close, more personal connection, or in work that has intrinsic meaning that may come from relationships. Psychological safety can also be seen to be providing a supportive context by creating a culture of trust and appreciation that made people feel valued and supported even in more socially distant relationships such as with a manager. With close colleagues the closer interaction one to one or in groups seems to provide a holding environment caring for and supporting each other, which is explored further in the next section.

Mapping Close Colleague Relationships

'What is it about relationships? Time and history I suppose, working together and shared experiences' (*close colleague)*

In the interviews some participants felt that there was another level of relationship beyond where people separated their work from their social space. There was a point where they became friends, socialized outside of work, knew each other's families, and were invited to significant events which becomes evident in further exploration of close colleague relationships. In this section exploration and analysis of the history of close colleague relationships suggests that there may be a further transition implicated beyond the personal and social dimension. This continues the transition from the more transactional relationship with co-workers to a transitional one as colleagues share some personal information; to a

relational one as close colleagues where the relationship may deepen into a work friendship

of emotional connection based on shared felt mutuality.

When analyzing histories of close colleague relationships from the interviews, there

seemed to be a pattern of clusters emerging that form the typology illustrated in Figure 1,

where the differences between clusters have helped to suggest the underlying dimensions that

have determined their position. These two dimensions are strength of felt mutuality on the

horizontal axis and emotional attachment on the vertical. The transition from average strength

of emotional attachment in the relationship to deep/strong emotional attachment at the lower

end of the vertical axis reflects close colleague relationships already having transitioned from

colleagues working together, sharing personal information and socializing within and

possibly outside work. The vertical dimension also reflects emotions having been activated.

The horizontal dimension reflects the sharing between friends or close colleagues on one

hand and on the other a relationship that is initially more one-sided, one person mentoring the

other or caregiving at the beginning of the relationship which may evolve into more shared

mutuality as time progresses. These quadrants loosely resemble plots used in fiction about

relationships from the instant attraction (shared experiences) , the watching development

(taken under the wing), the turning point (acts of kindness), to the slow burn (deep personal

sharing) of Darcy's 'I was in the middle before I knew I had begun' (Austen, 1813, p. 293).

Figure 2 about here

Taken under the wing: there were a number of participants where their close colleague story

was about mentoring or developing practices in a relationship, either formal or informal. This

often evolved into being able to be very open and getting to know more personal information

about the other person, with the relationship being a need to help perhaps being met by a need to be helped and potentially a one-sided relationship. Illustrated by this short story:

'We had an instant connection, we had a lot in common and just gelled. I had been on secondment when she joined and the first time we met I knew I could trust her immediately and we've been working together ever since. She is my confidante at work, we work really closely together and are friends. It is rare for me to let people in. She challenges me, steers me in the right direction, focuses me, has given guidance and support, helping me through a difficult time and helped me raise my work to the highest level.' (Pip, 2020)

Experiences in this story are more one-sided illustrating caregiving in a developmental relationship. This quadrant also includes line manager subordinate friendships which seem to navigate formal and informal: 'as I got better at the job and didn't need so much training then I was able to share the more personal stuff with her and the relationship sort of built up from there' (Chris), retain the development emphasis 'I probably know a lot about her beyond the work context and [vice versa]. It's a very productive relationship and very development focused' (Jamie). This also illustrates a mentoring developmental or the supervisor – follower context that is mediated by engagement to influence extra role behaviors (Bouckenooghe & Menguç, 2018).

Shared experience: The most populated quadrant reflects where work can spill over into socializing. Participants reported meeting through working together, on a training course or project which often ended up with going for a drink or coffee where they got to know each other. This quadrant was characterized by the practices of sharing common interests or frustrations, often with similar values or philosophies where the relationships allowed them

the opportunity to vent or laugh about their frustrations or to relieve the pressure, support

each other or just have enjoyable conversations. It is illustrated by this short history:

'We met four years ago on a course, got on well during it and ended up going for a drink

with others afterwards. We didn't see each other for some time until we were involved on

a program together, which meant seeing each other more regularly. The relationship is an

off-the-books, open and honest with each other and different – the things they don't teach

you. We see each other when in the same city together. It is about common interests,

shared values, seeing each other and enjoying conversations about our common

understanding of the organization. It is refreshing when you meet people who understand

the rhetoric of the organization in the same way you do.' (Charlie, 2019)

This story demonstrates importance of connection, openness and honesty with each other,

also shared experience. It also highlights the importance of organizational context in the

common language providing a shortcut to sense making of a mutual situation leading to a

deeper sharing of understanding. 'Off the books' and 'the things they don't teach you'

illustrate the sense of the informal side of the organization and Kahn's 'emotional

undercurrents that run beneath people's rational, cognitive selves' (1998). Others reinforce

the social support 'it has developed into a sort of buddy support system (Kerry)', '[it was]

very long hours and very fast paced. We'd go out for drinks and relax a little bit, reflect on

just how ridiculous things were' (Jude). Validation from shared views and values 'knowing

that there is someone who would equally be finding this frustrating, it's not just you' (Mel)

and shared history 'we've been through our growth together, there's still that history between

us… We're in the same department now, that's fast tracked our relationship, we had that

history – it's almost been banked' (Jo). This also brings out a sense of investing in

relationships as well as the context of public service with the connection that comes from

large organizations and tenure but mobility within them and across organizations in the same sector.

Acts of Kindness: This quadrant is characterized by relationships that have been changed by an act of kindness ranging from being given a hug after a sad event, helping someone through a difficult situation to being taken out for a coffee at just the right time in difficult circumstances. These practices of acts of caregiving in the moment relied on the giver being able to assess the situation and act appropriately with a simple action that led into developing a bond and relationship. This gave participants the reassurance that they could be vulnerable and honest with someone who had been willing to go over and above what would be expected of a colleague contributing to their sense of wellbeing.

> 'This was someone who used to drive me crazy, I had [a meeting] where I got feedback that had upset me, seeing that, they bought me a hot chocolate and I told them what had upset me. From someone who annoyed me to, in that moment, was in the right place when I was upset and ever since that moment, we have been friends. It was that ability to be vulnerable. My emotional defenses were already down, that was the trigger when you allow people to come in and, as the result of that, I felt very differently because they turned out to be a very good friend, over and above what a colleague should have had to do and they hadn't taken advantage of it.' (Jack, 2019)

In this quadrant it is possible to see affective events theory (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002) at work and relationships deepening at an emotional level as a result 'I burst into tears and he gave me a big hug and it was that touching moment, and he said afterwards that he always thought I was career driven, focused and a bit hard-nosed but saw there was a human side, really vulnerable side'(Laurie), 'gave her a lot of support which she really appreciated and … through that we both recognized a greater closeness and have become really good friends'

(Nicky). Initially these were acts of kindness or caregiving from one person to a vulnerable other that developed into good friendship that has continued beyond the workplace. These acts took place in the context of a negative event and caregiving.

Deep Personal Sharing: The participants in this quadrant had all had an experience which involved someone making a deeply personal disclosure or involving the other in a very personal activity. For some they felt this had been a pivotal moment that created a very deep relationship where they felt they knew each other well and were able to share anything and say what they think with a deep level of trust. These are relationships with a high level of mutuality and sharing illustrated by:

'[A] colleague was thinking about moving to same city and I had made that move myself earlier and loved it. They joined same division and moved. I had remembered what it was like re-establishing social life and helped them with it. I realized how alike we were even though different in age, I remember I had asked them about how they felt about something [deeply personal] and I really recognized that because it was identical to how I would be feeling about it too, the things they struggle with are the same that I have struggled with. They are someone I would share if I'm feeling really rubbish about something. Their standards of behavior are similar, integrity is really important to both of us, so if I say something, I know I'm not going to hear it repeated.' (Sasha, 2019)

This story has some parallels with affective events theory but is also open sharing and mutual rather than one sided. This quadrant was one of moments of recognition and disclosure or deep sharing that was tied up with their personal life and the culmination of gradual sharing over time. 'we progressively shared more stuff with each other … [shared event] that was a very personal thing for him that he hadn't shared with the team or with some

members of his family. He trusted me with a very personal and intimate thing and that was kind of lovely because yes he trusted me' (Alex). 'It grows gradually – the realization is when there is self-disclosure, you let them know a bit more about your personality, some secrets maybe' (Frankie). This is reminiscent of Schein's (1978) sharing of organizational secrets as part of the mutual acceptance of a developing psychological contract with its expectations and obligations to each other. The context here is a more intimate personal relationship beyond the organization.

The overall analysis of the relationship histories suggests findings that while there are common aspects to how close relationships supported participants, for a number of them there were clear trigger events or 'pivotal moments' for the relationship to develop at a deeper level, either through shared disclosure or an act of kindness. Each of the quadrants demonstrates a different aspect of relational context and different types of holding environments. This required at least one partner in the relationship to be able to recognize someone in need of kindness or feeling psychologically safe enough with the other to share something very personal. This bond raises expectations of support and loyalty, felt obligations of being there for each other in good and bad times. However, when this expectation is not satisfied the response is more emotional than it would be with a co-worker or colleague as also shown in the diaries:

'Angry, disappointed' (close colleague)

'Frustrated! Difficulties in communicating our views to enable us to come together on the same page.' (close colleague)

'I thought this person would support me …they essentially refused to commit an opinion either way leaving me frustrated.' (close colleague)

For others their relationships developed without being able to pinpoint the moment that it may have changed into something deeper and the emotional bond was not clear until later, possibly impacting feelings of expectation and obligation.

'Its little things like you suddenly get a Christmas card that says to a special friend ... and you say 'ooh that's different and I've gone up a notch'' (Jo, 2020)

This section has also shown that relationships support the three dimensions of engagement and the value that individuals gain from their relationships especially in terms of a pressure valve to protect their mental health and wellbeing. The typology of close colleague relationships particularly reflects psychological safety in demonstrating the support of different types of holding environments and reflecting the context of the relationship to map out the relational context as a whole for this group of public and government service organizations. The findings have also shown the potential sources of personal and psychological resources to support availability in a wider organization and national context of uncertainty. It highlights the energizing effect of working with others with the potential cause for concern of disconnection and disengagement for those working remotely.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study provides insights into the experience of individual close colleague workplace relationships and friendships in providing the holding environment or relational context to enable them to be ready to be fully engaged in their work. It brings out the importance of the conditions, personal availability, meaningful work and connection, and particularly psychological safety to support personal engagement and wellbeing. The findings from the diaries demonstrate that many of the experiences of meaningfulness and psychological safety are in line with what would be expected from Kahn and Heaphy's

(2014) relational context, and those of availability also reflect JD-R theory (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Work engagement seems to have a narrower focus on meaningfulness of the task itself and availability, missing the more emotional elements of connections and belonging of personal engagement (Parkinson & McBain, 2013) and the aspects of psychological safety as seen in Table 1.

The diaries also provided perspective on different workplace relationships and the continuum between co-workers and friends. The lack of belonging for co-workers and meaningfulness contributing to rather than working with, suggests initially a transactional relationship (Ferris et al., 2009) and information peer (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Co-workers become colleagues as they work together in a transitional phase until they gradually grow closer or a trigger or affective event (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002) draws them into a relational, close colleague relationship and similarly moving to deeper emotional support or depth of friendship (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014), with loyalty and mutual commitment (Ferris et al., 2009; Kahn, 2001).

Personal experiences of close work relationships based on the contribution of the interviews have enabled mapping the relationships to provide a framework to understand the different contexts and holding environments for those taking part in the study. The dimension of emotional depth and attachment on the vertical axis and instrumentality as caregiving and receiving or felt mutuality on the horizontal provide different types of holding environments and practices. This horizontal dimension suggests a move from instrumentality in a relationship (Kahn, 2001; Rumens, 2017), seeking out help or directly helping others in acts of kindness, informal mentoring, care-giving or Kahn's (2001) 'trusting movement towards others' in a holding environment towards mutuality. Mutuality here denotes shared experience, similar interests and personality (Sias et al in Rumens, 2017) a shared past history

(May in Rumens, 2017) and felt mutuality (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014) that creates high quality connections.

The vertical dimension shows the depth of connection from an average level of intimacy or emotional connection to a deeper level supporting a number of explanations from a feeling of more passive to activated emotions (Bindl & Parker, 2010) as the relationship passes through a transition triggered by an affective event (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002), sensed connection (Cronin, 2014) or moments of psychological presence (Kahn, 1992). These moments of significance signal the relationship has moved into a deeper emotional stage of friendship, a deeper bond between the two that brings with it a set of expectations and obligations similar to a relational psychological contract with the organization (Rousseau, 1995) or Kahn's open-ended commitment of friendship 'to care about one another and invest in one another's growth with the possibility of doing so across time and space' (2001 p. 265).

Similarly, engagement is also seen as active (Shuck et al., 2017) rather than a state, perhaps part of the transition from a task related transactional focus to developing relationships with colleagues. Rumens' (2016) move from social relationships to personal ones reflects relationships becoming friendships as individuals explore their identity, emotionally and materially supported by these friendships. The relationships are also likely to be anchoring relationships, although Ragins et al. (2017) include mentoring and shared history, context and buddy support to suggest that anchoring relationships would be pervasive. Despite traditional thinking that suggests it is difficult for men to have the emotional relationships that are ascribed to women (Rumens, 2017), several of the histories were stories that shared similar emotional depth between men and across genders (see Table 2). Many of the stories engendered deep emotions as participants recalled events that enabled them to open up and be their 'preferred selves' (Kahn, 1990).

Table 2 about here

The framework tentatively demonstrates the point where close colleagues engage emotionally to become social friends as well as work colleagues contrasting the opposite pole where more bounded aspects of the work context allow for more conditional commitment to caregiving, mentoring and development at an instrumental level. Each quadrant represents an interpersonal context providing a holding environment with different roles, practices and anchoring relationships offering psychological safety (Kahn, 1998; Ragins et al., 2017; Rumens, 2016) and taken as a whole it represents the organization's relational context which supports engagement. These represent stories of people in a public service context who were likely to have worked together and in the sector for some time, potentially impacting the depth of relationships developing over time, underpinned by prosocial public service values. Context featured throughout the study at different levels from the national level creating initial disruption, uncertainty and anxiety, and an organization level with restructuring, down to the level of individual interpersonal relations which create different types of holding environments which together make up the relational context for engagement.

The contributions to engagement from this study start with reminding engagement scholars of the social aspects of work, bringing out the emotional element that can be missing in the focus on the organizational outcomes without considering the personal outcomes. This chapter reinforces Kahn's contention that assuming people employ their work relationships in the service of organizational goals is only part of who they are at work (1998). It provides experiences of different intensities of interpersonal relationships at work that contribute to

meaningfulness, provide psychological safety and resources of 'feeling held' that operate at an emotional level during a time of disruption and uncertainty.

The second, and main, contribution maps out the process of developing relationships to form a typology of the different contexts for holding environments and their practices, arising out of close colleague dyadic workplace relationships and friendships based on axes of felt mutuality and emotional depth and attachment. This typology brings together a number of strands from a scattered literature. Third this chapter and the study distinguished personal from work engagement simply by recognizing that work engagement as focused on the task and its outcome without taking into account the context for the work. For this group the role of their close colleague friendships brought out, as Rumens (2017) requested for his sociology of friendship, a number of practices such as interactions, caregiving, listening, giving feedback, supporting and sharing knowledge, in order to provide the environment for engagement to take place.

The research design contributes capturing interactions 'in the moment', followed by reflection on relationships and beliefs about them, providing a dual lens and triangulation, on the process of developing informal relationships at work. The experiencing comments allowed exploration of the supportive context during disruption which demonstrated the experience of caregiving and providing psychological safety.

Limitations, further research and implications

There are a number of limitations that could be addressed in further work. The interpretation of trigger events was only from one perspective, although as Byron and Landis (2020) suggest, whether the other person has misperceived the same sense of a pivotal moment is less material for a positive outcome for an individual if they feel supported or have the experience of being held. Another limitation came from the anonymity that was built into

the app which, while encouraging participation, meant not knowing any biographic details of contributors, just the organization. Finally, while this research occurred in a time of disruption when it was expected people would need maximum support, and despite the app making it easy for participants to provide information, it is possible this context also meant people felt too busy to participate. Further research would benefit from a dyadic perspective and investigating workplace relationships in different contexts. It would also be helpful to explore contrasting organizations in the private sector where meaningfulness, safety and availability may be differ to smaller, younger organizations where workplace relationships have more impact for better or worse.

Implications of the study suggest understanding the activities that form the practices of workplace friendships potentially enable organizational policies that are 'sensitive to the sheer diversity in the lived relational experiences of workplace friendships, and its role in facilitating human flourishing in and outside the domain of work' (Rumens, 2017, p. 1163). These contexts demonstrate the informal mentoring and coaching of 'taken under the wing', the conversations and mutual support in 'shared experience', acts of caregiving and receiving in 'acts of kindness' and mutual disclosure at a deeply emotional level of 'deep sharing'.

These need to be complemented by formal holding environments in organizations, teams and individuals, such as employee helplines, people trained in mental health first aid, policies for flexible working, managers able to recognize signs of strain or stress, a positive and supportive culture with working feedback systems, places or events where people can connect with each other informally both physically or online as a starting point. They are particularly relevant in a time of global pandemic with many suddenly working from home. With no time to prepare people have had to negotiate with others at home to share resources, maintain support systems with their teams and close colleagues and remain engaged with their work and organization.

Managers enable appropriate communication mechanisms keeping people and teams in touch with one another or managing environments in which they can provide relational support to enable people to engage in their work. This includes setting the right atmosphere and checking in informally with team members regularly rather than checking up, giving them space such as time either side of team meetings, making sure the relational context is not lost while the focus is on completing tasks. Remote workers need physical and psychological resources and work that is meaningful to them in a safe, supportive environment especially new employees where managers and teams provide the anchoring relationship and psychological safety that supports them in becoming engaged in their work. For individuals importance needs to be placed on respecting interpersonal relationships and understanding each other to avoid taking advantage or abusing them rather than building relationships to support each other especially when unexpected personal, work and wider events take place. The motivation that comes from interactions demonstrates people working remotely need regular interactions with colleagues especially if they live alone.

For engagement scholars the implications of this study suggest the opportunity for more research in the different contexts and their impact on engagement and particularly understanding the softer side of engagement such as personal engagement to contribute more interpretive studies in this field.

> 'Knowing that there's that support around me, gives me confidence that if I do fall, or I do need support or a sounding board or that I'm in a difficult situation … I know she'll give me the 'there, there's' but she'll also give me a kick up the arse as well. It stops the pressure cooker getting to the bubbling over point, turns down the gas a notch.' (Jo)

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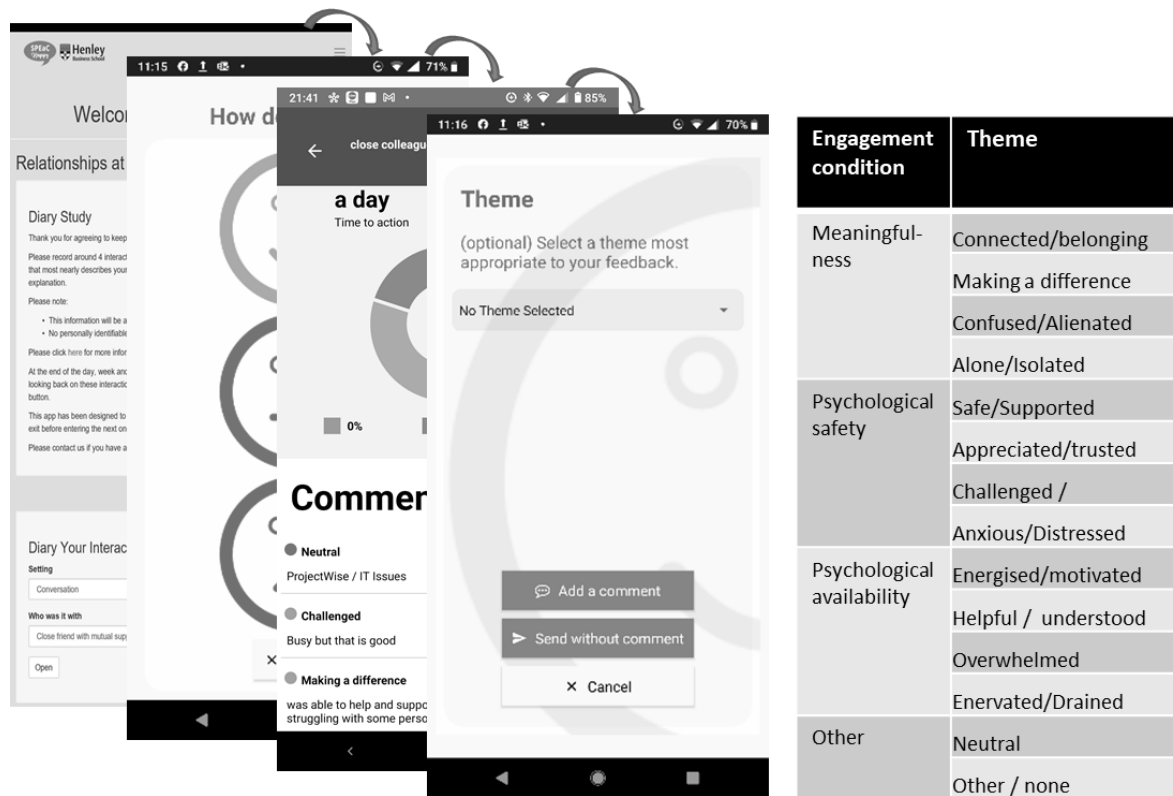*Relations, 68*(10), 1601–1622. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726714562235

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Engagement condition	Theme
Meaningful-ness	Connected/belonging
	Making a difference
	Confused/Alienated
	Alone/Isolated
Psychological safety	Safe/Supported
	Appreciated/trusted
	Challenged /
	Anxious/Distressed
Psychological availability	Energised/motivated
	Helpful / understood
	Overwhelmed
	Enervated/Drained
Other	Neutral
	Other / none

Figure 1. Diary App with themes

Map of close colleague relationships

	Passive
Average	

Taken Under The Wing
coaching/mentoring
developmental
helping or being helped
share knowledge
focusses and challenges
share personal information
helps wellbeing

Shared Experiences
shared work and social activity
'instant connection'
similar personality
common interests
enjoyable conversations
share frustrations / vent
'turns down the gas'

Emotional attachment — Emotions

Acts of Kindness
'going extra mile for me'
'was there in the moment'
created bond / friendship
supportive
can be honest
can be vulnerable
gives reassurance
sense of wellbeing

Deep Personal Sharing
personal disclosure
pivotal moment
mutual activity
honoured to be trusted
shared values, philosophy
safe to share feelings
manages emotional reactions
relieves stress

Deep /High — Activated

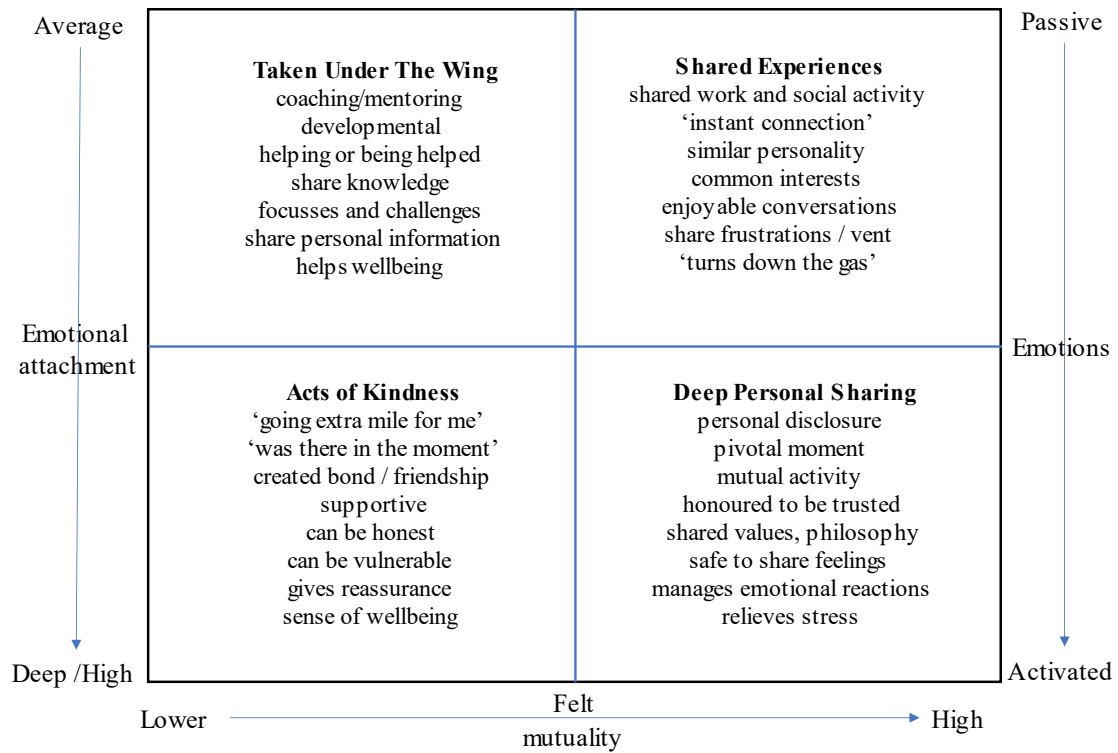Lower — Felt mutuality — High

Figure 2: Map of Close Colleague Relationships

Table 1. Relationships and conditions of engagement (from diary entries)

Relational dimensions	Close colleague	Colleague	Co-worker
Meaningfulness Making a difference	*Able to add another perspective which will re-shape the piece of work. I feel like I'm helping us make progress.*	*I was able to positively contribute and help my team.*	*Working with colleagues in another part of the business to make improvement.*
Connected/ belonging	*When in the nearest office there is no one that sits with you – a quick messenger can help lift your spirits and know you belong.* *Our team meeting made me feel like I belong*	*Monthly team meeting I was made to feel fully included despite being the only one on the line.*	*I felt really useful and connected to my work and colleague after this particular email conversation* *You offer and then you are stood down because of a policy that is supposed to help your wellbeing – which causes you stress.*
Confused/ Alienated	*Feels like we are moving apart, writing documents rather than true conversation because we don't have time.*	*Email chain with no clear ask left me feeling bewildered and confused as to who was leading what*	
Psychological Safety Safe/supported	*Team have all been very supportive. Checking in if I'm ok and whether work was part of the cause [not being well].*	*Team is great, always trying to make things better. I feel supported because they are so honest and open.*	*Felt able to say things that I wouldn't have written in an email… but via phone call I felt supported and trusted.*
Appreciated/ trusted	*a really good unplanned conversation with a close colleague today …made me feel trusted and appreciated.*	*Views sought on an approach to a new piece of work. Felt trusted, appreciated and energised.*	*- it made me feel like we had a shared understanding, trusted to make the right decision*
Challenged	*very concerned about the risks we hold and how to resolve them*	*My colleague shut down my suggestion.*	*Someone who thinks they know better and fails to understand their impact on people.*
Anxious/distressed	*Made me feel sad and a little guilty that I can't be there for them more.*	*Same problems coming around again raised up and same solution as end point. Had enough.*	*Feel like I am failing at everything doing too much and delivering it all badly.*
Availability Energised/ motivated	*Meeting with senior leaders. Strong support for our work and reaffirmed that our approach is sound.*	*Working on a project to support staff... Great meeting, sharing ideas and approaches.*	*Fab phone call with a colleague that sparked some seriously interesting ideas.*
Helpful/ Understood	*Helped a colleague cope with troubles at home by lifting their mood that in turn made me feel good.*	*Clear communication and clear outcome. Help and support offered from both of us. Enjoyable interaction.*	*You forget how much knowledge you have and how you can help someone else do their job. I just did that… it helped make someone else's job easier.*
Enervated/drained Overwhelmed	*They know I'm busy, but they chase for a response on something we've agreed a timetable – feel overwhelmed and unable to prioritise my work with so many demands for attention.*	*Hearing about not having enough resources and everyone has got to do more to help each other – we are actually already doing that – I don't think I have any more to give.*	*I feel like I'm doing my job and someone else's job as well and it's too much to think about.*

Table 2. Close colleague relationships by gender

Taken under the wing		Shared experience	
male / male	2	male / male	2
male / female		male / female	1
female / male		female / male	2
female / female	4	female / female	3
Acts of Kindness		**Deep Sharing**	
male / male	1	male / male	2
male / female	1	male / female	
female / male	2	female / male	1
female / female	2	female / female	2