

University of Bucharest  
Faculty of Sociology and Social Work  
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## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

# **The discursive dimension of employee engagement and disengagement**

Accounts of keeping and leaving jobs in present-day Bucharest  
organizations

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Bucharest, 2016

## Thesis overview

### Introduction

Within my doctoral thesis, I study accounts of organizational disengagement in order to understand processes and decisions of keeping and leaving jobs in present-day Bucharest organizations. In dialogue with current studies of employee disengagement I aim to conceptualize “discursive disengagement”, starting from interview accounts.

Thus, I aim to find out how people account for their decisions of leaving or sticking to jobs in different organizations in Bucharest, analyzing the disengagement process as it unfolds in people’s stories of their experiences and interpretations.

I look to identify discursive types and sub-types of employee disengagement, several vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940) and rhetorical features employed to justify persistence or abandonment. Furthermore, to tackle the topic both theoretically and practically, in the last part of the present paper I present an experimental method of fostering employers and employees’ reflexivity on organizational disengagement. I use a video game and its learning affordances to explore employee disengagement in a certain organizational medium, namely the corporate one.

If until now the concept has been studied mostly in a positivistic perspective, I engage with discourse analysis to classify employee disengagement trajectories, vocabularies of motive and rhetorical resources that might help employers, employees and coaching practitioners to deal with organizational disengagement and its unwanted consequences at an organizational and at individual level.

The present study aims at finding discursive patterns in organizational disengagement that might be useful for practical reasoning, both for employees and employers.

My approach aims to generate results useful for experts and employees who want to understand better their or others’ working situation and to be able to find alternative definitions of the respective situations, so that they wouldn’t remain prisoners of a sole overreaching perspective. By exploring alternative definitions of the situation, one may find a way out of a process of disengagement prone to take them to physical and emotional failure, burnout and, finally, to job abandonment and following resentments towards the organization.

My study was also aimed at helping organizations fight against employee disengagement reported to be connected with low productivity, absenteeism, incivility and even theft. The more wisely organizations prevent their employee disengagement, the less they have to invest in pricey

induction processes and the more engaged their employees the better the organizations' performances on the market. Moreover, a proper approach of the employees' engagement process would benefit the organizations' brand awareness in the long run. People leaving their jobs on internal considerations, as outgrowing the organizations, and not on external motivations, as vicious interactions with managers, would engage with positive word of mouth regarding the organization they worked for, determining other qualified people to be interested in working in the respective place.

Given the above considerations, my study aims to answer the following questions:

*How do people frame their decisions of staying in organizations or leaving their jobs by defining their employment situation, and how do they justify their choices?*

Thus, I want to find out how do people account for their decisions of leaving or sticking to jobs in different organizations in Bucharest by looking for discursive patterns in organizational engagement and disengagement processes that might be useful for practical reasoning and interventions, both for employees and employers.

At this point in time, much of what has been published regarding employee engagement and disengagement comes from practitioner journals and consulting firms, having the basis in practice rather than in theory and empirical research. In fact, there is little academic literature that deals with employee engagement and disengagement even if the topic became more and more popular during the last years and especially popular during the latest economical crisis (2007-2011).

At present, in Romania, there are no studies regarding the exact number of organizations preoccupied with employees' engagement and the actions taken for dealing with globally reported decreasing employee engagement (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Saks, 2006; Wollard, 2011).

This fact-finding comes as a surprise as employee engagement has been conceptualized as having to do with people's physical, cognitive and emotional needs (Shuck & Wollard, 2010; Cusack, 2009; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Kahn, 1990) thus being in direct connection with well-being, a topic largely discussed in academic and popular literature.

In this context, discursive employee engagement and disengagement analysis would come as a useful method for studying employees' motivation to be proactive and keep their jobs

for a longer time. Not only human resources representatives could engage with this kind of analysis, but also managers and employees themselves.

### **Theoretical grounding**

My study is aimed at understanding processes and decisions of keeping and leaving jobs in present-day Bucharest organizations. To meet my research goal, I start from interview accounts and study the unfolding of organizational disengagement.

In dialogue with current studies of employee disengagement (Shuck, Wollard, 2010; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006; Kahn, 1990) and in line with the three already studied components of the process of disengagement (cognitive, behavioral and emotional) (Wollard, 2011), I aim to conceptualize a new facet of the process, namely “discursive disengagement”.

In the theoretical grounding of my paper I firstly look into the existing literature and conceptualization regarding employee engagement and disengagement and then I present the concepts that further help me conceive and develop a discourse analysis to study people’s options for staying and leaving and the unfolding processes. Accounts, decisions, vocabularies of motive and the connections between the three represent the scaffold of my interpretation aimed for seeing how people frame their decisions of staying in organizations or leaving their jobs and also for the conceptualization of discursive employee disengagement.

To meet my research goals, I show how decisions are shaped by vocabularies of motive which help us account for our preferences by assigning meaning to past actions and being explanatory for situated decisions and behaviors.

Then I draw on Kahneman’s claim (1993) that the narrative -“remembering self” is a crucial component in life-changing decisions; the remembering self consists in stories and accounts. People create their own meanings and understanding by telling accounts about what happened. They put together events, interactions, opinions and emotions to make out the surrounding world. The remembering self is the one telling the account.

Further on I explain how decisions are made by developing a sociological perspective on motivation. I stress the importance of discourse in shaping grounds for action and inaction and I take into consideration the situational character of decisions.

In the end, I look into theories that explain how certain situations can be defined and re-defined (Merton, 1948; Thomas, 1928) by the same social actor

## Methodology

My research is a sociological survey aimed at studying accounts about keeping and leaving jobs in present-day Bucharest organizations. I wanted to see *how people frame their decisions by defining their employment situation and how they justify their choices regarding their professional experiences*. To accomplish this research goal I decided to focus on the manner people assign meaning to their past actions and on the manner they make sense of their previous decisions.

To meet my study expectations I engaged with qualitative research that pleads for a naturalistic, interpretive approach and tries to decipher events and actions function of the understandings that people assign to them (Denzin, Lincoln, 1994 *apud* Chelcea, 2007). According to Deniz and Lincoln using multiple accounts as data and an interpretative perspective of study altogether represents the very scaffold of qualitative research.

To collect my data I engaged with focused unstructured interviews, as one of the most frequently used methods in qualitative research prone to help me answer my overreaching study questions. Focused unstructured interviews are the equivalent of in depth interviews with an exploratory goal and are characterized by a limited number of questions most often with spontaneous formulation, no time limit constraints, large volume of information, complex answers. This kind of interview provides the researcher with the opportunity to note and interpret the respondents' feelings and attitudes (Chelcea, 2007; Babbie, 2010).

The chosen method of investigation faces a few limitations. The most important refers to the fact that when answering the questions the interviewees might be tired or in a bad health condition, physical details that might influence the accounting process as well as the respondents' mood at the time of the interview. In addition, unstructured interviews use unstandardized questions that might provide answers that limit the number of possible comparisons (Bailey, K., 1978, p.183 *in* Chelcea, S, 2007, p.310). To deal with these limitations I asked my interviewees to set the time of our encounters and I tried to ask resembling questions and permanently focus the conversation on the research topic during the encounters so I could map out patterns and directions.

To accomplish the present research I used a collection of 20 interviews taken during two years. I had the first six encounters when preparing my dissertation thesis, while the other 16 - during my second PhD year. 15 of the respondents were persons I knew before (for at least three years) and with whom I had friendly relationships. I selected the other five respondents by using the snow-ball method as a non-probability sampling technique (Babbie, 2010). I asked my 15<sup>th</sup> interviewee to recommend me another respondent who would meet my research expectations. Then, I asked this person to recommend another one and so on until the list of 20 was completed.

The fact that the respondents knew my professional background, as we had been friends for quite some time then, enabled me to do “face work” (Goffman, 1959) and relate on a deeper level with them.

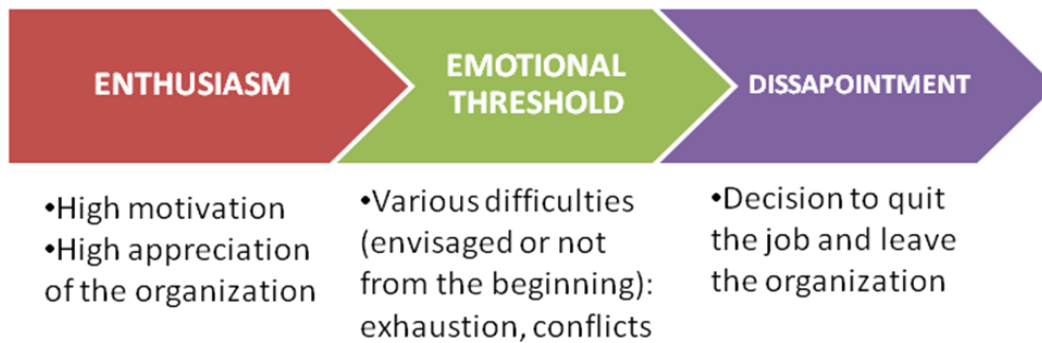
In total I interviewed 13 women and seven men. 18 of the respondents were aged between 29 and 35, while two of them were 54, respectively 55 years old. These ones were selected by using the snow-ball method. All the interviewees lived and worked (at a certain point) in Bucharest organizations. Every encounter was at least two hours long. I usually let the interviewee pick up the place and time of the meeting. In the case of close friends, I also suggested my place as a possible alternative for seeing each other. Most often, however, we met in coffee shops. All the discussions were tape recorded with the interviewees consent. I also explained my respondents that all names and places will be anonymized in the research. Only their age would be kept as it was.

## **Main findings**

My analysis showed that interviewees’ accounts had a sequential form given by people’s emotions in relation to their professional experiences unfolding. Hence, I marked out two main emotional sequences: “*from enthusiasm to disappointment*” and “*from enthusiasm to perseverance*”.

The first emotional sequence (see Figure 1) was observed in the interviewees who decided to leave their jobs in the end.

Figure 1. Emotional sequence from enthusiasm to disappointment



In this case, I could make out four different leaving trajectories according to the attribution of failure done by the employees:

1) External degradation

Negative experiences are attributed to an objective change in the organization, for example due to financial crisis, bankruptcy, administrative readjustments.

2) Internal degradation

Negative experiences are attributed to an internal degradation due to fatigue, accumulation of stress.

3) Outgrowing the organization

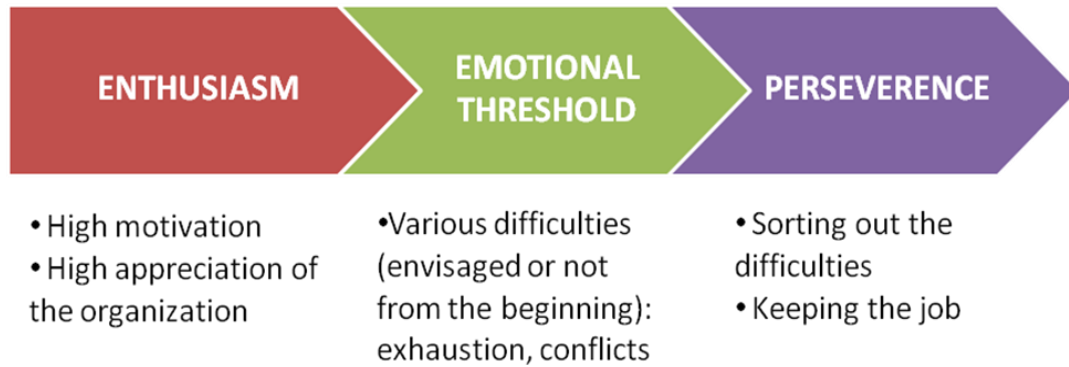
Negative experiences are attributed to one's own growth and subsequent need to move to something better.

4) Gradual awareness

Negative experiences are attributed to one's awakening, and realization that initial positive assessments were due to naiveté and were not grounded in reality.

The second emotional sequence (see Figure 2) referred to interviewees who kept their jobs, notwithstanding the encountered difficulties.

Figure 2. Emotional sequence from enthusiasm to perseverance



The main difference between the two sequences was given by an observed emotional threshold (an obstacle), a turning point in the employees' experiences connected especially with physical and emotional burnout or with faulty interactions with colleagues and/or managers. The interviewees who matched the first sequence did not succeed into overcoming the emerged obstacle, while the ones in the second sequence were able to deal with the emerging inconsistencies and they moved forward with their jobs. In the first case, I observed several instances of re-definition of the initial working situations that I exemplified and discussed.

When employees accounted for their professional experiences, their stories were populated with different *social actors* whose actions and attitudes employees invoked to make their points or justify their decisions.

The characters described several *character types* that followed closely the sequential form of the interviewees' recollections. Thus, the role played by the characters (villains, mentors, wise helpers, grand masters etc.) and the moment of the account when they showed up, accounted for specific moments in the disengagement process the employees went through.

Paying attention to the manner in which employees talk about their colleagues or managers and pointing up typifications might be of help for evaluating employees' engagement and even for employees' self-evaluation regarding their work commitment and their emotions in relation to their work place. At the same time, managers could take measures and make changes in their managerial approach accordingly, while human resources practitioners could develop dedicated experiments in organizations or focus groups where similar analyses could be put in practice.



Further on, my research underlined a series of *vocabularies of motive* that the interviewees used in their accounts to assign meaning to their past actions. In this respect, I studied two different functions of vocabularies of motive: vocabularies for staying in an organization (vocabularies of engagement) and vocabularies for leaving jobs (vocabularies of disengagement). I split each main type of vocabulary in sub-categories according to the salient types of justifications the interviewees invoked.

The main vocabularies of employee engagement that resulted from my analysis were the following:

- 1) The vocabulary of fulfilling interactions
- 2) The vocabulary of challenge and learning new skills
- 3) The vocabulary of staying because of ego considerations
- 4) The vocabulary of emotional attachment: one job, one love.

For employee disengagement, I sorted out the following categories of vocabularies:

- 1) The vocabulary of degrading interactions
- 2) The vocabulary of burnout
- 3) The vocabulary of a dysfunctional relationship with the job.

During my analysis I observed that there was a certain vocabulary of motive that could not be clearly and uniquely matched with “staying” or “leaving”. That was the vocabulary about money that bridged the gap between the two. People talked about money neither as main incentive for their stay in organizations, nor for their leave. Still, they brought up the topic quite often. That is why I decided to create a separate section dedicated to vocabularies of money and other incentives.

I considered that another discursive approach that might help employers, employees and coaching practitioners prevent organizational disengagement and its unwanted consequences is represented by the investigation of the *rhetorical features* people use in their accounts regarding their professional experiences. This type of analysis would be especially useful as it helps investigating accounts at a deeper level, beyond employees’ intentions to deliver a positive discourse so they wouldn’t face eventual consequences. Moreover, investigation of the rhetorical features can be done even from the early stages of the disengagement process, to figure out employees’ positioning regarding their job, the organization and their definition of the working situation.

My analysis of the rhetorical features showed that when accounting for their professional experiences, people use different tools (*humor* and *irony* were salient) to put themselves at shelter from eventual opposite opinions on the interlocutors' part or generally accepted social representations regarding jobs and rules of organizational conduct that would make them feel different or inappropriate.

The last part of my paper was dedicated to an experimental method of identifying and reflecting on a certain type of organizational disengagement, namely disengagement with corporate jobs. I conducted a case study of La Molleindustria's game "Every Day the Same Dream" (EDSD) (La Molleindustria, 2009) and I discussed the game's learning affordances and the possibility of using it especially as a resource for coaching or counseling sessions on employee disengagement topics. Video games are increasingly used for serious purposes – either by creating dedicated games for learning, or by using existing games for purposes other than entertainment. My case study indicates that a video game may be productively used for fostering employee reflexivity on disengagement, provided that coaches take into account several factors: participants' previous experience with digital gameplay, their ability to complete the game, their orientation towards gameplay success or reflexivity, their interest in reading game mechanics as a specialized rhetoric, and their identification with the main character.

My research documents *the discursive dimension of employee engagement and disengagement*, through a sociological research of vocabularies of motive that account for decisions to leave or stay in organizations after facing challenges. While positivistic methodologies consider discourse as a window to mental processes which are to be studied through language, a discursive perspective considers that forms of verbal expressions are constitutive of thinking. In this light, *motives are vocabularies of motive* (Mills 1940), and employees' engagement and disengagement occur through specific discursive practices. My empirical research documents *several types of discursive trajectories*, and I analyze their inflection points and main constituents. By taking into account the discursive dimension of employee engagement and disengagement, researchers and practitioners could offer a richer understanding of people's experiences, definitions and redefinitions of their situations, and could create finer tools to empower people to better manage their careers.

## **Fostering employees' and employers' reflexivity on organizational disengagement. Reflecting on employee disengagement with the game "Every Day the Same Dream"**

According to Wollard's scheme of action, the disengagement process should be addressed by taking the following clear steps: "begin with the symptoms of disengagement, determine their causes and systematically work to eliminate them" (2011, p.532).

Until this point, within the present paper, I proposed a new method to tackle employee disengagement, namely discourse analysis that helped me underline several disengagement trajectories and find out rhetorical features of discursive disengagement. At the same time, I underlined a series of motives for employees to be disengaged and decide to leave organizations. Thus, there is one step left unaddressed in Wollard's scheme of action: systematic work to eliminate employees' dissatisfaction, methods to be put in practice by employers, employees and human resources practitioners to foster organizational disengagement.

At the time this paper was written, much of what had been published regarding employee engagement and disengagement came from practitioner journals and consulting firms, having the basis in practice rather than in theory and empirical research. Most of the "how to do it" articles addressed managers and what they can do to raise employers' engagement. Still, there was a surprising dearth of literature addressing employees and employees' reflexivity on their disengagement.

In the following pages, I present a dynamic, scientifically grounded tool that might be successfully used during organizational coaching sessions to evaluate employees' engagement, on the one hand and raise workers' awareness regarding their own definition of their professional situation, on the other hand: tackling disengagement issues with video games.

In this spirit, I conducted a case study of La Molleindustria's game "Every Day the Same Dream" (EDSD) (La Molleindustria, 2009), I discussed the game's learning affordances and the possibility of using it especially as a resource for coaching or counseling sessions on employee disengagement topics.

I was interested to explore and analyze the diversity of messages derived from players from an art game aiming for social critique, to see whether and how they question the outcomes of a certain type of working engagement, namely that of a corporate employee. Six out of the 12 employees involved in the case study were also later interviewed regarding their entire

professional experiences, their decisions of staying in organizations and leaving jobs, their answers being analyzed in the former chapters of the present paper.

On the one hand, my findings point to the fact that a serious art game as “Every Day the Same Dream” has great potential in being used as medium for tackling the issue of everyday routine and questioning the outcomes of a corporate working engagement. On the other hand, evaluations made by former and actual corporate employees who were asked to play the game focused more on the description of the game routine and understanding of the explicit content rather than on deciphering underlying messages.

Even if most of my research participants (10 out of 12) were not familiar with playing video games, playing EDSD stirred up many emotions. Albeit not requested, seven participants discussed their *identification* with the main character.

I believe that the potential of a game to be used as a resource for learning might be considerably enhanced with *proper contextualization and guidance*. If participants in my study had been briefed regarding the possible underlying messages of the game, or if they had read a couple of reviews before engaging with the game, their understanding could have been deeper. Moreover, if they were interested in the topic beforehand and they would have played and discussed the game in a dedicated environment, as a life coaching session, the value of gameplay as an experiential metaphor would have been stronger.

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