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**Full circle : employee engagement in the Welsh public service**

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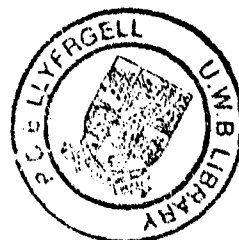
**FULL CIRCLE:**

**Employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service**

**Natalie Louise Jones**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements of  
Bangor University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**October 2012**





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## Dedication

To my friends and family:

### **Taith**

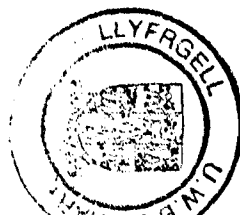
*Yna down at afon na chlywn mohoni  
ac mae ynddi gerrig yn rhyd ac yn sarn;  
trwy goed duon, trwy gwm tywyll,  
esgyn y llwybr i'r golau rhwng dwy garn.*

*A does dim troi'n ôl, er nad oes inni arwydd  
dim ond bod rhywle yn galw, yn galw yn blaen:  
bod un man drwy'r bedw'n ein mynnu  
bob yn ail gam, ac awn ymlaen*

*heb fap, heb faich ar ein cefnau,  
heb graffu ar gymylau chwaith,  
heb nabod y tir heibio i'r tro  
a heb enwau ar gribau yn ein hiaith,  
heb wybod dim yn ein dilladau blêr  
ond bod llwybrau o hyd yn croesi dan y sêr.*

*(ap Dafydd 1998 yn ap Dafydd 2011, tudalen 19)*

(this is a poem in Welsh for which there is no official translation to English).





## Acknowledgements

It is an often heard statement that without the support of others, research of this kind could not happen. It is true. I would like to acknowledge the support and care of the following people who have helped me complete this study:

Thank you to mum and dad. I know how difficult I have been to live with during the PhD and I hope that I can make some recompense in the future.

Thank you to my friends Adrian, Tre, Sian, Ruth and Martin. In different ways you have sustained me and helped me make breakthroughs when I needed.

Thank you to all the staff at CYMRUcyf, in particular the HR team, for allowing me access to your organisation and providing me with practical support throughout my time with you. *Rydym yn gwybod cyn lleied am brofiadau'r gweithlu yn y sector gyhoeddus yng Nghymru. Oherwydd eich parodrwydd i'm cynorthwyo yn ystod yr ymchwil, mae dealltwriaeth o ymgysylltiad staff wedi cynyddu, gyda'r gobaith daw gwell rhaglenni a cymorth yn y dyfodol. Diolch i chi am ganiatáu i mi dreulio amser yn eich msg.*

Thank you to the library staff at Bangor University, to the statisticians at the Welsh Government and the researchers at the National Assembly for Wales Members Research Service for answering my enquiries so promptly and helpfully.

Thank you to Bangor Business School, for providing me with a 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Bursary for the duration of this study. Without this support, I would not have been able to undertake this research.

Thank you to my supervisors, Professor Sally Sambrook and Dr Clair Doloriert. Your support has not faltered, despite plenty of provocation! I suspect it has not always been easy to know how to help me and I appreciate how committed you have been to me and the work. Your dedication to autoethnography is perceptible and an inspiration to others.

Finally, a particular thank you to Gillian Miles of the Arriva Trains Wales Lost Property Office at Newport Station, South Wales, for retrieving my research journal after I carelessly left it on a bench on platform one at Cardiff railway station following a day's fieldwork. I hope that I have learnt that no pair of new shoes is worth the anxiety of thinking eleven months of fieldwork data may have been lost.

## Abstract

### **Full circle: employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service**

This is a study of employee engagement in the public sector in Wales. It is concerned with understanding how employee engagement is conceived, managed and experienced by employees in the public services within the remit of the devolved government for Wales. In the public sector, employee engagement has been presented by both the UK and Welsh Governments as a vital component in the delivery of modern responsive services within the context of reductions in the public finances.

I have used an autoethnographic research approach informed by an idealist philosophical perspective in this study. I conducted a survey of HR practitioners, interviewed senior public sector managers and carried out a qualitative case study of one organisation's programme for employee engagement. I also used my personal experiences of my own engagement while working in the public sector in Wales over a five year period.

Overall, I found relatively high levels of reported engagement amongst the mainly female and unionised workforce although opportunities for progression were limited as a result of political devolution and long standing weaknesses in the Welsh economy. As in the academic literature, employee engagement was conceived in practice in two ways but with a clear focus on meeting organisational rather than individual's aspirations. Little awareness or commitment amongst public sector employees to the Welsh Government's concept of a supra organisational Welsh Public Service was found. Senior managers' conceptions of employee engagement shared more similarity with the HR practitioners who worked in the private rather than the public sector. The management of employee engagement was found to be informed by the rationalistic perspective of strategy making which overlooked gaps in implementation between different organisational stakeholders. I found that senior and line managers were lukewarm in their support for employee engagement initiatives compared with HR practitioners. While employees experienced employee engagement as a welcome effort by their employers, staff considered such initiatives to be little more than a fulfillment of a basic part of the employment package. They also felt that participation in employee engagement was not entirely voluntary. The research culminates in a contextualised model of employee engagement, a research agenda and recommendations for practice.

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## **Notes to readers**

### *A note on the structure and style of this dissertation*

I have chosen to present this document in a particular way. I have adopted the “opening out” model (Dunleavy 2003) of dissertation where short introductory chapters are followed by the author’s findings. A final chapter provides a discussion of the wider implications of the research for scholarship, management practice and myself. I have done this because of my own experience of reading doctoral theses during the first weeks of my research. I found myself flicking forwards almost immediately to the findings and implications pages. I wanted to write my dissertation in a way that presented findings early on and connected academic literature and empirical observations to one another.

I try and write in the first person in this dissertation, in a relatively informal style. I have employed autoethnography (AE) as my research approach, which consists of “highly personalised accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding.” (Sparkes 2002 in Wall 2008, p39). AE is normally written in the first person (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). At the beginning of each chapter, I present a personal autobiographical vignette (Humphreys 2005) which is a fictionalised recollection of an event that happened on a certain day intended to be pertinent to the chapter that follows. I use quotations from interviews that I collected during the ethnographic element of the study and also from interviews that others have conducted with me during this research where I recollect my life and my experience of engagement and disengagement at work. I also use extracts from research journals that I have kept during this study.

### *A note on terms used in the dissertation*

In the dissertation I refer to the Welsh Public Service (WPS). This is a term adopted by the Welsh Government (WG) to describe those organisations and functions that were devolved to Wales in 1999 by way of the Government of Wales Act (1998, 2006). The twenty areas of devolved responsibility are shown in the Appendix (Item 1). The Welsh Public Service does not include those functions that continue to be the responsibility of the UK Government (e.g. broadcasting, welfare and criminal justice) which operate in Wales. I use the term *Welsh Public Service* when I am discussing an organisation operating in a domain that is devolved to the Welsh Government. I also use the term ‘public sector’ when discussing general issues but which are not intended to be specific to Wales or the Welsh Public Service.

## **PART ONE: FOUNDATIONS**

### **Chapter One:**

#### **Introduction**

### **Chapter Two:**

#### **How I have conducted this study of employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service**

## Chapter One: Introduction

**29 March 2011**

*My name is Natalie Jones and I am 41 years old.*

*I went to see Chris today. We had worked together for five years, and I had been her line manager. I took her an iced bun, as I know how much she likes them. Her husband disapproves of this predilection, and we laughed.*

*It is her last day at work before she retires after 35 years service. I had gone back to wish her well. She asked me why I had left two years previously to go and research employee engagement.*

*I had always thought Chris a bit dim, with a laissez faire attitude to work. But she had always been willing to do the "grunt work" and let the rest of us go off and do our projects. She seems to worry about very little. I wish I was like that.*

*We talked about people we both knew from work: who was still there, who had left, who wasn't sure if they had a job or not. The unit that I had managed was down to two people from five, but the staff who remained sounded like they were pretty happy.*

*We said goodbye as I went off to see a friend. I felt glad I had dropped in to see Chris. I said hello to another couple of former colleagues who asked me how I was getting on at the University. I said it was OK, but I didn't think that the academic life was for me.*

*What of Chris's question? Why had I left my management job?*

*I left because I had become disengaged.*

## 1.1 Introduction

In this opening chapter, I present information and discuss:

- My research question and supporting objectives,
- Why I think it is important for research to be carried out on employee engagement at the present time,
- Why I have chosen to conduct an autoethnographic study,
- My biography and how I think aspects of my personality, life experiences and attitudes are likely to affect how I carry out this research,
- An overview of the literature on employee engagement,
- How I consider my study meets with Bangor University's criteria for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

This is an autoethnographic study of employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service. I chose this topic for a number of reasons, some of which haven't become clear until I started to write this dissertation. My experience of undertaking doctoral level research is that for a lot of the time you're not quite sure where you're going, or what you're looking for, but a point will be reached when a written account becomes possible, and necessary. The result is this dissertation.

Employee engagement "is an enormously appealing concept" (Kahn, 2010, p20). If we only took into account anecdotes and media coverage of the topic, it would appear that more and deeper engagement at work represents a panacea to many of our organisational problems. I have been fortunate to know personal engagement at work (Kahn 1990). I have also suffered disengagement from work: the tiredness, willing the clock to reach 12 so that I can escape (along with plenty of others) from the office to meet a friend for lunch and have a good moan, lack of motivation, low productivity, and generally just not caring any more and feeling guilty for it. I choose the word 'suffering' deliberately as it captures one of the main reasons why I wanted to study employee engagement. In my view, too many people suffer when they go to work, and they needn't. This observation is one of my attitudes about people and their work, and like other aspects of me, is likely to influence my study of employee engagement.

The purpose of my study is to examine employee engagement is conceived, managed and experienced within a particular context: the Welsh Public Service. My research can be viewed as a multi-level case study that attempts to give significant regard to the nature and characteristics of both a country (Wales) and a sector (public sector). I include relatively extended discussions of context (country, sector, organisation and my personal biography) as I consider it helps to “explain the constraints on, or the opportunities for, the phenomenon I am studying...and contributes to the manuscript telling a story, an attribute that Daft (1983) ascribes to craftful research.” (Johns 2001, p40). This focus on context, partly influenced by my background as a town planner and my continued interest in place does mean that some aspects of the study (in particular my examination of the practice of employee engagement by an organisation in the Welsh Public Service) are more limited than if I had chosen to curtail my discussion of context.

### *1.1.1 My research question and objectives*

The research question and its accompanying objectives are shown in Figure 1.1. I reached my research question principally by way of consultations with practitioners, former colleagues and friends, my supervisors and scrutiny of the academic and UK oriented practitioner literature. The data I collected, my decision during Year 2 of the PhD to include myself as a source of data and my decision to adopt an idealist informed philosophical perspective (discussed in Chapter Two) have also influenced the research question. I have settled on a research question after several iterations, and the supporting research objectives have been rewritten, reprioritised and examined numerous times. Revisions have been impossible to avoid but that has been the nature of the research, confirming the observations made by Berry (1986 in Cryer 2000) and Easterby-Smith et al (2002) about inevitable changes in direction when conducting doctoral level research.

It is important for me to note at this point that this study is not an evaluation of the performance or effectiveness of organisational employee engagement initiatives nor is it seeking to assess the impact of such programmes on individual productivity, employee well being or organisational outcomes. Neither is the study concerned with identifying or verifying the numerous factors (antecedents) that have been associated with personal engagement at work (Kahn 1990) or work engagement (Schaufeli et al 2002) as research of this nature has already taken place (May et al 2004, Rich et al 2010). My study is concerned with establishing the meanings associated with employee engagement by different parties in a particular context.

**Figure 1.1: My research question and objectives**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>RESEARCH QUESTION:</b></p> <p>How is employee engagement conceived, managed and experienced in the Welsh Public Service?</p> |  |
| <p><b>Research Objectives</b></p>  |  |
| <p><b>1</b></p>  | <p><b>FOR PRACTICE</b></p> <p>What are the implications of my study for the practice of employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service?</p>   |
| <p><b>2</b></p>  | <p><b>FOR ENGAGEMENT SCHOLARSHIP</b></p> <p>What are the contributions of my research to our understanding of employee engagement <i>theoretically and conceptually</i>?</p>   |
| <p><b>3</b></p>  | <p><b>FOR METHOD SCHOLARSHIP</b></p> <p>What can a qualitative and autoethnographic approach to the study of employee engagement contribute to our understanding of the topic?</p>   |
| <p><b>4</b></p>  | <p><b>FOR ME</b></p> <p>Why did I feel the high degree of engagement with my last job? Why and how did I become disengaged?</p> <p>How can I use this research to help me make better choices in the future about finding and maintaining engaging work?</p> |

### *1.1.2 The importance of carrying out this research at this point in time*

There are several reasons why I think it is important that employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service should be studied at the present time. I consider employee engagement to constitute both a 'trouble' and an 'issue' that is worthy of examination for a range of reasons (Mills 1970). I have known lack of engagement at work as a 'trouble', a personal matter that I have endured that I wished to overcome, and have spoken to a number of other public servants anecdotally about their struggles with engagement at work. Promoting more engagement at work has also become a public 'issue' as bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the UK and Welsh Governments have argued that it is an essential component in efforts to address the challenges the public services currently face (WAG 2009a). The public service workforce is a significant source of employment in Wales, which has been charged with depending too much on the public sector which is too bureaucratic to deliver changes that are considered necessary by politicians (Cameron 2011). Public service organisations are being encouraged to undertake activities that help strengthen employee engagement, but against a backdrop of cuts in budgets and reduction in workforce size, and demands for ever improving service quality (MacLeod and Clarke 2009). Some scholars have noted that normative judgements have been made about the 'win-win' nature of employee engagement not only by practitioners but also academic researchers (George 2010). The Welsh Government is seeking to promote employee engagement amongst public service organisations and build stronger engagement with its own workforce, and the findings of this research will be relevant to the development of that agenda (WAG 2005).

### *1.1.3 My interpretation strategy for this research*

I could have interpreted the data I collected for this study in a number of ways. I have chosen to use the metaphor of a "full circle" (the title of my dissertation) as my principal interpretation strategy. I first introduce this metaphor in Chapter Five (Figure 5.16) where I suggest potential tensions between two conceptions of employee engagement that I generate from the empirical research. I further explore this tension metaphor in the final Chapter. I also intend the "full circle" metaphor to be interpreted as a completion of a cycle of research in two under-researched contexts (the public services, Wales) which has revealed a new research agenda for employee engagement in Wales. As an autoethnographic study, another meaning to "full circle" is the completion for me of a ten year period of working in both applied and academic research which may now reveal a new career trajectory. Readers of this dissertation may identify other



interpretative strategies I could have employed and see other areas of the dissertation where the “full circle” metaphor could be applied.

#### 1.1.4 *Adopting the opening out model of dissertation*

In the preface to the dissertation I explain that I have adopted the ‘opening out’ model of thesis, where:

“...the first element in the sequence is a deliberately short and terse specification of the research question...it focuses tightly on the immediate issue to be tackled and gives only a brief discussion of the most recent relevant literature plus a very compressed amount of essential set up information...followed by a section of applied analysis, which tracks back and forth across what has been found out and connects it up in details with previous research and literature...the thesis opens out into a discussion of the wider themes or theoretical implications arising from the research and discusses possible avenues for the next phase of work in the field...there are many advantages in the opening out model...readers come into contact with your original work much sooner...they get far more analysis of your results and a better appreciation of how your results mesh with the immediately relevant previous research.” (Dunleavy 2003, p59)

My supervisors have been supportive in allowing me to pursue the opening out model of dissertation. In my case, there are two ‘set up’ chapters comprising an introduction and a methods chapter where I explain how I have conducted this research. I then present five ‘findings’ chapters which comprise two contextual chapters about the policy issues facing the Welsh Public Service and possible implications for personal engagement at work (Kahn 1990) and the characteristics and levels of engagement of the WPS workforce. These are followed by three chapters where I present empirical evidence on the conception, management and experience of employee engagement from a range of different perspectives. In these three Chapters, I present and develop a model of employee engagement that comprises two distinct elements: state and device engagement. In my final Chapter, I extend the model developed in the findings Chapters to incorporate more fully the contextual issues I raise in Chapters Three and Four. I also consider the contributions my research have made to different constituencies (practice, scholarship and myself) and propose a future research agenda informed by the analytical HRM approach (Boxall 2012). My discussion of the literature on employee

engagement takes into account both established and more recent contributions and its emphasis on the state engagement literature reflects the state of published knowledge, which in mid 2012, continues to be dominated by psychology informed literature.

## 1.2 Why I have chosen autoethnography (AE) as my research approach

“...autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist.” (Ellis et al 2011, p2)<sup>1</sup>.

While I had intended from the outset of this research to conduct an ethnographic investigation, autoethnography was neither familiar or appealing to me, as my notes in one of my early diaries shows:

*Me: Saw my supervisors today. Went on about autoethnography again. If they think I’m going down that road, they’ve got another thing coming. I’ve just spent the last couple of years contemplating my navel about what I should be doing next, shall I do this PhD or not, and they want me to wallow some more? They just don’t know me and where I’ve been.*

Constructed from research journal, encounter dated February 2010

However, during the second year of the PhD, I warmed to the idea of bringing my own experiences more fully into the study. I had what I call an ‘epiphany moment’ (Ellis et al, 2011) at a research seminar when one of the speakers talked about the importance of the self in work. On my return home, I took out my copy of William’s Kahn’s 1990 article (the principal scholar whose work I draw upon in this research) on personal engagement at work and re-read it for the first time since I started my engagement with the academic literature more than 12 months previously. His definition of personal engagement as “the harnessing of people’s selves to their work” (Kahn 2010 in Albrecht 2010, p21) started to get me thinking that I could bring my self into the study. In addition, rereading Kahn’s work also reminded me that I had something valuable to contribute to the study. I had experience of both engagement and disengagement

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from others are shown in standard text, indented from the left margin, while quotations from me (recreated from memories, interviews and my research journal) are shown in italic text, boxed and indented from the left margin.

at work, which meant that I could bring some understanding of the phenomenon to my research. When I was interviewed by a fellow research student, we discussed how my experience of engagement and disengagement at work could be relevant to my study:

*Me: ...so what am I bringing distinctively into this and therefore how am I going to be affecting the research, and the data. I'm certainly bringing in having been a practitioner, having been a manager.*

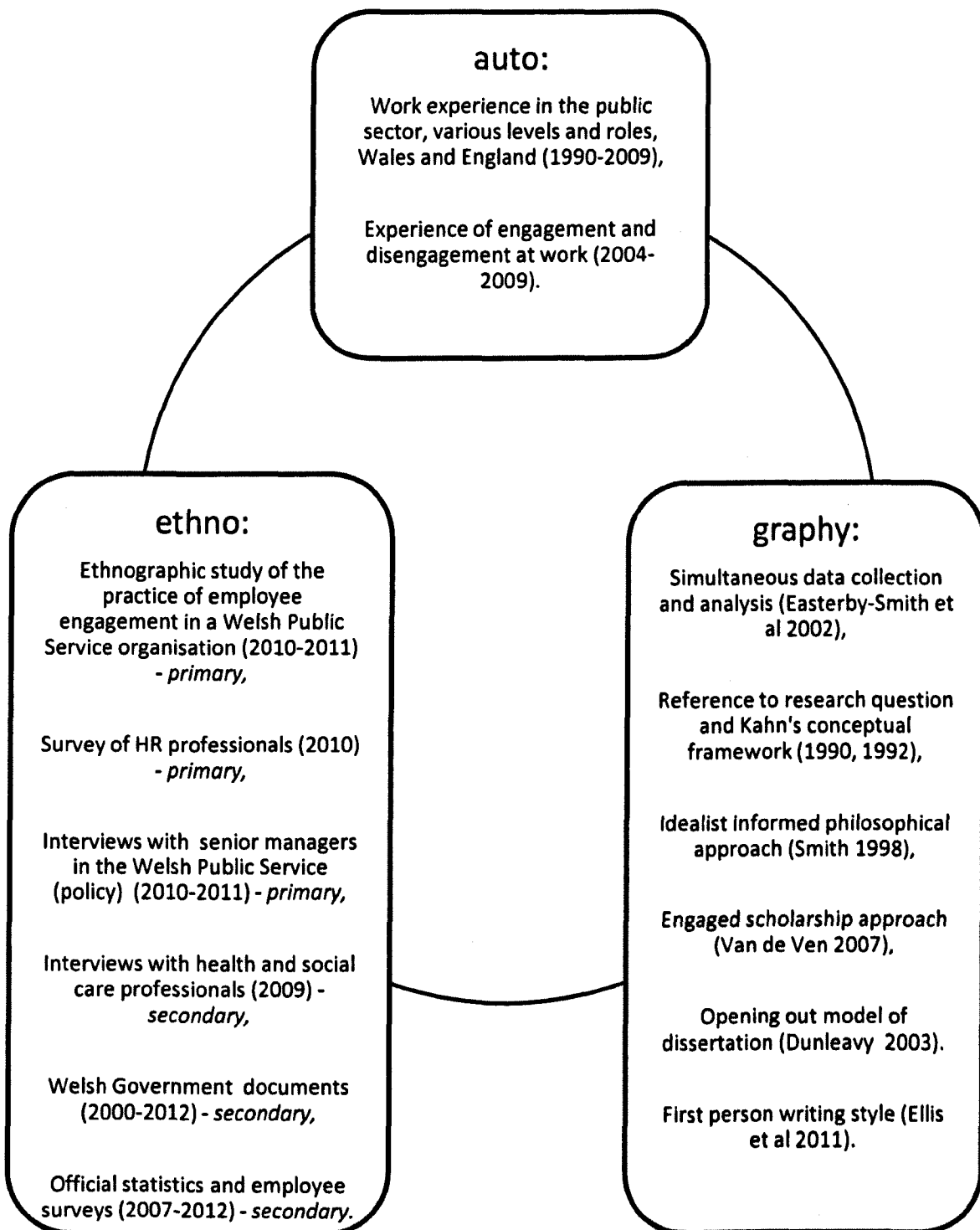
*Research Student: Yes, so you want to represent the practical. What's struck me is that you're bringing an understanding of being engaged and being unengaged. This is just a suggestion, but when you're interviewing people, you're not going to just be looking for well how is this person engaged, but has she ever been disengaged? Maybe that's expanded your research question a little bit more, your bias, you've been engaged, you've been disengaged, are you also looking at disengagement. Which gives a whole different research question. You're looking at disengagement as well because you know it.*

Interview conducted with me by Bangor University research student, August 2011

I understand autoethnography to be a research approach that enables the researcher to draw upon themselves as a source of data (auto) in order to understand a social phenomenon or wider culture (ethno) through analytical writing (graphy) (Wall 2006). The researcher not only collects data from others but also turns to their own personal experiences to inform the research. The researcher is seen and heard in the research text and is not marginalised in an attempt to promote objectivity. This is considered to be a rarity (Sparkes 2002). Ellis et al (2011) have described autoethnography as "aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience...patterns of cultural experience evidenced by field notes, interviews and/or artifacts, and then describing these patterns using facets of storytelling (e.g. character and plot development), showing and telling, and alterations of authorial voice" (p6). Ellis et al (2011) also stress that instead of insisting that values, our own and others', should be minimised in research, they should be centre stage. For the purposes of this study, I associate myself with the analytic branch of autoethnography where AE is viewed as an offshoot of ethnography (Anderson 2006) rather than a separate form of social science investigation that is more concerned with evocation (Ellis et al 2011).

The types of data that I have collected (shown in Figure 1.2) reflect those acknowledged by Ellis et al (2011) as being appropriate for an autoethnography. For my 'auto' data, I made notes and created timelines (such as the career timeline since 1990 in Figure 1.4) to describe my personal and work lives. I requested to be interviewed by fellow research students about my biography and its potential impact on this study, and also experiences of engagement and disengagement that I felt during my last job in the public sector in Wales. For the 'ethno' element I conducted interviews with senior public servants working in the Welsh Public Service, studied one organisation's approach to managing employee engagement, carried out a survey of HR professionals, and examined Welsh Government documents and published statistics on the characteristics and engagement levels of the public sector workforce in Wales. Analysis of the data has been conducted simultaneously with data collection, guided by the research question, and framed by Kahn's model of personal engagement and disengagement at work (1990, 1992) and also the concept of engaged scholarship (Section 1.2.2) where I have discussed my research at different stages with a range of stakeholders (Van de Ven 2007). The diagram in Figure 1.2 suggests a variation in the balance between the auto, ethno and graphy elements. Differences in balance between the three components is normal practice in autoethnography (Wall 2006).

Figure 1.2: Data collection and analysis components, my autoethnography



### *1.2.1 Judging the quality of autoethnography generally and this study in particular*

Autoethnography is not without its critics, who have questioned its validity as a form of social science and merely a poor form of literary writing (Atkinson 2006). It has been argued that it is nothing more than personal therapy for the researcher, whose stories are allowed to invade the spaces that should be occupied by others (Anderson 2006). The risks of harm to other people who might be identified as a result of being associated with the researcher have also been offered as a criticism of autoethnography (Ellis 2007) and it is contested whether such studies meet the traditional standards of generalisability and validity, i.e. how truthful are personal accounts and how can they reflect the truths of others? (Atkinson 2006). Attempts have been made to collate and establish criteria in order to be able to judge autoethnography (Anderson 2006, Holman Jones 2005, Doloriert and Sambrook 2011) according to traditional and non-traditional standards, while Ellis et al (2011) puts the question of value firmly in the hands of the reader of the text: "The question most important to autoethnographers are: who reads their work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?" (p13), rather than seeking to satisfy traditional standards of quality and validity.

I explained earlier in this section how I associate myself with the more analytical form of autoethnography (Anderson 2006). In Figure 1.3 starting on the next page, I demonstrate how I consider my research exhibits the characteristics of an analytic autoethnography, using Anderson's five features.

**Figure 1.3: Fit with Anderson’s features of analytic autoethnography, 2006**

| Criteria  | How my research has met the feature (with selected examples shown in brackets)  |
|---|---|
| <p>Complete member researcher status:</p> <p>“the researcher is a complete member in the social world under study” (p379)</p>   | <p>Complete membership of a group of employees that have experienced personal engagement and disengagement at work, and experienced employee engagement as an organisational device.</p> <p>Complete membership of a group of individuals who identify themselves as Welsh.</p> <p>Conscious documentation of setting activities through writing field notes (substantive and analytical) based on 11 months observation at the case organisation.</p> <p>Analysis of lay interpretations of conceptions and purposes of employee engagement by reference to theories (Kahn 1990, 1992) and developed frameworks (Figure 5.16, Chapter 5) to promote understanding of engagement practices and experiences.</p> |
| <p>Analytic reflexivity:</p> <p>“an awareness of reciprocal influence between ethnographers and their settings and informants. It entails self conscious introspection guided by a desire to understand both self and others...” (p382)</p> | <p>Reflect on my reactions to activities that I have encountered during data collection and analysis by writing a research journal, revealing my thoughts and feelings in personal vignettes (e.g. Chapter 1, Chapter 3, Chapter 6).</p> <p>Sharing my personal biography and identify how I think my background could affect the way I approach this study (e.g. my experience of personal engagement at work, and reasons for undertaking the study described in Chapter 1).</p>  |

**Figure 1.3: Fit with Anderson’s features of analytic autoethnography, 2006 (continued)**

| Criteria   | How my research has met the feature (with selected examples shown in brackets)   |
|--|--|
| <p>Narrative visibility of the researcher’s self:</p> <p>“the researcher is a highly visible social actor within the written text. The researcher’s own feelings and experiences are incorporated in the story and considered as vital data for understanding the social world being observed.” (p384)</p> | <p>Reflect on my reactions to activities that I have encountered during data collection and analysis by writing a research journal, revealing my thoughts and feelings in personal vignettes (e.g. Chapter 1, Chapter 3, Chapter 6).</p> <p>Open about my changes in beliefs and views over the course of fieldwork (e.g. as demonstrated in the personal vignette in Chapter 7).</p> <p>Construct my own meanings of employee engagement in Chapter Five and show how these are mutable over time.</p> <p>Share my “subjective experience” of working with previous colleagues (vignette in Chapter 1) and of research participants (vignette in Chapter 7).</p> <p>By focusing on how my ‘auto’ data can complement the ‘ethno’ data (in Chapters 5 and 6 in particular) and provide tentative ‘answers’ to aspects of the research question the ‘ethno’ does not reach, I avoid self absorption and “take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise go to.” (Behar 1996 in Anderson 2006, p385).</p> |
| <p>Dialogue with informants beyond the self:</p> <p>“is grounded in self experience but reaches beyond it as well.” (p386)</p>   | <p>Primary and secondary empirical data collection from others (described in Chapter 2):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-documents,</li> <li>-survey,</li> <li>-group and one to one interviews,</li> <li>-observation of workplace settings.</li> </ul> <p>Contact with informants, other researchers, as part of commitment to engaged scholarship (Van de Ven 2007).</p> <p>I asked other researchers to conduct interviews with me about my personal experiences of personal engagement and disengagement at work (Chapter 1).</p>   |

**Figure 1.3: Fit with Anderson’s features of analytic autoethnography, 2006 (continued)**



| Criteria   | How my research has met the feature (with selected examples shown in brackets)   |
|--|--|
| <p>Commitment to an analytic agenda:</p> <p>“to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena that those provided by the data themselves.</p> | <p>Using thematic analysis and categorisation techniques and use of sensitizing concepts (Kahn 1990) (described in Chapter 2), I develop links between the theory and practice of ‘state’ and ‘device’ employee engagement.</p> <p>My analysis of my experience of ‘state’ and ‘device’ engagement (Chapters 5 and 6) reveals the importance of positive organisational support for line managers, the different constituencies served by employee engagement (other than the workforce)</p> |

*Note: Layout inspired by Wainwright 2010*

### 1.2.2 Autoethnography in the context of ‘engaged scholarship’

“Researchers typically...study a research question without communicating with or being informed by other stakeholders who can make important contributions to understanding the problem...often results in making trivial advancements to science and contributes to widening the gap between theory and practice.” (Van de Ven 2007, p5)

I can think of few things worse than “going it alone to study a research question” (Van de Ven 2007, p5). While I have kept journals of my experiences, thoughts and feelings as a research student at Bangor University, I do not intend to explore these in detail in this dissertation. I am still living the experience of doctoral research and I do not feel that I have reached a stage where enough time has passed for me to make sense of it (Kierkegaard 1957 in Muncey 2005). However, there is no doubt that I have found the solitary nature of doctoral research a shock to my system following several years of working closely with others to carry out research for public policy. I have found it very uncomfortable to move away from the model of doing research that I had come to know before embarking on the PhD, and continued to use practices from my previous work experience to begin my doctoral studies, such as speaking with practitioners rather than ‘engaging’ with the academic literature, as shown in the journal extract below:

*"Natalie, I need a Delia<sup>2</sup>."*

*I look puzzled at the woman sitting before me. I have just embarked on the PhD and I am trying to meet up with as many people as I can to get some insight into the issue of employee engagement in the public services in Wales. Anything but sit down with the literature. For me, that is the last place to learn about engagement and what aspects of it I should study.*

*"A Delia?" I ask.*

*"Yes, a recipe for engagement. You know, exactly what to do and when."*

*"Excuse me, but do you really need a recipe for employee engagement?" I ask. This person occupies a senior position in the public services. She seems bright, and committed to engaging with staff. She has very few resources to achieve anything, but wants to do more. She's following a course on coaching and mentoring at the local university.*

*"I don't, but my boss does."*

Recreated from notes in personal journal, encounter dated 30 April 2010

However, there are scholars who consider that "research is not a solitary exercise" (Van de Ven 2007, p9) arguing that academic researchers should participate in 'engaged scholarship' (Van de Ven 2007) for management research to be both theoretically sound and practically relevant. Van de Ven offers a four part model of engaged scholarship where researchers undertake problem formulation, theory building, research design and research communications in association with other people. The application of multiple theories and conceptual models are encouraged rather than dependence on a single theoretical framework to explain social phenomena, which for example is the approach I take in Section 3.5.1 of Chapter Three in my discussion of the possible impacts for engagement of the Welsh Public Service context. Research can be designed with theory building or theory testing in mind, with the researcher encouraged to discuss detailed methodological issues with experts. Exchanging rather than imparting knowledge to practitioners and to other scholars is a goal of engaged scholarship, with researchers being encouraged to enter conversations with stakeholders who are seen as actively producing meaning from the texts and words produced in research.

I consider that I have attempted some aspects of 'engaged scholarship' in my PhD, although it was not planned. As outlined earlier, during the first year of doctoral studies I spent time

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<sup>2</sup>: 'Delia' refers to Delia Smith, a popular television food presenter and author in the UK.

speaking with managers, former colleagues and researchers from a range of disciplines (such as sociology, history, politics and psychology) as well as reading the academic literature, to help me formulate the research question. Spending time with these informants may have meant that there are some areas of the literature that I have not engaged with as fully as I might have done if I had not been interested in 'engaged scholarship'. My choice of principal conceptual framework (Kahn 1990, 1992) was less informed by other stakeholders, but I have identified a range of theories and frameworks that are also relevant to my study through reading academic literature, attending lectures and seminars both within Bangor Business School and other schools at Bangor University, such as Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll 2011), Self Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 1985 in Albrecht 2010) and the Three Component Model of Commitment (Meyer and Allen 1991). I have discussed my research design with my academic supervisors, former colleagues who are experienced in research methodologies, members of faculty at Bangor University and scholars I have met at conferences and seminars. I also involved members of staff at the case study organisation in decisions about data to be collected and how to sample the workforce. In terms of research communication and to encourage application of my research findings, I have produced a feedback report for the organisation whose employee engagement practices I studied for this research and also participated in practitioner networks in Wales.

Engaged scholarship "represents a more challenging way to conduct social research than the traditional approach of researchers going it alone" (Van de Ven 2007, p23) and as a sole doctoral researcher, engagement with some constituencies has been very limited due to the time available. I include a list of the presentations and written outputs that I have produced in this study in Chapter Two. I consider that taking an 'engaged scholarship' approach has helped me to ground my research within not only a scholarly context but also a sectoral, geographical and political context, all of which are likely to be influencing the conceptions, management and experience of employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service.

In the next section, I wish to identify some of the implications of my background, personality and life and work experiences for the way I approach this research.

### 1.3 My biography, and implications for my study of employee engagement

“Writing ethnography raises fundamental and problematic issues of power and knowledge...the way in which the ‘researched’ are portrayed and mediated by the complex positionality of the writer: his or her background, personal biography, prior experiences, attitudes, values, agenda, cultural baggage, and so on. Consequently, writing ethnography is not a neutral or value free process but instead involves the active shaping of the worlds and peoples that are being represented.” (Light, 2010, p183).<sup>3</sup>

Light’s comments above (2010) reflect an unease that has become prominent in social science since the 1960’s concerning the representation of others in research accounts and the need to conduct ethical research that respects the voices of participants and makes clear the role of the researcher in the study (Scott Jones and Watt, 2010). Both ethnography and autoethnography place reflexivity at their core, where the researcher considers explicitly the impact they are likely to have on the topic they are studying and how they relate to other people in the study (Light, 2010).

#### 1.3.1 *My biography*

I am a full time research student at Bangor Business School in north Wales. I joined the University from a middle management job in the public sector that I held for five years. Most of my twenty year career has been in local councils (also known as local authorities or local government). Local councils deliver a wide range of public services such as education and social services within a specific geographical area and are overseen by elected Councillors, chosen by the residents of the area the council covers. Subsequent UK and Welsh governments have urged councils to improve their performance and reduce their running costs, within a context of falling budgets, an ageing population and expectations of higher quality services (WAG 2006, 2009a).

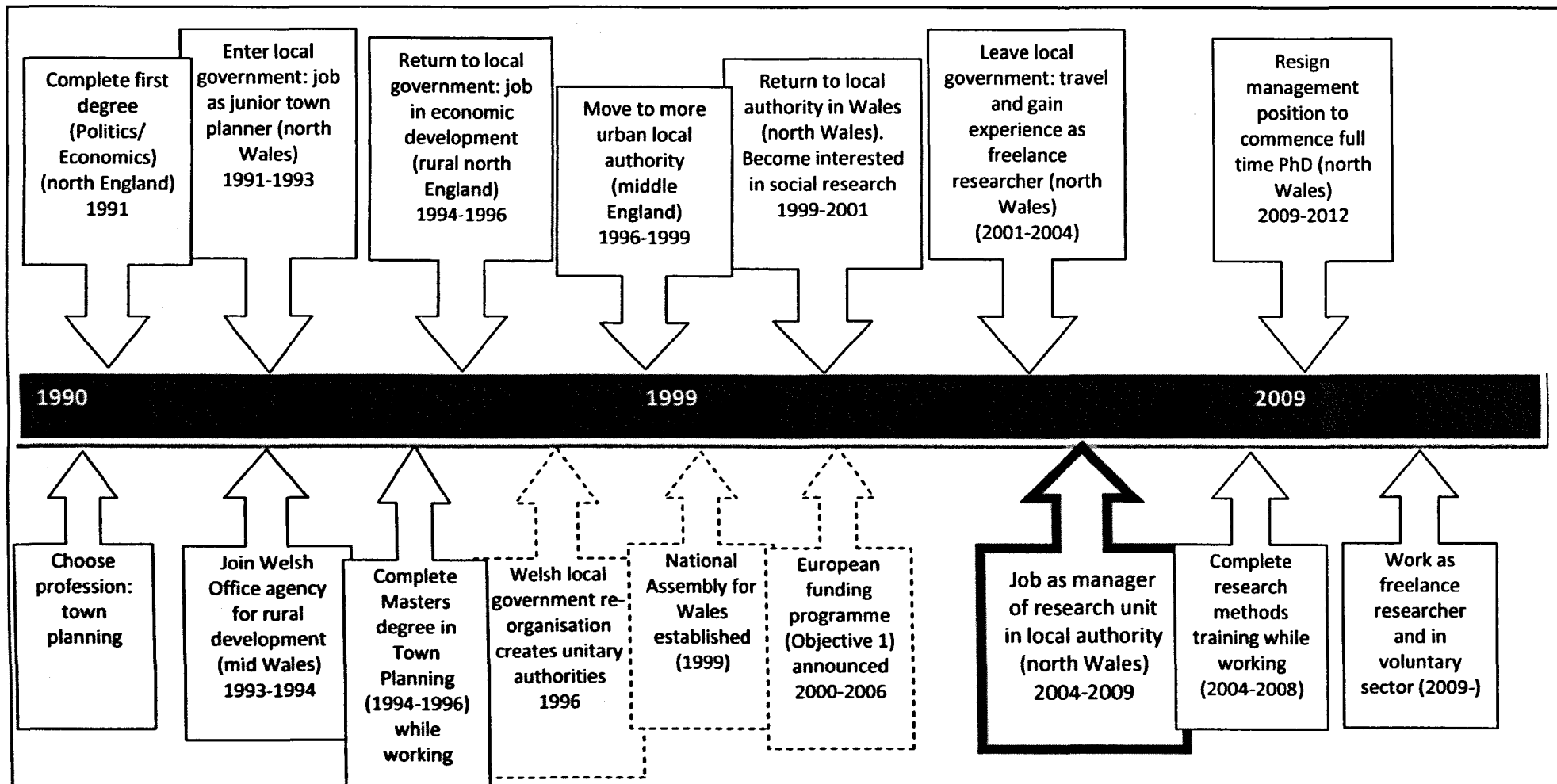
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<sup>3</sup> In this dissertation, I place quotations from others in non italic text, and quotations from my research journals, recollections and interviews conducted with me in italic text. Both types of quotations are indented.

My last job with a local authority involved managing a small team of professional staff. For the first three years of my employment, I consider that I was highly engaged. For the last two years, I felt disengaged from my job. In Figure 1.4, I show the jobs that I have held since I graduated in 1991, the principal qualifications that I have gained and external events that have influenced my decisions to move away and return to Wales to work. I begin the timeline in 1990 when I decided, on the basis of a week's work experience at my local council, that I wanted to be a town planner. Much of my career has been focused on gaining a better understanding of localities, and their people, and how they both might change (hence the extended discussion of context in this dissertation). The timeline also informs me that all but one of the places that I have worked have been areas that are generally considered to be economically challenged where the public sector has either been a significant employer or where there has been public sector led intervention to stimulate economic prosperity. Looking back (Kierkegaard 1957 in Muncey 2005), I particularly enjoyed the job I obtained directly after graduating from my first degree, also the job I had at a local authority in the one area I have worked considered more economically successful, as well as the first three years working as a manager in my last full time job. I enjoyed these jobs more than others I have held because they were newly created positions where I was responsible for setting the agenda for the role. For my research study, I particularly examine the personal engagement and disengagement that I felt in the job I held between 2004 and 2009 (Kahn 1990), shown in the box outlined in bold in Figure 1.4.

I was born in England (the rural county of Lincolnshire) but moved with my parents to north Wales when I was very young, to be close to my father's family. I am an only child and I have a close relationship with my parents. I consider myself Welsh. I speak Welsh and I have often worked in the language. My dad is retired from a social housing job in local government and my mum has worked for a church for nine years in a job which she loves, after quarter of a century working in an outdoor education centre run by a local authority. When I was a child, money was very tight. I am the first to go to university in my family, and over the years I have secured a number of academic and professional qualifications. My mum regularly tells acquaintances that 'Natalie is always investing in herself' by completing qualifications. My dad says I should be careful 'not to overdue the brain work' and wonders if I enjoy myself enough. Work has been an important source of identity for me and during my 20s and early 30s I moved frequently to take up new jobs. I think I have looked to work to give my life, and my self, meaning and a sense of purpose.

**Figure 1.4: My professional and career timeline, 1990 to 2012**



Notes: There is no association between the size of the boxes and the events referenced. Layout inspired by Shuck and Wollard (2010).

**KEY:**

Solid line, fine: Career events

Solid line, thick: Period of my career that receives particular attention in this study

Dotted line: Political and governance events in Wales

I think that being an only child and growing up amongst older people, along with my personality type as described later, has been highly influential on me as an adult. From the interview extract below, I can see how important work, and being good has been in our family:

**Research Student:** ....going back to your childhood, did you see it as a happy time, what part of your childhood do you think has affected who you are today?

**Me:** OK, uhm, I think, thinking about it, the word that is coming through to me is lots of time on my own, in that I was an only child....I remember my dad, this would have been the early 1970's, when work was very thin on the ground up here, that he worked in south Wales during the week. He stopped farming in the early 70s and then he drove taxis, he sold black and white televisions, I used to go out with him in the evenings selling these black and white televisions.....My mum was working, her job at the outdoor education centre was in the afternoons so I would get picked up from school by my Welsh grandmother, taken to her house, and get picked up later, so one of the things is that I have always been around older people.....Uhm, I think it's also tended to make me quite quiet in the sense that I think that I grew up in an era that was about being seen and not heard, and to be a good child, sitting quietly, probably, that was something that they liked, really....So being quite obedient, basically..... I think that, uhm, childhood experiences, I feel that is probably where I've got the idea, or the belief, from that working hard, being good, not asking for much, is probably the answer to all things.....

Interview conducted with me by Bangor University research student, August 2011

Where I talk in the above interview extract about my dad going to south Wales for work in the 1970s reminds me about one of the principal characteristics of north Wales. This part of Wales has struggled economically for many decades and the public sector has been an important source of employment. The last few years has seen extensive growth in public sector employment (WAG 2009) which is currently being reversed. This issue is discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

During the last ten years, I have become interested in the Myers Briggs personality profiling system which allows individuals to categorise themselves according to one of 16 types made up of four dimensions, based on theoretical work undertaken by Carl Jung (Myers and Briggs Foundation 2011). I associate myself with the INTJ personality type. This type is considered to be one of the most independent, sceptical and analytical:

“INTJ’s have original minds and great drive for implementing their ideas and achieving their goals. Quickly see patterns in external events and develop long-range explanatory perspectives. When committed, organize a job and carry it through. Skeptical and independent, have high standards of competence and performance – for themselves and others.” (The Myers Briggs Foundation, 2011).

I think that the personality type that I associate myself with has implications for how I am carrying out this research. As the following extract from one of the interviews I asked fellow research students to conduct with me demonstrates, taking into account others’ opinions and needs has not always been a strong point of mine, which can be an issue for INTJ’s:

*Me: ....because at the time that I went there, to the Council, I didn’t really want to be doing other peoples’ bits and bobs, as I viewed it, I had my own agenda, and I was being told that I was cherry picking, which I probably was. But hey, it was a time to pick cherries!*

Interview conducted with me by Bangor University research student, August 2011

Recalling Light’s comments (2010) on the position of the researcher, I offer the following reflections on the implications for this research of my personal biography, prior experiences, attitudes, values and agenda. I have placed great emphasis on paid work, working hard and meeting my commitments. I set high standards for myself and others, and only privilege some people with my respect. This may mean that I have only taken certain peoples’ views and opinions into account when conducting this research. I have a tendency to jump to conclusions and not seek out evidence to support or deny these, which may be problematic for the PhD. I feel that I have attempted to address this weakness by seeking out alternative opinions and being rigorous in examining the data I have collected, discussing my conclusions with my supervisors, and ensuring that the conclusions that I come to are supported by empirical or literature evidence.



In the next section, I describe why I decided to study employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service using an extract from an autobiographical interview conducted with me as part of this research. The purpose of the interview was to describe my biography and how I thought it might effect my approach to this research. The questions were co-constructed by me and the interviewer (explained more fully in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.1, data item C).

### 1.3.2 Choosing to pursue a PhD and study employee engagement as a topic

**Research Student:** *What made you choose employee engagement as your research topic?*

**Me:** *Well I took it, I suppose, my research, to make up for the engagement that I had lost. In that I got this job at the council, and uhm, I never thought I would end up working there, because it's got a very distinctive culture. I was shocked that I worked there and I really enjoyed it but I was there for a specific job, which was to establish a successful research unit, which I did do, but what I found was that that wore off...*

**Research Student:** *So how long? Because I remember when you were engaged. When I first met you, you were engaged, that was 2005.*

**Me:** *I started in May 2004 and I would say that I was pretty engaged until September/October 2006. Two and a quarter years, I tend to get bored after two and a quarter...I'm getting on for two and a quarter now at the University!*

**Research Student:** *I can remember meeting you in 2005 and you were fully engaged. How long were you there for? ...Well I think for the last two years you were there you were definitely unengaged. Why were you engaged and why did you become unengaged?*

**Me:** *I was engaged because I found a job that I loved. I was so well suited to what was asked for. Set up a unit, give it direction, get it working and there was, uhm a lot of freedom, because the senior managers had been told basically to have a unit like mine, but as for what work was actually going to be done, who by, and how, they just didn't know.*

**Research Student:** *So you were engaged for a couple of years, and so why were you unengaged then? You started off having this freedom, there was a lot of autonomy there, so where did it change?*

**Me:** *Uhm, well I went through a period of personal difficulty. I had fallen in love and the relationship hadn't gone the way I wanted it to go.*

**Research Student:** They never do! (laughing)

**Me:** Uhm, so I was feeling very down personally for a period from late 2006 onwards, but in 2006 I had worked on this fantastic project which was all about using my skills, all about being wide ranging, so that suited me, I could totally be myself, and I think there was probably a down time after that project because you don't have those sorts of projects more than once every five years. What was I going to do after that? And I had had this big love affair which didn't go anywhere, so what was I going to do after that too? So there was a real vacuum I think...I think I had mastered the job, so all the things, the mastering of the job, had been done. So the work started to look all the same and there was nothing new to look forward to. And the economic environment was starting to change, with job cuts, and I had this vacuum which was personal and professional so I was trying to find projects that would fill that vacuum.

**Me:** So I was exploring and trying to find something that would give me that kind of buzz again....I did some training but that didn't lead to anything....I applied for jobs within the Council and outside but didn't get shortlisted. I always get shortlisted! I started to look around for a secondment, and I thought that maybe a secondment would help, let's explore that. And I ended up at the University on a part time secondment.

**Research Student:** So how did that lead to the PhD....how did you find yourself doing a PhD in employee engagement then?

**Me:** ...the Chief Exec at the council was setting up an internal employee engagement working group and I asked her if I could be on it, hoping that it would re engage me, re ignite me. And I sat on that and thought this is a waste of time. But it did set off some questions in my mind uhm, and that's all I can really say.

**Research Student:** Why did you want to do an ethnographic study?

**Me:** Uhm, because I wanted to demonstrate that there was value in using ethnography in the public services. We used a lot of surveys, and the information derived from surveys seemed to be the only stuff that mattered and even that wasn't good enough a lot of the time, and I wanted....I wanted to make the point that people in surveys and in focus groups sometimes tell us what they think we want to hear. Whereas if you are observing someone, you're amongst people, then you're more likely to see how they really live, and we need to be designing policies on the basis of how people live, not how they say they do, or how we want them to. So that was the idea behind doing ethnographic. Uhm and I wanted to do it on an organization, I knew that. Uhm, but other than that, I didn't really know much else.

Interview conducted with me by Bangor University research student, August 2011

In the above extract, I explain how a high degree of personal engagement at work that I initially felt with my role as a middle manager (Kahn 1990) was replaced by a sense of boredom, lack of challenge, frustration and dissatisfaction with my job. My interviewer detected a change in me between 2007 and 2009, from being “fully engaged” to “unengaged” although at the time, I recall describing to my line manager that I was starting to feel “demotivated”. I don’t consider the thoughts, feelings and behaviours that I exhibited during the latter part of my job concur with Kahn’s definition of personal disengagement at work (1990) described as “...an evacuation or suppression of their expressive and energetic selves in discharging role obligations....they become physically uninvolved in tasks, cognitively unvigilant and emotionally disconnected from others in ways that hide what they think and feel, their creativity, their beliefs and values.” (p702). I feel that rather than become disengaged from my role, I moved from experiencing a strong sense of personal engagement at work over a relatively extended period (two and a half years) to a weaker sense of engagement which I experienced more infrequently than had been the case at the beginning of my job. I only perceived a sense of personal disengagement, in the Kahn sense, during the last few months of my employment when I had decided to leave my position and became more cognitively and emotionally disconnected from others at work. I feel that I have experienced a greater degree of personal disengagement during the first two years from my role as a research student than I did in my job (Kahn 1990). I describe William Kahn’s conception of personal engagement at work more fully in the next Section on literature.

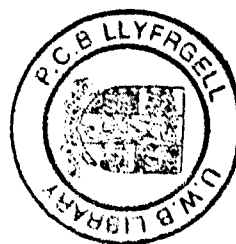
## **1.4 An overview of the literature on employee engagement**

### **1.4.1 Introduction**

In the previous section, I describe the sense of connection I felt between myself and my last job. At the time I would not have described this as engagement. However, a strong sense of connectedness between an individual and their work role would be recognised by some scholars as a characteristic of employee engagement. In this section I outline the primary ways in which employee engagement has been conceptualised in both the academic and UK oriented practitioner literatures.

Before embarking on a review of the employee engagement literature itself, it is worth mentioning that much of the academic and practitioner literature on the subject is predicated on a non conflicted view of the employment relationship (Harter et al 2002, Gatenby et al 2009, Alfes et al 2010, Shuck et al 2011, Gourlay et al 2012) where "...two way promises and commitments between employers and staff are understood and are fulfilled" (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, p9). In the 'mainstream' school of management studies, employees and managers are assumed to share interests and the benefits for staff from employee engagement initiatives are beyond question (MacLeod and Clarke 2009). Indeed when I asked the HR Director at the organisation that took part in this study how employee engagement interventions benefited the workforce, I felt strongly that this senior manager thought I had asked a very stupid question.

Scholars associated with the 'critical' school of management studies take issue with assumptions found in the more mainstream research that employment relations and the link between the management of the workforce and performance is unproblematic. According to the critical school, the relationship between managers and the workforce is subject to "two seemingly conflicting requirements: to cut costs to the bone and yet at the same time promote the commitment necessary for innovation." (Sisson and Purcell 2010, p84). Even in the public sector, often viewed as a model employer (Bach 2011), recent workforce cuts, pay freezes and changes to pension arrangements have been accompanied by statements of the importance of the public sector workforce and calls for more commitment and greater employee engagement (Bach 2011, Welsh Assembly Government 2009). George (2010) notes that it should not be assumed that "what is good for managers is good for rank and file employees...employees' interests are often conflicting with the interests of managers and other stakeholders such as shareholders...(p54). Another source of tension for employees is between 'living to work' and 'working to live'. The employee engagement literature's focus on social exchange as an lens for understanding how employees reciprocate their employer's investments overlooks what George calls:



“economic instrumentality...work is a necessity for the vast majority of workers...essentially employees have an exchange relationship with their employers – they contribute valuable inputs including their time and effort and in return receive important outcomes such as pay. Few people would continue in their jobs, even if they were not economically dependent on them, if they were not paid...if highly engaged employees contribute more, shouldn't they be paid more? The research on engagement is largely silent on this issue and perhaps implicitly assumes that high engagement serves as its own reward for employees. I question whether this is a viable assumption.” (2010, p55).

The economic instrumentality of work alone might help to explain the dominance and persistence of lower rather than higher levels of engagement amongst UK employees (CIPD 2011). As managers have to contend with the tensions arising from attempting to reassure staff they are valued by the organisation when those very staff being subjected to cost cutting measures, human resource professionals also find themselves caught between responding to the needs of employees in the tradition of personnel management or serving managerial goals informed by shareholder priorities (Guest 1987 in Boselie et al 2009, Thompson 2011). While there has been a degree of rapprochement between the mainstream and critical views of management (Janssens and Steyaert 2009 in Boselie et al 2009), scholars from the employment relations field in particular have called for a “close and sometimes critical look at the engagement industry” arguing that engagement as both a state and organisational process should be viewed with rather less rose tinted spectacles (Purcell 2010, Welbourne 2011 in Purcell 2012) than is currently the norm in much of the academic and practitioner literature.

Employee engagement has been informed by a number of theoretical positions, principally from the psychology and sociology fields. Psychological perspectives have dominated our understanding of employee engagement thus far, although human resource development literatures now appear to be catching up, albeit from the mainstream perspective as outlined in the previous paragraphs (Shuck 2011). The exchange nature of employee engagement has been conceptualised on the basis of social exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity (Blau 1964 and Gouldner 1960 in Kahn 1990), psychological contract (Rousseau 1998) and attachment and detachment from roles (Goffman 1969 in Kahn 1990). People's attachment to their work has

been understood with theories of motivation (Maslow 1954 in Myers 2001) and organisational commitment (Meyer and Allen 1991).

The reasons why organisations undertake employee engagement activities and the consequences for employees appears to be less well informed theoretically, although human resource management (HRM), of which employee engagement could be considered an element, has been understood principally by three organisation oriented theories: contingency, resource based view of the firm and the Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) theory of high performance work systems (Boselie et al 2005). It would also be possible to use New Public Management as a model for understanding how employee engagement is imported from the private sector and promoted for use in the public sector (Bach and Givan 2011).

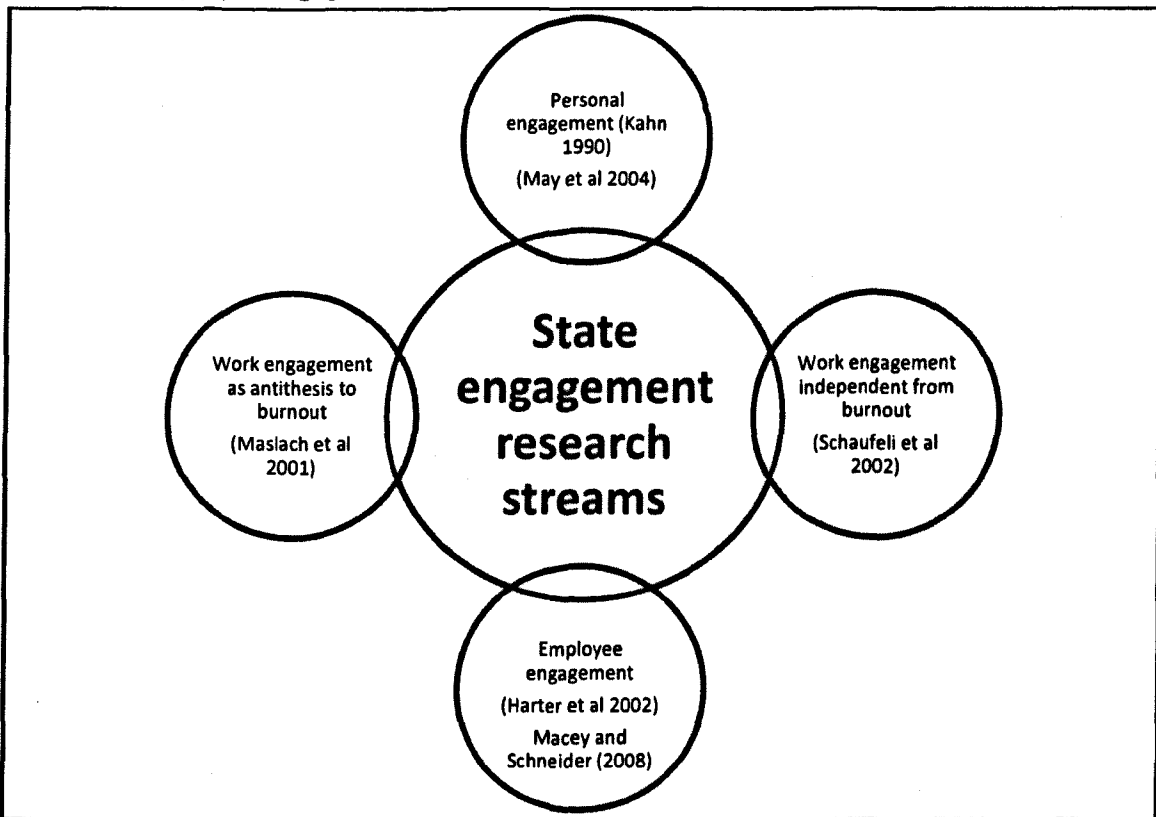
Employee engagement has been conceptualised in two ways: as a state experienced by individuals, and as an approach undertaken by and within organisations to generate desirable business outcomes. I first discuss the literature on engagement as a personal state, followed by an evaluation of the literature on employee engagement as an activity within organisations.

#### *1.4.2 Employee engagement as a positive individual level state*

Engagement as a state experienced by individuals has received more attention in the academic literature than engagement as a practice undertaken by organisations. Two studies have reviewed the academic literature on engagement from primarily the state perspective: Simpson (2009) and Shuck (2011). Both have identified similar streams for three of four streams of research they identify (personal engagement, work engagement, employee engagement) but Shuck also identifies a literature where engagement can be with a job and with an organisation (Saks 2006). I have selected Simpson's work for more discussion here as it provides a particularly valuable discussion of studies of state engagement. Using twenty studies (nineteen being quantitative hypothesis testing studies and all but two being cross sectional), four streams of state engagement research have been identified by Simpson (2009) as shown in Figure 1.5: personal engagement at work, work engagement as the antithesis of burnout, work engagement as a separate construct and employee engagement. The stream on personal engagement discusses in a broad sense the connection between an individual and their role at work while

two work engagement streams has a narrower focus on measuring three elements that are exhibited by an individual who is engaged with their work: vigour, dedication and absorption. The employee engagement stream relates to concepts that have associations with organisational benefits, which neither personal engagement or work engagement directly claim. I now intend to discuss the four streams of research in turn, beginning with personal engagement at work.

**Figure 1.5: Employee engagement as state literature: streams of research, Simpson 2009**



Source: Derived from Simpson (2009)

### 1.4.3 Personal engagement at work: the work of William Kahn

“Personal engagement is the simultaneous employment and expression of a person’s ‘preferred self’ in task behaviours that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive and emotional) and active full role performances.” (Kahn, 1990, p700)

When I started to engage with the academic literature on employee engagement in 2009, I found that a number of scholarly authors cited William Kahn as a key contributor to our understanding of personal engagement and disengagement at work (May et al 2004, Saks 2006, Macey and Schneider 2008, Simpson 2009). I have selected William Kahn's work as my primary although not exclusively, sensitising concept (Parker 1993) for this study for two reasons. At the time that I began this research, employee engagement as an area of academic investigation was undergoing transformation (from being mainly associated with psychology to one that was starting to be investigated by business and management scholars) with few theoretical frameworks other than William Kahn's work or the general theory of social exchange (Blau 1964 in Albrecht 2010) being identified. Since then, other theories and concepts such as organisational commitment (Meyer et al 2010 in Albrecht 2010), the Job Demands-Resources model (Mauno et al 2010 in Albrecht 2010), self determination theory (Albrecht 2010) and Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll 1989 in Albrecht 2010) have been offered as ways of understanding employee engagement as both an individual state and an activity pursued in organisations. Secondly, Kahn's concept of personal engagement at work (1990) is informed by a range of psychological and sociological frameworks which in my view transcends the micro (personal and individual level) focus of work engagement and the more macro level of business and management approaches to employee engagement. As I have sought to examine employee engagement at both the personal and organisational levels, Kahn offers one of the few multi-level frameworks that are available to do this.

Kahn is identified by Simpson as representing the first stream of state level engagement research. His work has also been cited in more practitioner oriented material (Alfes et al 2010), further underlining the importance of his contribution. Kahn developed the concept of 'personal engagement at work' from ethnographic research conducted in two small private sector organisations in the United States. In a personally engaged state, according to Kahn, an individual is able to bring of all of their self that they wish into the work role. Engaged employees in the Kahn sense are said to:

*"harness their full selves in active, complete work role performances by driving personal energy into physical, cognitive and emotional labors. Engaged individuals are described as being psychologically present, fully there, attentive, feeling, connected, integrated and focused in their role performances. They are open to themselves and others,*



connected to work and others, and bring their complete selves to perform.” (Kahn 1992, in Rich et al 2010, p819).

Personal engagement at work is characterised by positive thoughts, behaviours and feelings in the individual (Kahn 1990). I describe the experience of being in a state of work oriented engagement in an interview conducted with me by a fellow researcher, when I talk about what the state felt like to me when I was working in my management role in the Welsh Public Service. I related this experience to Kahn’s description of personal engagement at work once I had read his work during the early part of my doctoral studies. I would not have conceived employee engagement in this way while I was still working at the Council:

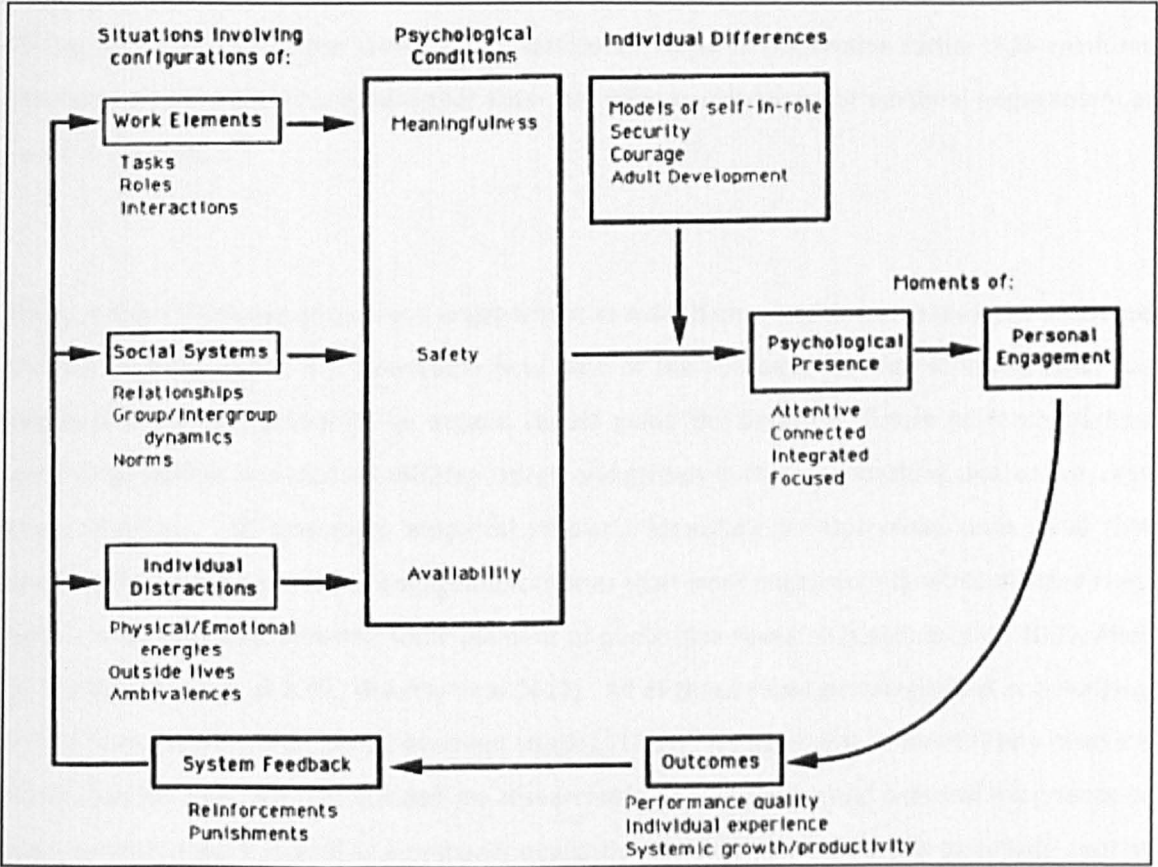
*Me: “It was amazing actually. To feel so grounded in something, being left to get on with it and set the whole thing up, which was a bit scary at times...it was a very busy time and I loved being busy, made me feel needed. I’d get up early, get to work early, be on the ball, want to tackle things, going to see people, finding out, very active, very energetic, running down the corridors in my high heels to get somewhere. You couldn’t stop me.”*

(Interview conducted with me by Bangor University research student, August 2011)

As well as identifying the characteristics of the state of engagement, Kahn identified three psychological conditions that influence an individual’s willingness to engage with their work: meaningfulness, safety and availability: “Psychological meaningfulness is the sense of return on investments of the self-in-role performances, psychological safety is the sense of being able to show and employ the self without fear of negative consequences, and psychological availability is the sense of possessing physical, emotional and psychological resources for investing the self in role performances.” (Kahn 1990, p705). These three conditions have been operationalised by subsequent researchers (May et al 2004, Rich et al 2010) who have found support for their relevance and influence on engagement at work. In a paper from 1992, Kahn argued that the three psychological conditions are mediated via a state that an individual experiences as psychological presence, which then provides the grounding for the individual to employ their self in moments of personal engagement at work. I show Kahn’s model of psychological presence Figure 1.6 where personal engagement at work is manifested on the basis of an

individual’s conscious and unconscious internal calculations based on their perceptions of the work environment and their personal characteristics (Kahn 1990, 2010).

**Figure 1.6: Personal engagement at work: conceptual framework (Kahn 1992, p340)<sup>4</sup>**



While empirical research has tested the three psychological conditions that Kahn identifies (May et al 2004, Rich et al 2010), these operationalisations have not incorporated the state of psychological presence as a mediator, and neither have they tested for the impact of individual differences, which are considered to be highly influential by Kahn. This is a major omission as Kahn himself states that the three psychological conditions for personal engagement at work may not lead to individuals entering the state due to variations in their personal characteristics and “even if organization members experience their situations as meaningful and safe and themselves as available they may still be rendered partially absent by the subconscious models they carry, insecurity or lack of courage, or the developmental limits on how present they are able to be.” (Kahn 1992, p341). The impact of individual differences on engagement is clearly an area requiring academic attention as a matter of priority, as the current body of research may

<sup>4</sup> This reproduction of Kahn’s model has been taken from the original journal article, and I have not been able to improve on its quality.

be placing undue emphasis on conditions, rather than personal characteristics, as drivers of engagement. Kahn himself does not pay any regard to institutional context (Boon et al 2009) or labour market conditions which some critical scholars cite as very likely to affect the 'performance' of management initiatives to increase commitment (Cushen and Thompson 2012). In Chapter 3 of my study, I provide evidence of how the economic and political context facing the workforce of the Welsh Public Service are likely to undermine rather than reinforce the three psychological conditions that Kahn identifies as necessary for personal engagement at work to flourish.

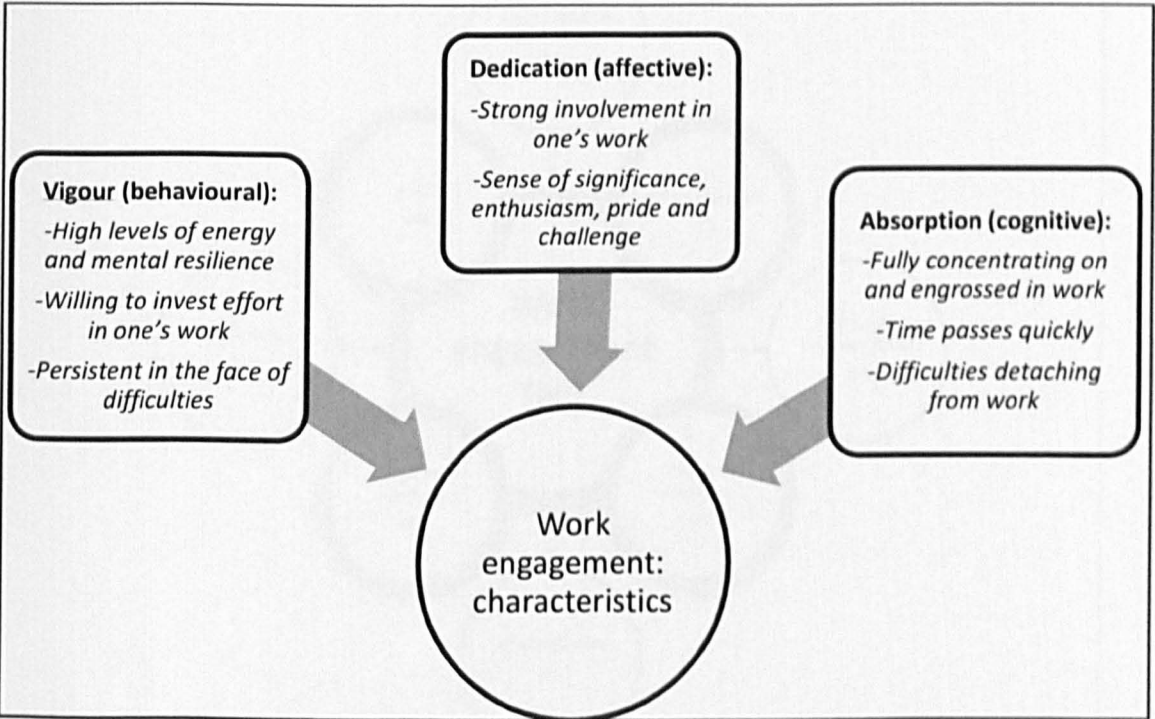
Despite Kahn's concept of personal engagement at work being cited in the majority of academic studies on the subject, it is noticeable how little of the research that has followed Kahn has adopted any of the principles he argued should guide the design of future research studies: multi level (taking into account different levels and groups in the organisation), qualitative, case study methods. Of seventeen empirical studies I identified for this study since 1990 that specifically examine employee engagement (rather than work engagement), while all have cited Kahn's work only four included some element of qualitative research (Gatenby et al 2009, Alfes et al 2010, Shuck et al 2011, Gourlay et al 2012). All of these could be categorised as belonging to the mainstream school of management studies. I have not been able to identify any research other than my own that has included the researcher's autobiography and personal experience of engagement at work as well as a primarily qualitative study which has sought to include staff at different levels not only within a single organisation but across the public sector as a whole.

#### *1.4.4 Work engagement as the opposite of burnout and as a separate construct*

As personal engagement at work (Kahn 1990, 1992) concerns the relationship between an individual and their work role, 'work engagement' also focuses on the individual and their work. Also a positive individual level experience, work engagement first appears in the academic literature as the positive antithesis to burnout (Maslach et al 2001), measured by reverse, and low, scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory's dimensions of exhaustion and cynicism and high scores on the efficacy dimension. Work engagement has been negatively associated with burnout in several studies (Halbesleben 2010).

Work engagement as a concept distinct from burnout has been subject to considerable scrutiny and examination, in particular in relation to its distinctiveness from other work related constructs such as burnout (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2007), organisational commitment (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006) and workaholism (Schaufeli et al 2006). Work engagement comprises three elements: vigour being high levels of energy and a willingness to persist, dedication being a sense of pride and enthusiasm in one’s work, and absorption being a sense of time flying when the individual is working, as shown in Figure 1.7 (Schaufeli et al 2002). I have not been able to identify any empirical research that has examined the crossover between the three components of work engagement and the characteristics of personal engagement at work. However, both forms of engagement are characterised by affective, cognitive and behavioural aspects and are concerned with the state of engagement at the individual level. The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) is one of the principal instruments for measuring work engagement, and consists of seventeen survey items and has been used internationally in a wide range of workforces (Schaufeli and Bakker 2010). Work engagement has been found to be positively associated with increased organisational commitment, performance, better employee health and fewer staff indicating they wish to leave their job (Halbesleben 2010).

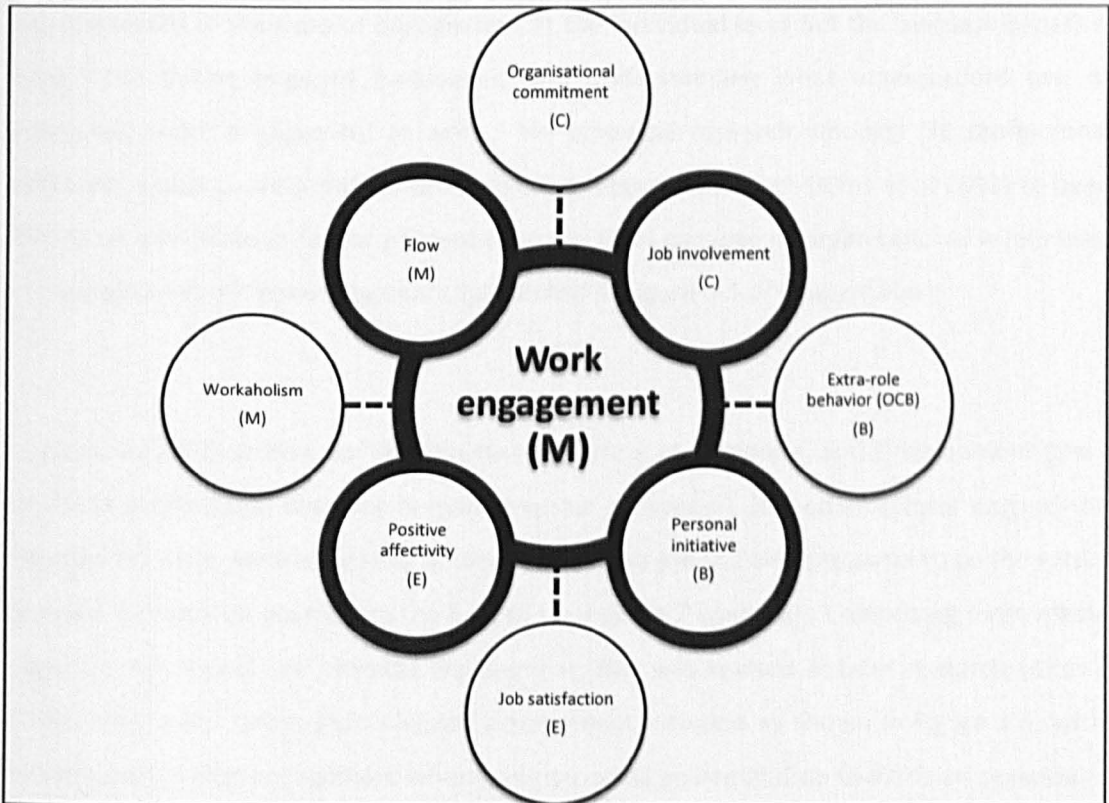
**Figure 1.7: Components of work engagement**



Source: Derived from Schaufeli et al 2002

Schaufeli and Bakker (2010) found that work engagement was conceptually distinct from extra role behaviour, organisational commitment, job satisfaction and workaholism, and partially overlapped with personal initiative, job involvement, positive affectivity and flow as shown in Figure 1.8. Unfortunately the distinctions at the conceptual level have not been borne out empirically, with overlaps found between work engagement, job satisfaction and workaholism, with personal initiative, job involvement and organisational commitment being found to be distinct (Schaufeli and Bakker 2010). It is only organisational commitment that has been found to be both conceptually and empirically distinctive from work engagement. This is understandable due to the way that work engagement has been defined, as involvement in one’s own job. However, for the practitioners that have taken part in my research, the distinction between engagement and organisational commitment is not so clear cut as it is for work engagement scholars and increasingly for business and management scholars (Alfes et al 2010). I found there to be overlap between conceptions of employee engagement and organisational commitment, with many respondents identifying the organisation as an important component in their definitions of employee engagement.

**Figure 1.8: Potential conceptual overlap between work engagement and other constructs**



Source: Derived from Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010 in Bakker and Leiter, 2010. Note: Letters in brackets in each of the above circles relates to the nature of the concept (M=multidimensional (behavioural, emotional and cognitive aspects), E=emotional state, B=behavioural state, C=cognitive state).



#### 1.4.5 *Employee engagement*

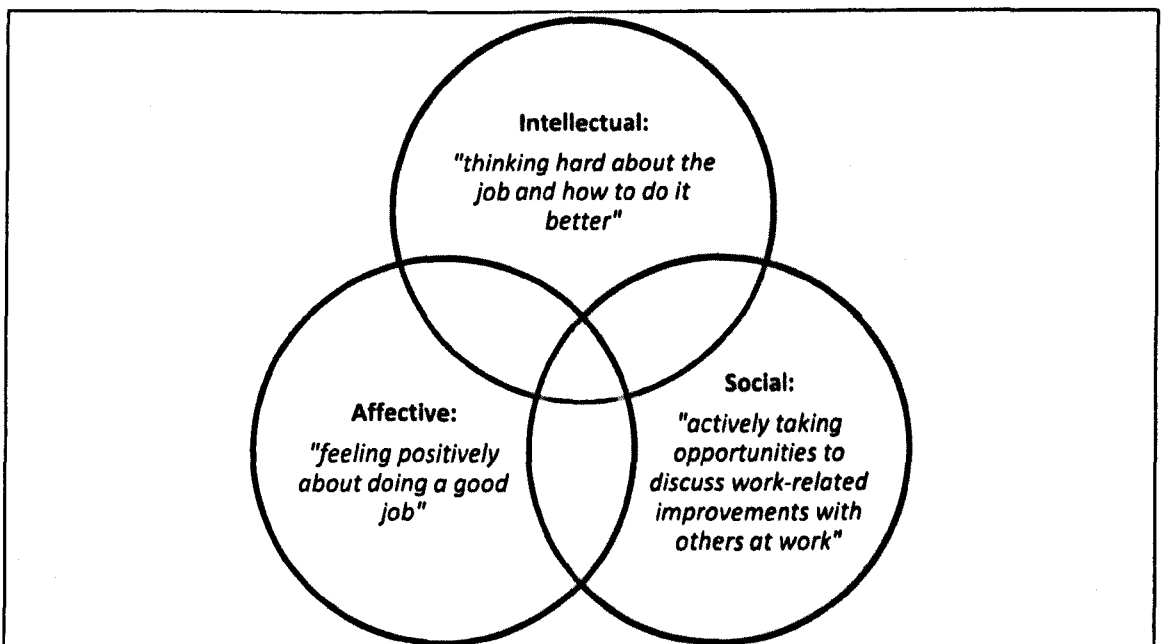
The term 'employee engagement' appeared in the academic literature in 2002 in work by Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002), being defined as "the individual's involvement and satisfaction as well as enthusiasm for work" (p269). The definition of employee engagement offered by Harter et al (2002) concerns an employee's relationship with their work, thereby reflecting a focus on the individual also shared by the other themes of engagement research (Simpson 2009). Using the results of staff surveys from business units across forty two companies using the Gallup Q12 instrument, the focus of their research is on demonstrating the business benefits of employee engagement and exhibits an organisational focus that is not evident in the other streams of research identified by Simpson (2009). An example of a study from the mainstream management studies school where employment relations are free from tensions and complexities, Harter et al (2002) found that engagement was positively associated with greater customer satisfaction, productivity, profit, employee turnover, and fewer accidents at work (Harter et al 2002). According to the authors, organisations should seek to manage "four antecedent elements" (Simpson 2009, p1020) comprising supervisor support for staff, feedback, clear work specifications and adequate resources and equipment to do the job to encourage greater employee engagement. Harter et al's view (2002) is that organisations are less interested in the state of engagement at the individual level but the business benefits that arise from having engaged employees, and understanding what organisations can do to encourage more engagement at work. My empirical research amongst HR professionals in particular would confirm this tendency in contemporary research (Alfes et al 2012) to overlook individual level state in favour of identifying the ideal package of organisational level measures to strengthen employee engagement (presented in Figure 5.1 of Chapter Five).

Truss et al (2006) writing for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (the UK's foremost professional body for human resource personnel) defined employee engagement as "passion for work, involves feeling positive about your job as being prepared to go the extra mile to make sure you do your job to the best of your ability." (page xi). Comprising three elements: cognitive, emotional and physical engagement, this was revised in later research (Alfes et al 2010), with social rather than physical engagement included as shown in Figure 1.9, with the authors stating that engagement when understood as an orientation towards an organisation is to be conceived as a separate, albeit associated, entity to personal engagement at work. Other research would also conceive "physical engagement", included as one of the three dimensions

of employee engagement in the 2006 report, as reflecting the separate construct of 'organisational citizenship behaviour' (OCB) (Organ and Ryan 1995).

Other than Kahn (1990), who asked individuals to describe moments of personal engagement and disengagement at work, survey methods have become the dominant means of measuring the extent to which individuals exhibit the different aspects of employee engagement and in practical attempts to increase engagement. Most of these instruments (a selection are shown in Appendix Item 2) contain self reported items where the respondents rather than a third party indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree they feel, think or behave in an engaged way. In the academic literature particular attention has been given to the measurement of work engagement by survey (Schaufeli et al 2002) rather than employee engagement which has for the most part been the domain of consultancy providers, or academic teams that have been commissioned by professional bodies to conduct workforce surveys (Truss et al 2006, Alfes et al 2010). Over reliance on surveys by practitioners has been cautioned with surveys needing to "be effective and well designed with the confidence of the employees as well as the senior managers." (Purcell 2010, p6).

**Figure 1.9: The dimensions of employee engagement, Alfes et al 2010**



Source: Derived from Alfes et al 2010

In conclusion, employee engagement as an individual level state can be seen within a framework of several streams of research that have emerged relatively recently (Simpson 2009) but also influenced by potentially overlapping constructs that have a longer heritage such as job involvement and organisational commitment. Employee engagement as a state in its various forms has been associated with positive outcomes for individuals or organisations. In the academic literature, there appears to have been a focus on linking the concept in particular to the sense of connectedness between an individual and their work, with engagement with an organisation also being initially as a component of engagement (Truss et al 2006) but increasingly viewed as a separate construct (Saks 2006, Alfes et al 2010) which demonstrates a closing of the gap between the psychology and business/management literatures. Survey methods have become the primary tool for researchers and organisations to gauge the level of overall engagement, and its affective, intellectual, and social dimensions, in addition to measuring its antecedents (such as the work environment) and its consequences.

Having discussed engagement as a personal level state, I now consider how employee engagement has been understood as an activity within organisations.

#### *1.4.6 Engagement as an organisational aim and process*

Against a backdrop of an “engagement deficit” (MacLeod and Clarke 2009), employee engagement has also been conceived as a goal for organisations worldwide as well as an positive individual level state. In order to achieve the goal of (more and better) employee engagement, organisations have been urged to adopt processes to increase engagement amongst their employees, the majority of whom have been found in numerous surveys to be moderately rather than strongly engaged (Truss et al 2006, MacLeod and Clarke 2009). A UK Government sponsored review of employee engagement viewed employee engagement as “a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organisation’s goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well being.” (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, p9) reflecting a focus on engagement as an activity to generate more alignment between staff and their organisations (evidence for which I have found in my study which I report in Chapter Three and Six). However, engagement as an organisational aim has a different pedigree to state level engagement, in that it is found primarily in non-academic literature. This is changing with more attention being given



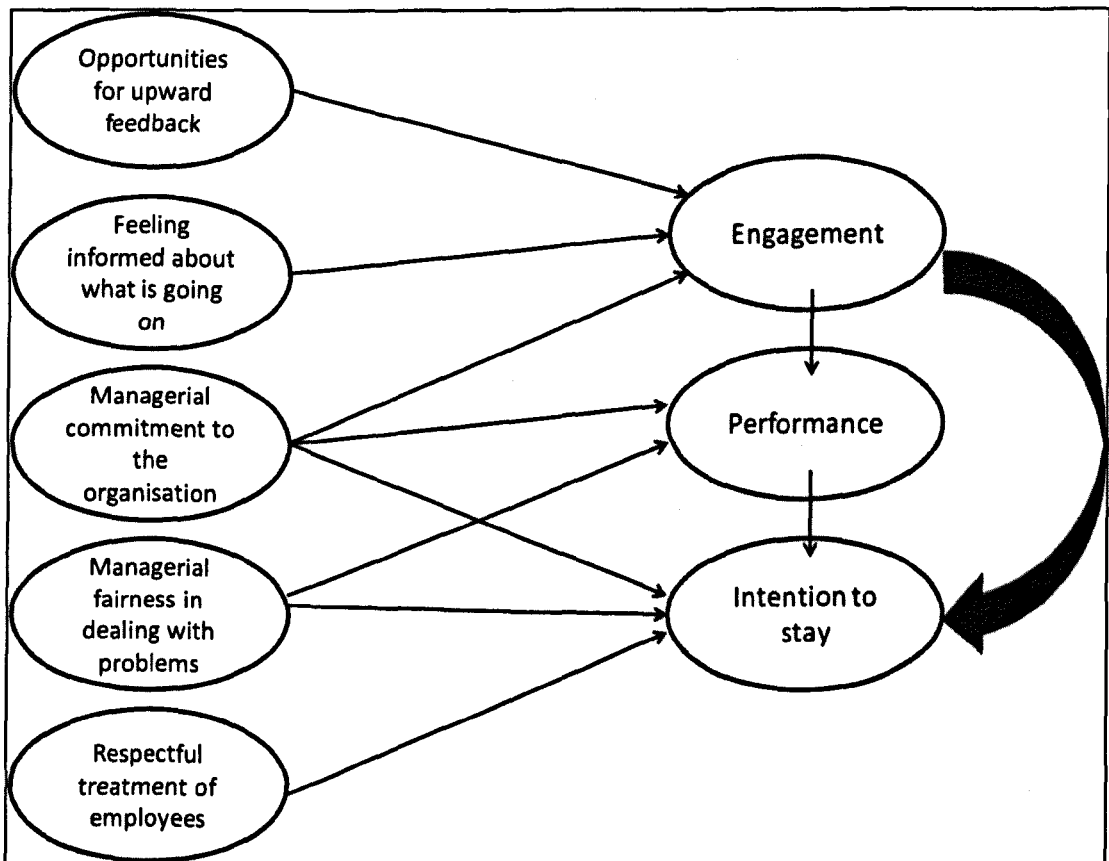
to employee engagement as an activity and as an ambition by organisations by business and management scholars, who continue to draw mainly upon the state engagement definitions (Alfes et al 2010, Shuck 2011). As the principal conceptual framework for this research, I use Kahn's definition of personal engagement at work which is an individual level concept where the focus is on the individual and their work role, rather than engagement with other foci such as the organisation, co-workers or a profession. There appears a gap, and an increasing one, between scholars who conceive employee engagement as a state for individuals, and practitioners, with a focus on engagement as a process pursued by organisations to deliver outcomes.

Numerous models have been developed, at individual and organisational level, to assist with the development of engagement amongst employees. The UK government commissioned review of employee engagement identified four factors considered crucial for organisations to encourage engagement: a strong narrative about the purpose and direction of the organisation, managers who are committed to staff engagement, opportunities for staff to voice their opinions about their jobs and the organisation, and behaviours amongst staff that are consistent with stated values (MacLeod and Clarke 2009). These factors have been identified on the basis of extensive consultations with a range of stakeholders, but have not been founded on frameworks such as personal engagement at work (Kahn 1990, 1992) or work engagement (Schaufeli et al 2002). They appear more closely aligned with the approach taken by Harter et al (2002) to identify conditions that organisations can influence rather than being concerned with the experience of engagement at the personal level.

A UK level study of engagement (Truss et al 2006) found that engagement levels were influenced by an individual's personal characteristics and contextual factors such as experiences of work, management support and clarity of organisational leadership and vision. While a number of personal characteristics were taken into account in the research such as age, gender, education, dependents, ethnic group and disability status, personality is not a factor that is taken into account. Using regression analysis, five managerial level characteristics and interventions were found to be particularly, although not exclusively, important in supporting engagement, as shown in Figure 1.10 on the next page, reproduced from Truss et al (2006). These five factors were significantly associated with individual performance (as reported by individual employees) and intention to stay as well as levels of engagement. Enabling staff to

voice their opinions to more senior staff in the organisation was found to be the most important factor in explaining differences in engagement. The four other most important factors comprise making sure staff felt they knew what was going on in the organisation, a perception amongst staff that they had a manager who was committed to the organisation, managers who were perceived to deal fairly with workplace problems, and managers who also treated other employees respectfully. The perceptions of senior and line managers held by employees is clearly very important for engagement and it is interesting to note that this research indicates it is public sector workers who are most likely to have least trust and confidence in their senior managers.

**Figure 1.10: Model of engagement, performance and retention, Truss et al 2006 p39**



#### **1.4.7 Conclusion**

Employee engagement has been conceived as a positive state that individuals experience, and as a goal to be pursued in and by organisations. The presence of these parallel streams of knowledge has been noted (Francis and Reddington 2011, Shuck 2011). Both have been associated in mainstream management research with positive benefits for the individual and for organisations although critical scholars have questioned the lack of emphasis on the tensions within the employment relationship between increasing commitment from workers and reducing employee costs. The operationalisation of personal engagement in the academic literature has failed to incorporate individual differences, which have been argued are a crucial element in the engagement process (Kahn 1992) and very few studies have endeavoured to enact Kahn's principles for qualitative, multi level case study research. In this study, I draw upon Kahn's conception of personal engagement at work as my principal sensitising concept for understanding conceptions, management and experiences of employee engagement, being one of "those background ideas that inform the overall research problem" (Charmaz 2003 in Bowen 2006) to make a contribution towards re-balancing (Boselie et al 2009) the body of academic knowledge towards qualitative case study research as promoted by Kahn (1992).

#### **1.5 How I consider my study meets with Bangor University's criteria for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

On the next page in Figure 1.10, I consider how my research meets Bangor University's four criteria for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, as set out in its Regulations for research degrees (Bangor University 2011).

**Figure 1.11: Fit with Bangor University's criteria for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Bangor University 2011)**

| Criteria   | How my research has met the criteria   |
|--|--|
| <p>An ability to create and interpret new knowledge through original research or other advanced scholarship. The work must be at the forefront of the discipline, of a quality to satisfy peer review, and must merit publication.<br/>(Paragraph 13, point i)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have conducted empirical research using mixed methods (described in Chapter 2) which has involved a comprehensive review of employee engagement literature and a research design that has been reviewed by my supervisors which has generated and synthesised data from several constituencies.</li> <li>• I explain in Chapter 2 how I have sought the input of other researchers and stakeholders (public management, employee engagement and Wales focused conferences, student presentations, and I have provided feedback to practitioners).</li> <li>• My work has satisfied peer review through acceptance into international conference proceedings and an ESRC sponsored doctoral symposium on employee engagement.</li> </ul> |
| <p>Acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice.<br/>(Paragraph 13, point ii)</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using the search strategies described in Chapter Two, I have gained access to both scholarly and practitioner literature, covering Wales, the UK and further afield,</li> <li>• I continue to monitor the academic literature (through the use of email alerts) for publications, and have updated my examination of the literature to include publications up to and including May 2012.</li> </ul>  |
| <p>An ability to conceptualise, design and implement a research project and to adjust the project design in response to unforeseen circumstances.<br/>(Paragraph 13, point iii)</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have planned the research project in association with my supervisors, and produced a project plan (included as Appendix Item 3) to ensure that I have completed my research on time, and have collected sufficient data to provide a comprehensive 'answer' to my research question.</li> <li>• I have responded to difficulties that have arisen in the research (e.g. withdrawal of a case organisation) by finding alternatives and discussing options with my supervisors and other experienced researchers.</li> </ul>   |
| <p>A detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.<br/>(Paragraph 13, point iv)</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have developed experience in the use of the following methods in this study: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-survey (open question design),</li> <li>-observation,</li> <li>-documentary analysis and interrogation of published statistics and reports,</li> <li>-collection and analysis of autobiographical data,</li> <li>-focus groups and one to one interviews,</li> <li>-qualitative thematic analysis techniques.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>   |

## **1.6 Summary and conclusions**

In this Chapter I have introduced my research question and the approach that I have taken to carry out the project. Several factors including my research interests, biography, personality and 'engaged scholarship' have influenced my approach to this study. Deciding to adopt an autoethnographic approach has altered the focus of my research from being mainly concerned with employee engagement as an organisational approach to one where I am more interested in understanding an individual's state of engagement and how this can be managed at the personal level. I propose to draw upon my own personal experience of engagement at work as well as collect data from others in order to understand how employee engagement is conceived, managed and experienced in a sector of the Welsh economy which is under substantial pressure to reduce costs, adopt different ways of working and to provide high quality services. I have outlined how employee engagement can be conceived as both an individual level state and an approach taken within organisations, with both concepts being associated with benefits for employees and their employers. The tensions between managers seeking to gain the engagement of employees while at the same time reducing workforce costs is summarised. I have described how my research exhibits the characteristics of an analytic autoethnography (Anderson 2006) and demonstrate how this study is a competent piece of research according to Bangor University's criteria for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Bangor University 2011).

In the next Chapter, I describe how I have conducted my research into employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service.

## Chapter Two: How I have conducted this study

**20 June 2011**

*I thought I knew how to research. One of the effects of doing the PhD has been that I question my skills and abilities as a researcher a lot of the time. I end up forgetting the research experience that I have already, and that I have successfully managed other researchers. I often feel that my track record of research outside academia counts for little, and that has sapped my confidence.*

*Today I asked for advice from my supervisors about whether to cease further data collection. I have been taking a purposive sampling approach in the research and I have reached a point where I feel that I am generating relatively few new insights. I know there are going to be pros and cons to stopping now or carrying on, but that's the reality of conducting research. I want to move on to data analysis and produce a draft thesis by Christmas. Because I want to finish this part of my life and get on with the rest.*

*I wanted a yes or a no answer to my question. What I got was guidance on the need to demonstrate the arguments for and against ceasing data collection and whose framework was I going to use to demonstrate that the quality of the research was not going to be compromised by a lack of further data.*

*I know it was all meant constructively, but I could have cried when I got the response from my supervisors. I feel myself withdrawing from the PhD once more. If this is what it takes to be an 'independent researcher', you can keep it.*

## 2.1 Introduction

In this Chapter, I describe how I carried out this research, using a five step approach. I explain the idealist philosophical position that I adopt for this study which is concerned with establishing how staff make sense of employee engagement rather than a search for general laws about the concept. My approach is highly appropriate in a field accepted to be relatively immature theoretically and conceptually (Edmondson and McManus 2007) where exploratory research has been recommended (Kahn 1992, Truss 2012, Shuck 2011). I collected mainly qualitative data through observation, one to one and group interviews which I have analysed thematically (Scott Jones and Watt 2010). I conducted a survey of HR practitioners to generate conceptions of employee engagement and also examined corporate and government documents in order to understand the context of the Welsh Public Service. I have sought to conduct this research ethically by considering how my research could affect not only direct participants (i.e. respondents) but also family, friends and associates that might be identified by virtue of their relationship to me.

The purpose of this Chapter is to demonstrate how I have carried out my research on employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service. Firstly I discuss the philosophical perspective that I have adopted for this study and then I explain the five step process I employed to carry out the research itself.

### 2.1.1 *Why I have adopted an idealist philosophical perspective position for this research*

I used to think that producing knowledge was a straightforward matter. Studying with the Open University for my postgraduate diploma in social research methods changed all that (Redman et al 2003). I became aware of the scientific circuit of knowledge and the challenges made to its assumptions and its applicability to the study of social, rather than the natural, sciences (Smith, 1998). I learnt there were different schools of thought about how the world is and how it can be understood, and these ontological and epistemological 'paradigms' (Alexander et al 2008) contain very different views on the purposes of research. For positivists, research is conducted to inform the development of general laws and theories about how the world works, while interpretivists consider the purpose of research is to promote understanding of how people interpret the world through their imagination and language. To a positivist, employee engagement exists externally to the individual while to interpretivists, employee engagement is

given meaning, and constructed by people, either by mediating a 'real' world via their imaginations, or producing it themselves by way of their language (Easterby-Smith et al 2002).

Like Dalton (in Easterby-Smith et al 2002), I do not consider the positivist perspective to be an appropriate one for my study. Many studies to date (May et al 2004, Rich et al 2010, Shuck et al 2011) have been taken a positivist approach and have been concerned with establishing the 'facts' relating to employee engagement (how it is defined, what causes it and what are its consequences). There has been less scholarly attention given to the meaning of engagement to staff, employers and organisations supporting its development, which is how I would like to investigate the concept. The experience and management of employee engagement by individuals and organisations takes place in social settings, and is constructed not only in the workplace, but is taken home by individuals as experiences to share and discuss with people outside work. It is not therefore confined to one closed place where the impact of an intervention can be easily measured. It is not possible to isolate a single or very small number of factors to explain the practice and experience of engagement (Smith 1998) and this is reflected in the scholarly literature which often identifies a long list of conditions that affect engagement at work (Alfes et al 2012 for an example). In addition, I have been struck by the taken for granted assumption particularly in the practitioner literature that employee engagement is inherently positive. I would argue that values, as well as facts, are prominent in the study and practice of engagement. The practitioner literature is highly normative, and even some scholars have also remarked on this tendency within the work psychology discipline (George 2010). Unlike positivism informed researchers, I do not consider it possible to separate facts and values from each other in the examination of employee engagement (Smith 1998).

My research is not concerned with identifying general laws relating to employee engagement (as positivists would attempt), but to understand and to make sense of how it is practised, experienced, and why it is carried out at all. My preference is to take a non-positivist, and specifically an idealist perspective in this research. Idealism differs from the positivist view that we can make sense of the world without using the human imagination; that facts and values can be separated and that the social world is no different to the natural world and can be researched similarly:



“...idealists emphasise the creative and interpretative characteristics of human beings and the impossibility of social researchers ever fully removing their values from the study of social relations and processes....social research should be relevant to the problems of the day.” (Smith 1998, p173)

Scholars adopting a stream of idealism, known as interactionism, have argued that the only way to generate knowledge “about social situations is by studying the social actors directly and constructing an account of their actions and interactions based on the understandings brought to the actions and the interactions by the social actors themselves.” (Redman et al 2003, p62). Interactionists have been associated with small scale research in organisations, seeking to reveal the lived experience of individuals in social settings, through mainly, although not exclusively, qualitative methods. One such scholar is Erving Goffman, whose work is utilised by Kahn (1990) to inform his seminal work on personal engagement at work. I therefore intend to utilise the idealist informed interactionist philosophy as a framework for my research not only for its tenets but also given its use previously in the study of employee engagement by one of its primary scholars. An ethnographic approach, which is concerned with “studying everyday life in order to expose the dynamics of lived experience, with significant involvement from the researcher” (Taylor and Smith 2008, p8) is consistent with the interactionist perspective. My study also takes into account phenomenology, another idealist perspective, which seeks to understand the motives and context in which individuals operate, and seeks to understand taken for granted assumptions more so than the interactionist perspective (Smith 1998). I particularly seek to uncover motives and assumptions about managing employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service, in Chapters Five and Six of the dissertation.

### *2.1.2 The five step process for conducting this research*

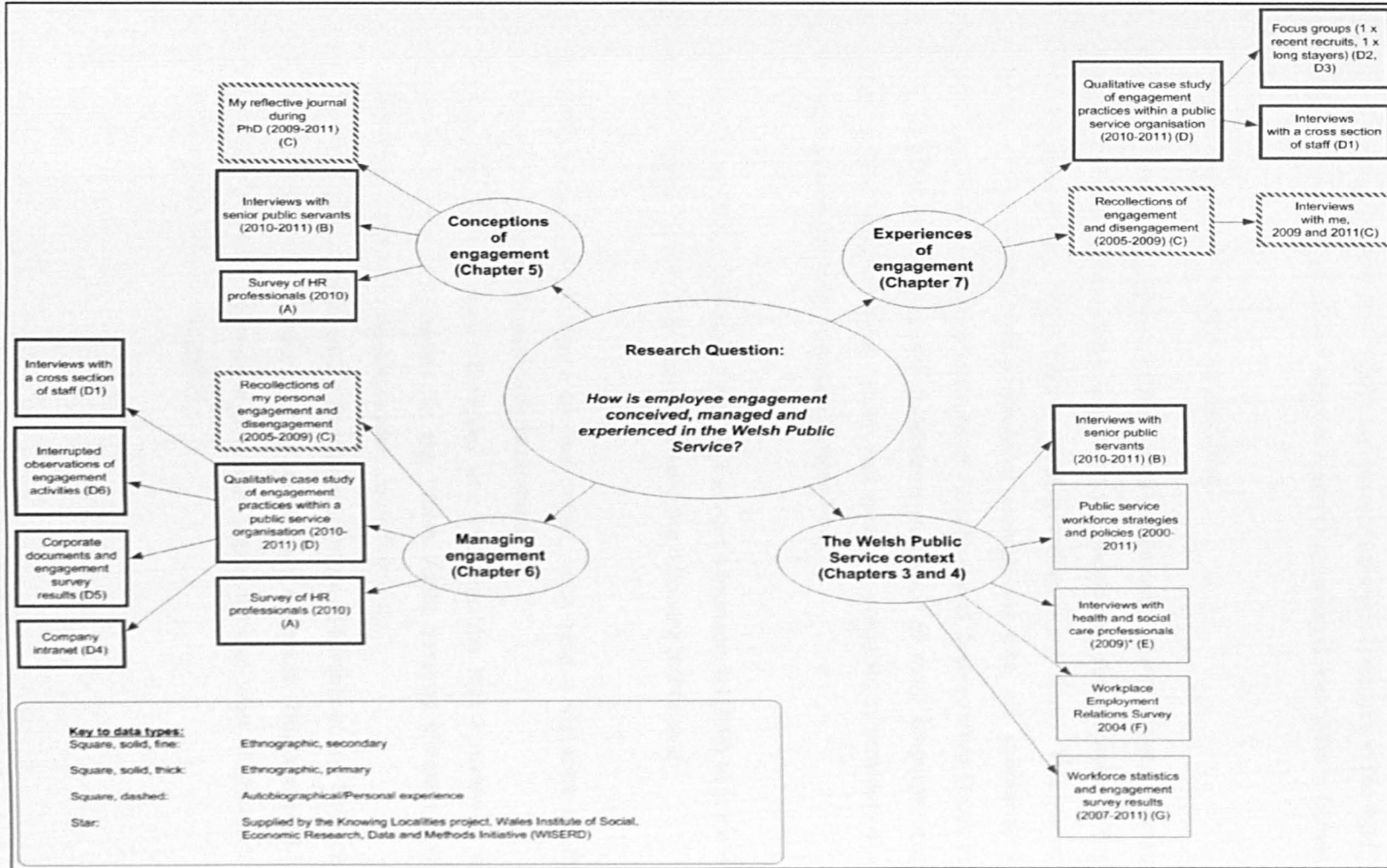
In Figure 2.1, I list five steps that I have undertaken in this research: understanding and reviewing the field, designing the research, data collection, data analysis and writing the research. Some of these stages have been continuous, and have been more or less significant at different times. In the diagram in Figure 2.2, I show how I have used the primary and secondary data that I have collected to different degrees depending on the aspect of the research question I am attempting to answer. Much of the content of this Chapter is presented in sequential fashion, suggesting that the process of conducting this research has been tidy and linear, with one set of tasks neatly following on from each other. This is highly misleading, as a number of the processes that I have undertaken in this research have been in “continuous interaction” (Le Voi and Potter 2000, p8) consisting more of flows between different elements of work rather than the execution of tasks in a logical way (Edmondson and McManus 2007).

**Figure 2.1: Steps in designing and conducting my research**

| Step  | Methods applied  |
|---|--|
| <i>Understanding and reviewing the field</i>                                      |  |
| Gaining knowledge of the field: what has been achieved by other researchers       | Literature review (academic and practitioner)  |
| Identify research methods that have been used to investigate employee engagement  | Literature review (academic and practitioner)  |
| Identify theories that have been applied to understand employee engagement        | Literature review (academic)   |
| Understanding the public service context in Wales                                 | Consultation and informational interviews<br>Policy documents, government statements   |
| <i>Designing the research</i>   |  |
| Defining, refining and selecting a research question                              | Literature review, research journal, informational interviews, discussions with supervisors, data collection   |
| Designing the research, selecting research methods and identifying ethical issues | Literature review, identifying philosophical position, reference to research question  |
| <i>Data collection</i>  |  |
| Collecting data   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Personal experience</i>: personal journals, data collected through interviews with me conducted by other researchers,</li> <li>• <i>Workforce characteristics and engagement levels</i>: secondary analysis of official statistics, workforce survey results, comparative workforce survey (WERS 2004),</li> <li>• <i>Policy context</i>: conducting interviews with senior public servants, gaining access to previously conducted interviews with health and social care professionals in the sector,</li> <li>• <i>Conceptions of employee engagement</i>: Small survey of HR Professionals, interviews with Senior Public Servants, autobiographical data,</li> <li>• <i>Managing employee engagement</i>:<br/>Case study: selecting and gaining access to an organisation, documentary analysis, one to one and group interviews, interrupted observations. Personal recollections of work experience over five year period.</li> <li>• <i>Experiences of employee engagement</i>: Case study (as outlined earlier). Gaining access to previously conducted interviews with health and social care professionals in the sector. Personal recollections of work experience over five year period.</li> </ul> |
| <i>Analysing data</i>   |  |
| Data analysis   | Simultaneous data collection and analysis, literature review, reference to research question, research journal and field work notes, thematic analysis.  |
| <i>Writing and sharing the research</i>   |  |
| Writing and sharing the research  | Literature review, presenting research findings (academic and practitioner audiences)  |

*Note: adapted from Ebeling and Gibbs 2008 in Gilbert 2008. Some steps are continuous.*

Figure 2.2: My research question and links to principal data sources, May 2012



Note: Letters in brackets (A to G) in each of the boxes denotes the data item reference, discussed later in the Chapter. The quality of this reproduction is not ideal, but is limited by the “export” capabilities of the software package that I have used to produce this diagram (Inspiration 9.0).

## **2.2 Understanding and reviewing the field**

In Chapter Five I discuss how the conceptions of employee engagement that I held before starting this doctoral research were limited to my personal experience and a small amount of practitioner oriented literature that I accessed through my professional institute (CIPD 2006). In order to establish how I intended to carry out research on employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service, it was essential that I learnt and assessed previous research in the field, to inform the development of an adequate and relevant research question (Green 2008 in Gilbert 2008).

### **2.2.1 Undertaking a literature review: searching**

Literature on employee engagement encompasses a wide range of documents and materials. As well as academic material, knowledge, assertions and judgments about employee engagement are found in documents that I have loosely called 'practitioner literature'. This covers research carried out for and on behalf of professional associations who are promoting employee engagement such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (Truss et al 2006, CIPD 2012), government reviews and statements in favour of more employee engagement (MacLeod and Clarke 2009) as well as reports and measures produced by providers of employee engagement consultancy providers (Appendix Item Two).

I used the four areas shown in Figure 2.3 as well as Hart's framework (1998) to guide my search for literature. I began my search for literature using the following techniques:

- I used the 'Google' search engine to find online, open access, literature on the public services in Wales, and practitioner reports on the topic,
- I consulted with former work colleagues who informed me that a review of employee engagement had been conducted for the Welsh Public Services (Finnear 2009) which identified a list of academic references that I could follow up,
- I searched the online archives of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, of which I am a member, for research studies and policy statements. This is where I found the first reference to Kahn's concept of personal engagement at work, considered to be a seminal work in this field (1990, 1992),

- I conducted initial, and somewhat unsuccessful, searches of electronic databases of records of academic literature, using 'Web of Science', 'Springer Journals', 'Google Scholar', looking in particular for articles providing overviews of employee engagement. I subsequently sought advice from a specialist librarian at Bangor University on how to use databases properly,
- I also consulted webpages of scholars whose names arose during my search for literature to identify other articles and sources of information,
- I consulted textbooks on human resource management (Armstrong 2010), organisational behaviour (Mullins 2010) and the sociology of work (Grint 2005) in order to identify sensitising concepts (Barker 1993).

On the basis of these activities, I drew up an initial list of keywords (such as 'employee engagement', 'work engagement') to guide further searches for material. In order to bound the literature search (Hart 1998), I also included keywords such as "Wales" and "public sector" that were particularly important to my study (which I found I had to remove as I generated few references, and substituted "UK" and "United Kingdom" for "Wales" in order to generate more references). I stored the references collected during this initial phase in the bibliographic software package "RefWorks" and read the abstract of the article or the summary of a practitioner report in order to gauge its relevance (Hart 1998) and to find further references.

### *2.2.2 Undertaking a literature review: assessing and reviewing*

As part of my progression from the first year of doctoral studies to the second year, I produced a document summarising the literature I had found on employee engagement. I adopted the narrative review approach to this document (Petticrew and Roberts 2006 in Ebeling and Gibbs 2008) where I was seeking to "...summarise, appraise and synthesise all the relevant studies and theories developed around the research topic..." (Ebeling and Gibbs 2008, p68). Using the headings in Figure 2.3 as a guide and advice on argumentation analysis (Hart 1998), I selected and appraised a range of documents (journal articles, published reports, survey findings, government documents) to develop a critical assessment of the existing knowledge of employee engagement and to inform the development and planning of my own research. I examined the literature with regard to the theoretical frameworks adopted, to what degree certain research approaches and methods had been adopted, how engagement had been operationalised across studies, the populations studied and in what parts of the world had research been carried out.

**Figure 2.3: Areas of my review of the literature on employee engagement**

| Areas  | Key literature types   |
|--|--|
| <p>Descriptions:</p> <p><i>What is employee engagement?</i></p> <p><i>What different types of employee engagement are there?</i></p> <p><i>What claims have been made to its existence and its impact on individuals, organisations and societies?</i></p>   | <p>Journal articles, practitioner reports, dictionaries, textbooks</p>     |
| <p>Statistics/Evidence:</p> <p><i>What are the characteristics of the WPS workforce?</i></p> <p><i>What is the level, and type, of employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service?</i></p> <p><i>What variation is there in employee engagement between different groups in the WPS workforce?</i></p>  | <p>Reports of surveys, official statistics, journal articles</p>           |
| <p>Theory:</p> <p><i>What are the main theories that explain WHY employee engagement is:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>a) experienced at the individual level,</i></li> <li><i>b) pursued as a goal by organisations in the public sector,</i></li> <li><i>c) associated with outcomes for individuals and organisations.</i></li> </ul>           | <p>Journal articles, books, government policy documents and statements</p> |
| <p>Methods:</p> <p><i>What methods have been used to measure and assess employee engagement?</i></p> <p><i>What research on employee engagement has employed an ethnographic approach?</i></p> <p><i>Are there special methods needed to study employee engagement?</i></p> <p><i>What particular ethical issues have been identified by previous researchers?</i></p> | <p>Journal articles, practitioner reports</p>                              |

Source: adapted from Ebeling and Gibbs 2008 in Gilbert 2008

Based on my early searches I found that a lot of the academic literature on employee engagement originated from a psychology rather than a business and management perspective, which has continued to be the case as my study has progressed. The literature I found was informed by a positivist perspective and used surveys to define and measure engagement. A considerable proportion of the psychology based literature I found was concerned with differentiating employee engagement from other work related constructs such as organisational commitment, flow and job involvement (Schaufeli and Bakker 2010). As noted in Section 1.4, most of the literature on employee engagement in the business and management field has come from the mainstream school and appears to be informed by positivist rather than interpretivist philosophies (Vigoda-Gadot et al 2012, Alfes et al 2010, 2012).

### *2.2.3 Consultations and informational interviews with stakeholders*

Consulting with a range of informants can be a useful way of finding out about unpublished material and to provide a range of perspectives on a topic (Le Voi and Potter 2000). As I found there was almost no published literature on employee engagement in a Welsh or any other context, I met with a number of individuals working in the sector (using my contacts from my previous work experience) that I felt would have knowledge of employee engagement in the public sector in Wales. I limited my consultations to individuals working in the public sector in Wales and organisers of the north Wales branch of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development as I was primarily interested in finding out about what was known about engagement in Wales.

### *2.2.4 Sourcing policy documents and government statements*

As part of the literature review, I collected Welsh Government public service policy documents from 2000<sup>5</sup> to 2012, using the Welsh Government's website and contacting the Welsh Government Publications Centre (WG 2011a) to identify documents available in electronic and non-electronic formats, which discussed the Government's aims and objectives for the Welsh Public Service, and in particular, identified policies and statement about workforce engagement. I identified sixteen documents, details of which are in Appendix Item Four to the dissertation and which are discussed specifically in Chapter Three. I also monitored the 'News' pages of the

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<sup>5</sup> The National Assembly for Wales, and its Government, came into being in 1999 and issued its first programme for government in 2000 (National Assembly for Wales 2000).



Welsh Government website for ministerial statements on public services in Wales, especially following the Assembly elections of 2011, to identify any shifts in public service and workforce engagement policy.

### **2.3 Designing the research**

“There is much to be planned before you should venture out into the field to collect data for your research project....” (Gilbert 2008, p35).

It is essential to plan a project in order to maximise the probability that the research is completed and makes a contribution to an existing body of knowledge. As well as consulting potential stakeholders and informants, and learning about the state of knowledge about employee engagement from both academic and practitioner literatures, I also began to keep a research journal to record ideas, questions, list reading material and contact details for people who I thought I might contact during the research.

#### **2.3.1 Defining, refining and selecting a research question**

Developing a research question is a crucial step in determining how the research will be carried out and “directs the literature review, the framework for study, data collection and the analysis and write up.” (Le Voi and Potter 2000, p13). In Figure 2.4, I show how my research question has changed, with three different versions developing at different times. During the early stages of my research, I employed a divergent thinking approach to generate a wide range of ideas and questions about employee engagement (Cross 1985). My proposal for doctoral research (Appendix Item Five) included a number of questions (as shown in the extract in Figure 2.4) which now, looking back, are very wide ranging, which is normal at the outset of a research project (Le Voi and Potter 2000).

Later on during the second half of the first year of doctoral studies, I needed to make decisions about how I intended to collect data on employee engagement and used a convergent thinking style (Cross 1985) to refine and select a preferred research question (Green 2008 in Gilbert 2008). In May 2010, I presented an idea for a descriptive research question (“What is the policy and practice of employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service”), along with a series of research objectives, to researchers at Bangor Business School which I used to develop a research proposal at the end of the first year of doctoral studies. I used this descriptive research question

to select methods that would enable me to describe how employee engagement was described in policies (suggesting documentary analysis methods and interviews with senior managers who could explain policies for workforce engagement in the WPS) as well as to describe how employee engagement was carried out in an organisational setting, suggesting qualitative methods and perhaps a case study over an extended period.

As I carried out data collection in the second year of doctoral research, I adapted the research question which became "How is employee engagement conceived, managed and experienced?", as I became more interested in understanding the processes and different perspectives relating to employee engagement once I had been carrying out fieldwork for a while. As I decided to undertake an autoethnographic study, I placed more emphasis on collecting personal data during the second part of my study (by asking other researchers to interview me, and transcribing personal audio and written journals).

**Figure 2.4: Development of my research question, 2009 to 2011**

| <b>A: Research proposal: pre entry to PhD (2009)</b>  | <b>B: Revised research proposal: end of first year of doctoral study (2010)</b>  | <b>C: Final research question, adopted during data collection (2011)</b>   |
|---|--|--|
| <p>“The research will seek to address the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What are the dimensions of employee engagement in the Welsh public service,</li> <li>▪ Differences in the nature and intensity of engagement between staff and their immediate co-workers and supervisors, and the wider organisation in which they serve,</li> <li>▪ What meanings do public service employees attach to engagement,</li> <li>▪ How do public service employees demonstrate engagement i.e. what behaviours or language demonstrate their commitment to an employer?</li> <li>▪ What are the implications for future survey instruments and measures of employee engagement?</li> <li>▪ What are the implications for learning and development programmes for managers and leaders that are designed to sustain and strengthen employee engagement?</li> </ul> <p>The researcher proposes to undertake an ethnography in a public sector workplace in north west Wales. Using interviews and observation, the researcher intends to develop relationships with a work group to understand how engagement may fluctuate over a period of time and in response to changes in their working environment.”</p> <p>(Extract from first proposal for research, May 2009)</p> | <p>Overall research question:</p> <p>“What is the policy and practice of employee engagement in the Welsh public service?”</p> <p>Supported by five research objectives:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How is employee engagement attempted and managed in the WPS?</li> <li>2. How is the impact of employee engagement manifested, measured and evaluated?</li> <li>3. How does it feel to participate in employee engagement efforts?</li> <li>4. How does being in Wales and of the public service affect/impact the policy and practice of employee engagement?</li> <li>5. What are the implications for reward, learning and development strategies and systems within the WPS?</li> <li>6. How does the policy and practice of employee engagement in the WPS relate to existing empirical and theoretical knowledge?</li> </ol> <p>(Extract from presentation to fellow doctoral researchers, Bangor Business School, May 2010)</p> | <p>Overall research question:</p> <p>“How is employee engagement conceived, managed and experienced in the Welsh Public Service?”</p> <p>Supported by four research objectives:</p> <p><b>FOR PRACTICE</b><br/>What are the implications of my study for employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service?</p> <p><b>FOR ENGAGEMENT SCHOLARSHIP</b><br/>What are the contributions of my research to our understanding of employee engagement theoretically and conceptually?</p> <p><b>FOR METHOD SCHOLARSHIP</b><br/>What can a qualitative and autoethnographic approach to the study of employee engagement contribute to our understanding of the topic?</p> <p><b>FOR ME</b><br/>Why did I feel the high degree of engagement with my last job? Why and how did I become disengaged?</p> <p>How can I use this research to help me make better choices in the future about finding and maintaining engaging work?</p> |

### *2.3.2 Designing the research*

From my literature review, it was evident that research on employee engagement using qualitative methods was almost non-existent, despite calls from the founding scholar of personal engagement at work and more contemporary researchers for this kind of research (Kahn 1992, Finniear 2009). While some research on organisational approaches to employee engagement in a Welsh context could be found (Finniear 2009), this was limited to secondary analysis of existing staff surveys, an assessment of the academic literature and some examples of engagement practices. I have not been able to find any research that has sought to describe how employee engagement is being practiced in organisations in Wales, or how it is experienced by staff. The final research design contained in my end of first year review was adapted during the period of data collection (September 2010 to September 2011) as a result of consultations with my supervisors, my experience of conducting fieldwork, discussions with gatekeepers at the case organisation and the organisers of the north Wales branch of the CIPD, and was informed by my decision to incorporate my personal experience into the study. Making changes to a research design, which might include responding to unexpected problems and events and having to compromise and renegotiate the data collection and analysis process is an experience shared by other researchers (Hey 1997). In order to ensure that I was able to complete my research within the agreed timescale and to identify any potential problems (Le Voi and Potter 2000), I produced a work programme for the three years of the PhD (Appendix Item 3) where I set out the key tasks that I needed to carry out, and an indication of when these would need to happen, and the amount of time to be allocated to each task. I did not adhere to this work programme slavishly as I was undertaking an exploratory study that involved fieldwork which might reveal interesting areas that I could not have known about at the time of designing and planning my research. However the work programme provided a degree of reassurance for myself, my supervisors and the Business School that my study was feasible and achievable (Le Voi and Potter 2000).

### *2.3.3 Selecting research methods*

The lack of prior knowledge and theorising about employee engagement as a management activity (as opposed to engagement as an individual level state and its relationship to other work constructs) in a public sector context that has only been in existence for twelve years would suggest that my area of investigation represents a “new phenomena in the world” (Edmondson and McManus 2007 p1161) and should be approached with methods that generate “rich,

detailed and evocative data...to shed light on the phenomena...interviews, observations, open ended questions...may involved the full immersion of ethnography or ...exploratory interviews with organizational informants” (Edmondson and McManus 2007, p1162). I consider that the methods that I have used in this study represent a good degree of methodological fit with the state of employee engagement’s early stage of theoretical development (Edmondson and McManus 2007) and can contribute suggestions for theories which can be evaluated and strengthened through further research. My final research design comprises a number of methods (shown in Figure 2.5) that are particularly well suited to studies that are exploratory in nature, in a field that is not well understood. The methods that I have used to collect data have been reviewed regularly to enable me to be able to pursue interesting areas that I did not identify at the outset (Green 2008 in Gilbert 2008). I have allocated each type of data that I collected a reference (using the letters A-G in the left hand column of Figure 2.5) to assist comprehension. These references are also shown in the boxes in the diagram in Figure 2.2.

**Figure 2.5: Methods used to collect primary and secondary data**

| Data item reference  | Data type  |
|--|--|
| <i>Primary data collection methods (date fieldwork undertaken)</i> |  |
| A  | Survey of HR Professionals (2010)  |
| B  | Interviews with Senior Public Servants (2010-2011)   |
| C  | Personal recollections written in my personal research journals, and collected through interviews with me by other researchers (2009-2012)   |
| D  | Case study (December 2010-November 2011):<br>-One to one interviews with a cross section of staff (Data item D1),<br>-Focus group with new starters (Data item D2),<br>-Focus group with long stayers (Data item D3),<br>-Examination of the company intranet (Data item D4)<br>-Examination of corporate documents including company staff survey results (Data item D5)<br>-Interrupted observations of company employee engagement activities (Data item D6). |
| <i>Secondary data collection methods (date published)</i>          |  |
| E  | Interviews with health and social care professionals, Knowing Localities (2011)  |
| F  | Workplace Employment Relations Survey (2004)   |
| G  | Workforce statistics and engagement survey results (2007-2011)   |
| <i>Supporting policy, academic and practitioner literature</i>     |  |
| None   | Welsh Public Service policy documents (2000-2010):<br>-Policy for the public services in Wales<br>-Policy for workforce engagement<br>Academic and practitioner literature (1990-2012)   |

#### 2.3.4 Ethical issues

In the 1960s researchers became concerned with the representation of others in their studies and their own roles in the research process. Having a concern for ethical research has come to prominence (Jones in Scott Jones and Watt 2010) where researchers need to take responsibility for their behaviour and the good treatment of others who are involved or implicated in the research. Ellis et al (2011) identify concerns that are specific to the autoethnographer, which is that family and friends will automatically be identified and implicated in the research by virtue of their relationship with the researcher, even if they are not directly included in the study. This is an issue in my study not only in terms of family and friends but also colleagues, acquaintances and employers that I have worked with in the Welsh Public Service.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) identify five aspects of ethnographic research that can raise ethical issues: informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation and consequences for future research. I used these five aspects to structure an assessment of the ethical implications of my study, as shown in Figure 2.6, which formed the basis for an application for approval of my study to College of Business, Social Sciences and Law committee. This was given in July 2010 when I was able to commence data collection.

A particular issue for conducting research in the Welsh Public Service is that all organisations have a duty to provide services in both Welsh and English. I investigated whether Bangor University had a policy about conducting research in a country with two official languages, but I was not able to identify such a policy. I therefore decided, following consultation with my supervisors, to conduct my research bilingually as far as practically possible. The documentation that I produced for candidate case organisations, the survey of HR Professionals, topic guides for one to one and group interviews as well as materials promoting my research on the case organisation's intranet were all provided in both Welsh and English. One to one interviews were conducted in the language of the respondents' choice. I conducted the group interviews at the case organisation in English, despite the high number of Welsh speakers in the groups, only as I was not able to offer simultaneous translation facilities from Welsh to English due to lack of financial resources to hire a translator.

**Figure 2.6: Ethical framework for this research project**

| <b>Area of ethical concern<br/>(Hammersley and Atkinson<br/>2007, Ellis et al 2011)</b>   | <b>How I have sought to address the issue</b>  |
|---|--|
| <p>Informed consent:</p> <p>Key issues in my study:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Gain consent for case study,</li> <li>-Staff to be advised of right not to take part, and withdraw,</li> <li>-Impression management (tolerating participants' views of others and of subjects)</li> <li>-Consent issues re: friends, family, former colleagues who might be identified in the study.</li> </ul> | <p>Made written application for access to the case study organisation, who informed staff of right not to take part, via staff intranet. Prepared information sheet on nature of research, and right to withdraw as an organisation.</p> <p>Overt researcher role adopted in case organisation, and written explanation of ethnographic approach included on staff intranet (ongoing electronic updates).</p> <p>Staff verbally asked to volunteer for one to one and group interviews, and informed of voluntary nature of these, and ability to withdraw consent for comments made during these. Email requests for interviews accompanied by similar advice, and included telephone and email contact details for myself and principal supervisor.</p> <p>Staff offered consent form to complete, and contents explained.</p> <p>Tolerating staff views, primarily through listening, but not overtly agreeing or disagreeing with them. Try to manage personal facial expressions. Use research journal to record thoughts and feelings arising from encounters, and take regular breaks from office environment.</p> <p>Discussed with family and friends where I wished to refer to them in my dissertation and asked them for their consent to do this. Situations and comments regarding former colleagues fictionalised and identifying characteristics (names, locations) removed to reduce possibility of identification.</p> |

**Figure 2.6: Ethical framework for this study (continued)**

| <b>Area of ethical concern<br/>(Hammersley and Atkinson<br/>2007, Ellis et al 2011)</b>  | <b>How I have sought to address the issue</b>   |
|--|---|
| <p>Privacy: self, relations and others</p> <p><i>-Private conversations in the workplace could be overheard and used as a source of data.</i></p> <p><i>-Privacy of family and friends may be infringed, if private conversations used as data.</i></p> <p><i>-My privacy could be infringed by including personal details in the dissertation.</i></p> <p><i>-I may be asked to share information gathered about and from staff with others in the organisation, especially HR (acting as gatekeepers).</i></p> | <p>Participants, both individual and organisational, advised that research findings could be published in a range of outlets. This implication contained in written information sheet.</p> <p>Case study organisation is not identified in any research outputs. Data from individuals at case study organisation and Welsh public service interviewees anonymised.</p> <p>Dissertation chapters offered to family and friends for scrutiny.</p> <p>Discussions with supervisors about degree of personal revelation contained in the dissertation and impact on my own privacy.</p> <p>I attempted to behave in a friendly way towards gatekeepers in order to develop trust and rapport, and inform them what I was doing at different times. I explained to staff at the case organisation and other respondents that I could not share what had been discussed with anyone other than my supervisors.</p> |
| <p>Harm: self, relations and others</p> <p><i>-Findings could portray the Welsh public service, myself and others in a bad light.</i></p> <p><i>-My presence could induce anxiety amongst staff in the case study organisation, concerned about my reasons for being there and that I may report their behaviours and attitudes to managers or other staff.</i></p> <p><i>-I may embarrass myself, family, friends and former colleagues and damage close relationships.</i></p>                                 | <p>Produced a report for the case study organisation providing feedback on current employee engagement activities and made suggestions for development.</p> <p>Reassured staff that I was studying the organisation's engagement activities, and staff's response to them. In intranet communications and face to face meetings, reiterated the purpose of my project and invited questions from staff about my work.</p> <p>I talked with family and friends about my research and shared pieces of written text with them where they were mentioned, and asked their views on the contents. I fictionalised accounts that involved former colleagues in order to minimise identification.</p>   |



**Figure 2.6: Ethical framework for this study (continued)**

| <b>Area of ethical concern<br/>(Hammersley and Atkinson<br/>2007, Ellis et al 2011)</b>  | <b>How I have sought to address the issue</b>  |
|--|--|
| <p>Exploitation</p> <p><i>-Staff and organisations may feel that I am using them to get a qualification.</i></p> <p><i>-Potential conflicts between meeting the needs of gatekeepers to the case organisation (HR) for “good news” and those of staff who might be critical of engagement activities.</i></p> <p><i>-Including personal judgements of others (in personal vignettes) may be considered exploitative, as a dramatic device.</i></p> | <p>I offered feedback to participants through written reports and verbal presentations. These included recognition of effective practices and suggestions for new and improved practices.</p> <p>The research is concerned with identifying the experience of engagement from the perspective of staff as well as managers and their agents, thus contributing to a sense of balance in our understanding of the topic.</p> <p>Situations and comments regarding former colleagues fictionalised and identifying characteristics (names, locations) removed to reduce possibility of identification, although this is difficult to guarantee given that it is possible to identify where I have worked, and with who, in the past.</p> <p>I considered the pros and cons of including potentially harming and exploitative material, by revisiting draft chapters, and sharing these with trusted colleagues, to gauge their reactions and to ask them if the material was relevant and important to my research question.</p> |
| <p>Consequences for future research</p> <p><i>-The organisation that has provided me access may refuse access to future researchers, based on their experience of working with me.</i></p>   | <p>I attempted to behave in a way that represented Bangor Business School, and researchers generally, well. This will involve being courteous to participants and communicating regularly with different stakeholders.</p>   |

## **2.4 Data collection**

In this section of the Chapter, I describe how I have collected and used both the primary and secondary sources of data in this study, using the data item references (A-G) shown in Figure 2.5 as a guide.

### *2.4.1 Primary data collection*

#### Data item A: Survey of HR Professionals

I decided to collect data from HR professionals as they are often called upon to carry out employee engagement activities in organizations and it is an area of competence for members of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, which is the UK's principal membership body for HR professionals (CIPD 2012a). HR professionals who are members of the CIPD are being encouraged to adopt a business and organisational focus and to become 'more strategic' which it has been argued may be to the detriment of supporting employee needs (Francis and Keegan 2006). As a result of attending a north Wales CIPD branch meeting in the summer of 2010, I was offered the opportunity to hold a special event on employee engagement in September 2010, open to all CIPD members in the area. Choosing to survey the attendees at the CIPD meeting constituted a non probability purposive sample (Sapsford 1999) as I did not choose the HR professionals randomly but targeted this group specifically.

The eighteen HR Professionals who took part in the survey came from organisations in both the public and private sectors and encompassed a range of roles from HR administrator, HR managers, learning and development specialists, self employed consultants and HR directors. The majority of respondents worked for large employers (more than 250 employees) which means that small, micro and medium employers, which comprised 60% of employment share in Wales in 2011 (WG 2011) are not well represented in this sample. However the purpose of my survey was not to produce generalisable findings but to develop conceptions of employee engagement based on HR professionals' own words." The characteristics of the sample are shown in Figure 2.7.

**Figure 2.7: Characteristics of human resource professionals who took part in the survey, North Wales, September 2010**

|  | Number of respondents |
|--|-----------------------|
| <b>Total respondents:</b>                            | 18                    |
| <b>Sector of employment:</b>                         |                       |
| <i>Public Sector</i>                                 | 7                     |
| <i>Private Sector</i>                                | 11                    |
| <b>Size of organization:</b>                         |                       |
| <i>Sole trader or small business (2-9 employees)</i> | 4                     |
| <i>Small business (10-49 employees)</i>              | 1                     |
| <i>Medium business (50-249 employees)</i>            | 1                     |
| <i>Large business (250 or more employees)</i>        | 12                    |
| <b>Job titles:</b>                                   |                       |
| <i>Director including consultants</i>                | 4                     |
| <i>Manager, HR</i>                                   | 5                     |
| <i>Manager, Learning and Development</i>             | 1                     |
| <i>Manager, Other</i>                                | 1                     |
| <i>Officer, HR</i>                                   | 1                     |
| <i>Administration, HR</i>                            | 2                     |
| <i>Other, HR and Learning and Development</i>        | 4                     |
| <b>Gender of respondents:</b>                        |                       |
| <i>Female</i>  | 16                    |
| <i>Male</i>  | 2                     |

The questionnaire I administered to the HR Professionals contained six 6 open questions (Appendix Item 6). I designed the items in the questionnaire myself and did not test them prior to asking the HR Professionals to complete the survey. Had I done this, I might have appreciated how challenging analysing open questions could be (discussed more fully in Section 2.5.2). However I had wanted to allow space for HR Professionals to define employee engagement in their own way, as most surveys of employee engagement comprise closed questions chosen by the researcher. I provided the questionnaire in paper format, in both Welsh and English, and invited respondents to complete the survey in the language of their choice.

### Data item B: Interviews with Senior Public Servants (SPS's)

In order to understand conceptions of employee engagement in the Welsh public service, I conducted ten (seven by telephone, three face to face) interviews with individuals occupying senior management positions representing different stakeholders in the employment relationship, as shown in Figure 2.7. I chose to purposively sample (Sapsford 1999) senior managers, first by using contacts that I had made before leaving my employment to identify individuals, and then asking for recommendations of other people to interview, thereby utilising a snowball sample approach (Trochim 2006). One of the respondents had a background in human resource management, while the others occupied general management roles. Eight of the respondents occupied national roles, while two occupied roles that focused on one of Wales's four administrative regions. Men and women were equally represented in the sample. I prepared a semi-structured topic guide for the interviews, which was modified slightly depending on who I was speaking with at the time (sample topic guides are included as Appendix Items 7 and 8). I used the academic (Kahn 1990) and practitioner literature (Alfes et al 2010) as well as some of the questions I had included in the survey of HR Professionals to inform the questions that I asked the Senior Public Servants. Nine of the interviews were conducted in English, and one in Welsh. While some interviews extended to approximately an hour, others were far shorter (around 30 minutes), which meant that I was not able to ask all questions in the topic guide in every interview.

**Figure 2.8: Interviews with Senior Public Servants, sectoral breakdown**

| <b>Constituency</b>                          | <b>Number conducted</b> |
|--|-------------------------|
| Employee representatives                     | 2                       |
| Employer representatives                     | 2                       |
| Public Service improvement                   | 2                       |
| Workforce development                        | 1                       |
| Sectoral perspective: health and social care | 2                       |
| Other  | 1                       |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                                 | <b>10</b>               |

*Note: I developed and assigned these categories to interviewees myself.*

### Data item C: My personal recollections and experiences

Part way through my second year of doctoral research, I decided that I would include my personal experiences as a source of data in my study. I had kept a research journal from the beginning of my studies and this included personal reflections on my experience of doctoral research, as well as recollections of my experiences of personal engagement at work (Kahn 1990). Serendipitously, I was offered access to the transcript of an interview that a researcher from the WISERD Knowing Localities<sup>6</sup> initiative had conducted with me while I was still working in late 2009 where I discussed my job in some detail. This prompted me to ask other researchers at Bangor University to conduct interviews with me about different aspects of my work experience for the five years prior to starting the PhD. In both these interviews, the format and questions were co-produced between myself and my interviewers (a list of the questions I was asked in each of the interviews are shown in the Appendix Items 9 and 10):

- An interview with me by a graduate research student from Bangor University in August 2011, discussing how I thought my personality, life and work experiences could affect my research study,
- An interview with me by a graduate research student also from Bangor University in October 2011, where I recall experiences of engagement and disengagement with my work in the Welsh public service, between 2005 and 2009.

I also prepared a timeline of my career and qualifications since 1990 when I was about to graduate from my first degree. This is discussed in Chapter 1 of the dissertation. As well as a written research journal, I have kept audio diaries (using my mobile phone recording facility) which I have transcribed and made what seems an enormous amount of scribbled notes and diagrams on loose pages. In Chapter 1, I discuss some of the criticisms that have been made of a researcher's personal data being used in a study (Section 1.2.1), in particular that it is too subjective and difficult to subject to analysis (Boufoyo-Bastick in Foster et al (2006). In this study, I argue that my experiences of engagement and disengagement at work brings an additional dimension to this research, to be understood alongside, not in place of, the perspective of the employees from the Welsh Public Service that have participated in this research.

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<sup>6</sup> See Section 2.4.2 for details of the WISERD Knowing Localities research initiative.

#### Data item D: Undertaking a case study of one organisation's approach to managing employee engagement

Case study research "consists of a detailed investigation...of one or more organizations, or groups within organizations, with a view to providing an analysis of the context and processes involved in the phenomenon under study" (Hartley 1994, p208-209). It is an approach concerned with intensity rather than representativeness and generalisation to other settings, which is better served by other methods such as surveys (Bryman 2004). Researchers undertaking case studies can employ both quantitative and qualitative methods, depending on the purposes of the research and the philosophical position and objectives of the researcher. Case study research is highly appropriate in situations where an understanding of processes and the influence of context is sought (Dobbins and Gunnigle 2009). As I wish to explore the processes taking place in organisations when they attempt employee engagement, the case study approach is highly suitable.

The conceptual foundations of employee engagement are based on case study research. Kahn (1990) carried out research in two private sector organisations in the United States to identify the characteristics of, and conditions for, personal engagement at work. Both organisations appear to be relatively small (both employing fewer than 50 staff) and located on single sites. One was a temporary educational summer camp in the Caribbean and the other an architect's practice in the north east United States. The summer camp staff comprised educational specialists and were mainly young (an average age of 25.5 years) white Americans from middle and upper class backgrounds (Kahn 1990). The architectural practice staff were also white middle to upper class Americans, and relatively young (average age for all staff in the company was 31 years). In both cases, men outnumbered women. The two sets of employees studied by Kahn share some similarities with those working in the public sector in Wales (who are predominantly White and relatively highly educated and professionals) but do differ in some very important respects. The public sector workforce in Wales is more likely to be female and older and as discussed in Chapter Four, and are distributed across not only a range of organisations, but also a range of sites that can be located at some considerable distance from each other. Many staff working in the Welsh Public Service will be bilingual Welsh and English and are working in very large organisations that serve extensive, and growing, geographical areas.

### Identifying and gaining access to an organisation

Finding an organisation to act as a case study “might be opportunistic or planned” (Hartley 1994, p216). I took both a formal and informal approach to finding an organisation to participate in my research. It took some time to recruit an organisation to take part, which while not reflecting the type of organisation that I had originally planned to study, did reflect a section of the WPS which accounts for a significant proportion of public spending (WAO 2011).

I drew up an initial set of criteria to identify candidate organisations. My aim was to gain access to an organisation from the Welsh Public Service rather than other sectors (e.g. voluntary, private or UK Government agency). I had established through my analysis of official statistics that the majority of the public sector workforce in Wales are employed in local authorities and in the National Health Service (WAG 2009). The ‘ideal’ organisation would have identified itself as ‘doing something’ about employee engagement, such as completing a staff survey. As I live in north Wales and wished to be able to spend time visiting the organisation’s premises and observing employee engagement activities, I felt that candidate organisations should be wholly or partly located in this region. Having drawn up a shortlist (Hartley 1994), I prepared a bilingual information sheet (Appendix Item 11) for candidate organisations where I explained the objectives of my research and sent this to individuals that I knew from my previous employment and people who I had met during the set up phase of my research who worked at organisations in the WPS. I was also provided with people to contact in the NHS by my supervisors. I publicised that I was looking for an organisation to take part in my research at the presentation I gave at the meeting of the North Wales branch of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in 2010 (described in more detail in Section 2.4.1). This generated interest from a private sector organisation, which I declined as it did not meet my criteria for a case study organisation. With hindsight, including this organisation would have enabled me to compare approaches to employee engagement in both the public and private sectors. I met with representatives of two organisations in north Wales that reflected my preferred sub sectors of the WPS (health and local government) to find out their suitability as case studies, and also to answer questions about my research. Both of these organisations appeared suitable for my study as they were both undertaking activities they described as employee engagement. I formally applied for access to one organisation, a local authority, but was refused. The reason given was that it was likely to require staff resources that were not available. The other organisation, in the NHS, was going through a large scale re-organisation which meant that the

ethical approval needed from the organisation would be particularly protracted and not practical given the timescales of my study.

While talking with a former colleague about the problem of gaining access to an organisation, she suggested that I approach her employer, an organisation which had already conducted an employee engagement survey and was developing an action plan to respond to its findings. Albeit with a modestly sized workforce itself, it operated in the health and social care sector which accounts for a large proportion of public expenditure in Wales (WAO 2011). Following a face to face meeting and a written application to the Director of Human Resources (HR), I was granted access to this organisation in October 2010 to conduct a case study of their employee engagement activities. I provided a document to the HR Director describing what would be involved in the research, that explained that the organisation would be able to withdraw from the study if they so wished, and the voluntary nature of their, and their staff's, participation (copy of the document is included as Appendix Item 12). To preserve anonymity (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), I have given the case study organisation the pseudonym "CYMRUcyf"<sup>7</sup>. As part of the agreement for access, I offered to prepare a feedback report for the organisation, which would include an assessment of their employee engagement activities and suggestions for the future. This was delivered to the organisation in September 2011 and I presented its findings to the staff consultative committee in November 2011, which formally closed my involvement with CYMRUcyf. I spent a total of eleven months at CYMRUcyf, from December 2010 to November 2011.

The organisation has its headquarters in south Wales (which I refer to as the 'head office'), with a small team located in rural Wales (the 'satellite office') as well as a number of staff who work from home. The characteristics of the workforce are shown in Figure 2.9. The workforce at CYMRUcyf reflects that of the wider public sector in that women are in the majority. In other respects, it differs from the wider public sector in that there is a higher proportion of both Welsh speakers and younger workers. Particularly noteworthy is the absence of any trade union members, which is at odds with the public sector in Wales where more than two thirds of the workforce in 2007 were members of a trade union.

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<sup>7</sup> Translated into English as "WALES/td".



**Figure 2.9: CYMRUcyf workforce characteristics, February 2012**

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| <i>Size of organisation</i>  | Medium (50-249 employees)                                 |
| Of which:                    |   |
| Gender:                      |   |
| Female                       | 67% (Welsh public sector: 64%, Welsh private sector: 38%) |
| Male                         | 33%   |
| Age:                         |   |
| Up to and including 29 years | 29% (Welsh public sector: 8%, Welsh private sector: 18%)  |
| 30-49 years                  | 49%   |
| 50 years plus                | 22%   |
| Welsh speaking:              |   |
| Yes                          | 63% (Welsh public sector: 27%, Welsh private sector: 20%) |
| No                           | 37%   |
| Recognised union             | YES - Public and Commercial Services Union                |
| Union membership             | 0% (Welsh public sector: 68%)                             |

Source: CYMRUcyf, and for statistics in brackets, Welsh Assembly Government 2009

In the next paragraphs I describe how I collected six different types of data from the case study organisation.

**Data items D1, D2 and D3: Collecting data at the case organisation through one to one and group interviews**

I conducted twenty one to one interviews (data item D1), and two group interviews (data items D2 and D3) comprising fifteen individuals in total at the case organisation. The distribution of one to one and group interviewees by type of job are shown in Figure 2.10. The staff I interviewed on a one to one basis reflected staff at all levels in the organisation, with the respondents approximately equally divided between non-managerial, professional and middle managerial, and senior managerial positions. Staff who took part in two group interviews were either non managerial or middle managerial/professional staff.

**Figure 2.10: Distribution of respondents in one to one and group interviews, by job type, CYMRUcyf, December 2010-June 2011**

| <b>Grade</b>                              | <b>Proportion of total workforce in grade</b> | <b>Proportion of staff who took part in focus groups (n=15)</b> | <b>Proportion of staff who took part in one to one interviews (n=20)</b> |
|---|---|---|--|
| <b>Non-managerial</b>                     | 54%   | 73%   | 35%  |
| <b>Professional and middle managerial</b> | 30%   | 27%   | 30%  |
| <b>Senior managerial</b>                  | 16%   | None  | 35%  |

*Note: I have categorised the grades used by the organisation to denote the level of job into these three categories, to minimise the likelihood of identification.*

I discussed who I should seek to involve in the focus groups with the HR team at CYMRUcyf. My relationship with the HR team generally will have had implications for how I conducted my research (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). The HR team were supportive of my study and provided me with access to the organisation’s intranet, document library, engagement survey results and provided desk space for me when I was visiting the head office. They also spent time talking with me about what they thought about the organisation as a whole and individual employees. An advantage of this close working relationship was that I was able to gain an insight into the workings and perceived culture of the organisation, and also able to draw upon the experience of the HR team when deciding when and where to collect data. However, a disadvantage might have been that other staff in the organisation might have perceived that I was an informant for the HR team and not to be trusted. In addition, the HR team might have expectations of my research (to provide ideas for how to improve employee engagement, and to portray the organisation in a good light) that were not central to my study (to understand how employee engagement was being managed and how it was experienced by staff) and which could then lead to a degree of misunderstanding and frustration as to the ‘practical use’ of my research (as was the case as reported in Chapter Seven, Section 7.3.4). I attempted to manage the HR team’s expectations of my research by providing written and verbal explanations of the purpose of my research (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) and also to spend time walking around the two offices regularly saying hello to staff and in conversations reminding them that I was not sharing anything they said to me with HR or with any other CYMRUcyf employee.

I was provided with a list of all members of staff categorised by department, work group, pay grade and also length of service, which we used to decide that I would convene three focus groups: One group of employees who worked at head office who had been with the

organisation in excess of four years and were considered by HR to be 'long stayers', a second group representing staff who worked at Head Office and who had been employed for less than eighteen months and were categorised by HR as 'new starters' and a third group of staff who worked at the satellite office with a mix of length of service. I publicised the focus groups on the organisation's intranet which did not generate a lot of participants. To overcome this lack of response, I recruited all participants face to face by walking around the offices, using the staff list as a guide to ensure that representation in the groups came from a range of department and pay grades (the composition of the groups is shown in Figure 2.11). Most of the staff in the 'new starters' focus group (7 of 8) came from one Department, as this was where recent recruitment had taken place. I did not explicitly seek to recruit staff who worked from home as these staff did not travel to either the satellite or the head office as a matter of course. If I were to conduct this research again, I would contact staff working from home and arrange one to one discussions (either in person or by telephone) as these staff may have a different perspective on engagement at CYMRUcyf compared to office based staff.

**Figure 2.11: Composition of focus groups, CYMRUcyf, 2011**

| Group                       | Number in group | Length of service       | Gender balance    | Conducted                       |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| Long stayers: head office   | 7               | Four years and over     | 4 male, 3 female  | 01 June 2011                    |
| New starters: head office   | 8               | Eighteen months or less | 2 male, 6 female  | 02 June 2011                    |
| All staff: satellite office | 11              | All                     | 1 male, 10 female | Cancelled (planned for 08 June) |

Two of the three focus groups that I planned took place. The third, arranged for the satellite office was cancelled. This was explained by staff to be due to employees' working patterns at the satellite office not being conducive to taking part in a focus group (a lot of staff worked from home and spent most of their work time visiting sites outside the office) and also the small number of staff based at the satellite office.

Sixteen of the twenty one to one interviews I conducted were with staff from head office, and the remaining four with staff based at the satellite office. Four of the interviews with staff based at head office were conducted via video conferencing facilities from the satellite office, with the remaining interviews conducted on a face to face basis. I explained to each interviewee the purpose of the interview and its confidential nature. I advised the respondents they could withdraw their consent to take part in the interview, and for me to use data collected during

their interview, at any time, by informing me in writing or by email, or by contacting a named individual in the organisation's HR department. I provided each interviewee with a written consent form which I asked each person to read and sign if they were in agreement (sample form is included as Appendix Item 13). On most occasions, I asked the respondents if I could record the interview, stressing that it was for my own use and would only be shared with my supervisors, and would not be provided to anyone else in the organisation. On some occasions, I did not ask consent from the respondents if I could record the interviews and I made written notes instead. I did not feel comfortable asking some senior managers if I could record the interviews, as I feared being rejected. This has meant that for some interviews with senior managers, I only have brief notes of our conversations. Eleven of the twenty interviews were conducted in Welsh. I prepared semi structured topic guides for each of the interviews that I carried out, but did ask follow up questions to probe responses and to discuss areas that appeared to be informative that I had not considered when I designed the topic guide. After twenty one to one interviews, I found that I was not generating any new insights that were relevant to my research question and ceased this activity, as I felt that I reached theoretical saturation and was collecting repeated rather than new evidence (Le Voi and Potter 2000).

As well as formal one to one and group interviews, I also discussed my research on an ongoing basis with four informants who worked at CYMRUcyf from different parts of the organisation. These informants provided me with additional feedback on the working environment at CYMRUcyf and I asked these individuals clarification questions that I had following formal one to one and group interviews. I did not reveal to these informants the identity of individuals who had taken part in formal data collection processes.

#### Data item D4: Examination of the company intranet

I was provided with access to the CYMRUcyf intranet during my period of fieldwork, its internal communication and information storage systems that operates using internet technology. The system is private to the organisation and is not accessible by external constituencies. Its main purpose is to provide an information depository and internal communications service for staff. All members of staff are able to access the intranet, and some staff are able to contribute material to the intranet (e.g. news items, policy and project reports) and take part in a user group to contribute ideas for ensuring the intranet is attractive and easy to use for staff. The intranet adopts the appearance of a website, with a front page that contains a number of links

that staff can navigate to find information about the organisation (its staff directory and copies of organisational policies for example). As discussed in Chapter Six, the HR team placed great emphasis on the company intranet as part of its employee engagement activities. A more in depth study of the channels, both electronic and other forms, that are used to communicate employee engagement 'messages' to employees, and the opportunities for staff to interact and produce their own content (Web 2.0) would be a helpful piece of research, as the dearth of literature on the impact of technology on HR practices and experiences has been noted (Francis and Keegan 2006).

I was able to explore the intranet on three occasions, firstly to familiarise myself with its structure and later to make notes about its content and appearance. I printed pages from the intranet for reference and also saved pages from the intranet in electronic format which consisted of a year's blog entries made by one of CYMRUcyf's senior managers. This blog consisted of a weekly journal where the senior manager wrote in an informal style about their work during the previous week and shared thoughts and priorities they felt would be of interest to staff.

#### Data item D5: Collecting data at CYMRUcyf through corporate documents

I also scrutinised copies of management reports and corporate documents such as business plans to understand the organisation's strategic priorities in order to understand the context of employee engagement activities at CYMRUcyf. Upon request to the HR department, I was provided with the results of the organisation's staff survey for 2009 and 2010, as well as copies of reports to CYMRUcyf's senior management team summarising the results of the staff survey and describing what was taking place to respond to its findings.

#### Data item D6: Collecting data through observation at CYMRUcyf

Over the eleven months of fieldwork, I undertook 13 overt observations of day to day goings-on in the organisation as well as formal employee engagement activities. Due to the distance between my home and the head office, observations were interrupted (Watt and Scott Jones 2010) and the most time I was able to spend at any one time was a day. Nine observations took place at head office and four at the satellite office, the dates and locations of these are listed in Appendix Item 14. As my observations were interrupted, my data mainly relates to formal events at CYMRUcyf such as team meetings and staff get togethers arranged by the HR team on

behalf of senior management. This does mean that I have missed out on collecting data about the day to day activities and interactions of staff which may have prompted me to develop data collection in other ways.

#### Gathering and recording data during observations

Using an A4 notebook, I hand wrote substantive notes on the right hand pages, mainly in a chronological order, where I described events, conversations and general office life in a notebook, and wrote analytic notes on the left hand pages where I reflected on the descriptions I had made, made tentative connections between different observations and posed questions to myself to think about which might guide future observations (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). I re-read the notes that I made during each period of observations after returning home to add further descriptions and to make additional analytic notes (extracts of my field work notes are shown in Appendix Item 15).

#### *2.4.2 Secondary data collection*

##### Data item E: Interviews with health and social care professionals from the Knowing Localities dataset

I re-used a portion of this national (Welsh) dataset to contribute to the contextual element of my research question. I wanted to understand the nature of the Welsh Public Service (which I have shown, in Chapter Three, to be increasingly distinctive), and how it might affect employee engagement (also discussed in Chapter Three). The managers who were interviewed in the Knowing Localities (KL) project were asked to describe the context in which they worked and to identify key issues affecting their locality and their work. The managers that I interviewed myself (Data Item B) occupied more policy oriented and less operational roles than the KL managers, which might have had a different perspective on issues facing them and their work.

Re-using qualitative data outside the original research purpose has been viewed as problematic by some researchers, who argue that qualitative data “are the product of the reflexive relationship between researcher and researched, constrained and informed by biographical, historical, theoretical and epistemological contingencies” (Mauthner et al 1998 p743 in Fielding 2000) and should only be ‘re-used’ in very limited situations. The interview data collected by the Knowing Localities (KL) project gives me access to information on the experiences of managers working in operational roles across Wales which I would not have been able to visit or gain

access to with the time and personal resources that I have had during this study. The operational managers interviewed in Knowing Localities are tasked with implementing policies that are developed by the (mainly Cardiff based) Senior Public Servants that I interviewed, and may have different interpretations and priorities from the those concerned with making policy. In addition, the managers from the Knowing Localities interviews describe the characteristics of Wales as a place to deliver and manage public services, which my data does not investigate. The KL interviews are also very timely for my study, as they were conducted in 2009 and 2010, just as the UK Coalition Government was elected with a commitment to reducing the UK Government deficit within one parliamentary term (HM Government 2010).

The Knowing Localities programme was established in 2009 as part of the Wales Institute of Social Economic Research Data and Methods (WISERD) to understand the nature and experience of place amongst a range of stakeholders operating at different levels in Wales. 120 interviews with senior managers working in local authorities and other public sector agencies were carried out by researchers in settings across Wales and “provides an innovative and unique resource into how...actors working across various policy sectors come to ‘know’ their locality and how this knowledge shapes the way they carry out their roles and responsibilities” (Mann 2011, p3). Senior managers representing eight public service areas took part in the interviews, where respondents were asked to describe their job and their locality, identify issues facing their functional and geographic areas, and how they come to ‘know’ the locality in which they work (WISERD 2011).

I sought and gained access, by written application to the WISERD hub at Cardiff University (email confirming access shown in Appendix Item 16), to fifteen of the Knowing Localities interviews that fell within the ‘health, wellbeing and social care’ policy area as this was the sector that the organisation whose management of employee engagement that I studied was affiliated. I requested the transcripts in the original language in which they were conducted. All of the transcripts were supplied in English. I include a copy of the topic guide used in the Knowing Localities interviews in Appendix Item 17. In order to identify the characteristics of the Welsh Public Service context and the issues facing managers in their work, I used the answers to the questions “What is your patch like now?”, “What are the key issues that are going on here?” “How do these issues impact on this locality?” as the basis of my analysis. As shown in Figure 2.12, the respondents in the health wellbeing and social care group were equally distributed between local government, the National Health Service and Welsh Government agencies or sponsored bodies. All the respondents occupied senior management positions and were

located in organisations across Wales, in both rural and urban areas. Two thirds of the respondents were female, similar to the overall public sector workforce in Wales.

**Figure 2.12: Characteristics of the Knowing Localities sample, health wellbeing and social care, 2009-2010**

|  | <b>Number (of respondents)</b> |
|--|--------------------------------|
| <b>Total respondents:</b>                        | 15                             |
| <b>Location:</b>                                 |                                |
| <i>North Wales</i>                               | 4                              |
| <i>Mid Wales</i>                                 | 3                              |
| <i>South West Wales</i>                          | 3                              |
| <i>South East Wales</i>                          | 5                              |
| <b>Organisation:</b>                             |                                |
| <i>Local authority</i>                           | 5                              |
| <i>National Health Service</i>                   | 5                              |
| <i>Welsh Government agency or sponsored body</i> | 5                              |
| <b>Gender:</b>                                   |                                |
| <i>Female</i>                                    | 9                              |
| <i>Male</i>                                      | 6                              |

#### Data item F: Workplace Employment Relations Survey

As part of my literature review, I found a reference to the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS), “widely regarded as the most authoritative source of quantitative evidence on employment relations in Britain” (Forth and Stokes 2006, p1). The WERS is a cross sectional survey of employees, managers and employers which has been conducted five times across the UK since 1980, the last survey being in 2004. The size of the UK and Welsh samples enables a comparison of survey items between the public and private services sectors in Wales, and with Scotland and the English regions. The survey contains items that measure employee attitudes towards work as well as measure the health of employment relations more generally (BIS 2012). I used survey items about employee job satisfaction, commitment and loyalty to the organisation as proxy indicators for employee engagement (I explain the limitations in more detail in Chapter 4). I used reports that had already conducted regional analyses of the cross sectional element of the WERS 2004 dataset (Forth and Stokes 2006) and carried out my own tabulations of these findings<sup>8</sup>, rather than seek access to the raw survey data myself. I felt it was appropriate to use published reports given that I was seeking to use the WERS findings to

<sup>8</sup> To compare job satisfaction (a proxy for ‘job engagement’) between private sector and public sector services employees, I used Tables 22.2 to 22.8 (private sector services, pages 138 to 141) and Tables 24.2 to 24.8 (public sector services, pages 154 to 157). To compare organisational loyalty (a proxy for ‘organisation engagement’) between private sector and public sector services employees, I used Tables 22.12 to 22.14 (private sector services, pages 143 to 144) and Tables 24.12 to 24.14 (public sector services, pages 159 to 160) (Forth and Stokes 2006).



contextualise my study, rather than be a primary source of data to answer my research question. However, as I discuss in Chapter 4, there is certainly value in carrying out more in-depth analyses of both cross sectional and panel WERS data, to examine similarities and differences between employment sectors, and to consider changes in employee attitudes over time.

#### Data item G: Workforce statistics and engagement survey results

Using knowledge of official statistics that I gained during my career prior to the PhD, I used a range of online sources of statistics to generate a profile of the public sector workforce in Wales. These resources included:

- Profiles from the National Online Manpower Information System (NOMIS): to provide statistics on the proportion of the working age population in Wales that are employed in the public sector, and to compare this with the other UK countries,
- Statistical profiles produced by the Office for National Statistics and the Statistical Directorate of the Welsh Government, to provide breakdowns on the public sector workforce in Wales, and the wider UK, by a range of demographic characteristics (WAG 2009, ONS 2011).

The report into employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service (Finnear 2009) identified three staff surveys that had been conducted in the local government, health and Welsh Government workforces. I used references to these surveys in this report to conduct online searches using “Google”, the Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association, Health in Wales and NHS Confederation websites<sup>9</sup> for copies of the original survey findings (two of which I was able to find (Redman and Gould Williams 2007 and WG 2011b), while I have failed to find the third for the NHS workforce), and also to identify if there had been any more recent staff surveys undertaken so that I could compare results over time (WG 2012a).

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<sup>9</sup> [www.google.co.uk](http://www.google.co.uk), [www.wales.gov.uk](http://www.wales.gov.uk), [www.wlga.gov.uk](http://www.wlga.gov.uk), [www.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.wales.nhs.uk) and [www.welshconfed.org](http://www.welshconfed.org), respectively.

### Supporting policy, academic and practitioner literature

I describe how I accessed literature of this type earlier in the Chapter, in the sections on 'Undertaking a literature review: searching' (Section 2.2.1) and 'Sourcing policy documents and government statements' (Section 2.2.2).

## **2.5 Analysing data**

"In quantitative analysis, numbers and what they stand for are the material of analysis, By contrast, qualitative analysis deals in words and is guided by fewer universal rules and standardised procedures than statistical analysis...part of what distinguishes qualitative analysis is a loop like pattern of multiple rounds of revisiting the data as additional questions emerge, new connections are unearthed, and more complex formulations develop along with a deepening understanding of the material. Qualitative analysis is fundamentally an iterative set of processes." (NSF 1997, p1)

In this section, I demonstrate how I have analysed the data that I have collected for my study. The research question and research objectives have been the principal guide for my data analysis, as well as the idealist philosophical position that I have adopted for this study, and practical considerations such as the amount of time I have available for analysis. In order to focus my analysis, I chose to identify a series of questions that expanded upon the different aspects of the overall research question (conceptions, management, experience of engagement, in the context of the Welsh Public Service). The detailed questions that have guided my analysis are identified are shown in Figure 2.13.

**Figure 2.13: Example questions guiding my analysis of the data collected**

| Aspect of the research question   | Questions informing the data analysis   |
|---|---|
| <b>Overall question: How is employee engagement conceived, managed and experienced in the Welsh Public Service?</b> |   |
| Understanding the Welsh Public Service context  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the characteristics of the Welsh Public Service workforce?</li> <li>• How do these compare with the non public sector workforce in Wales, and to workforces outside Wales?</li> <li>• What is known about the engagement of the Welsh Public Service workforce? How is employee engagement measured and understood in the sector?</li> <li>• What are the key policies and objectives for the Welsh public services?</li> <li>• What issues are identified by senior managers working in the sector?</li> </ul>   |
| Conceptions of employee engagement  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is employee engagement conceived by two workgroups: HR Professionals and Senior Public Servants?</li> <li>• Do these two workgroups conceptualise employee engagement similarly or differently?</li> <li>• Is it conceived mainly as a worker level state or more as a relationship between employee and employer,</li> <li>• Do respondents in the two workgroups refer to their own experiences of engagement at work, or do they describe the concept in a more abstract way?</li> <li>• What are my own conceptions of employee engagement? How stable are they? How do they relate to those of the HR Professionals and Senior Public Servants?</li> <li>• What are the possible implications of my interpretations of conceptions for the management and experience of employee engagement?</li> </ul> |
| Managing employee engagement  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do the HR Professionals report is taking place in their organisations to manage employee engagement?</li> <li>• What activities are reported and observed to be taking place in the case study organisation to enhance employee engagement? What processes can be identified?</li> <li>• Who is involved in the management of employee engagement, and how?</li> <li>• What reasons are given for managing employee engagement?</li> </ul>  |
| Experiences of employee engagement  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What views do staff have of organisational efforts to manage employee engagement?</li> <li>• What are the reasons organisations pursue employee engagement from the worker point of view?</li> </ul>   |

### *2.5.1 Analysing interview and observational data*

Geertz (1984 in Scott Jones and Watt 2010) identifies three skills that are necessary for the ethnographer to analyse qualitative data: reading, reflection and interpretation. Using Scott Jones and Watt (2010) and Miles and Huberman (1994) as models, I analysed the corpus of interview and observation data using the following steps:

- a. Reading and re-reading the corpus, making notes that linked the different aspects of the corpus to the different elements of the research question,
- b. Writing ideas and 'answers' under each element of the research question (as shown in Figure 2.13), making notes of the frequency of occurrences of evidence from the corpus. Also I made note of words or phrases used frequently by participants which could provide ideas for themes or which would lead to interpretations that may challenge those I generated on a first reading,
- c. I sought to bundle answers and ideas generated for each element of the research question into themes, both within and between elements (conception, management and experience of engagement),
- d. Making links between the 'answers' and the wider literature and theoretical knowledge, principally Kahn's model of personal engagement and disengagement at work, and conducting additional reading as ideas and "answers" began to emerging that have not been checked in earlier searches of the literature,
- e. Checking the analyses made through discussions with my supervisors, and sharing early findings with other researchers, and the participant organisation through feedback.

### *2.5.2 Analysing data collected through survey*

While my approach allowed people to respond using their own words, it has made analysis of the data more problematic than if I had administered questions that required yes or no answers. I typed the hand written responses from each completed questionnaire into a word processing document, and copied responses for each question into a separate spreadsheet document. I then read each respondent's response, and created breaks in each of these, to reflect where I thought each respondent was making a separate point. This gave rise to several responses per respondent for each question.

I first attempted to analyse the responses by categorising them deductively into behavioural, cognitive and emotional forms of engagement, as Kahn (1990, 1992) states that engagement is a comprehensive state that embraces behaviours, thoughts and feelings. However, I found that a lot of the responses could be categorised as either behaviours, thoughts and feelings, and some of the responses comprised two or more of these three characteristics. It has already been recognised that it can be difficult for people associated with promoting employee engagement in workplaces to define the concept (Luisis-Lynd and Myers 2011), and my own experience of trying to understand what the HR Professionals meant by some of the terms they used in their responses to my questionnaire was no different. Bearing in mind the purpose of my analysis and my overall research question, I used a coding and interpretation framework developed by Miles and Huberman to aid qualitative data analysis (1994). Taking the responses for the questions I was using in my analysis<sup>10</sup>, I read each of the responses several times. From each of the responses, I drew out a word or words that I felt described the response, and then reviewed these descriptor words to identify similar terms, which were then clustered around new descriptor terms (Dey 1993). Some categories with smaller numbers of responses coded to them were merged into categories with a greater number of responses, or were merged with other categories which had a small number of items coded to them. During the process of coding, category development and refinement, I reflected on the findings of the academic literature to check my analysis of the data (Miles and Huberman 1994).

### *2.5.3 Analysing documents*

The main purpose of the documents that I collected from CYMRUcyf and the Welsh Government was to understand the context in which both the sector, and the case organisation are operating. I was therefore seeking to use documents to describe the public sector and the case organisation which influenced the analytical approach that I took. I could have attempted an analysis of the language used in the documents but this was beyond the scope of my research question. I do note in Chapter Three and in the research agenda that I present in Chapter Eight that an analysis of the discourse around engagement in the Welsh Public Service (e.g. through policy and operational documents, speeches and news reports) would be an informative study to undertake. I read the Government policy documents with the specific intent of describing how policy for the public services in Wales had developed since the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999. I made notes from each of the policy documents about

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<sup>10</sup> Questions 1, 2 and 4 from my questionnaire. See Appendix Item 6 for more details.

the objectives being set for the public services, and counted the references to workforce engagement. Using this approach I identified the introduction of the concept of a single Welsh Public Service during the second Government administration of 2003 and 2007 and a concurrent increase in the number of times that increased workforce engagement was presented as an essential component in the delivery of modern public services. With regard to documents that I obtained from the case organisation, I read these seeking to understand the type and purpose of activities that were being undertaken to improve employee engagement. I also read documents summarising the staff survey results, which included response rates for each question, and results for each of the three departments. I sought clarification on aspects of the documents from the HR team at CYMRUcyf and also asked my personal informants in the organisation about the purpose of some of the documents to which I had access.

## **2.6 Writing and sharing the research**

“No research has been done, in any sense that counts, until the writing has been done and those who speak of ‘writing up’ rather than writing betray a total ignorance of what they are at.” (Watson 1987 in Le Voi and Potter 2000, p5).

### **2.6.1 Writing the research**

As noted by Light (2010), writing ethnographic research is an integral part of the study itself and not a separate ‘bolt-on’ activity that takes place at the end of the study. The project plan that I prepared for this study at the end of my first year of studies (shown in Appendix Item 3) shows writing the research as a separate activity but this is not what has happened in practice. From the outset of this study, I have been writing on a regular basis, which has taken place side by side with reading, data collection, giving presentations and listening to and interacting with other researchers. This has enabled me to capture early ideas for themes arising from the data, identify links to wider literature and to develop a style of writing the dissertation. My early writings (as can be seen in the extract from my doctoral proposal in Figure 2.4) were written in the third person and were mainly concerned with conveying information that I was gathering about employee engagement (such as definitions). During the second year, I started to write in the first person, providing more personal insights about my experiences of engagement and disengagement at work. At times, I have felt deeply frustrated at what I perceive to be wasted writing that I produced early in the research as I have not been able to re-use these writings in

my dissertation. However, "writing and rewriting is a quite normal part of ethnographic research...a useful experience...through redrafting, you will be able to produce a final version, which succeeds in being "true" to the data." (Light 2010, p186). I also read ethnographies and autoethnographies (Sparkes 1996, Hey 1997, Weeks 2004) to learn how other researchers had presented their findings (Light 2010) and to gain confidence in developing my own style of writing. In this dissertation, I have attempted to write contextualised accounts of conceptions, management and experiences of employee engagement that combine description of activities, people and places along with quotations from both primary and secondary data sources which I comment upon by drawing upon the wider literature. My text also includes fictionalised accounts of events (mainly to minimise the identification of others, as outlined in section on ethical issues) as well "stories" that I have constructed using fieldwork data (particularly in Chapter Seven in the Section regarding the use of employee engagement survey results at the case organisation) (Taylor and Smith 2008). The 'story' in Chapter Seven can be likened to an example of 'enhanced ethnography' where the author uses the techniques of a novelist to describe events (Humphreys and Watson 2009 in Wainwright 2010). An alternative to the 'story' approach would have been to attempt a 'thick description' (Light 2010) where I wrote a detailed account of what I observed during my research to produce an in-depth report. I decided not to attempt "thick description" as my research question is comparatively wide ranging and I did not feel that I would be able to create a sufficiently detailed account given the time that I had to write the research and also the word count limits to a dissertation. At postgraduate level, it is acknowledged that a 'thick description' will be difficult to achieve and students will need to make decisions about which data to use, and which to leave out of the written research (Light 2010).

### 2.6.2 *Sharing the research*

During my doctoral studies, I have attempted to communicate my research and to learn from others about important research questions, how to carry out my study, theoretical and conceptual frameworks to aid my interpretations of data, and also to test the soundness of the conclusions that I have made. Given my interest in 'engaged scholarship' (Van de Ven 2007), I have attempted to reach a range of constituencies through oral and written presentations, as shown in Figure 2.14. These are in addition to the discussions that I have had with my supervisors in face to face meetings on a monthly basis, who have also provided feedback on my writing through regular email contact.

**Figure 2.14: Writing and sharing my research, activities, 2009 to 2012 (PhD commenced September 2009)<sup>11</sup>**

| <b>Date of sharing</b> | <b>Description</b>   | <b>Purpose</b>  | <b>Audience</b>  |
|------------------------|--|---|--|
| 26 May 2010            | Presentation to fellow research students at Bangor Business School (as part of PhD training programme) | To present results of literature review revised research question and to receive feedback on its suitability for guiding data collection.   | Research students and Bangor Business School faculty.                      |
| 15 September 2010      | North Wales Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development branch event                              | To give a presentation about employee engagement, facilitate a discussion about employee engagement, administer a survey and publicise that I was seeking organisations to take part in my research as case studies.  | HR Professionals working in the public and private sectors in north Wales. |
| 18 February 2011       | Presentation to fellow research students at Bangor Business School (as part of PhD training programme) | To receive feedback on including personal experience of engagement at work in my study.   | Research students and Bangor Business School faculty.                      |
| 30 March 2011          | Presentation at Bangor University Academic Development Unit lunchtime student seminar series           | To practice my conference presentation (14 April) and to gain feedback on research approach and design from students from a range of disciplines.   | Research students (from across the University).                            |
| 14 April 2011          | Presentation at International Research Society for Public Management (IRSPM) annual conference, Dublin | To present initial findings about the management of employee engagement, based on data collection at the case organisation, and to request advice on appropriate theoretical frameworks to understand how engagement is practised in a public sector setting. | Public management scholars (international).                                |

<sup>11</sup> Note: these are formal writing and sharing events. I have also held informal discussions with fellow students, scholars at Bangor Business School, the School of Social Sciences at Bangor University and Glamorgan University, as well as conversations with scholars at seminars and conferences.



**Figure 2.14: Writing and sharing my research, activities, 2009 to 2012**

| Date of sharing  | Description   | Purpose   | Audience  |
|------------------|---|---|---|
| May 2011         | Submit article to Human Resource Management Journal co-written with my supervisors entitled "What we don't know about employee engagement".                             | To gain publication for our ideas for addressing gaps in the academic literature.   | Employee engagement scholars.   |
| November 2011    | Feedback to CYMRUcyf staff consultative committee my report on the case organisation's engagement activities  | To present my findings on the case organisation's engagement activities and to feedback to non managerial staff in particular suggesting for improving engagement practices.  | Non managerial and managerial staff at the case organisation.   |
| 07 December 2011 | Presentation to MBA students, Bangor Business School  | To present findings of my research in the context of a lecture of managing change in organisations.   | Full time MBA students (international cohort).  |
| 29 March 2012    | Presentation at Wales Institute of Social, Economic Research, Methods and Data annual conference, Bangor University (co-organised panel on workforce research in Wales) | To present interpretations of secondary analysis of qualitative data (WISERD Knowing Localities interviews with managers in the public sector).<br><br>To promote a discussion on future streams of research on the public services workforce in Wales. | Experienced scholars (political science, economics, economic geography and social sciences) with research interest in Wales.<br><br>Managers and professionals in the Welsh Public Service. |
| 16 April 2012    | Presentation at ESRC supported Employee Engagement Doctoral Symposium, Kent University  | To gain feedback on my interpretations of data collected to investigate conceptions of employee engagement (Chapter Five of the dissertation)   | Employee engagement scholars (international).   |

## **2.7 Summary and conclusions**

In this Chapter, I describe how I carried out this research, using a five step approach shown in Figure 2.1. I have shown how my research question has changed during the research, which is understandable given that I have been researching what has been identified as a relatively immature field theoretically and conceptually (Truss 2012, Briner 2012, Shuck 2011). The research methods that I have used have been informed by the final research question, my experience of data collection and consultations with others in the spirit of 'engaged scholarship' (Van de Ven 2007). I have collected mainly qualitative data which I have analysed thematically (Scott Jones and Watt 2010) with close reference to my research question. I have collected data myself, and have re-used data and findings produced by other researchers. I have sought to conduct this research ethically by considering how my research could affect not only direct participants (*i.e. respondents*) but also *family, friends and associates that might be identified by virtue of their relationship to me.*

This Chapter concludes Part One of the dissertation. The next part, Part Two, comprises five 'findings' chapters. In the next Chapter, I present my findings about the institutional context (Boon et al 2009) which provide a backdrop for the experience and management of employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service.

## **PART TWO: FINDINGS**

### **Chapter Three:**

**The context for employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service**

### **Chapter Four:**

**The Welsh Public Service workforce**

### **Chapter Five:**

**Conceptions of employee engagement**

### **Chapter Six:**

**Managing employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service**

### **Chapter Seven:**

**Experiencing employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service**

09 March 2007

*Today we travel to Cardiff for the Merit Wales awards. Two teams from the Council have been nominated. Merit Wales was established to recognise and promote good practice in public service policy making and service delivery. I wasn't sure if I was going to get to go, but as I said to my line manager: I have the perfect dress! I started at 9 o'clock this morning getting prepared with hair and nails, and once in Cardiff I intend to stop off at Howells the department store to get my make up done.*

*I am very excited, as this is the culmination of a year's work. I've never been part of a team to be nominated for anything, and I'd like to say it isn't important. But the project that's been submitted has meant a lot to me. It has involved collaboration with policy makers from both within the Council and from other organisations. There's been lots of facilitation of meetings to do, researching socio-economic context and coming up with ideas about what sort of place we want to be. I smile to myself as I think about the weekend I spent at home drawing tens of 2x2 matrices trying to make sense of the material we'd gathered and generating scenarios for our possible futures. This was beyond my brief but who cares. The partnership that commissioned the project paid a lot of money to external consultants to lead the work, but I know how much we at the Council, and I, have contributed to this. The firm weren't keen that we would work alongside them to learn 'their' process, doing each step with them. Now, they sell this feature to other clients.*

*I pick up my gown and head for the train station. We met with the Merit Wales assessors a few weeks ago and I hope we've done well. I spoke about how we had learned to do scenario planning and that our skills and knowledge were now a resource for the wider local government family in Wales. For me, this is how it should be, using our own skills and talents when we can.*

*I would like to do more of this kind of work. Not just producing, but also making sense of, and extending, research. Putting it to use. This has been a once in five years project and I'm not sure when the opportunity will arise to do something on this scale again. I hope it's not too long.*

### 3.1 Introduction<sup>12</sup>

In this Chapter, I provide an assessment of the context facing the Welsh Public Service workforce. I show how devolution was accompanied by the development of “distinctively Welsh” policy priorities (Seargant 2011) but like the rest of the UK, included public service reform. From an analysis of documents and interview data with senior public sector managers, I identify a number of current and structural issues likely to be detrimental to personal individual level engagement (Kahn 1990). Managing and sustaining employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service within the economic and political structures that I identify in this Chapter is likely to be very difficult.

#### 3.1.1 Introduction

“Essential to an understanding of employee attitudes and behaviors in public service is a consideration of context...not only work environment and job characteristics...but also broader institutional features.” (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler 2003, p214)

It has been asserted that increasing employee engagement is crucial for organisations to be able to respond effectively to changing conditions (MacLeod and Clarke 2009). Kahn (1990, 1992) identified that individuals’ propensity to experience moments of personal engagement at work were a product of both individual characteristics and their environment but did not consider the influence of context beyond the organisation on personal engagement. Scholars writing more recently also note that employee engagement requires the interaction of both personal and environmental characteristics and resources in order to be activated (Schuck and Rocco 2011). “Given that workplace co-operation is shaped by its context” (Dobbins and Gunnigle 2009, p551), the characteristics of the wider environment are a factor to be taken into account in employee engagement.

The purpose of this Chapter is to identify aspects of the external context bearing upon the Welsh Public Service workforce, which may have implications for their willingness and ability to engage more fully with their work and their employers. There are long standing debates over the degree to which individuals’ actions and responses are shaped primarily by the environment

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<sup>12</sup> This Chapter references material from Chapter Four: The Welsh Public Service workforce, with which this Chapter is closely associated. Both chapters should be read in conjunction with each other.

or are more freely determined. One perspective assumes that employees' identities, and their behaviours, thoughts and attitudes, are shaped primarily by the social, economic and political structures they occupy. Hierarchies and imbalances of power constrain and determine individual action (Aston 2012). An alternative view is that individuals have control over their circumstances and can exhibit 'agency' i.e. individual volition to shape the conditions in which they operate (Smith 1998). The 'either/or' debate regarding the dominance of either external structures or individual agency has been displaced by arguments that these determinants are not in direct opposition but relate to one another (Giddens 1984 in James 2011).

In order to understand the context facing the Welsh Public Service workforce, I describe the development of the Welsh Government's policies for public services since devolution which identifies a number of issues that the workforce is expected to take into account in their attitudes and behaviours towards their work. I then use interview data to identify issues that are considered to be important by senior public service managers working in policy and operational roles across Wales. Using material from Chapter Four on workforce characteristics, I then present an overview of the context facing the Welsh Public Service workforce combined with a summary of what is known about public sector employees in Wales and their attitudes towards work. Finally, I discuss the possible implications of the context that I describe for employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service, identifying theories which might help explain why this might be. I use the following sources of data to identify the set of contextual issues facing employees of the Welsh Public Service:

- Documents produced by the Welsh Government and other key agencies between 2000 and 2011 setting out its objectives for public services in Wales (WAG 2003, 2004, 2006, 2009a, WG 2011c, WAO 2011),
- Interviews I have conducted in 2010 and 2011 with Senior Public Servants (SPS) in the WPS, who occupy high level policy making roles, which I introduce in Chapter 2,
- Interviews conducted by other researchers with managers working in senior operational roles in the Welsh Public Service in 2009 and 2010, collected as part of the WISERD Knowing Localities programme, also introduced in Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2, Data Item E (WISERD 2011),
- Official statistics describing employment in the public sector in Wales (WAG 2009).

### 3.2 Wales: an overview

Wales is one of the four constituent countries of the United Kingdom. Approximately, 3 million people live in Wales, representing 5% of the UK population in 2001 (ONS 2004). Wales has two official languages, Welsh and English, and the public sector along with some organisations in the private sector have duties placed upon them to provide services in the two languages (BBC 2012). The last twelve years have seen substantial changes in its governance as a result of the creation of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999<sup>13</sup>, when responsibility for twenty areas of public policy (listed in Appendix Item 1) were devolved from the United Kingdom government, the main areas of expenditure being health, education and local government.

Economically, Wales is a relatively poor country, and has been so for a long period of time (Jones and Henley 2007) with relatively little demand from employers for high level skills (Felstead 2009). Within Wales there are differences in economic performance, with west Wales and the valleys of South Wales particularly challenged. It is important to note that between 1999 and 2007, there was strong employment growth in Wales, although much was in the public sector (as in the rest of the UK), and low value added manufacturing and services in the private sector (WAG 2009, Beatty and Fothergill 2011). Following a period of expansion in public sector employment in Wales (as described in Section 3.3.5), recruitment freezes and job losses have taken place in the last two years, with more jobs at risk in the next 3 years as a result of cuts in real value of funding for public services in Wales (WAO 2011). This impact of this factor alone on employee engagement should be explored in more detail by scholars.

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<sup>13</sup> When the National Assembly for Wales was established by the Government of Wales Act 1998, the legislature (National Assembly for Wales) and executive (Welsh Assembly Government) were one body. Other than very early documents (e.g. BetterWales.com 2000), most government policy documents were published under the name 'Welsh Assembly Government' until May 2011 when the First Minister announced that the executive would be known as the 'Welsh Government' (BBC 2011). The separation of The 'National Assembly for Wales' and the 'Welsh Government' was formally established in the Government of Wales Act 2006. The 'National Assembly for Wales' is the "...*democratically elected body that represents the interests of Wales and its people, makes laws for Wales, and holds the Welsh Government to account.*" (NAW 2012).

### 3.2.1 *Employment in the public sector<sup>14</sup> in Wales*

“In comparison with the rest of Great Britain, Wales has a higher proportion of the workforce employed in public administration.” (Jones et al 2004, section 3)

In this section of the Chapter, I present estimates of public sector employment in Wales, using data from the Welsh Government’s analysis of the Annual Population Survey 2007 (APS) (Welsh Government 2009). Statistics on actual public sector employment, using administrative datasets, are only available at the UK level (Mathews 2010). The use of survey data to estimate public sector employment has its limitations. Quality and accuracy can be compromised due to mistakes in employees reporting their sector of employment and difficulties in allocating staff to a sector (WAG 2009). The APS has been shown to over estimate public sector employment (Prothero 2011) and reflects the residence of the respondent rather than the location of the employment. However, it is noted by Prothero (2011) that “the APS data provides a very useful source for comparisons of relative public sector (and private sector) employment across different subregions” (p4). The limitations of the APS data, as well as the lack of disaggregation to the Welsh Public Service level, is a significant barrier to understanding the nature of the Welsh Public Service workforce, its similarities and differences with other workforces, and any variations within the WPS itself. However, I have utilised the APS dataset due to the lack of alternative sources in order to provide some information on public sector employment in Wales, which has been described as representing “a disproportionate share” (Bryan and Roche 2011, p162) of employment, in both rural and urban Wales (WAG 2009).

In 2009, there were in the region of a third of a million public sector jobs in Wales (WAG 2009). In 2010 the proportion of the workforce employed in the public sector in Wales was second only to Northern Ireland (ONS 2011) with 28.4% of employee jobs in the public sector in Wales compared with 21.7% of all employee jobs in Great Britain as a whole. Between 1992 and 2002, increases in public sector jobs accounted for the largest element of the growth in service related employment in Wales (Jones et al 2004). Where employment in public administration, defence and compulsory social security for the UK fell 1.2% between 2001 and 2011, it grew 7.2% in Wales (WG 2012b). Growth in public sector employment in Wales was twice the amount found in the UK for the same ten year period, while employment in human health and social work

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<sup>14</sup> The statistics presented in this section refer to the wider public sector operating in Wales (i.e. include UK Government employment) rather than the narrower Welsh Public Service, for the reasons described at the beginning of the Chapter. I estimate UK Civil Service employment located in Wales to account for a headcount of 35,000 employees in March 2011 (WAO 2011).

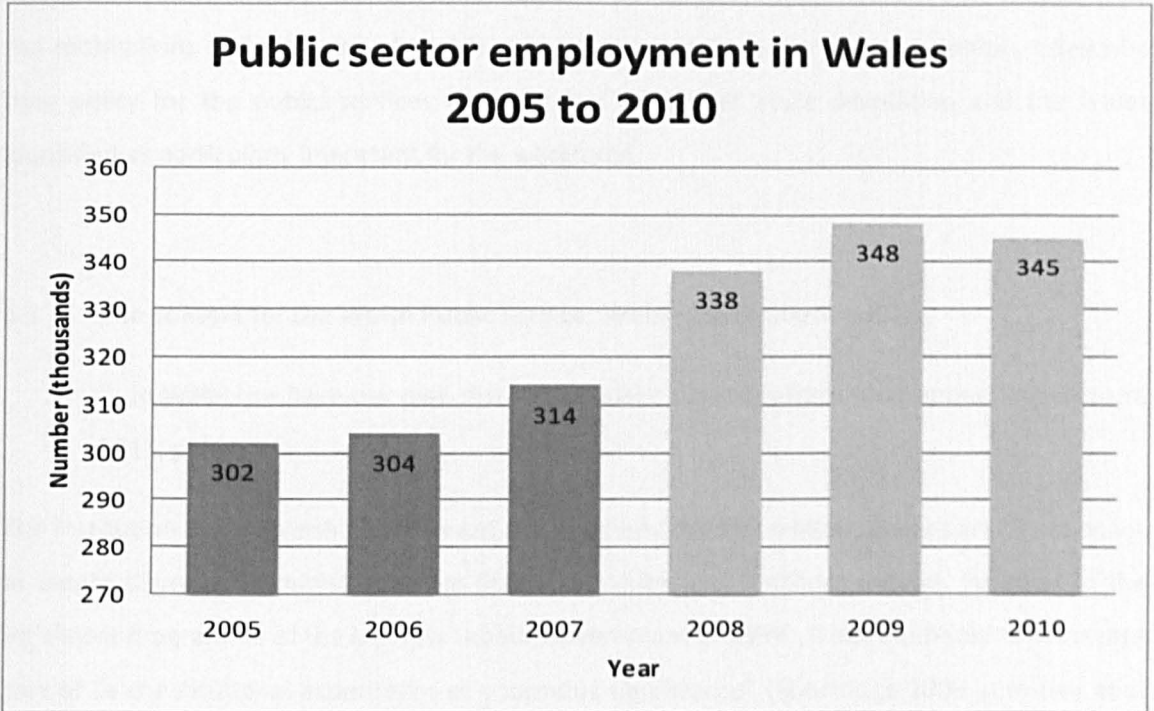


activities grew by a fifth in Wales, compare to an increase of a quarter in the United Kingdom (WG 2012b). The trends in public sector employment are shown diagrammatically in Figure 3.1, showing a year on year increase from 2005 to 2009, and a reduction in overall employment in 2010.

Public sector pay is “largely set nationally” (IFS 2011, p172) which in the case of the Welsh Public Service, will be determined through direct negotiation at the Wales level (for local government and some sponsored bodies employees) and at the UK level through pay review body recommendations (for Civil Service and NHS employees). In 2010, the IFS (2011) found that outside London and the South East of England, the “estimated pay differential [between public and private sectors] is substantial, ...over 10% in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland for men and between 13% and 16% for women” (p173). The method of calculating the estimates has its limitations as it is not able to capture non-monetary rewards, and does not include pensions and other aspects of reward packages (IFS 2011) and the findings have been challenged as over estimating the pay gap in favour of the public sector (O’Leary et al 2012). Estimated earnings for graduates living in Wales working in the public sector “are noticeably higher than they are for those working in the private sector” (Bristow et al 2011, p66) according to research conducted using the APS, and found that the public sector has “dampened to a degree in recent years” (Bristow et al 2011, p73) the pull of graduates from Wales to more economically successful areas of the UK.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer of the UK Government requested in 2011 that pay review bodies covering civil servants, the NHS, teachers and prison staff consider how “to make the pay of some their remit groups more market-facing in local areas. The Government argues that differentials between public and private sector wages vary considerably between local labour markets...” (OEM 2012, p1). Given that there is some evidence of a pay premium in favour of the public sector in Wales, varying pay within the Welsh Public Service is likely to only serve to complicate the management of employee engagement even further.

Figure 3.1: Public sector employment in Wales, 2005-2010<sup>15</sup>



Source: Recreated using WAO 2011, p30, using Stats Wales/Office for National Statistics.

### 3.2.2 A country exhibiting distinctive values

As a result of its economic history, Wales has a smaller middle class and a larger working class than the other nations of Great Britain, and traditionally has elected primarily left of centre politicians and governments (Drakeford 2010). While cuts in funding for public services are impacting upon Welsh Government statements regarding the role of the public sector (WAG 2009a), the public sector has been viewed more benignly in Wales than in other countries, such as England, that have sought to bring about smaller rather than larger government (Loughlin and Sykes 2004). This has been attributed not only towards the dominance of left of centre political parties but also a greater reverence for professionals working in the public sector (Keating 2006). There is also said to be more commitment in Wales to community and the provision of universal rather than means tested services, although the evidence to support these statements is shallow (Drakeford 2010, Loughlin and Sykes 2004). It has been claimed that Scandinavian (Cox 2004) rather than Anglo-American values have influenced public service policy making in

<sup>15</sup> Note in the WAO report (WAO 2011): “Figures for 2005 to 2007 are not directly comparable to those for 2008 onwards due to a change in the methodology for producing the statistics” (p31). Includes employees of banks that were brought into public sector ownership in 2007 and 2008. This chart refers to Welsh Government and UK Government public sector employment.

Wales (Drakeford 2010). I have not been able to identify any research that has considered the incidence of such values in Wales, or the impact of Scandinavian type values should they exist on the motivations and attitudes of Welsh public service workers. In the next section, I describe how policy for the public services in Wales has developed since devolution and the issues identified as particularly important for the workforce.

### **3.3 The context for the Welsh Public Service: Welsh Government policy**

“...in Wales we have our own distinctive public service reform programme.” (Sargeant, 2011, p1)

The institution of the Welsh Government is a relatively recent creation, being part of the policy to create devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, included in the legislative programme of the UK New Labour Government of 1997. It has been said to represent part of “a constitutional experiment of enormous significance” (Shortridge 2009 in Nutley et al 2011 p1). Andrews and Martin (2010) note that institutional theory contends that institutions “play a critical role in constraining and conditioning the strategic behaviour of public service organizations...actors choices are therefore embedded in political structures and policy settings which constrain the options available to them. The presence of distinctive regional processes of policy formulation and implementation...may have significant implications for public service performance” (p920). This may also be the case for conceptions, management and experiences of employee engagement, which is why I am choosing to explore the development of public policy in Wales since devolution.

Since the National Assembly for Wales was established in 1999, public services have received extensive policy and political attention. I have produced a timeline, shown in Figure 3.2 on page 100 identifying the principal government strategies, public service policy documents and workforce initiatives that have been developed during each of the four Welsh Government administrations. I consider this to be important for this study as it demonstrates the focus there has been on public sector reform and modernisation since the establishment of the Assembly, and how the workforce has been expected to work differently. In each of the administrations, Welsh Labour has either governed alone as a minority government (second and fourth terms), or as the majority partner in a coalition, with the Liberal Democrats in the first term, and Plaid Cymru – the Party of Wales in the third term. Welsh Labour is accepted to be the dominant

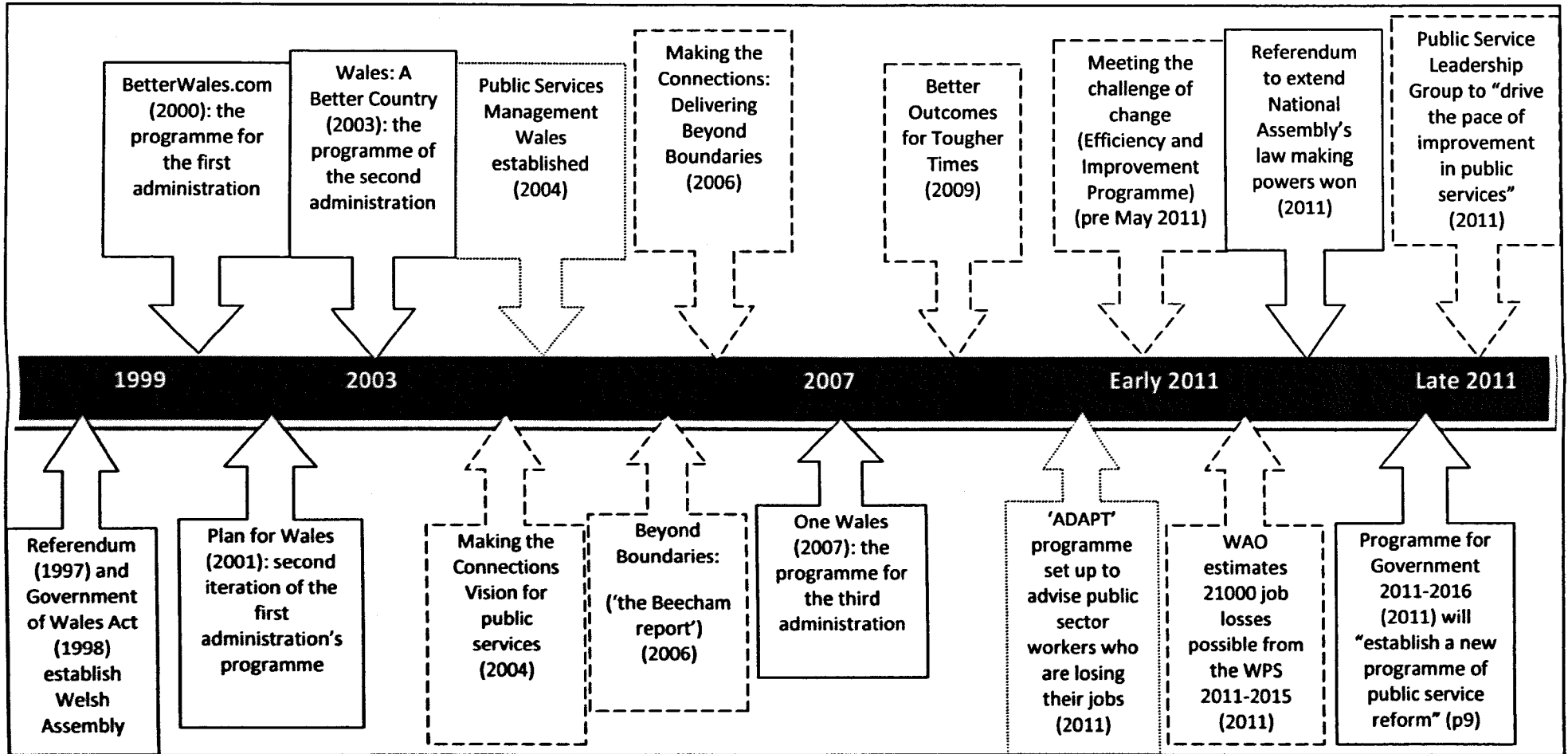
political party in Wales, having won the largest share of the vote in every UK General Election since 1922 and in every National Assembly for Wales election in 1999 (Mackay 2010). In the next four sections, I describe the principal aspects of Government policy for the Welsh Public Service.

### 3.3.1 *The first administration 1999-2003*

**"All our public services, including those provided directly by the Assembly itself, must show that they are top performers in terms of service delivery and value for money."  
(NAW 2000, para 2.29)**

In the first Welsh Government's vision for Wales contained in its first strategic plan 'BetterWales.com' (NAW 2000), the political desire for high quality and cost effective public services was clear. It was stated that Wales needed to be "served by modern, effective, efficient and accessible public services" (NAW 2000, np) and an ambition to build "a thoroughly modern and responsive public service sector in which improved performance is delivered year on year" (NAW 2001, p2) was identified. Recognition was made during these early years that the Welsh Government was not in direct control of all of Welsh Public Service organisations. I identify this issue in Chapter Four when I show that more than half of the Welsh Public Service workforce in 2007 worked in organisations autonomous from the Welsh Government, mostly in local government. In the Government's assessment of Wales in BetterWales.com, public services are included in the section on "weaknesses" (NAW 2000, p16) due to variation in service provision and quality. Operating efficiently and saving money were identified as priorities from the outset, with a target for reducing the costs of procuring public services in the BetterWales.com plan. This was against a backdrop of increasing budgets provided to the Welsh Government from the UK Government, and a large injection of European funding for regional development which commenced in 1999 (NAW 2000). Policy and government were to pursue a "distinctively Welsh approach" (NAW 2000) its meaning unclear at this stage, although "motivated and supported public sector workers" (NAW 2001, p2) was offered as one indicator of a Welsh approach.

**Figure 3.2: Key events in government policy, public services policy and public services support arrangements, Wales, 1997-2011**



*Notes: solid lines indicate Government wide policy statements, dotted lines indicate public service specific policy statements, micro dotted lines indicate public services support arrangements. There is no association between the size of the boxes and the policy documents referenced. Layout inspired by Shuck and Wollard (2010).*

### 3.3.2 *The second administration 2003-2007*

“There has been relatively limited thinking about the Welsh public service workforce as a whole.” (WAG 2006, Section 6).

While the desire for better public services in Wales was first identified during the first administration, it was during the second administration that a model of public service reform was developed and promoted by the Welsh Government to the Welsh Public Service. Based on co-ordination between public service providers, rather than market and competition based approaches being pursued in other parts of the UK, the Welsh Government’s ‘Making the Connections’ approach sought to develop services centred on citizens. It was recognised that this would mean changes for the workforce as it required “significant changes in the way that services are designed, planned and delivered” (WAG 2004, Section 2) and “the citizen model cuts across the culture and working practices of traditional public service...it requires a weakening of organisational boundaries, to extend delivery horizons radically so that citizens are put centre stage.” (Beecham 2006, p5). A collaborative approach, with public service employees working across organizational boundaries to deliver and improve public services, was felt to meet both political preferences for non market approaches and service delivery objectives, where population size may not support the development of a range of public service providers:

“By using co-ordination rather than competition, users and producers of public services are enabled to be on the same side. As a consequence, the best outcomes are obtained when those who use and those who provide services work together in collaboration.” (WAG 2004, preface)

The collaboration model being pursued by the Welsh Government extended to encouraging the exchange of staff between organisations and the sharing of staff capacity as “services which are centred on the needs of citizens require those delivering services to work together as never before” (WAG 2004, p4). While policy documents during this term acknowledged that joint working and collaboration did already take place, the Welsh Government formally placed collaboration between providers at the heart of its model of public service delivery. An independent and influential review of public service delivery in Wales also promoted a collaborative rather than a competitive approach amongst public service providers (Beecham

2006) which the Welsh Government took as an endorsement of their model. In neither the Welsh Government nor the Beecham review is there a detailed discussion regarding the theory underpinning why collaboration between providers should be either possible or desirable, and how this would impact on the motivations and engagement of the workforce.

Whereas there was reference in the first term of government to the need to build better working relationships between public sector organisations, it was in the second administration that the concept of a single Welsh Public Service, as an “ideal” (WAG 2004, Section 2) was introduced. As well as 29 arms length organisations with 2368 staff who were integrated into the Welsh Government<sup>16</sup> as part of Welsh Labour’s “bonfire of the quangos” between 2000 and 2010 (NAW 2011c), a single set of WPS values was introduced by the Welsh Government to the rest of the Welsh Public Service which it was argued would enhance collaboration and improve citizen and user focus. Staff allegiances to professions, service areas or individual employing organisations would need to adapt to take into account this new set of values, which appear to be unitarist in nature (Legge 2005):

“The Government has a radical vision for a Welsh public service, sharing common goals and working across functional and organisational boundaries...bring together the different elements of the public service in a more integrated way...organisations with different purposes, constitutions and accountabilities...can be brought together by the shared values of social justice, equality, sustainability and a sense of community.” (WAG 2004, section 10)

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<sup>16</sup> During the second administration, a number of Welsh Government sponsored bodies that were separate entities were integrated into the Government, most notable economic and business development, education and training.

Engaging the Welsh public service workforce was seen as “critical to delivering the vision” for public services (WAG 2004, p33), with individual WPS organisations being required to engage with staff, and develop managers, in order to adapt their ways of working and put citizens first. Employee engagement is being presented as a “normative good” (Osborne and Brown 2011, p1339) to be taken on board by both non-managerial and managerial staff as a desirable attribute:

“We need to engage with and enable front line staff to operate more responsively and flexibly...we need to build their capacity...to continuously improve the way in which services are organised and delivered...leaders and managers play a pivotal role...by demonstrating their personal commitment to the vision of improved and integrated public services coupled with an exemplary ability to manage others...the common foundation...will be a strong public service ethos in which the needs and well being of the citizen become the first point of reference.” (WAG 2006, section 4).

“Leaders, both centrally and locally, should create a process of sustained engagement with staff which enables change through engagement....A skilled, motivated, energetic workforce from refuse collectors to chief executives, from care assistants to consultants, from receptionists to radiologists is crucial to making public services in Wales amongst the best in the world.” (Beecham 2006, p60)

In *Making the Connections* (WAG 2005), gaining better knowledge of the WPS workforce is identified as an objective, to include the development of a profile of the workforce. As I note in Chapter Four, I have not been able to find any research or monitoring report that describes the Welsh Public Service workforce as a whole. As well as a distinctively Welsh model of public service management, the Government stated that it was also creating “a distinctively Welsh approach to developing Welsh public servants” (WAG 2006, Section 6) although there is no detail on what the Welsh approach would entail. A new organisation, Public Services Management Wales, was established to develop management and leadership quality across the Welsh Public Service. The growth in resources available to the Welsh Government is noted, with



commitments to increase staffing in key areas such as health. The reforms set out in the Making the Connections portfolio were pronounced as positive for staff, who would have the opportunity to work in different ways and across organisational boundaries, making jobs more satisfying (Welsh Assembly Government 2006). Some jobs that were located within central Government departments would be moved “closer to communities” (WAG 2006, p34), and as a result, would be more satisfying for staff. I have not been able to identify any research, either academic or applied, that has assessed these claims that job satisfaction has increased as a result of the Making the Connections (MTC) agenda. My analysis of job satisfaction in 2004, using the WERS data, suggested that job satisfaction amongst public sector workers in Wales was already high in that year compared to other parts of the UK, and that this might be associated with contingent rather than full engagement (Meyer et al 2010). I explain the foundation and evidence for this assertion later in Chapter Four (Section 4.4). The impact of the Making the Connections agenda on staff engagement and work attitudes such as satisfaction and commitment to organisation is worthy of further examination.

### *3.3.3 Third administration 2007-2011*

“Wales is moving towards full employment...Wales has a higher employment rate than Germany, France and Japan...the labour market is buoyant with employment opportunities and vacancies arising all the time....offering opportunity for all.” (DWP 2007, p7).

The Making the Connection framework established during the second administration continued to hold sway during the third administration, with the Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru coalition government stating their commitment to continue to prioritise a citizen centred and efficiency oriented model of public service delivery (WAG 2007). Improvements in public services were acknowledged to have taken place as had increased resourcing, but the pressure to continue to improve performance was re-iterated in 2009 as it was felt there remained inconsistency in the quality of service delivery (WAG 2009a). During the second half of the third term, promoting efficiency in public service delivery appeared to assume an even greater prominence due to the recessionary economic climate brought about by the global financial crisis of 2008 (WAG 2009a). The human resource functions of Welsh Public Service organisations is identified as one service area where co-location and cost reduction should be encouraged (WAG 2009a). Enabling the workforce to adapt to changed circumstances was identified as one of the three key areas of the Efficiency and Improvement Programme, with an emphasis on increasing transfer of staff

between organisations. For the first time, reductions in staffing is acknowledged to be a possible outcome of the squeeze on resources facing the Welsh Public Service (WAG 2009). The Workforce Partnership Council, made up of the Welsh Government, the Welsh Local Government Association and Trade Unions and chaired by the First Minister, was established as the forum for the three sectors to monitor the implications for the workforce arising from changes in public service policy and the increased focus on delivering efficiency and cost savings (WAO 2011).

#### 3.3.4 *Fourth administration 2011-2015*

“It’s clear that in Wales we’re facing our biggest challenge since devolution began.”  
(WG 2011c, p1)

The continuous improvement theme that arose in the policy documents in the first administration continues to be evident in the plans of the Welsh Government for the fourth administration, as does the model of collaboration between public services providers developed during the second term. Collaboration to deliver and manage services across regions of Wales rather than individual local authorities has been demanded, with councils being grouped into six areas for regional collaboration. The intention to “establish a new programme of public service reform” (WG 2011c, p9), which includes a review of the governance of public services, is identified in the Welsh Government’s five year Programme for Government for the period 2011 to 2016. Collaboration between agencies is to be enforced through further legislation to make local authorities collaborate with other organisations, as it is viewed as a necessary condition for public service delivery and efficient use of resources:

“we will require service providers and users to work in partnership more effectively...we will insist on rapid implementation of joint procurement systems to obtain maximum value....” (WG 2011c, Chapter 2, No.2/001).

In 2012, the First Minister asserted that the Government's approach to the management of public services remained distinctive, stating that "it will come as no surprise when I say that we reject the model of reform driven by the market and competition between service providers. There is clear evidence that marketisation works against equality and social justice – for us these are core principles that must underpin public service delivery" (WG 2012, p1). Civil servants occupying senior roles in the Welsh Government attested to an increase in focus on measuring performance, external scrutiny of public service performance and promoting an even stronger focus on collaboration between providers in the WPS, being evidence of "a harder managerial edge" (Cole et al 2011, p10).

### *3.3.5 Discussion of the policy context for the Welsh Public Service 1999-2015*

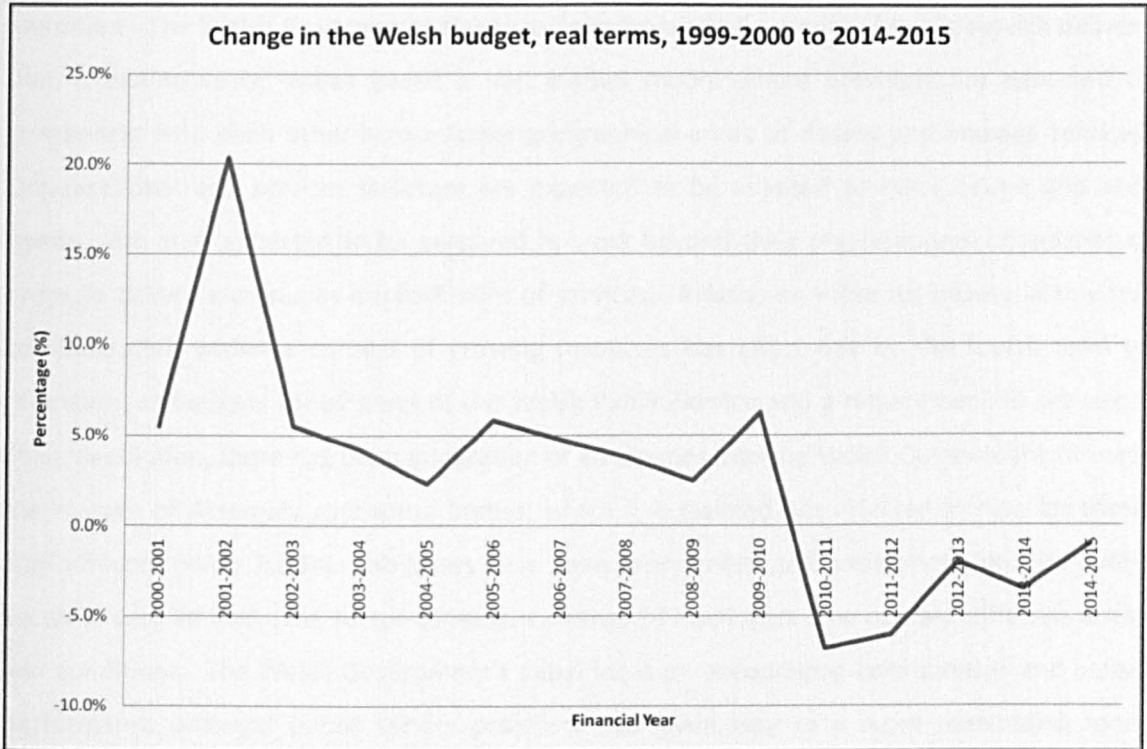
Given the consistent claims by several Welsh Government administrations that the model of Welsh Public Service delivery is "distinctively Welsh" (Sargeant 2011, p1), the absence of any research that has conceptualised the 'Welsh model' in relation to extant models and theories of public management is noticeable. Across Europe and the United States, it has been argued that established approaches to public service management based on "traditional and professional bureaucracies are being transformed into managerial bureaucracies based upon business principles and practices imported from the private sector...rules and procedures...hierarchies are being replaced with often competitive smaller, matrix structures, partnerships and networks coordinated by contracts and performance agreements involving complex relationships between public, private and voluntary bodies." (Horton 2006, p533). This development of "New Public Management" (NPM) "has been the dominant reform agenda across the OECD for the last quarter of a century" (Bach and Givan 2011, p2359) although I have not found any research that has considered the impact of NPM on the public sector specifically in Wales. Changes to employment conditions and relations are a characteristic of New Public Management with employees being transferred to private sector operators due to privatisations and changing relationships with trade unions as individual rather than collective bargaining has been pursued (Bach and Bordogna 2011). Employee engagement, conceived in its 'personal engagement at work' sense on the basis on qualitative research with two private sector companies in the United States (Kahn 1990) and promoted as having benefits for organisations as a result of research conducted in 36 private sector companies (Harter et al 2002), could be viewed as an import in terms of conception, nature of outcomes and individual level orientation (in the case of personal engagement at work) into the public sector.

While the UK as a whole has been identified as a country where NPM reforms have particularly taken hold (Exworthy and Halford 1999), I have not been able to find research evidence that has explored to what degree, or if the adoption of private sector influenced practices and market based approaches, known as “New Public Management” (NPM), is taking place in the public sector in Wales as a separate country. Divergence in policy, practice and public service outcomes have been observed between Wales, Scotland and England (Andrews and Martin 2010, Birrell 2007, Drakeford 2005) but I have not been able to identify any discussions in relation to the degree of fit with either ‘traditional’ or ‘new’ models of public management. From the Welsh Government statements that I have presented earlier in this Section and the close working relationships between Welsh Government ministers and trade unions reported to me in my interviews with Senior Public Servants, it would appear that there is certainly not much fondness amongst leading politicians for the delivery of public services by private sector providers in Wales. In other respects, increasing focuses on performance management, the development of managerial capacity across the sector would suggest the adoption of some aspects of the new public management. Fundamentally, the impact of changes to the policy direction for public services (be they towards or away from NPM or other models such as digital era governance (Dunleavy et al 2006 in Bach and Bordogna 2011) brought about by devolution for the workforce, and their willingness to engage with their own roles, organisational and Welsh Public Service wide objectives and ability to adopt new ways of working such as partnership and collaborative working, have not been explored thus far.

The net growth in financial resources that were witnessed during the first three terms has given way to a far more austere financial climate and public sector job losses being forecast (WAO 2011) as shown in the graph in Figure 3.3. “The UK Government’s Comprehensive Spending Review 2010 announced a period of unprecedented restraint in the public finances in order to reduce the UK’s budget deficit...at the current time the Welsh block is predicted to see an overall reduction of £2.1 billion...” between 2010-11 and 2014-2015. (NAW 2011, p3). In 2011, a programme was established by the Welsh Government to provide support for public sector employees whose jobs may be lost as a result of cutbacks in funding, providing access to careers advisers and advice on training and educational opportunities as well as advice on claiming benefits (WG 2012c). In 2010, 380 Welsh Government employees left their jobs through redundancy or early retirement with further invitations for staff to express an interest in leaving the organisation expected in later years. External recruitment to the Welsh Government is

restricted, and redeployment of civil servants is taking place to cover areas of work that would have been carried out previously by consultants (NAW 2011a).

**Figure 3.3: Percentage change in the Welsh block grant 1999-2000 to 2014-15 in real terms**



Source: Recreated from NAW (2011). Years shown are financial years.

### 3.3.6 The context for Welsh Public Services: Welsh Government policy – a summary

“...public management reform and the consequences for the workforce can vary significantly between national jurisdictions...the focus on organisational and managerial reform needs to be complemented by an understanding of the institutional context in which reforms are enacted and the distinct role of the state as an employer.” (Bach and Givan 2011, p2349)

I have included this discussion of the policy context facing the Welsh Public Service as changes in public management philosophies “are impacting on public officials as their roles and the work they do, the ways in which they are managed, their relationships with the public and the criteria by which they are assessed, both internally and externally, are continually evolving.” (Horton 2006, p534). Although potentially extensive as shown in the quotation above, the impact of

reforms in the public sector generally on staff has largely been ignored by researchers (Bach and Bordogna 2011).

From my description of the policy framework for the public services, a number of issues can be identified. The Welsh Government claims to have developed a model of public service delivery that is distinctive to Wales based a non market model where providers are expected to collaborate with each other across larger geographical areas to deliver and manage services. Organisational and services structure are expected to be adapted to meet citizen and user needs, with staff expected to be prepared to work beyond their organisational boundaries in order to deliver continuous improvement of services. A focus on value for money in the first administration within a context of growing resources has given way by the fourth term to reductions in budgets for all parts of the Welsh Public Service and a requirement to cut costs. Since devolution, there has been integration of employees into the Welsh Government through the merger of Assembly sponsored bodies, which it is claimed has affected morale for those staff affected (NAW 2011c). Job losses have been experienced and recruitment into the public sector is very limited. The sector comprises a range of employers who operate different terms and conditions. The Welsh Government's initial focus on encouraging collaboration and better performance amongst public service providers has given way to a more demanding tone, supported by legislation to require organisations to collaborate with each other (WG 2011c). A single set of Welsh Public Service values have been promoted by the Welsh Government as guiding principles for all organisations: social justice, equality, sustainability and a sense of community suggesting an attempt to pursue an uni-dimensional 'one best way' approach (Marchington 2008) to creating an engaged workforce. The engagement of the workforce is considered to be crucial for the Welsh model of public services to be delivered. Engagement appears to be conceptualised as an improved working relationship with staff, who will be provided with training to carry out their jobs in new ways and to develop an attitude of considering the needs of citizens "as the first point of reference in the design and management for all public services." (WAG 2006, p29).

The need for the Welsh Public Service workforce to adapt their working practices appears to be a taken for granted assumption in the Welsh Government's policy trajectory. The Government and key stakeholders have consistently listed a range of contextual factors (such as increasing demand for services as a result of an ageing population, growing expectations amongst users

that are more attuned to their needs and more recently the cuts in funding for public services) that it is said make changes to working practices and attitudes unavoidable (WAG 2005, Beecham 2006, WAO 2011). It seems a taken for granted assumption that employees will need to work differently from how they have worked in the past. A study of the language used to describe and categorise public service workers in Government policy documents would be interesting in order to identify whether staff attitudes and behaviours are viewed as fixed or dynamic and capable of being changed. It would also be interesting to conduct research to ascertain whether public servants are viewed as virtuous “knights” or self-interested “knaves” (Le Grand 1997) by the Welsh Government and WPS employers. Gaining these understanding would be helpful for designing employee engagement initiatives.

The policy timeline that I have described in this Section (Figure 3.2) provides only one perspective on some of the issues facing the Welsh Public Service: the Welsh Government. Government employees only comprises a small proportion of the overall WPS workforce, and are employed by the UK Civil Service. In the next Section, I describe how managers working in both policy and operational roles in the WPS conceive of the principal issues facing them in their work.

### **3.4 The context for the Welsh Public Service: Policy and operational managers' perspectives**

In this Section, I use data from two sets of interviews with managers from the Welsh Public Service to inform the identification of important issues facing the sector. As referred to in Chapter 2, I interviewed ten senior managers in 2010 and 2011 representing a range of public service policy, workforce and employment relations where I asked them for their views about the key issues facing the Welsh Public Service. In addition, I have also examined transcripts of interviews conducted in 2009 with fifteen public managers working in operational roles in the health and social care sector provided by the WISERD Knowing Localities initiative (see Section 2.4.2 in Chapter 2 for more details about this dataset). I particularly examined these transcripts to identify what structural factors the respondents revealed as influencing how they undertook their work. I use a selection of quotations from both datasets to illustrate how managers felt that delivering public services across Wales needed to take account of geography, culture (especially the Welsh language) and the relative poverty that could be found in both rural and

urban communities as well as more contemporary concerns such as cuts in resources. The importance of the public sector as an source of employment is identified, which re-iterates the analysis of official statistics that I provided in the earlier Section of this Chapter.

#### *3.4.1 Wales as a distinctive place to deliver public services*

One of the key aspects identified by the KL respondents was the geographic diversity to be found in Wales, with urban and rural areas considered to have different cultures which affected service provision:

“North Wales is very different to South Wales...so for a little country it’s got a lot of diversity as well...”(KL<sup>17</sup>, NHS, North Wales, Female)

“I mean I’ve got Swansea, a very complex city...and then I’ve got Ceredigion, which is a very rural...often things are designed without taking that into account...they’re sort of often designed in more sort of, more sort of urban type focus and I have to think, how am I going to deliver this in a rural context?” (KL, Government Agency, South West Wales, Female).

The distances between parts of Wales was found to affect not only public service provision but also the ability of staff to interact with one another. Reorganisation into larger regions, as in the case of the NHS in Wales and the collaboration agenda across several council areas, as described in the earlier Section, has meant that staff need to operate across far larger geographical patches than before, often on their own:

“A couple of days ago...I happened to go to Mid Wales and we were driving for about an hour and a half and we were still in Gwynedd! So when you think about it, it is a challenge for people who have worked in Gwynedd and there’ll be counter challenges for people who’ve worked in Wrexham. People think North Wales is all the same, but it’s certainly not...I mean we haven’t got lots of big cities...if you go to Towyn for a meeting, it’s a two hour drive there and a two hour drive back and it’s in our patch...so there’s a challenge.” (KL, NHS, North Wales, Female).

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<sup>17</sup> Abbreviation of “Knowing Localities”, the source of the quotation.



"It's a vast geographical area because Gwynedd is one of the largest counties in Wales...which is geographically and logistically difficult to manage at the best of times...you know we're always kind of catching up on ourselves really because of the travelling and the distances..." (KL, Government Agency, North Wales, Female)

"it's quite an isolating role, because of the geographical distance between branches. My branch covers three counties, so that's quite an area, and erm I suppose the nearest to me would be covering north west, which is another huge area. Your peers aren't close to you." (KL, Government Agency, North Wales, Female)

While Wales has two official languages, Welsh and English, the Welsh language is felt by some of the Senior Public Servants to define some parts of Wales more than others, and becoming a more important consideration in the delivery of public services:

"I suppose the Welsh language is something that's gonna be very high on our agenda...because Ceredigion certain areas and pockets the first language is Welsh, especially the children now and I suppose that's another thing that we've noticed is more and more children having to be...wanting to be interviewed in the language...in the Welsh language...even if their parents are English speaking because they've gone through the Welsh streams in school...they feel more comfortable in a formal environment speaking in Welsh...and the same in Powys, there are certain areas where the Welsh language is getting stronger and stronger and you know if you get a referral...the first thing you need to look at is language preference...In Gwynedd, it's really important, it defines it a lot really." (KL, Government Agency, Mid Wales, Female)

Although improvements were acknowledged to have taken place in terms of economic performance and environmental quality particularly in urban parts of Wales, the lack of resources in communities, and the resulting poverty and deprivation were often cited as defining qualities of Wales as a place:

“Rural deprivation is a problem. I worked here quite a while ago and it was one of the most horrific, sorry horrific is probably an overstatement but I think you’ll know what I mean. We did some stuff about dental health promotion with the school, one of the classes that the girls went to work to, they found that in this class there were only three kids who actually own their own toothbrush.” (KL, NHS, Mid Wales, Male)

“Wrexham...there are some very deprived communities, some of the most deprived communities in Wales...where mining and steel making were the primary occupations and obviously they have all closed now so we have a number of old mining communities.” (KL, Local Government, North Wales, Male)

The public sector is cited by a number of respondents to be an important source of employment:

“Well, there isn’t...there are opportunities and as we said until you get down to the M4 corridor yeah, the employment opportunities really are still largely in the public sector....” (KL, Local Government, South East Wales, Male)

“The public sector is by far the biggest employer here. If you look at it, the University, education and health services, they employ a huge percentage of the population...there’s very little industry here at all...it is something that we are quite conscious of...it’s not a good position to be in...on one level the employment that exists is relatively secure because of the type of employment it is, if you lived here went off and did a degree and want to come back and get a job, what are you going to do if you don’t want to work in the public sector, I’m not really sure.” (KL, NHS, Mid Wales, Male)

### 3.4.2 *Cuts in resources to deliver public services*

The reductions in resources available to the public services was a key issue for the operational managers, who were trying to manage the impact of the cuts in funding that were just beginning to take hold in 2009. The reductions in resources were placing tensions on working relationships, with trust said to be adversely affected as organisations reduce their commitments to working in partnership and across organisational boundaries. This appears to be going against the grain of the policy aspirations of the Welsh Government described in the earlier section for the Welsh Public Service, to work in a collaborative manner as a matter of course:

“We’re having to find huge amounts of savings...I don’t think it’s actually happened yet, it might not be felt by the patient for a while....in terms of local authority public services they’ve been doing a schools review...looking at school closures...” (KL, NHS, North Wales, Female)

“...because of the recession the funding for partnerships is dwindling...it’s the thing we need to do more of now because of the recession, is working in partnership, and the thing that we’re doing less of is working in partnership...social care think health are going to push all the patients out to them because the health service can’t afford the services so they’re backing off from the partnerships. In 2005 we did a needs assessment in a very detailed way, talking to the community, not on our own, we were doing this in partnership, it’s not going to happen next time.” (KL, NHS, Mid Wales Female)

“Finance is becoming increasingly challenging...the efficiency agenda has become increasingly difficult and there’s only so far you can go in terms of making services leaner. And in terms of what we do, there’s a very high demand for our services and it becomes increasingly difficult to see where I can make efficiencies without them turning into cuts...to an extent you can reconfigure services, you can redesign them, you can look at processes and systems to make them more and more efficient but a point comes where there’s no more bright ideas about how to do that.” (KL, Local Government, South East Wales, Male)

When I asked the Senior Public Servants what they thought were the key issues for the Welsh Public Service which could affect employee engagement, all of the respondents cited the cuts in financial resources to operate services as the most important issue. The respondents felt that engagement amongst staff could be threatened by changes to employees' terms and conditions, pay freezes, the way that changes to the workforce including job redundancies were handled, and also staff who might have chosen to move to other jobs in the past may be prevented from doing so, as a result of a lack of alternatives:

"I think that the most important priority at the moment is the financial situation. Most definitely. The cuts facing the public sector. People are on the brink of quite severe upheaval in terms of potential redundancies, changes in terms and conditions. Pay freezes for the next two years. So the potential for organisations to have to change terms and conditions, worsen them, so that's the major priority really." (SPS<sup>18</sup>, Female, all Wales role)

"...at the moment nobody can go anywhere because there aren't the jobs for people to be able to move around....One of the major challenges now is that staff don't have somewhere else they can go and all the factors, all the external factors are pretty ropery, so it's even more important that employers do what they can to ensure they do engage their staff but... there's no money to do stuff or there's very little money." (SPS, Female, all Wales role).

However, two managers felt that engagement may increase amongst staff as they sought to demonstrate their commitment to their employers. Whether this is full or more contingent engagement (Meyer et al 2010) is not known:

"I know some people they are worried, working extremely hard and their manager is aware they are working extremely hard, and emphasising their achievements." (SPS, Male, north Wales, regional role)

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<sup>18</sup> Stands for 'Senior Public Servant', i.e. individuals I personally interviewed.

Four respondents mentioned that their organisations did not possess a large management capacity, that there would be fewer management resources in the future, and that the quality of managers left a lot to be desired:

Me: "Where do you see yourself in three to four years' time?"

Respondent: "I think that my role will cease to exist, I think that it'll be in a bigger more overarching sort of department...I think we're not gonna have the numbers of hands-on managers that we've got at present...because of the economies of scale are gonna force us to, to change that, the finances are not gonna allow us to continue in the way that we are doing which I think is disappointing but I can't see it, I can't see it, lasting another sort of four to five years." (KL<sup>19</sup>, Local Government, South East Wales, Male)

"One of the things we lack...it is about management resources really...people with the skills to be able to work on things with you...in the Dyfed<sup>20</sup> days, there were these principal officer kind of posts who could focus in on certain aspects of things. I would say that is a challenge. We are very management light here." (KL, Local Government, South West Wales, Female).

"The difficulty is I think that in the public sector that a lot of it is down to the quality of the managers, and they're not necessarily all that good in the public sector. When people are leaving their jobs, often they're leaving their manager because it's their manager that's really made them feel that they don't want to be wherever they are, but at the moment nobody can go anywhere because there aren't the jobs for people to be able to move around so if their manager is really disengaging them, they're staying where they are and being really unproductive." (SPS, Female, all Wales role).

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<sup>19</sup> Stands for 'Knowing Localities' i.e. an interview conducted by WISERD (see Section 2.4.2, Chapter 2).

<sup>20</sup> One of eight County Councils abolished in the 1996 reorganisation of Welsh local government.

Respondent: "We're getting rid of several layers of management, with some staff being moved into front line roles."

Me: "Who is going to manage front line staff from now on?"

Respondent: "No one. Self managed teams is what's going to happen." (SPS, Male, All Wales role)

Some of the managers I interviewed identified the lack of progression opportunities for staff, caused not only by the reduction in vacancies as jobs were lost or not filled if someone left but also as a result of the loss of transfer opportunities into other parts of the UK pre devolution when organisations covered more than one of the UK countries. This issue was also raised by staff at all levels at CYMRUcyf, the WPS organisation where I spent time researching their approach to employee engagement, which I discuss more fully in Chapter Seven. As a result of devolution, staff who previously would be able to pursue development or promotion by moving to take up jobs in other parts of Great Britain and stay within the same organisation were no longer able to do so. Those opportunities were no longer available as functions became separated between the UK countries:

"The other difficulty that we have is a relatively flat structure and a number of staff have become increasingly frustrated...they feel they want to develop, progress, be promoted and because there are so few opportunities obviously in the current climate where we're losing staff rather than taking more staff on, the problem will become even more acute. There are only limited opportunities which can lead to some disengagement. We have a lot of people here committed to the public service ethos but after a few years of not getting anywhere, you do get a degree of disengagement...We're quite a small organisation, 250 people, which was previously part of a GB wide regulator which was a 2000 strong organisation so as long as you were prepared to relocate, there were lots of opportunities. There was always a job going in Southampton! We don't have that...other public bodies in Wales are feeling the pinch and are looking to downsize. There used to be thirty Directors of Finance in the NHS, now there's seven. People who are aspiring to go to those kinds of jobs, they just simply aren't there. We are trying to do things, have development programmes so that staff don't feel like they're stagnating." (SPS, Male, all Wales role).

Some managers thought that senior managers' commitment to employee engagement would be affected by the need to focus on meeting short term objectives to reduce operating costs. As I discuss in Chapter Six, the HR Director at CYMRUcyf admitted that senior manager interest in employee engagement was limited:

*"Everyone is running around trying to save jobs but there are issues around survivors and making sure they're performing effectively....Everyone's focus at the top is on slicing away chunks of the budget which is understandable given the size of the task that's in front of people to cut millions and millions off budgets so for the leadership it's [engagement] probably not going to be top of the list."* (SPS, Female, all Wales role).

In conclusion, similar to the Welsh Government policy statements, the policy and operational managers identified cuts in funding for the Welsh Public Service to be a very important issue. However, according to the managers interviewed, the lack of resources extended beyond financial budgets, but also included limited management capacity (and interest in employee engagement at the most senior level of management) and a general sense of poverty and deprivation in many of Wales's communities. There appears to be an awareness amongst the managers of a number of geographic, cultural and economic factors that affect Wales and its citizens and their ability to deliver public services consistently and equitably, thereby delivering the Welsh Government's vision (WAG 2006). These, along with the Welsh Government policy context, could be viewed as evidence of structures beyond the individuals concerned which are constraining their actions and attitudes. An issue identified by the managers which was not reflected in the policy documents of the Government was the implications of growing operational areas for the management of staff, and the ability of employees to connect with one another. The trend towards larger areas of operations (covering several hundred square miles in some cases) could be viewed as a threat to employees' abilities to develop and maintain social engagement, defined as "Actively taking opportunities to discuss work-related improvements with others at work." (Alfes et al 2010 p5) as outlined in Chapter 1 in the Section 1.4.

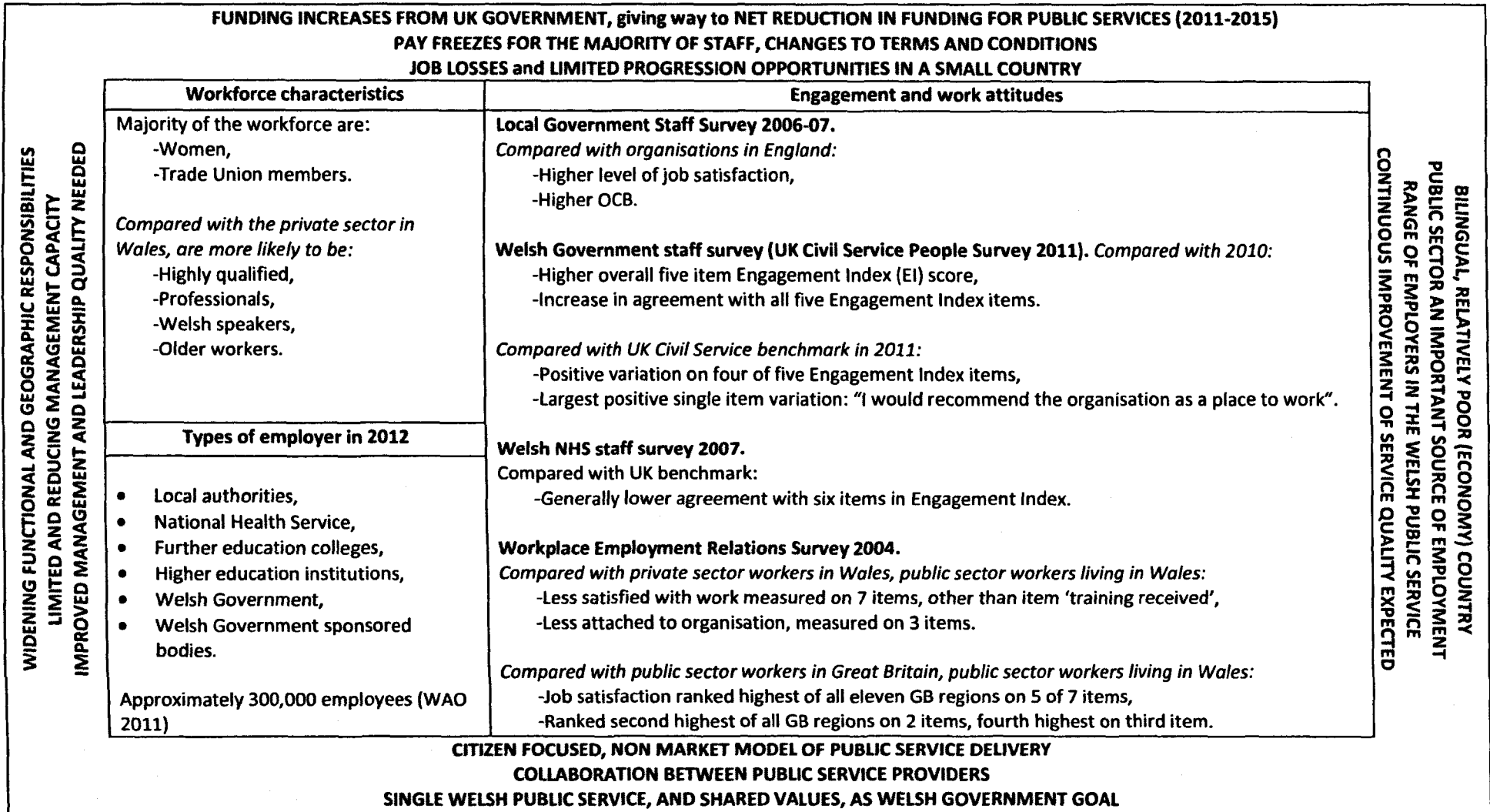
### 3.5 Synthesising context and workforce characteristics

In the previous two sections, I have identified a number of issues for the WPS workforce as a result of an assessment of the Welsh Government's policy direction for the public services, and also the views of senior managers working in the sector. I have combined the issues raised by the managers and in the policy documents of the Welsh Government to provide a framework for considering the engagement of Welsh Public Service employees which I show in Figure 3.4, in the outer part of the diagram in bold uppercase text. In the inner part of the diagram, I summarise what is known about the characteristics of the workforce, their attitudes and the types of employer found in the Welsh Public Service (discussed more fully in Chapter Four). The context that I have identified in Figure 3.4 appears to be a challenging one. The WPS workforce, mainly female, unionised and dispersed across a number of employers, is faced with diminishing financial and managerial resources, geographical and functional responsibilities increasing in size, a collaborative model of public services focused on citizens which are dispersed across a bilingual country, where communities and public sector staff can be separated by large distances.

The implications of the Welsh Government's policy direction and the challenging financial and structural condition that face the workforce for the engagement of employees is a topic that deserves more detailed research attention than is possible in this study. In hindsight, I would have liked to explore how staff working in the Welsh Public Service have been affected by threats of, and actual cutbacks in resources, using a longitudinal design, in particular following those staff who have decided to leave the employment of the WPS, or have been required to do so. In the next Section, I discuss some possible implications arising from the context I have described for employee engagement.



Figure 3.4: A synthesis of context and workforce characteristics, Welsh Public Service, 2012



Note: Layout inspired by Rogan et al 1997. The workforce characteristics contained in the internal section of the box are the conclusions of my discussions in Chapter Four.

### 3.5.1 *Implications of context for employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service*

“When people are worried about losing their jobs, constantly looking over their shoulders, and when organisations can’t offer more pay or more of anything, how can engagement work?...It’s likely many employees feel their employer has broken promises made to them – and so violated the psychological contract... the largest and most collective psychological contract violation of all must be the one between the state and its staff.” (Briner 2010, p1)

It has been asserted that managing employee engagement needs to take into account the characteristics of different groups in the workforce (Truss et al 2006, Alfes et al 2010) and that *greater employee engagement is particularly necessary in difficult economic times* (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, Shuck et al 2011). I have not been able to identify any research that has considered the implications of different economic circumstances or changes in resources for employee engagement at either the individual or organisational levels, and as Briner asserts in the above extract, employees may have little truck with employers’ demands for more engagement in a world dominated by economic crisis. Using the issues identified earlier in this Chapter and shown in the diagram in Figure 3.5, I have attempted to identify some implications for individual level engagement (personal engagement at work being the primary sensitising concept), accompanied by proposals for relevant theoretical and conceptual frameworks as shown in the table in Figure 3.5. This exercise could be repeated for organisational level engagement initiatives, as an impact assessment tool.

The majority of the “impacts” on individual engagement that I identify relate to the likelihood of increased stress (Hobfoll 2011), threats to psychological meaningfulness and safety (Kahn 1990), increased job dissatisfaction (Price 2001 in Lu et al 2005) and likelihood of psychological contract breach (Rousseau 1998). I have identified some implications that have the potential to strengthen the sense of psychological meaningfulness (Kahn 1990) and for social and intellectual engagement (Alfes et al 2010) although these are in the minority. Important theories that I have identified as providing the possibility of explaining the responses that I identify are Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll 1989 in Salanova et al 2010), personal engagement at work (Kahn 1990), the Job Demands-Resources model (Demerouti 2001 in Hakanen and Roodt 2010) and

the Kingston Employee Engagement Consortium tripartite model of employee engagement (Alfes et al 2010).

These assessments are preliminary and need to be tested in further research. However they do indicate the range of issues and pressures facing the Welsh Public Service that are both current (for example cuts in resources) and more structural (relatively poor country), the implications of which should be considered more fully in any assessments of the readiness and capacity of the workforce to become more fully engaged.

**Figure 3.5: Links between policy and socio-economic context facing the Welsh Public Service and impacts on personal engagement, provisional, 2012**

| Key Issue (taken from Sections 3.3.5, 3.3.6 and 3.4)   | Possible implications for personal engagement at work  | Relevant theoretical frameworks  |
|--|--|--|
| Funding increases from UK government, giving way to net reduction in funding for public services (2011-2015) | <i>Less positive</i>   | Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll 1989 in Salanova et al 2010)   |
|  | Vulnerability to increased stress likely as resources are threatened or withdrawn, as <i>“resource loss is disproportionately more salient than resource gain.”</i> (Hobfoll 2011, p117)   |  |
| Pay freezes for the majority of Welsh Public Service staff, changes to terms and conditions                  | <i>Less positive</i>   | Psychological contract (Rousseau 1998). Also relative deprivation theory (Stouffer et al 1949 in Feldman et al 2002).<br><br>Hertzberg two factor theory of motivation (Hertzberg 1959 in Furnham and Eracleous 2006)          |
|  | Dissatisfaction may increase as employees perceive changes to their agreed deal of employment, representing a breach of the psychological contract, and remuneration not matching with that which individuals’ feel entitled.<br><br>Dissatisfaction as extrinsic rewards (Hertzberg’s hygiene factors) are reduced. |  |
| Job losses and limited progression opportunities in a small country  | <i>Less positive</i>   | Personal engagement at work: psychological conditions (Kahn 1990).<br><br>Job Demands-Resources model (Demerouti et al 2001 in Kakanen and Roodt 2010). Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll 1989 in Salanova et al 2010) |
|  | Psychological meaningfulness threatened as task and role characteristics no longer confer on an individual the desired identity or status, as they wish to progress to new positions.<br><br>Redundancies may lead to increased workloads for those staff who remain in employment, thereby increasing strain.       |  |

**Figure 3.5: Links between policy and socio-economic context facing the Welsh Public Service and impacts on personal engagement, provisional, 2012**

| Key Issue (taken from Sections 3.3.5, 3.3.6 and 3.4)   | Possible implications for personal engagement at work   | Relevant theoretical frameworks  |
|--|---|--|
| Citizen focused, non market model of public service delivery   | <i>More positive</i>  | Personal engagement at work: psychological conditions (Kahn 1990).<br><br>Kingston Employee Engagement Consortium tripartite model of employee engagement (Alfes et al 2010) |
|  | Psychological meaningfulness may be enhanced for employees with a sense of public service motivation and favour non market models of delivery,<br><br>Enhanced opportunities for social and intellectual engagement with service users. |  |
| Collaboration between public service providers   | <i>More positive</i>  | Kingston Employee Engagement Consortium tripartite model of employee engagement (Alfes et al 2010)<br><br>Personal engagement at work: psychological conditions (Kahn 1990). |
|  | Enhanced opportunities for social engagement, where staff work together to discuss work related improvements.   |  |
|  | <i>Less positive</i>  |  |
| May decrease sense of psychological safety amongst employees as norms and values relevant to one organisational setting may not be present/appropriate in another, and staff experience anxiety when trying to identify new norms. |   |  |

**Figure 3.5: Links between policy and socio-economic context facing the Welsh Public Service and impacts on personal engagement, provisional, 2012**

| Key Issue (taken from Sections 3.3.5, 3.3.6 and 3.4)  | Possible implications for personal engagement at work   | Relevant theoretical frameworks  |
|---|---|--|
| Single Welsh Public Service, and shared values, as Welsh Government goal  | <i>Less positive</i>  | Personal engagement at work: psychological conditions (Kahn 1990).<br><br>Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll 1989 in Salanova et al 2010) |
|   | Possible tension and conflict between allegiance to employing organisation's values and those of the wider Welsh Public Service, with possible negative impact on psychological availability as staff feel less secure about organisational/sectoral purpose.<br><br>Introduction of a new locus of engagement (the WPS) may require staff to invest resources in developing a relationship with this new locus, and reduce resources availability for engagement with existing loci. |  |
| Bilingual, relatively poor (economy) country  | <i>Less positive</i>  | Personal engagement at work: psychological conditions (Kahn 1990).   |
|   | Limited employment and progression opportunities may affect psychological meaningfulness as roles and tasks in the public sector may not fit with individual's aspirations.   |  |
|   | <i>More positive</i>  | Personal engagement at work: psychological conditions (Kahn 1990).   |
| Psychological meaningfulness may be enhanced by opportunities to deliver public services and to work in Welsh as well as English. |   |  |

**Figure 3.5: Links between policy and socio-economic context facing the Welsh Public Service and its workforce, provisional, 2012 (continued)**

| Key Issue (taken from Sections 3.3.5, 3.3.6 and 3.4) | Possible implications for personal engagement at work   | Relevant theoretical frameworks   |
|--|---|---|
| Public sector an important source of employment      | <i>Less positive</i>  | Personal engagement at work: psychological conditions (Kahn 1990).<br><br>Personal engagement at work: psychological conditions (Kahn 1990).  |
|  | Limited employment and progression opportunities may affect psychological meaningfulness as roles and tasks in the public sector may not fit with individual's aspirations.                                       |   |
|  | <i>More positive</i>  |   |
|  | Potential for increased psychological meaningfulness and safety amongst staff as a result of the dominance of left of centre politics in Wales and preference amongst politicians for non market public services. |   |
| Range of employers in the Welsh Public Service       | <i>Less positive</i>  | Organizational justice (Cropanzano 2007). Also equity theory (Adams 1976 in Feldman et al 2002).  |
|  | With employers operating different terms and conditions of employment, potential dissatisfaction with perceived fairness of remuneration packages.  |   |
| Continuous improvement of service quality expected   | <i>Less positive</i>  | Kingston Employee Engagement Consortium tripartite model of employee engagement (Alfes et al 2010)<br><br>Job Demands-Resources model (Demerouti et al 2001 in Kakanen and Roodt 2010). |
|  | Expectation of continuous improvement may increase job demands which " <i>represent characteristics ...that potentially evoke strain ...</i> " (Hakenen and Roodt 2010 p86)                                       |   |
|  | <i>More positive</i>  |   |
|  | Potential increase in scope for intellectual engagement, if there are opportunities to think about how to deliver and manager better public services.   |   |

**Figure 3.5: Links between policy and socio-economic context facing the Welsh Public Service and its workforce, provisional, 2012 (continued)**

| Key Issue (taken from Sections 3.3.5, 3.3.6 and 3.4) | Possible implications for personal engagement at work  | Relevant theoretical frameworks   |
|--|--|---|
| Widening functional and geographic responsibilities  | <i>Less positive</i>   | Kingston Employee Engagement Consortium tripartite model of employee engagement (Alfes et al 2010)<br><br>Kingston Employee Engagement Consortium tripartite model of employee engagement (Alfes et al 2010)                        |
|  | Reduction in the opportunity for social engagement between staff, as distances between offices increase and face to face interactions become less frequent.  |   |
|  | <i>More positive</i>   |   |
|  | Potential increase in scope for intellectual engagement as staff need to learn about new functions, and identify needs of communities and geographical areas.  |   |
| Limited and reducing management capacity             | Loss of a source of resources could lead to increased levels of stress at work.  | Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll 1989 in Salanova et al 2010)  |
|  | Possible reduction in sense of psychological safety as staff have limited opportunities for interactions with a line manager.  | Personal engagement at work: psychological conditions (Kahn 1990).  |
| Improved management and leadership quality needed    | <i>Less positive</i>   | Personal engagement at work: psychological conditions (Kahn 1990). Also leader-member exchange (LMX) (Erdogan and Liden 2002 in Cropanzano and Rupp 2008)<br><br>Personal engagement at work: psychological conditions (Kahn 1990). |
|  | Potential for improved psychological safety as quality of management support for staff is improved.<br><br>Potential for improved psychological availability as leaders become better equipped to identify and communicate organisational purpose. |   |



### **3.6 Summary and conclusions**

Researchers examining management interventions such as employee engagement are being encouraged to go beyond the boundaries of the organisation to examine the impact of institutional context in order to understand employee and managerial responses (Boon et al 2009, George 2010). In this Chapter, I have identified a number of current and structural issues facing the WPS workforce which I consider have mainly detrimental implications for the existence of individual level engagement, conceptualised as an positive individual level state (Kahn 1990, Schaufeli et al 2002). It remains to be known to what degree individual employees' thoughts, behaviours and attitudes will be shaped by the factors, or structures, that I identify, or whether evidence can be found that staff are able to demonstrate agency (Aston 2012) and not be constrained in their attitudes and level of engagement by the structures they occupy. Managing employee engagement against the political and economic backdrop that I have identified is likely to be difficult and shows the value of taking a critical political economy approach which some contemporary scholars suggest is overdue (Thompson 2011).

In the next Chapter, I consider the results of a set of staff surveys which provide a partial (and somewhat dated) picture of the attitudes of staff in the WPS workforce. These findings, I suggest, point to a preponderance of contingent rather than full engagement (discussed fully in Section 4.4) amongst public sector workers in Wales (Meyer et al 2010) at a time of relative economic prosperity (pre 2008), reflecting the tendency for public and private sector workforces in the UK as a whole to consistently be moderately rather than fully engaged (Truss et al 2006). Increasing employee engagement in the current economic and financial conditions may be possible, and be desirable as some scholars have called for (Shuck 2011). However, the assessment I have conducted of the issues facing the WPS suggest that stronger engagement with their work and their employers may be, as Briner (2010) asserts, a step too far for many employees.

In Chapter Four, I describe the characteristics of the Welsh Public Service workforce and assess what is known about the engagement of employees working in the sector.

**14 July 2011**

*Yesterday, I had lunch with some of the Welsh Public Service's most senior managers in a nondescript hotel in Llandrindod Wells. I had been invited to join them to hear about their latest plans for employee engagement in the public services. These people are as senior as they get in Wales, and I would never have met these women and men if I hadn't pursued this PhD. I hoped to be able to tell them about my research. They started by telling me what they thought of the workforce.*

*For these managers, it was a battle to get staff engaged with the need to work differently. The threat from these "disengaged and dangerous" was considerable. "And they're everywhere, not just in the lower ranks, but in senior positions too." I thought back to the people that I had spent time with in the case organization, and the people who I had worked with over the years in the public services, and thought the senior officials' views slightly melodramatic.*

*They asked me if I would like to be involved with an emerging all Wales employee engagement initiative. A few years ago, this would have been a dream come true. Engaging with the highest level of policy making that we have in Wales. But I don't really feel anything, other than a desire to be doing something else. I should feel proud and ready to get involved, shouldn't I? I've seen this all before. Committees, reports, a list of 'quick wins' that senior managers will be able to say have come about through 'partnership and collaboration.' I just don't believe that these people are committed to engaging with the workforce. I may be wrong, but it sounds like the 'doing to' model of employee engagement. One way: our way.*

*These managers had been 'engaging' with the workforce all morning, informing staff about new policy priorities and had a whole afternoon of presentations to follow. They were 'workshopping' and 'power pointing' continuously on what was a very hot day. Perhaps they didn't want any more of it over lunch and wanted to let off steam. But this morning, as a result of meeting with the high ups, I'm feeling pretty low.*

## 4.1 Introduction

In this Chapter I describe the Welsh Public Service workforce where, unlike the private sector workforce in Wales, women and trade union members are in the majority. Using organisation level survey results, I find that the local and central government staff report higher levels of employee engagement than comparator organisations while Welsh health service staff report lower employee engagement than their UK counterparts. Using the findings of the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey I find that both public and private sector workers in Wales appear more satisfied in their jobs and with their employing organisations than workers in other parts of the UK. I suggest that 'contingent' rather than 'full' engagement is the norm amongst Welsh Public Service employees (Meyer et al 2010) where staff are likely to stay in their jobs as they receive desirable outcomes and contribute what is necessary rather than what is possible. The lack of direct control of the Welsh Government over the majority of WPS employees who are employed by arms length or independent organisations is noted. Given the distinctive make up of the WPS workforce, caution should be applied in making use of employee engagement initiatives developed and imported from the private sector.

Several authors have stated that individual characteristics are an important factor in employee engagement (Truss et al 2006, Kahn 1992). Understanding the characteristics of the Welsh Public Service workforce is therefore relevant to my investigation into conceptions, management and experiences of employee engagement. In this Chapter, my aim is to describe the Welsh Public Service workforce, and to identify similarities and differences between employee engagement in the public sector and other parts of the economy.

### 4.1.1 *Issues with finding information about the Welsh Public Service*

It has been very difficult to find information about the Welsh Public Service workforce separate from the wider public sector. Statistics are produced by the Office for National Statistics and the Welsh Assembly Government that estimate the size and composition of the wider public sector, rather than the Welsh Public Service that I am investigating. The wider public sector includes UK Civil Service employment located in Wales associated with non-devolved areas of government activity (the principal areas being the police and criminal justice systems and social

security administration)<sup>21</sup>. For this reason, I use information on the wider public sector workforce in Wales when information on the Welsh Public Service has been lacking. I recommend that a profile of the Welsh Public Service workforce both as a whole, and broken down to its constituent parts, is developed as a matter of priority.

I use the following data in this Chapter:

- Statistics on the size and composition of public sector employment in Wales (WAG 2009) (subject to the limitations outlined earlier),
- Results from surveys of three groups of staff working in the Welsh Public Service (Redman and Gould-Williams 2007, UK Civil Service 2011a and 2012, UK Government 2012, Finniear 2009),
- Results from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) to compare job satisfaction and commitment to employer between public and private sector workers in Wales, and in comparison with other regions of Great Britain (NIESR 2012),
- Academic and practitioner literature on variations on employee engagement, job satisfaction and organisational commitment by sector (Alfes et al 2010, Baarspul and Wilderom 2011, Finniear 2009).

By using data that have been collected by others, I can provide a national overview and make comparisons with other parts of the economy and the United Kingdom. The WERS is conducted across Great Britain and the sample size enables comparisons between sectors in Wales, and between workers in Wales with workers in the English regions and Scotland. My small survey of HR Professionals working in north Wales does not have the same reach either in terms of geography or workforce. The Workplace Employment Relations Survey contains closed questions, where employees answer on a scale the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements about their job. My survey of HR Professionals consisted of a small number of open questions, which allowed the respondents to answer in their own words. The government statistics, the WERS survey data and the three staff surveys from the WPS allow me to provide a quantitative overview of the composition, characteristics and attitudes of the public sector workforce living in Wales during the last decade. The qualitative data that I have collected can be better understood against this backdrop.

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<sup>21</sup> See footnote 14 for an estimate of the UK Civil Service workforce in Wales.

There are strengths and limitations to the secondary data that I have chosen to use. The questions asked in the WERS on job satisfaction and commitment to organisation are approximations for the concept of employee engagement, the focus of my study. The three staff surveys cited by Finniear (2009) have used different survey items from each other, and have been conducted at different times, so comparison between them is difficult. Items in the surveys have been used to “infer” (Finniear 2009, p10) employee engagement but they are not consistent with concepts developed by academic scholars to measure work engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker 2010) or personal engagement at work (May et al 2004, Rich et al 2010). The data on public sector employment in Wales analysed by the Welsh Assembly Government (2009) are based on survey responses from people living in Wales working in the sector (which may or may not be located in Wales) and consist of estimates rather than actual numbers of staff, and also refers to the wider public sector rather than the Welsh Public Service that I am studying. Given the changes that are taking place in workforce size due to funding cuts, depending on survey data (and the time lags this inevitably means) to understand the public service workforce is inadequate, and efforts should be made to access administrative data (through human resource systems for example) to provide better knowledge of the workforce. Most of the secondary data that I use in this chapter is cross sectional and given that employee engagement can be conceived in the academic literature as a dynamic state (Sonnentag et al 2010) or an organisational level process that takes place over time (Alfes et al 2010), these data can only provide a snapshot of engagement amongst Welsh Public Service employees.

#### **4.2 The Welsh Public Service and the wider public sector in Wales**

The Welsh Public Service is not a single employer. It is generally accepted that more than half of the Welsh Public Service workforce are employed by local authorities, followed by the National Health Service as the next largest employer, then further and higher education combined, with the Welsh Government and its sponsored bodies representing the smallest group (LGA 2011). In the wider public sector in Wales, more than half of employees work for local government, a quarter in health and approximately one in seven in UK Government functions (WAG 2009). The Welsh Government, through its own employees and that of its own sponsored bodies<sup>22</sup> and NHS Wales staff, appears to have direct, or most, control, over less than half of the Welsh Public

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<sup>22</sup> These bodies do not necessarily form part of the UK Civil Service, and may operate other sets of terms and conditions (e.g. access to local government pension scheme).

Service workforce. Given that local authorities, universities, colleges of further education and some of the Welsh Government's own sponsored bodies are autonomous employers, operating their own pay and conditions schemes, the scope of influence of the Welsh Government over other employers in the WPS is indirect and likely to be contested. The Welsh Government has recognised this lack of direct control over some WPS organisations (particularly local authorities) in its public service policy documents, discussed in Chapter Three and that it needs to influence and negotiate with WPS employers (WAG 2006). The tools that the Welsh Government have to do this have become more extensive since the devolution of legislative powers to the National Assembly for Wales took place in 2011 (as discussed in section 3.3.4 of Chapter 3), which allows for the making of legislation without recourse to the UK Parliament in Westminster.

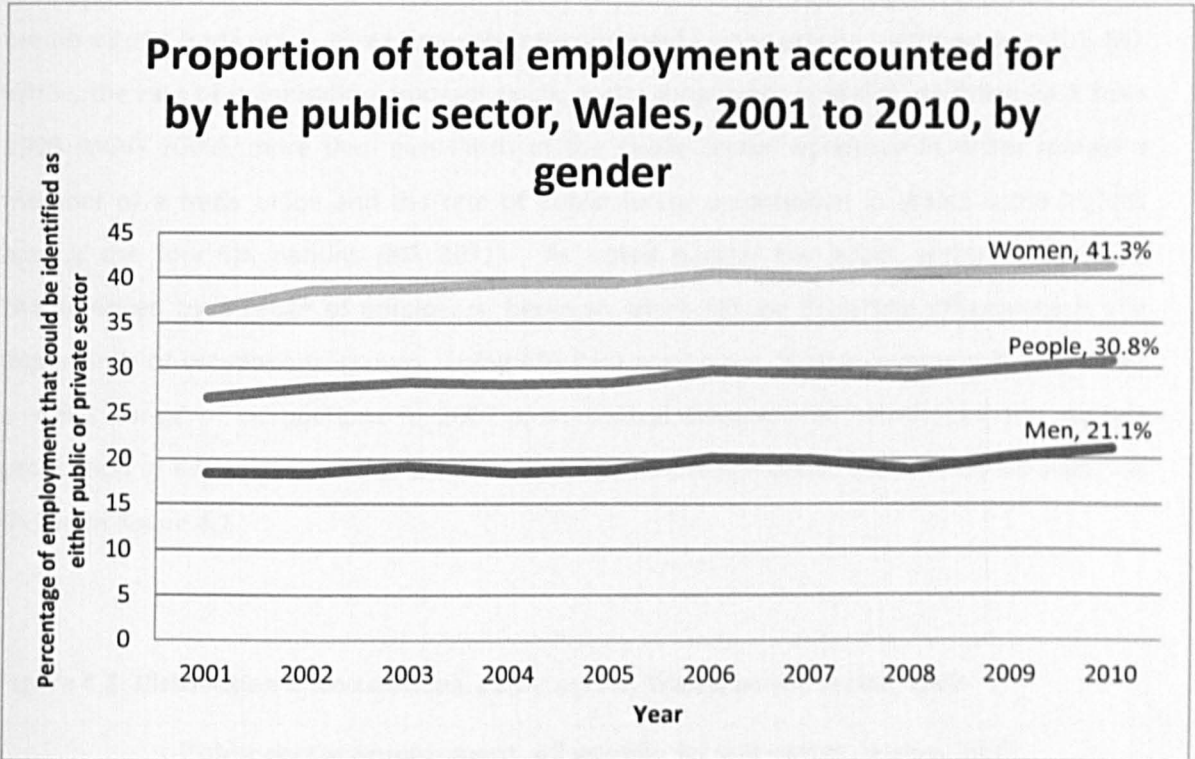
#### *4.2.1 Characteristics of the workforce in the public sector in Wales*

It is known that work related attitudes can vary between individuals, due to demographic characteristics (Mowday, Porter and Steers 1982 in Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler 2003), age (Avery et al 2007), gender (Alfes et al 2010), length of service (Robinson et al 2004) and responsibilities outside work (Rothbard 2001). This section presents what is known about the demographic and occupational characteristics of the public sector workforce in Wales.

In 2010, as in the UK, almost two thirds of public sector workers living in Wales were female (64.2%) which is "the opposite of that which is found in the private sector" (Millard and Machin 2007, p47). In that year, more than 4 out of 10 women working in Wales (41.3%) were employed in the public sector (ONS 2011). For all people, the public sector accounted for 31% of all jobs that could be identified as either public or private sector in 2010, an increase from 27% in 2001. For women, this proportion grew from 36% in 2001 to 41% in 2010. The trends in total employment accounted for by public sector of employment is shown in Figure 4.1. By 2010, the public sector is almost twice as important a source of employment for women (41.3% of total employment) in Wales compared with men (21.1% of total employment). In the wider UK economy, there is some evidence of a difference in engagement levels between men and women, with women being "significantly more engaged overall than men; while 74% of women report being moderately engaged and 9% strongly engaged, 68% of men are moderately engaged and 7% strongly engaged" (Alfes et al 2010) from a survey of eight UK public and

private sector organisations. A survey of staff carried out in the NHS<sup>23</sup> however did not find significant differences in engagement between men and women (Robinson et al 2004).

**Figure 4.1: Employment in the public sector, by gender, Wales, 2001-2010**



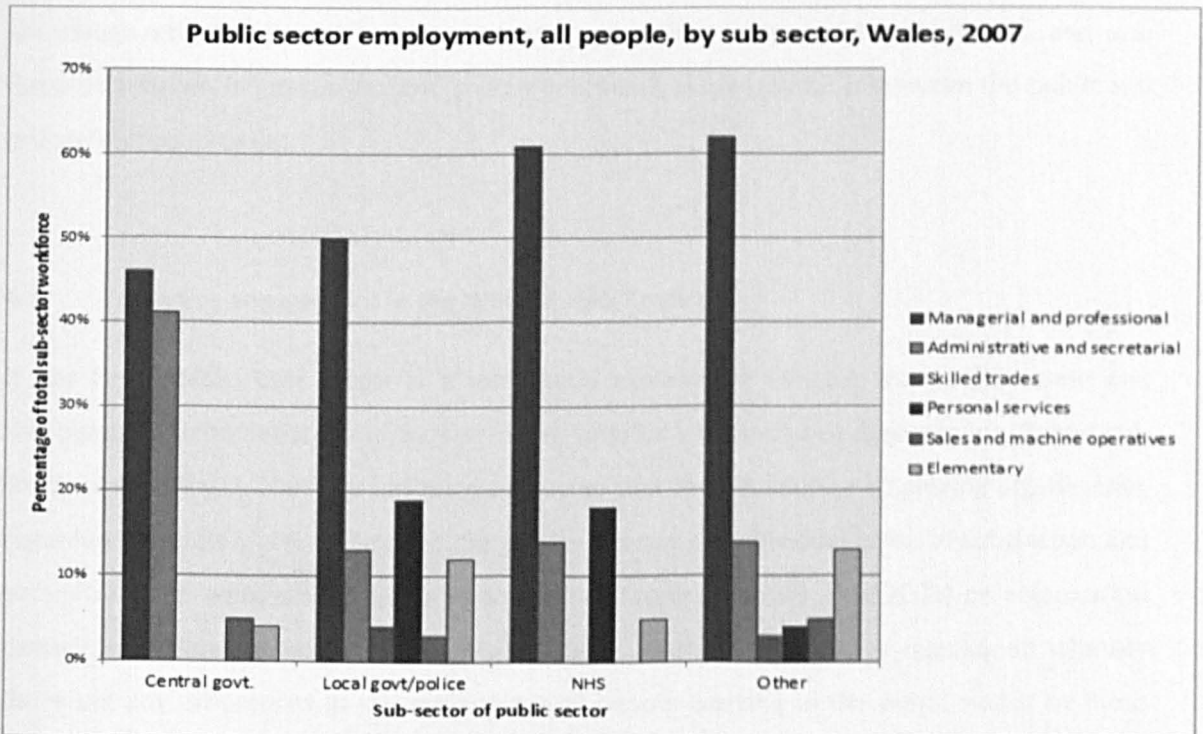
Source: Using data from Stats Wales (WG 2012b) (Table 019360).

As well as women outnumbering men in public sector employment, employees with degrees or higher qualifications in the public sector are highly represented, compared with the private sector (WAG 2009). In 2007, over half of those employed in the public sector had a degree or a higher qualification of some kind, more than double the rate of higher qualifications found in the private sector in Wales (WAG 2009). Guest (2002) found that having higher educational qualifications was associated with lower work and life satisfaction, albeit in a private sector context. On the other hand, younger workers (those aged under 25) are less represented in the public sector workforce in Wales than older workers, although to a lesser degree than in other parts of the United Kingdom (LGA 2011). In 2007, just under half (47%) of female, and almost two thirds (63%) of male, public sector employees occupied senior management, professional or associate professional and technical roles. This is a higher proportion of the public sector

<sup>23</sup> It is not known if this included Welsh NHS staff, or only NHS staff in England.

workforce (53%) than the Welsh workforce (38%) as a whole (ONS 2012, WAG 2009). More than a quarter (27.4%) of staff working in the public sector could speak Welsh compared with a fifth (20.4%) of private sector workers and of those who could speak Welsh, public sector workers were more likely to do so on a daily basis than their private sector counterparts. In 2008, more than two thirds of people working in the public sector in Wales (67.8% of employees) were members of a trade union, three times the rate observed among private sector workers (21.4%). While, the rate of unionisation amongst public sector employees in Wales has fallen back from 1998 (WAG 2009), more than two thirds of the public sector workforce in Wales remain a member of a trade union and the rate of public sector unionisation in Wales is the highest among the four UK nations (BIS 2011). As noted earlier, the public sector in Wales is characterised by a range of employers, between which can be discerned differences in the importance of occupational groups. Using APS data once more, local government in Wales had a wider range of occupations in 2007 than Central Government, which had the highest proportion of administrative and secretarial occupations in the public sector<sup>24</sup> (WAG 2009), as shown in Figure 4.2.

**Figure 4.2: Distribution of occupations, public sector, Wales, by sub sector, 2007**



Source: Produced using data from WAG (2009, p5, Table 6).

<sup>24</sup> Some of these differences may be due to inconsistencies in employees reporting their occupation in the Annual Population Survey (Mathews 2010).



In summary, the public sector is a relatively important source of employment in Wales which has seen a greater rate of increase than for Great Britain as a whole during the last ten years. Employment growth is now being reversed due to cuts in funding for the public services, and in the region of 21000 job may be lost from the sector between 2011 and 2015 (WAO 2011). The public sector workforce mainly consists of women, and trade union members. In these two respects, the public sector workforce is different from the private sector workforce in Wales, where men and non trade union members are more prominent. Professionals, older workers, staff with higher qualifications, and Welsh speakers are more likely to be found than in the public sector in Wales that in the Welsh workforce as a whole. There is variation within the public sector in Wales in terms of pay and conditions policies, and the distribution of different occupations. There is some evidence that average earnings in the public sector are higher than for the private sector in Wales, and that the public sector has been an employment destination for many Welsh graduates (Bristow et al 2011).

In this section I have described some of the characteristics of people working in the public sector in Wales and how these differ from the private sector. In the next section, I discuss the state of knowledge about levels of engagement amongst public sector workers in Wales, and also discuss variations in job satisfaction, and commitment, in organisations between the public and private sectors in Wales.

#### **4.3 Employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service**

It has been stated that sector is a less useful explanatory variable than organisation and demographic characteristics for understanding variations in employee engagement (Robertson-Smith and Markwick 2009). It has been suggested that the job and the employing organisation, regardless of sector, is likely to have the greater bearing on individual sense of satisfaction and commitment to work when measured as job satisfaction (Kersley et al 2005) or organisation commitment (Buelens and Van den Broeck 2007). Some scholars have questioned whether there are any differences in the motivations of people working in the public sector to those working in other sectors (Alfes et al 2010), while other scholars assert that sector does matter (Buelens and Van den Broeck 2007). It has been argued that people choose to work in the public sector due to different personal motives to people who work in the private sector. This

preference for working in socially useful roles has been conceptualised as 'public service motivation' with the dominant model consisting of four elements: attraction to public policy making, commitment to the public interest and civic duty, compassion and self-sacrifice (Perry 1996 in Perry and Hondeghem 2008). Public service motivation has been found to be higher among public sector employees, although it is not absent from the motivations of private sector workers, and can be strong among voluntary sector employees (Perry and Hondeghem 2008). While there may be some lack of clarity about the importance of sector when explaining differences in employee engagement, and whether managing engagement in the public sector needs to be pursued in different ways to the private sector, I present some provisional evidence, in terms of variations in satisfaction with pay and benefits amongst public sector workers in Wales and also commitment and loyalty to employers by both public and private sector services employees, that point to a possible nation, as well as sectoral effect.

I have not been able to identify a single source of data, such as a sector wide employee survey, that has measured the level of employee engagement across the Welsh Public Service (WPS). Albeit unfortunate, this is unsurprising given the range of employers that make up the Service. It is known anecdotally that individual organisations within the WPS have carried out surveys of their own workforces, including the case study organisation which is described later in the dissertation. In addition, I have not been able to identify academic research that compares employee engagement between public and private sector employees, either in Wales, UK or other countries.

A report by Finniear (2009) commissioned by the Wales Public Service Workforce Forum is the main source that describes research on employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service. The purpose of the report was to understand the state of employee engagement in the public sector in Wales, the reasons for variations in engagement and to highlight good practice in managing engagement within Welsh Public Service organisations. The report consists of a secondary review of definitions and quantitative measures of employee engagement, and also identifies a definition of employee engagement that has been developed for the Welsh Public Service (Section 5.3.1) (Wales Public Service Workforce Forum 2009). Finniear (2009) notes that plans to conduct primary research had to be abandoned due to problems accessing Welsh Public Service organisations, so it was not possible to operationalise the Wales Public Service Workforce Forum definition of employee engagement, as intended. This gap still exists. If I were

doing this study again, I would recognise the lack of operationalisation of the Forum's definition as an opportunity to carry out a Welsh Public Service wide survey to provide a baseline measure of employee engagement across the sector.

Finniear (2009) identified three surveys that have been conducted amongst WPS workgroups. These are the NHS Wales Staff Survey (last conducted in 2007), the Civil Service People Survey covering staff working in the Welsh Government and some of its agencies (conducted annually since at least 2008); and the Welsh Local Government Staff Survey conducted as a one off study in 2006 and 2007. The number of respondents, dates completed and the findings can be compared with other groups is shown in Figure 4.3. It is helpful that the results of all three surveys for Welsh staff can be compared to organisations outside Wales. It is acknowledged that the Wales Local Government Staff Survey in particular is not strictly a study of engagement amongst public sector workers, but rather measures attitudes towards work that can be associated with engagement.

**Figure 4.3: Surveys of public sector staff, Wales, 2006-2011**

| Survey  | Conducted          | Number of respondents (response rate)              | Benchmark  |
|---|--------------------|--|--|
| Wales Local Government Survey: employee component | 2006-2007          | 1755 employees from 16 local authorities (unknown) | 1000 employees in 60 public and private organisations in England 2002-2006 |
| Civil Service People Survey: Welsh Government     | 2008 <sup>25</sup> | Unknown (70%)                                      | Other Civil Service organisations in the UK (number unknown)               |
| Civil Service People Survey: Welsh Government     | 2010               | 4080 employees (68%)                               | Other Civil Service organisations in the UK, n=102)                        |
| Civil Service People Survey: Welsh Government     | 2011               | 4186 employees (77%)                               | Other Civil Service organisations in the UK, n=96)                         |
| Welsh NHS staff survey                            | 2007               | Unknown (31%)                                      | NHS in the UK (number unknown)   |

Source: Compiled using Finniear (2009), WG (2011b)

<sup>25</sup> This information is from Finniear (2009).

Meyer et al (2010) have utilised the concept of organisational commitment (which I argue in the next Chapter can be found in the conceptions of employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service) as a basis for identifying three forms of employee engagement: disengagement, contingent and full. Some of the survey items identified by Finniear (2009), such as "I intend to still be working for the Welsh Assembly Government in 12 months time" (Finniear 2009, p31), might be indicators of contingent engagement, based on Meyer et al's notion of continuance commitment<sup>26</sup> rather than affective or normative forms of engagement which are considered to be more valuable forms of the concept (Meyer et al 2010). The responses to individual items in the NHS and UK Civil Service People surveys are combined and weighted to form engagement indices, which are then compared, in the case of the UK Civil Service People Survey, with previous years' results, and those of other participating organisations. The UK Civil Service People Survey engagement index of 2008 consisted of seven individual items, which was revised to five individual items in the 2010 and 2011 surveys. The NHS staff survey index consisted of six items (Finniear 2009), some of which are similar, but not exactly the same, as the Civil Service survey. None of the three surveys compare public sector workers with those working in the private sector in Wales<sup>27</sup>, so it is not possible to examine intersectoral differences on matters such as public service ethos, which is reported by Redman and Gould-Williams (2007) to be "high" (p1) amongst respondents to the 2006-07 Wales Local Government Survey.

Only the UK Civil Service People Survey has been repeated in Wales so the ability to measure changes in engagement amongst staff in local government and the NHS is not possible. The lack of knowledge about changes in engagement amongst public sector workers in Wales has been noted as a weakness (Finniear 2009). Kular et al (2008) recommend caution when attempting to compare results from different survey studies as different definitions of employee engagement, and survey instruments, have been applied and this is clearly the case in the Welsh examples described above. Finniear (2009) notes the dependence on survey evidence for our understanding of employee engagement in the Welsh public sector and "the fear remains that there is a failure to reveal the extent to which we have truly unravelled the key issues that may be impacting on...engagement scores...The extent to which we fully understand what influences feelings of pride, sense of belonging and recommending public sector organisations in Wales as a place to work, and why this is, remains a priority." (p8). The lamentable gap in our

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<sup>26</sup> A form of organisational commitment that is based on an assessment by the individual of the costs of leaving their job (Meyer and Allen 1991).

<sup>27</sup> The Wales Local Government Staff Survey 2006-07 does benchmark itself against a group of public and private organisations from England (Redman and Gould-Williams 2007).

understanding of why people work in the public sector in Wales, and in the Welsh Public Service in particular, is reiterated in my discussion of job satisfaction by sector in the next section. Despite the weaknesses in the availability and consistency of the three Welsh surveys that can be used to “infer evidence of engagement” (Finniear 2009, p6), eight common themes were identified as associated with engagement, with leadership, line management and being treated fairly being identified as particularly important drivers of engagement in both the NHS Wales and the WAG Civil Service People Surveys. Despite the Welsh NHS staff survey and the Wales Local Government Staff Survey not being repeated, and in the case of the latter, not explicitly measuring employee engagement, the three staff surveys cited by Finniear (2009) do provide a picture, albeit partial, of public sector staff attitudes and behaviours that is not available from elsewhere.

#### *4.3.1. Findings of the Welsh NHS Staff Survey 2007*

After local government, the NHS is the second most important employer in the Welsh Public Service, in terms of headcount (WAG 2009). Unfortunately, I have not been able to find the results of the Welsh NHS Staff Survey of 2007<sup>28</sup> and I have not been able to identify, through searching the internet whether a more recent survey has taken place, therefore I rely on Finniear’s (2009) assessment of its results.

Of the six items used to form the Engagement Index, NHS Wales staff generally scored lower than the UK benchmark, with the greatest variation from the benchmark being for the item “I would recommend NHS Wales as a good place to work” (minus 25 percentage points from the UK benchmark) and “I feel proud to work for my organisation” (minus 17 percentage points from the UK benchmark). The only item where NHS Wales staff deviated positively from the UK benchmark was “I intend to still be working within this organisation in 12 months time” (plus 4 percentage points from the benchmark), which as discussed earlier may be an indicator of continuance commitment rather than a genuine desire to stay with the NHS.

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<sup>28</sup> As a result, it is not possible for me to scrutinise the research design, response rates and respondent characteristics.

#### 4.3.2 Findings of the Wales Local Government Staff Survey 2006-07

The Wales Local Government Survey 2006-07 is an important source of information for my study as local government is the largest employer in the Welsh Public Service<sup>29</sup>. A cross-sectional survey of staff working for 16 local authorities (of a total of 22 across Wales) took place in 2006 and 2007 “about their attitudes to their work, their jobs, their organisation and their union” (Redman and Gould-Williams 2007, p5) which generated 1754 responses<sup>30</sup> from managerial and non managerial staff to a questionnaire containing closed questions where staff indicate on a scale their degree of agreement or disagreement with a set of statements. A little less than half of responses came from staff in professional or associate professional positions (44.7% of total respondents), with staff in clerical and administrative positions the next most frequently observed group of respondents (38.4%). 60% of respondents were in non-managerial roles and 61.6% of respondents were women. Two thirds of the respondents (65.1%) were members of a trade union. These statistics concur with the characteristics that I have identified for the wider public sector workforce in Wales, discussed earlier in Section 4.2.1. A strength of the survey is that a degree of comparison is possible with public and private organisations who took part in a similar survey in England between 2002 and 2006, although the balance between public and private sector employers in this group, or the number of local authorities specifically, is not known. A weakness of the study is that it has not been repeated in Wales, and there is no comparison with people working either in the private or third sectors in Wales. The issue of not knowing exactly how the study was carried out is a limitation for users of secondary data, as they are not privy to the details of how the work was conducted (Boslaugh 2007).

The preliminary report issued by the authors states that one of the purposes of the survey was to measure staff commitment to their employing organisation, but the questions used as the basis for analysis ask about individuals’ commitment to their department. It is not possible to assess the level of commitment to the organisation (rather than department) from the published survey results<sup>31</sup>. The Welsh Government is seeking to lessen workers’ commitment to their service area, and be more willing to work across organisational boundaries (WAG 2006,

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<sup>29</sup> Eight service areas are covered by the survey, so not all aspects of local government have been included. Important omissions are: schools workforce, social services (adult services), engineering and highways.

<sup>30</sup> The response rate is not known as it is not included in the report of findings and it is assumed that the sample was self selecting and there wasn’t a comprehensive sampling frame.

<sup>31</sup> The Wales Local Government Staff Survey body of data has been placed in the UK data archive (ESDS 2012) so further analyses of the data, including commitment to organisation, could be pursued by other researchers.

Beecham 2006), so a strong commitment to a department maybe be at odds with the commitments that some WPS employers wish to observe in their staff. The authors do state that staff commitment to the organisation in Wales is not dissimilar to that of the respondents in England (Redman and Gould Williams 2007) although the information provided in the preliminary report does not allow me to assess this for myself. A little more than half of respondents in Wales (52%) agreed<sup>32</sup> they would be "happy to spend the rest of my career in this department" while a little under half (47%) agreed with the statement "This department has a great deal of personal meaning for me".

Although no comparison is possible with respondents from England, the authors indicate that staff report a high level of public service ethos, with 57% strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement "Meaningful public service is very important to me". Scholars have argued that public service ethos is not exclusive to those working in the public sector, and is also observed amongst employees working in non public sector jobs (Buelens and Van den Broek 2007). The question as devised may identify attitudes that concur with a public service ethos amongst local government employees in Wales, but it does not measure whether people are choosing to work (i.e. a behavioural outcome) in Welsh local government because public service is meaningful to them.

The survey contains a series of items that measure work attitudes such as job satisfaction, sense of empowerment in the job, intention to leave, trust in supervisor, manager and elected councillors; and positive feelings<sup>33</sup>. Rates of job satisfaction amongst the Welsh local government staff scored favourably compared with the English benchmarks, with 69% of the Welsh respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement "In general, I like working here" compared with 48% in England. In terms of intention to leave their employment, Welsh local government staff were slightly less likely than the respondents from England to indicate that they were thinking of leaving their job, although differences on individual items between respondents in Wales and England were quite small.

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<sup>32</sup> As per the authors' preference, this consists of a sum of respondents who indicated they "strongly agree", "agree" or "slightly agree" with the statement "I would be happy to spend the rest of my career in this department" (Redman and Gould-Williams 2007, p6)

<sup>33</sup> The items contained in this part of the survey mention in-person levels of affect, rather than positive feelings towards an external focus, such as an employer or team.

In Chapter Five, I identify “proactive and extra effort by staff” as an element in the Senior Public Servants’ and the HR Professionals’ understanding of engagement at work, and a number of the SPS’s in their interviews recognise engaged employees as staff who are willing to do more than is strictly necessary in their job. This bears resemblance to organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (Organ and Ryan 1985), which the Welsh Local Government staff survey has sought to measure. The authors found that local government staff in Wales were more willing to go beyond their expected duties when this involved assisting colleagues rather than the organisation as a whole, compared with the benchmark organisations. In terms of doing more in their own jobs, the Welsh respondents were found to be more willing than the benchmark group to carry out a range of behaviours that have been classified by the authors as indicating OCB (Redman and Gould-Williams 2007) and which are compared in Figure 4.4. For the five items where comparison to the benchmark organisations is possible regarding OCB, Welsh local government staff reported themselves to be more willing to help others often or always than staff in England. It would be useful if measures of OCB had been included in the two other staff surveys, and were included in any future surveys and measures of employee engagement.

**Figure 4.4: Employee attitudes, organisational citizenship behaviours, Welsh local government, 2006-07**

|  | <b>Welsh local government staff (n=1754)</b>             | <b>Benchmark (60 public and private organisations in England)</b> |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Item</b>  | <i>Percentage who would help others often or always:</i> |   |
| <i>Help others who have heavy workloads</i>                        | 77   | 52  |
| <i>Help others who have been absent</i>                            | 70   | 36  |
| <i>Take time to listen to work colleagues’ problems or worries</i> | 85   | 60  |
| <i>Suggest ways to improve quality</i>                             | 61   | 41  |
| <i>Make innovative suggestions to improve work procedures</i>      | 63   | 37  |
| <i>Go to work even if you do not feel particularly well</i>        | 85   | 71  |

Source: Derived from Redman and Gould-Williams 2007.

The Wales Local Government Survey 2006-07 provides a useful picture of attitudes amongst staff occupying mainly non-managerial roles working in local government in Wales at a time just



before the worldwide economic crisis and consequent cuts in public service budgets. It would be useful if the survey were repeated, as part of a wider Welsh Public Service survey ideally, to see how staff attitudes are faring in the current economic climate. It would also be useful to include more questions on commitment to organisations and the wider WPS as well as commitment to department, and also to include more indicators of behaviours, in order to understand whether staff are working in the public sector because they are intrinsically motivated to do so, or for other extrinsic reasons, such as pay and benefits, or because of economic conditions and lack of alternative opportunities (Day 2010, Bristow et al 2011). Analyses by occupational group, as well as organisational level would be useful, to identify if there are differences in work attitudes and behaviours between women and men, older and younger workers, managerial and non-managerial staff, as well as people with a professional affiliation and those without.

#### *4.3.3 Findings of the UK Civil Service People Survey for the Welsh Government and its agencies*

Despite the Welsh Government being a relatively small employer in the Welsh Public Service, the staff survey is useful as it is the only one of the three surveys discussed that has measured change in engagement over time, albeit only since 2010. The previous survey of 2008 included a wider range of items, with different wordings, from the items used in the 2010 and 2011 engagement indices.

The report to the Welsh Public Service Workforce Forum (Finnear 2009) presents the findings for the seven items that make up the Engagement Index for Welsh Government employees in 2008, which amounted to a score of 63%, approximately equivalent to the benchmark (UK Civil Service as a whole). In 2008, Welsh Government staff reported either similar, or lower scores on four of the seven items included in their Engagement Index, and very slightly higher on one item<sup>34</sup>. In 2008, compared to other parts of the Civil Service, Welsh Government staff did not feel as proud to work for their organisation (minus seven percentage points from the benchmark, and a similar negative deviation to that found amongst NHS Wales staff from its benchmark). The greatest negative deviation from the benchmark for an individual item amongst Welsh Government staff was the item "I enjoy my work" (minus 13 points from the

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<sup>34</sup> Benchmark data was not available for two of the seven items contained in the 2008 Engagement Index for the Welsh Government.

benchmark). A modestly higher proportion of staff at the Welsh Government would “recommend the Welsh Assembly Government as a good place to work” (plus two percentage points from the benchmark), and the gap in favour of the Welsh Government on a similar item<sup>35</sup> is also observed in the 2010 and 2011 results. The employee engagement index score for Welsh Government employees in 2011 (the latest available) was 59%, a two percentage point increase on 2010 and six percentage points above the benchmark. For all five items included in the index, positive scores had increased between 2010 and 2011, and were either the same as, or higher than, the Civil Service benchmark. The largest gap for an item making up the Engagement Index (EI) between WG and other Civil Service staff was for the item “I would recommend the organisation as a great place to work”, being twelve percentage points, as shown in Figure 4.5. The individual item in the Engagement Index with the highest score was for “I am proud to tell others I am part of the organisation” (58% of staff gave a positive response), representing an increase of four percentage points on the previous year, while the lowest rate of positive response was to the item “The organisation motivates me to help it to achieve its objectives” (39%).

**Figure 4.5: Changes in Engagement Index score, Welsh Government staff, 2010-2011**

|   | 2010 | 2011 | Difference from Civil Service benchmark in 2011 |
|---|------|------|---|
| <i>Overall Engagement Index Score</i>                                     | 57%  | 59%  | +3  |
| <b>Percentage of staff who strongly agree or agree with:</b>              |      |      |   |
| <i>I am proud when I tell others I am part of the organisation</i>        | 54%  | 58%  | +6  |
| <i>I would recommend the organisation as a great place to work</i>        | 51%  | 55%  | +12   |
| <i>I feel a strong personal attachment to the organisation</i>            | 45%  | 46%  | 0   |
| <i>The organisation inspires me to do the best in my job</i>              | 40%  | 42%  | +4  |
| <i>The organisation motivates me to help it to achieve its objectives</i> | 36%  | 39%  | +4  |

Source: Compiled using WG (2011b)

<sup>35</sup> Reworded to read “I would recommend the organisation as a *great* place to work”.

Although not included in the Engagement Index items, I now examine how satisfied Welsh Government staff are with their pay and benefits, as I have provided some evidence in earlier sections of the Chapter of a pay gap in favour of the public sector employment, which is particularly noticeable in Wales (IFS 2011). While satisfaction with the total benefits package had fallen between 2010 and 2011 (from 61% to 55% of respondents), the satisfaction scores for the four pay and benefits related items contained in the Civil Service People Survey were far higher for Welsh Government staff compared to the benchmark, being on average in the region of 20 percentage points higher than the rate of satisfaction points among other Civil Service employees. The fall in satisfaction with pay and benefits may be due to a pay freeze for all but the lowest paid civil servants that was introduced in 2010 for two years and has been continued by the UK Government (Guardian 2010, Telegraph 2011). I explore satisfaction with pay again later in the section on WERS results for public sector workers in Wales.

#### *4.3.4 Summary of discussion on surveys of staff in the Welsh Public Service*

“no effective baseline engagement index exists (in Wales) in which to compare meaningful change over time.” (Finnear 2009, p9)

The survey evidence I have discussed here cover the principal employers in the Welsh Public Service: local government and health, in addition to the Welsh Government workforce. It is unfortunate that evidence is not available for the public sector education workforce in Wales (higher and further education, and schools staff in local government). All three surveys provide opportunities to compare their results with other sets of organisations either in the same or other sectors. However, all three surveys report vertically (i.e. by department) rather than horizontally (i.e. by groups in the workforce) and it is therefore not possible to compare engagement or work attitudes between men and women, union and non union members, or by other demographic and job characteristics. I also observed that the case organisation that I studied also analysed its staff surveys vertically rather than horizontally, at the same time as aiming to reduce commitment to department and organisation and to increase collaboration across organisational boundaries (WAG 2005).

In 2007, NHS staff in Wales reported lower scores on five of the six items that made up their Engagement Index, compared with NHS staff elsewhere. In 2006-07, there was a relatively high level of agreement amongst Welsh local government staff with the concept of public service

ethos (PSE), but no evidence to demonstrate that PSE was a factor in choosing to work in local government. Staff in Welsh local government were more satisfied in their jobs than public and private employees in England, and also reported they were more willing to help colleagues, make suggestions at work and to work when not feeling well. In 2008, Welsh Government staff reported either similar, or lower scores on four of the seven items included in their Engagement Index, and very slightly higher on one item<sup>36</sup>. Between 2010 and 2011, improvements were observed in the Engagement Index scores for Welsh Government employees.

The results of the NHS Wales survey and the Wales Local Government Survey provide cross sectional snapshots as they have been conducted in their present form only on one occasion<sup>37</sup>. The Civil Service People Survey does provide comparisons between 2010 and 2011. Given what is known about the demographic make up of the public sector workforce in Wales, analyses by gender, age, union membership, professional affiliation and Welsh language competency are strongly recommended, if only to attempt to align our knowledge of engagement with efforts to reduce allegiance to organisation, professions and departments (WAG 2006).

#### *4.3.5 Job and organisation 'engagement' amongst public sector employees in Wales*

In the previous section, I discuss three surveys that have been used to indicate levels of employee engagement in some of the organisations that comprise the Welsh Public Service. As only one of the three surveys provides a comparison with private sector employees (UK Civil Service 2011a), in this section, I extend my discussion to include comparisons of engagement between public and private sector employees in the UK using an analysis that I have conducted of the Workplace Employment Relations Survey 2004 (Forth and Stokes 2006, BIS 2012). Research has found that two forms of engagement can exist: with a job and with an organisation (Saks 2006) hence this discussion on what is known about job and organisation related attitudes amongst public sector staff in Wales.

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<sup>36</sup> Benchmark data was not available for two of the seven items contained in the 2008 Engagement Index for the Welsh Government.

<sup>37</sup> There was an intention to conduct the NHS Wales staff survey in 2009 but this was abandoned due to reorganisation of the sector.

The Workplace Employment Relations Survey, “widely regarded as the most authoritative source of quantitative evidence on employment relations in Britain” (Forth and Stokes 2006, p1) has measured satisfaction with job and commitment to organisation. The WERS is a cross sectional survey of employees, managers and employers which has been conducted five times across the UK since 1980. In the last survey of 2004, 1071<sup>38</sup> non managerial workers from production and service sector (both public and private) workplaces in Wales took part in the employee element of the survey. The size of the UK and Welsh samples enables a comparison of survey items between the public and private services sectors in Wales, and with Scotland and the English regions. A self completion questionnaire was distributed to a sample of employees in a workplace, via the employer, and included seven questions about job satisfaction, and three organisation oriented questions. I have chosen to compare the 2004 WERS results for people working in services in Wales, both public and private, and exclude those working in production in the private sector, to compare two groups of employees which are likely to be more similar. The WERS has not been repeated since 2004<sup>39</sup>, so the results are somewhat dated, reflecting a period of expansion of public sector jobs in Wales. I use the seven items in WERS to measure job satisfaction as a proxy for engagement with job, and the three items in WERS concerned with attachment to the organisation as a proxy for engagement with an employer in the next two sections.

#### *4.3.6 Variations in job satisfaction between public and private employees in Wales: WERS 2004*

According to WERS 2004, job satisfaction, defined as “how satisfied the individual feels with his/her job” (Cho and Lee 2001 in Baarpsul and Wilderom 2011, p985) was found to vary between different GB regions and countries (Sutherland 2008), with public sector employees in Wales being more satisfied with many aspects of their work than employees in both the public and private sectors in other parts of Great Britain. In respect of the seven elements of job satisfaction included in WERS that I outlined in the previous paragraph, public sector workers in Wales exhibited the highest proportion of satisfaction<sup>40</sup> in five of these areas compared with other parts of Great Britain: ‘sense of achievement from work’, ‘scope for using own initiative’,

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<sup>38</sup> 329 employees from private production, 265 employees from private services and 477 from the public sector (Forth and Stokes 2006, p8) employed in Welsh workplaces took part in the WERS.

<sup>39</sup> Fieldwork for WERS6 is due to be completed, with a boosted sample in Wales, in 2012.

<sup>40</sup> I define satisfaction as respondents who answered they were ‘very satisfied’ or ‘satisfied’ in the WERS 2004.

'amount of influence over job', 'training received' and the 'work itself' (shown in Figure 4.6). Private services employees in Wales also ranked highly compared to private sector services employees elsewhere in Great Britain, on the same elements of job satisfaction as public sector workers in Wales, other than for 'training received'. These high scores for both public and private sector services worker suggests to me the possibility of a 'Wales effect" which should be explored more fully. The influence of nation, and sector, could be explored by further analyses of the WERS by sector and by country, before undertaking primary research. Baarspul and Wilderom (2011) note the paucity of academic studies that have sought to investigate sector alongside other factors to explain differences in the work behaviours of employees but did not identify that 'nation' may also be an important variable.

**Figure 4.6: Job satisfaction, employees, public and private sector services, ranked, Wales, 2004**

|                                       | Public services                                     | Private services |
|---------------------------------------|---|------------------|
| Satisfaction with....                 | Wales ranking compared with other GB regions (n=11) |                  |
| <i>Sense of achievement from work</i> | 1/11  | 1/11             |
| <i>Scope for using own initiative</i> | 1/11  | 1/11             |
| <i>Amount of influence over job</i>   | 1/11  | 1/11 (joint)     |
| <i>Training received</i>              | 1/11  | 5/11 (joint)     |
| <i>Amount of pay received</i>         | 2/11 (joint)  | 11/11            |
| <i>Job security</i>                   | 5/11 (joint)  | 5/11             |
| <i>Work itself</i>                    | 1/11  | 1/11             |

*Source: Produced using Workplace Employment Relations Survey 2004 (Forth and Stokes 2006). Note: ranking system operates as '1' representing the largest proportion of staff being very satisfied or satisfied, '11' the smallest proportion. Note: The rankings are per sector, not across sectors i.e. not cumulative.*

Comparing workers within Wales in 2004 on the seven WERS indicators of job satisfaction, public services workers were more likely than private sector employees to be satisfied with the 'training received' and the 'amount of pay received', which was the largest gap to be found in favour of public services workers (difference of ten percentage points from private services workers), as shown in Figure 4.7. Satisfaction with the 'work itself' and 'scope for using own initiative' were on a parity between the two sectors. The largest gap in favour of private services workers was in terms of 'sense of achievement from work' where there was a gap of more than twenty percentage points between the two groups of employees, as shown in Figure

4.7, with a gap in favour of private sector workers also observed in 'amount of influence over job' (difference of nine percentage points). Given the public sector's reputation for 'jobs for life' (and bearing in mind when the 2004 WERS was conducted, when public sector employment in Wales was growing), it is interesting to note that private services employees are more satisfied with job security than public sector workers. The reasons for some of these gaps could be explored in further research, and also to what extent meanings of job security, influence over job and sense of achievement from work converge or differ between sectors. Further explorations of these differences would be particularly useful at this time, given the current UK Government's desire for expansion of private sector employment, as some employees in the public sector may be unwilling to move to private sector jobs with less training and pay, but may be convinced to do so if they are looking for a greater sense of achievement from work, greater influence over work, and rather surprisingly, a sense of job security.

**Figure 4.7: Job satisfaction, employees, public and private sector services, proportion, Wales, 2004**

|                                       | Public services  | Private services | Difference (private from public – percentage points) |
|---------------------------------------|--|------------------|--|
| Satisfaction with....                 | Percentage of respondents either very satisfied or satisfied |                  |  |
| <i>Sense of achievement from work</i> | 56   | 77               | +21  |
| <i>Scope for using own initiative</i> | 77   | 79               | +2   |
| <i>Amount of influence over job</i>   | 58   | 67               | +9   |
| <i>Training received</i>              | 61   | 54               | -7   |
| <i>Amount of pay received</i>         | 37   | 27               | -10  |
| <i>Job security</i>                   | 62   | 68               | +6   |
| <i>Work itself</i>                    | 78   | 79               | +1   |

*Source: Produced using Workplace Employment Relations Survey 2004 (Forth and Stokes 2006). Number of public services respondents: 477; number of private services respondents: 265.*



4.3.7 Variations in attachment to organisation between public and private employees in Wales: WERS 2004

The previous section has shown that job satisfaction amongst public and private services workers is relatively high compared to other parts of Great Britain, and that there are gaps between the two sectors in Wales, with private services employees reporting higher job satisfaction on five of the seven WERS items. In this section I consider commitment to organisation by sector in Wales, using three items from the 2004 WERS: loyalty to the organisation; pride in their employer and a question on the degree to which employees share the organisation’s values. With respect to the three items in the 2004 WERS used to measure attachment to organisation, like job satisfaction, both public and private sector services’ workers ranked highly in terms of sharing the values of their organisation, feeling loyal and having pride in who they work for. As shown in Figure 4.8, private sector services’ employees in Wales ranked the highest in terms of their strong agreement with the three organisation items, compared to private sector services workers elsewhere in Great Britain. Public sector workers in Wales were also ranked highly, but not to the same degree as private sector services workers in Wales.

Figure 4.8: Engagement with organisation, public and privates services employees, ranked, Wales, 2004

|  | Public services                                     | Private services |
|--|---|------------------|
| Strong agreement with...                               | Wales ranking compared with other GB regions (n=11) |                  |
| <i>“I share many of the values of my organisation”</i> | 2/11 (joint)  | 1/11 (joint)     |
| <i>“I feel loyal to my organisation”</i>               | 2/11  | 1/11             |
| <i>“I am proud to tell people who I work for”</i>      | 4/11  | 1/11             |

Source: Produced using Workplace Employment Relations Survey 2004 (NIESR 2012). Note: ranking system operates as ‘1’ representing the largest proportion of staff agreeing strongly with the statement, ‘11’ the smallest proportion.

Within Wales, private rather than public sector workers were more likely to report strong agreement with the three indicators of organisation ‘engagement’ contained in WERS, as shown in Figure 4.9. In particular, there appears to be evidence of a higher rate of alignment between private sector services’ workers and the values of their organisation (75% of respondents strongly agree), compared with public sector workers (60%). It would be interesting to know



more about the size distribution of private sector workplaces that took part in WERS, given that a lot of private enterprises are very small, which might help to explain the difference in levels of alignment with organisational values.

**Figure 4.9: Engagement with organisation, public and private services employees, proportion, Wales, 2004**

|  | Public services  | Private services |
|--|--|------------------|
| Strong agreement with...                               | Percentage of respondents who strongly agree or agree: |                  |
| <i>"I share many of the values of my organisation"</i> | 60   | 75               |
| <i>"I feel loyal to my organisation"</i>               | 76   | 78               |
| <i>"I am proud to tell people who I work for"</i>      | 62   | 72               |

Source: Produced using Workplace Employment Relations Survey 2004 (NIESR 2012).

In summary, contemporary research from the UK has found a relatively low level of engagement and job satisfaction in the public sector (CIPD 2011, 2011b), and also found that employees in the public sector are less frequently engaged in their jobs than private sector workers, but when engaged, can be so more strongly (Alfes et al 2010). Job satisfaction and commitment to organisation has been found to be higher in Wales compared to Scotland and the English regions, but this is also the case for private sector workers in Wales, which exhibited higher levels of satisfaction and commitment than public sector workers in Wales in 2004 (NIESR 2012). Given the fragile nature of the Welsh economy and the importance of the public sector as a source of employment in parts of Wales where private sector jobs are limited (Day 2010), it is considered a priority to measure the presence of the three types of commitment, and the associated forms of engagement, across the Welsh Public Service workforce, as this may have implications for the content, and more importantly, the impact of management efforts to build engagement in the workforce. There is a significant gap in our understanding of the reasons why people choose to work in the Welsh Public Service given the historic dependence on the public sector in Wales for employment, and the likely reduction in employment opportunities in the sector in the future.

#### 4.4 Summary and conclusions

From my analysis of official statistics, I have found that the Welsh Public Service workforce consists mainly of women and trade union members. Professionals, older workers, staff with higher qualifications, and Welsh speakers are more likely to be found in the WPS than in the Welsh workforce as a whole. The WPS is characterised by a diversity of employers, who operate different terms and conditions of employment.

From my review of the three surveys that have been conducted of the local government, health and Welsh Government workforces, I conclude that NHS employees in Wales reported lower engagement than their UK counterparts, while local government and Welsh Government staff reported levels of engagement that were higher than comparator groups. The Engagement Index (EI) score for Welsh Government staff increased between 2010 and 2011, who exhibited higher scores than the UK Civil Service as a whole on four out of the five items that made up the EI for 2011.

I use evidence from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey also to demonstrate that both public and private service workers seem generally more satisfied in their jobs and committed to their organisation than their counterparts in other parts of the UK. This might provide some evidence of a 'nation' effect in job satisfaction and commitment to organisation. This interplay of 'nation', 'sector', 'organisation' and 'personal' characteristics is likely to be complex, given the devolution of policy for public services to the Welsh Government, but the retention of decision making powers regarding pay and benefits for some groups working in the Welsh Public Service at the UK level. The long standing importance of the public sector as a source of employment in Wales, and the more recent development of "distinctively Welsh" (Sargeant 2011, p1) public services policies means that a 'nation' effect on conceptions, management and the experience of employee engagement should be explored further.

From the three staff surveys that have taken place in the Welsh Public Service, and research findings that I have discussed for the wider public sector in Wales, I consider there to be some evidence of 'contingent' engagement in the Welsh Public Service, which is less than what employers and scholars are looking for from employees when they exhibit employee engagement (WAG 2006, Meyer et al 2010). Like employee engagement, many conceptions of organisational commitment have come from North America which has been noted as a

limitation (Klein et al 2009), whose relevance and applicability to a small country with a substantial public sector workforce might be questioned. Meyer and Maltin (2010) defines organisational commitment as “an internal force that binds an individual to a target (social or nonsocial) and/or to a course of action of relevance to that target...the force itself is experienced as a conscious mindset...can be one of desire (affective commitment), obligation (normative commitment<sup>41</sup>) perceived cost (continuance commitment) or some combination of these” (p39). Using social determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000 in Meyer et al (2010), Meyer et al (2010) have linked these three types of commitment, to three engagement states that they label as ‘disengagement’, ‘contingent engagement’ and ‘full engagement’. To be found in “perhaps a majority” (p68) of employees, ‘contingent engagement’ is associated by Meyer et al (2010) with continuance commitment where staff do what they need to do in their jobs, but only stay with the organisation because of concerns over loss of status or benefits associated with their job. A relatively high level of organisation and job engagement as measured by the WERS proxies could be interpreted not as a sign of contingent engagement but as an indicator of a sense of support from left of centre Welsh Government administrations which has not sought to introduce market mechanisms as in England in key public services such as health. If this were the case, I would expect there to be a gap in satisfaction and commitment scores in favour of the public sector, which I have not observed in the WERS data. I consider the evidence of high satisfaction with pay and benefits amongst public sector workers in Wales measured by WERS, and also by Welsh Government staff as reported in the 2010 and 2011 Civil Service People Survey can be construed as indicators of continuance commitment, suggesting a prevalence of ‘contingent engagement’ (Meyer et al 2010) in parts of the Welsh Public Service. Meyer et al (2010) question the value of contingent engagement to employers who are dealing with difficult business conditions:

“[contingently engaged]...staff do not enjoy their jobs or see them as particularly meaningful, but rather as a means to the attainment of desired outcomes largely controlled by others...employees who are contingently engaged are likely to stay and perform for the organisation but their efforts may be restricted to meeting minimum performance requirements...in today’s environment where employees are continually expected to adapt to new conditions and find innovative and creative ways to contribute to organisational success, contingent engagement may not be enough.” (Meyer et al 2010, p68-69).

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<sup>41</sup> Can have two constituents: normative commitment as indebted obligation, and normative commitment as moral duty (Meyer 2009).

The Welsh Public Service workforce is certainly being “expected to continually adapt to new conditions” (Meyer et al 2010 p69) as discussed in the previous Chapter which outlined the complex and challenging policy environment facing Welsh Public Service employees. I make these assertions regarding contingent engagement on the basis of limited evidence, but I consider there to be a case for further exploration of the extent, and type, of commitment and engagement that exists in the Welsh Public Service. In particular, a study of public service motivation (Perry 1996 in Perry and Hondeghem 2008) amongst public sector employees in Wales, compared with the voluntary and private sectors, should be pursued as a priority. Research for the Scottish Government has identified five types of engagement which staff can exhibit, on the continuum basis (ORC International 2009). Given its application in a public sector, multi-organisation setting, the Scottish Government model may be appropriate for the Welsh Public Service, as an alternative to the Meyer et al (2010) three types of engagement.

I consider there to be several implications arising from this Chapter for my study of the conceptions, management and experience of employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service. Firstly, the wide range of employers in the WPS is likely to lead to variations in the conceptions of employee engagement in the sector. Due to the lack of direct control that the Welsh Government has over organisations that employ the majority of staff in the WPS, the promotion and adoption of the WPS’s definition of employee engagement is only likely to take place through negotiation and persuasion, and will need to be strong enough to displace other conceptions of employee engagement. Given that the WPS definition has yet to be operationalised and therefore offer a baseline, it is unlikely to be attractive to WPS employers looking for quantitative measures of employee engagement, which can be benchmarked against other employers.

Secondly, management of engagement in the WPS will need to take into account that the WPS workforce characteristics are different, and in some ways opposite to that found in the private sector, with women, trade union members, professionals, highly qualified staff, and older people more likely to be employees. The need for different strategies to engage different groups in the workforce is accepted (Truss et al 2006). It has been observed that there are no differences in the management approaches being taken in public and private sector organisations to promote employee engagement (Alfes et al 2010) which is surprising given the different characteristics of their workforces. The application of programmes to increase

employee engagement in the WPS that have been imported from the private sector should therefore be treated with caution, as the characteristics of private sector workforces that have taken part may be very different from those in the Welsh Public Service.

A further issue for the management of engagement is the vertical analyses of employee engagement surveys that is prevalent in the WPS, where results are reported by department or organisation. This is at odds with the Welsh Government's aim to develop a single Welsh Public Service and to increase lateral collaboration between organisations. At both the WPS and organisational levels, serious consideration should be given to analysing survey data by occupational and demographic groups, before providing information on engagement at unit or department levels. Finally, the influence of 'contingent' engagement on the responses of WPS staff to engagement initiatives also needs to be researched more fully. It is possible that there is a growing proportion of staff are engaged in a 'contingent' rather than a 'full' way, due to the long standing issue of lack of opportunities outside the public sector for well paid employment, and also due to the more recent job freezes and pay restraints in the public sector as discussed in Chapter 3. Staff may be less willing to contribute their ideas and make extra effort in these circumstances, although the contrary may be also possible, where staff become more fully engaged if they think this will help to maintain services, and protect public sector employment. This makes the need to understand why people work in the Welsh Public Service, and whether they do so out of a strong public service ethos, even more vital.

In the next Chapter, I consider how employee engagement is conceived in the Welsh Public Service.

05 October 2009

*I have just started the PhD, and I have had my first supervision session. We discussed how we intend to work together and for my next session, I agree to write a piece defining employee engagement. I love walking and so I head out around Llandudno Junction, the village where I live, with my camera, to think about engagement.*

*Llandudno Junction is not a pretty town, but it is in a lovely spot. It is positioned at the mouth of the River Conwy with fantastic views up towards Snowdonia, Conwy Castle and over to Llandudno. It's main claims to fame are the railway and that it once had a Hotpoint factory that made twin tubs. I remember coming home from school and being confronted by waves of men in brown boiler suits leaving the factory at the end of a shift. That all went a while ago and in its' place we have car dealerships and the Welsh Assembly Government's new North Wales office. It is being built as part of an effort to spread Assembly employment across Wales and bring the Government closer to citizens. Its design is meant to promote "new ways of working", with hot desking and increased collaboration between departments. New jobs were meant to be created as posts were relocated from South Wales, but recruitment has stopped and people are leaving rather than joining the Government workforce.*

*As I walk, I find myself taking photographs of "keep out!" signs attached to gates and of electricity sub stations with their warning signs: risk of death! I am slightly taken aback. The first definition I attempt of engagement: "a mutual intention to commit" is quite pleasant, a bit romantic even. But looking later in the dictionary, I find references to engagement as a battle and a military endeavour. Might there be risks and dangers from trying to build employee engagement? I hadn't thought of it this way before. And I don't feel quite so comfortable after this and wonder what I have got myself into.*

## 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I consider how employee engagement is conceived by different parties in the Welsh Public Service. I use data collected through a survey of HR professionals and interviews with senior public sector managers to inform my analysis of conceptions. I find that senior managers' conceptions of engagement share more similarity with private rather than public sector HR professionals. Public rather than private sector HR professionals were likely to conceive employee engagement as a personal state envisaged by Kahn (1990). I also demonstrate how my personal conceptions of employee engagement have developed over the course of the research. Overall I identify both organisational and individual level conceptions of employee engagement from my empirical research which like in the academic literature do not appear to be connected to one another.

### 5.1.1 Introduction

"There is no universally accepted definition of engagement." (Meyer et al 2010, p63)

In the opening Chapter, I introduced Kahn's concept of personal engagement at work. Despite Kahn's work often being cited as the founding work for understanding the concept of engagement, other definitions abound. The consensus from both practitioner and scholars appears to be that employee engagement is a contested, vague and ill defined concept (Macey and Schneider 2008). The UK Civil Service (2011) cites three definitions of employee engagement on its website while MacLeod and Clarke (2009) in a report to the UK government identified more than fifty definitions. While some scholars have lamented this lack of clarity (Arkin 2011), others have identified that the plurality and shifting of understandings might assist practitioners to associate themselves, their organisations, and their practices relatively simply with the employee engagement agenda that seems to be currently in favour with professional associations such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2012, 2012b).

In Chapter 1, I described how employee engagement has been conceived in the academic literature and in publications for practitioners in two ways: as a positive, multi dimensional state for individuals, and as a goal that organisations from any sector, country, size or purpose, should pursue (MacLeod and Clarke 2009). However, we do not know how employee engagement is conceived by individuals working in organisations, in particular those who are in influential

senior management positions, and also human resources professionals who are often called upon to operationalise the ambitions and objectives of senior managers to improve employee engagement.

In this Chapter, I intend to show how senior managers in the Welsh Public Service, and staff working in Wales as human resource professionals, conceive employee engagement. I propose to explore how these definitions are similar and different to each other and how they relate to William Kahn's concept of personal engagement at work and to the wider scholarly literature. I also reflect on my own conceptions of employee engagement.

I intend to draw upon the following set of data for this Chapter:

- Responses to two questions in the survey I administered in late 2010 to human resource professionals (HR Professionals) working in north Wales,
- Interviews that I conducted during late 2010 and early 2011 with senior managers working in the Welsh Public Service (SPS-Senior Public Servants) when we discussed employee engagement from a strategic perspective,
- Documents from my own diaries and research journals from 2009 to 2011, including interviews I asked other researchers to conduct with me, where I have explored how I conceive employee engagement.

## **5.2 Conceptions of employee engagement in Wales: the HR Professional perspective**

I begin with considering the perspective of people who are often tasked with the "doing" of employee engagement in Welsh organisations: HR Professionals.

### **5.2.1 Responses to the Question 'What does employee engagement mean to you?' by HR Professionals**

From the survey I administered to 18 HR Professionals working in north Wales in 2010, I identified 36 individual responses to the first question in the survey. The majority of respondents appeared to conceive employee engagement in an abstract sense, where employee



engagement was discussed as something separate from themselves. A very small number of respondents (n=2) described what employee engagement meant to them as an individual. From the thematic analysis process outlined in Chapter Two, I propose there are four elements to the conceptions of employee engagement expressed by HR Professionals in north Wales, as shown in Figure 5.1. The four elements are organisational focus; pleasurable state for employees; constructive relationships; and facilitation of proactive and extra effort by staff. The number of items that have been coded to each of the four elements is shown in Figure 5.1.

**Figure 5.1: Conceptions of employee engagement, HR Professionals, north Wales, 2010**



*Note: N means "number of responses coded to this element". Source: Survey of HR Professionals, North Wales, September 2010*

**'Organisational focus'**

I developed this element to capture responses where the HR Professionals describe employee engagement as principally a sense of connectedness between the employee and their employing organisation. Employee engagement in this sense refers to staff being oriented towards understanding and meeting business needs. 'Organisational focus' appeared to be conceived as a state, a behaviour, and also as an outcome of employee engagement by the HR Professionals.

I coded 9 of the 36 responses to this element. It was more likely for private sector respondents to refer to 'organisational focus' in their definitions of employee engagement (6 of 9 total responses coded to this element) than HR Professionals working in the public sector (3 of 9 responses). Some sample responses follow in Figure 5.2.

**Figure 5.2: Responses to the Question "What does employee engagement mean to you?": 'Organisational focus', examples of responses**

"Actively involved in the work of the organisation." (public sector respondent)

"Being involved in an organisation." (private sector respondent)

"Using their skills and abilities to deliver organisational objectives." (private sector respondent)

"Engages employees in the business to promote better outcomes...reflecting on the organisation's goals/targets/outcomes." (public sector respondent)

*Source: Survey of HR Professionals, North Wales, September 2010*

*'Pleasurable state for employees'*

I developed this element to reflect those responses that described engagement as an experience that the worker feels as an individual. These definitions of employee engagement described feelings and desires on the part of employees that could be considered positive for the individual, and would seem to reflect the emotional aspects that have been associated with the concept (Kahn 1990, 1992). I coded 7 of the 36 responses to this element, which were all provided by HR Professionals working in the public sector. These appeared to refer to the state of being engaged with an individual's work rather than the organisation, as shown in Figure 5.3.

**Figure 5.3: Responses to the Question "What does employee engagement mean to you?": 'Pleasurable state for employees', examples of responses**

"Feeling like I want to go to work and enthusiasm to carry out tasks. (public sector respondent)

"Employees wanting to come to work." (public sector respondent)

"Enjoying their employment." (public sector respondent)

*Source: Survey of HR Professionals, North Wales, September 2010*

### *'Constructive relationships'*

I developed this element to reflect responses that related to relationships between employees and their co-workers, line managers and constituencies outside the organisation such as customers. Employee engagement was conceived as consisting of positive relationships and involvements between an employee and others, those being mainly elsewhere in the organisation. The possibility of multiple foci for engagement (CIPD 2011c) and for commitment (Kinnie and Swart 2012) has been established in the academic literature. I also coded responses to this element where employee engagement was said to be enabling staff to voice their opinions, have an input into their own jobs and generally be involved in the operation of the organisation. I coded 10 of the 36 responses to this element. The majority of responses coded to this element (8 of the 10 responses) came from HR Professionals working in public sector organisations in north Wales. Sample responses are shown in Figure 5.4.

**Figure 5.4: Responses to the Question "What does employee engagement mean to you?": 'Constructive relationships', examples of responses**

|  |
|--|
| <p>"Communicated about decisions and events." (private sector respondent)</p> <p>"Customer involvement." (private sector respondent)</p> <p>"Opportunity to involve and suggest changes/recommendations." (public sector respondent)</p> <p>"Good relationships with other staff." (public sector respondent)</p> <p>"...where I feel valued by my line manager, this enables me to feel valued..." (public sector respondent)</p> |
|--|

*Source: Survey of HR Professionals, North Wales, September 2010*

### *'Facilitates proactive and extra effort by staff'*

I developed this element to describe responses that conceived employee engagement as additional effort willingly made by staff in their jobs and in the wider organisation. In addition, this element includes responses where employee engagement appeared to be defined as staff thinking about their work and making proactive contributions to their own job, that of others and the wider organisation.

I coded 10 responses to this element (samples are shown in Figure 5.5), which were much more likely to be found in the responses from private sector HR Professionals (9 of 10 responses) than from those working in the public sector (1 response). There was a clear theme in the responses that staff volunteering more effort was viewed as a core characteristic of employee engagement. There appeared to be a clear expectation that effort over and above what was considered to be “basic” was an indicator of employee engagement, although what was meant by “basic” effort was not defined in any of the responses. Likewise, the characteristics or amount of “extra” effort was not defined by the HR Professionals.

**Figure 5.5: Responses to the Question “What does employee engagement mean to you?”: ‘Proactive and extra effort by staff’, examples of responses**

“...thinking about the task they are performing, actually contributing...” (private sector respondent)

“...an element of proactivity in the role they perform.” (private sector respondent)

“Employees exercising their discretionary behaviour....” (private sector respondent)

“...putting in extra effort....” (private sector respondent)

“People making the extra discretionary effort most of the time....” (private sector respondent)

“Caring about the service they offer and image of the organisation.” (public sector respondent).

*Source: Survey of HR Professionals, North Wales, September 2010*

### *5.2.2 Discussion of the analysis of responses to the Question ‘What does employee engagement mean to you?’, with reference to scholarly and practitioner literatures*

The responses offered by the HR Professionals in North Wales share some similarities and differences with conceptions of employee engagement offered in the academic and practitioner literatures.

The conceptions of the HR Professionals differ from the work engagement and personal engagement at work literatures by including 'organisational focus' in their understandings of employee engagement. While some business and management scholars have included organisational focus in their conceptions of employee engagement (Shuck and Wollard 2010) the majority view held in the mainstream academic literature is that 'organisational focus' element is more akin to the academic construct of organisational commitment (Meyer, Becker and Van Dick, 2006, Meyer and Maltin 2010). In particular, it would appear that the 'organisational focus' element offered by the HR Professionals bears particular resemblance to the concept of affective commitment, where an individual feels an emotional attachment to the organisation (Meyer et al 2010). Recent work on behalf of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (Alfes et al 2010) specifically excludes organisational focus from their definition of employee engagement, arguing that "our concern is with an individual's engagement with their specific job, rather than with their organisation as a whole. We would argue that these notions of organisational commitment and advocacy are generally associated with high levels of engagement, but are distinct from it" (p5). It is interesting to note that the HR Professionals in North Wales include 'organisational focus' in their conceptions of employee engagement when a report commissioned by their professional institution (Alfes et al 2010) distinguishes organisational focus as a different and distinct concept. To establish why the HR Professionals in north Wales include 'organisational focus' as an element in their conceptions of employee engagement, further research could be carried out to establish the sources of knowledge and experience they have used to come to their definitions, and to what degree they draw upon academic or practitioner oriented literature or sources such as colleagues and senior managers.

In relation to the 'pleasurable state for employees element', academic and practitioner writers concur that employee engagement is a positive psychological state for workers. From both the psychology, and business and management fields, scholars concur that employee engagement can be conceived as a "positive work related psychological state" (Albrecht 2010, p5), and as "a positive, fulfilling affective-motivational state of work related well being" (Leiter and Bakker 2010, p1). The HR Professionals descriptions of positive emotional and psychological feelings concur with scholarly understandings of the content of state engagement, which comprises a range of feelings such as enthusiasm, belonging and passion for work, a high degree of psychological and behavioural involvement in work as well as pride in the job and the

organisation (Macey and Schneider 2008). Practitioner oriented literature also promotes employee engagement as a positive state for individuals, where MacLeod and Clarke (2009) describe the concept as a state where employees “are able...to enhance their own sense of well being” (p9) and Alfes et al (2010) view employee engagement “as a state experienced by employees” (p4) which they argue is the predominant way that the concept is understood in the academic literature. In the case of the “pleasurable state for employees element”, it appears that the HR Professionals conceptions are similar to definitions found in both the scholarly and practitioner literatures where engagement is conceived as a positive psychological state for employees, represented by individual well being, positive psychological experiences and enjoyable thoughts and feelings.

The empirically derived ‘constructive relationships’ can also be found in the academic literature. Alfes et al (2010) include “meaningful connections to others” (p6) in their definition for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, as do others (Luthans and Peterson 2002). Kahn (1990) describes engagement as “people become ...empathically connected with others in the service of the work they are doing” (p700). Practitioner oriented material from the Institute of Employment Studies (Robinson et al 2004) also identifies connections to others as an essential component of employee engagement where “an engaged employee ....works with colleagues to improve performance within the job...” (p1). The scholarly literature does not make explicit reference to employee engagement being a concept that demonstrates an involvement between the individual employee and initiatives or efforts by the organisation to enable to staff to voice their opinion on business changes or future strategy, which is different from the responses by the HR Professionals who extend employee engagement into this wider realm.

For the fourth element identified from the HR Professionals’ responses, ‘facilitates proactive and extra effort from staff, the scholarly literature generally regards additional effort by employees as a consequence rather than a characteristic of employee engagement itself (Albrecht 2010), and therefore better understood as a separate construct such as organisational citizenship behaviour (Organ and Ryan 1995 in Fleck and Inceoglu 2010, Macey and Schneider 2008). Some scholars find the idea of engagement being characterised as additional or extra-role effort problematic as engaged employees might be exhibiting different, or better efforts rather than more effort (Schaufeli and Bakker 2010). Amount of effort is not construed as a key characteristics of

employee engagement by such scholars. The HR Professionals in north Wales did not identify employee engagement as consisting of different or better efforts by employees, but rather as an increase, willingly given by employees, in the effort made at work. Proactivity, and the willingness to be active both behaviourally and cognitively in their jobs, has been identified by several scholars as a core element of engagement (Kahn 1990, Alfes et al 2010, Luthans and Peterson 2002).

Overall, I propose that the empirically derived element of 'pleasurable state for employees' that I have developed from the HR Professionals' responses to Question 1 of the survey is most similar to conceptions of employee engagement in the academic literature. The element 'constructive relationships' shares some similarities with seminal scholarly definitions (Kahn 1990), but these do not explicitly characterise engagement as a process which enables staff to voice their opinions about their jobs or employer, although such activities might assist in the development of psychological safety where individuals feel they have good quality relationships with co-workers and their managers (Kahn 1990). The 'organisational focus' element is more at odds with the academic literature, most of which views this element as a separate construct, namely organisational commitment. The element 'facilitates proactive and extra effort' is more likely to be defined in the academic literature as a consequence rather than a characteristic of employee engagement.

### *5.2.3 Summary of the analysis of the HR Professionals in north Wales' responses to the Question 'What does employee engagement mean to you?'*

In summary, I categorised the 36 responses provided by the 18 HR Professionals who participated in the survey into four elements to describe their conceptions of employee engagement. These were 'organisational focus', 'pleasurable state for employees', 'constructive relationships' and 'facilitates proactive and extra effort by staff'. I interpreted the responses as reflecting a positive, sustained multi-dimensional state for employees, where staff contribute additional effort willingly, have constructive work relationships with others, in the service of the organisation. Employees' efforts are relational and directed: towards their job, customers, other staff and the organisation. The conceptions describe employee engagement as a pleasurable experience for staff.

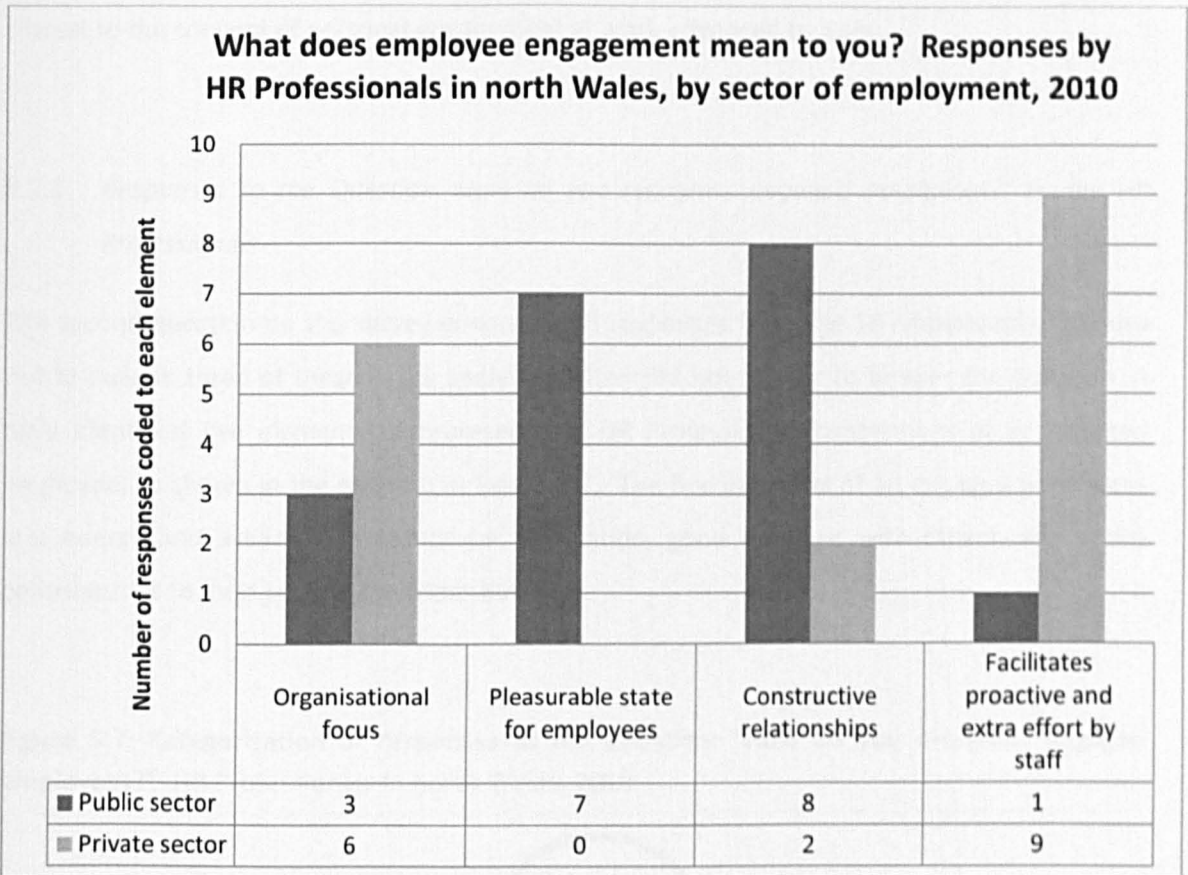
Overall, employee engagement appeared to be conceived by the HR Professionals as an individual level state and as a series of outcomes for both staff and the organisation. Interestingly, none of the responses described employee engagement overtly as a distinctive practice or initiative undertaken by organisations. Later in this Chapter, I show how many of the conceptions I have held during this research have characterised employee engagement in this way. There were references to staff being encouraged to take part, and be involved, in the wider organisation although this was not referred to by any respondent as an approach. Where responses refer to engagement as an individual level state, these included references to behaviours, thoughts and feelings that appeared to be positive and pleasurable for the employee.

#### *5.2.4 Impact of sector on conceptions of employee engagement held by HR Professionals*

I found differences in the frequency that each of the four elements of employee engagement were cited by HR Professionals working in the public and private sectors. Private sector HR Professionals were more likely to conceive employee engagement as a concept consisting of 'organisational focus' (6 of 9 responses coded to this element) and the 'facilitation of proactive and extra effort by staff' (9 of 10 responses coded to this element) than public sector respondents. These latter individuals were much more likely to conceive employee engagement as a 'pleasurable state for employees' and 'constructive relationships' than as a concept with 'organisational focus' and which 'facilitates proactive and extra effort by staff'. The variation in responses to Question 1 of the survey by sector HR Professionals is shown in Figure 5.6. The reasons why HR Professionals in north Wales working in different sectors of the economy should conceive of employee engagement so differently could be explored in further research, as should the implications of these differences for the practice and management of employee engagement.



Figure 5.6: What does employee engagement mean to you?, HR Professionals, 2010



Source: Survey of HR Professionals, North Wales, September 2010

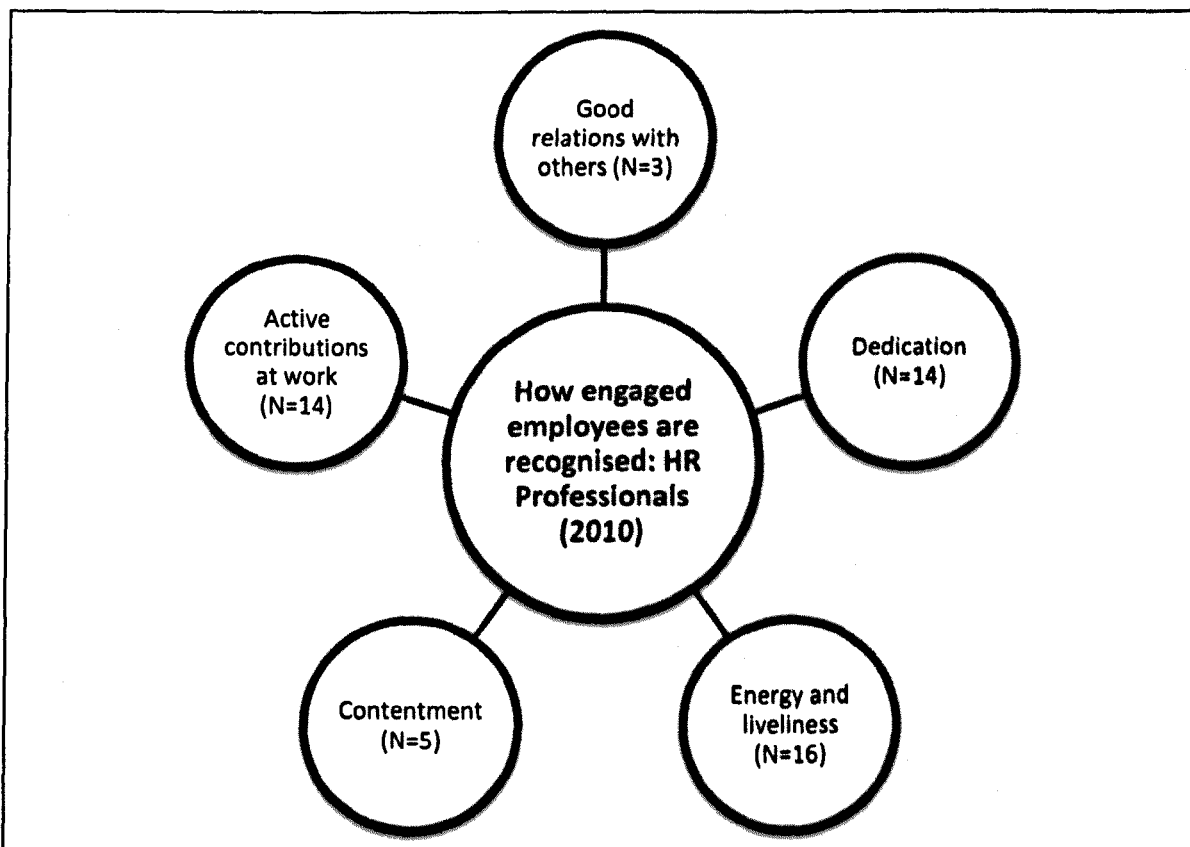
With specific reference to Kahn’s definition of personal engagement at work (1990, 1992), the conceptions offered by the north Wales HR Professionals concur when they describe employee engagement as an individual level state that comprises behavioural, cognitive and emotional elements. The conceptions share Kahn’s focus on relatedness with others and an active psychological and behavioural participation by the individual in their job. However, the professionals’ definition place a focus on meeting organisational objectives that does not appear in Kahn’s framework, which is understandable given its focus on the individual and their role. For the HR Professionals working in private sector organisations in particular, employee engagement appears to be more than a context in which an individual calculates their role performances as Kahn would contend, it is a target for the individual’s engagement efforts. The HR Professionals in north Wales working in the private sector viewed engagement as facilitating additional effort on the part of employees, while public sector respondents did not, which Kahn does not discuss in his conceptualisation. It would appear that HR Professionals working in

public sector organisations in north Wales have conceptions of employee engagement that are closest to the concept of personal engagement at work advanced by Kahn.

### 5.2.5 Responses to the Question 'How do you recognise engaged employees?' by the HR Professionals

The second question on the survey generated 53 responses from the 18 respondents. I chose not to include three of these in my analysis as they did not appear to answer the question. I have identified five elements to represent the HR Professionals conceptions of an engaged employee, as shown in the diagram in Figure 5.7. The five elements of an engaged employees are: energy and liveliness, contentment, dedication, good relations with others, and active contributions to their job and the wider business.

**Figure 5.7: Categorisation of responses to the question: "How do you recognise engaged employees?" HR Professionals in north Wales, 2010**



Note: 'N' means "number of responses coded to this element". Source: Survey of HR Professionals, North Wales, September 2010

### *'Energy and liveliness'*

I developed this element to reflect those responses where engaged employees were described by the HR Professionals as displaying energy in their behaviours at work. The responses included descriptions of positive physicality being exhibited by engaged employees, such as smiling, alert body language, and behaviour that denoted enthusiasm. I coded 16 of the 50 responses to this element. More than half of the responses coded to this element came from respondents working in private sector organisations (10 of 16 responses). Sample responses are shown in Figure 5.8.

**Figure 5.8: Responses to the Question: "How do you recognise an engaged employee?": 'Energy and liveliness', Examples of responses**

|   |
|---|
| "Energy and motivated." (Private sector respondent)           |
| "Energetic individuals." (Private sector respondent)          |
| Body language is alert, upright." (Private sector respondent) |
| "Energy and motivated." (Public sector respondent)            |
| "Enthusiastic." (Public sector respondent)                    |

*Source: Survey of HR Professionals, North Wales, September 2010*

### *'Contentment'*

I developed this element to reflect those responses that described engaged employees being satisfied at work. I coded 5 responses to this element, almost equally distributed between public (2 responses) and the private sectors (3 responses). According to the HR Professionals, engaged employees appear to be satisfied and content in their work, and enjoying what it is they are doing, with sample responses shown in Figure 5.9. Further research would be helpful to explore how this satisfaction is manifested and made visible to others, and whether the HR Professionals think that engaged staff will also be feeling and thinking in ways that demonstrate contentment (e.g. through their own sense-making processes).

**Figure 5.9: Responses to the Question: "How do you recognise an engaged employee?": 'Contentment', Examples of responses**

"Employees who are positive and content in their workplace." (Private sector respondent)

"Satisfaction levels." (Public sector respondent)

"Content." (Public sector respondent).

*Source: Survey of HR Professionals, North Wales, September 2010*

### **'Dedication'**

I developed this element to reflect responses made by the HR Professionals where engaged employees were recognised by their commitment to their job and the wider organisation. Engaged employees appear to be conscientious, committed to completing work and meeting targets and in the case of two responses, exhibit good attendance. They appear to be reliable and willing to work conscientiously in their jobs and for their employers. I coded 14 responses to this element (samples shown in Figure 5.10, which were equally distributed between public and the private sector respondents).

**Figure 5.10: Responses to the Question: "How do you recognise an engaged employee?": 'Dedication', Examples of responses**

"Dedication to their work." (Public sector respondent)

"Likes to complete tasks." (Private sector respondent)

"Emotional involvement with their job/team/organisation." (Private sector respondent)

"Focused on achieving targets, proud of the organisation they work for." (Private sector respondent)

*Source: Survey of HR Professionals, North Wales, September 2010*

### *'Good relations with others'*

I developed this element to reflect responses that describe engaged employees taking an interest in their fellow colleagues and being willing to help others at work. This element comprises responses where staff are respectful of others in the organisation, and willing to support colleagues' efforts. This element shares a similarity with the element identified as 'constructive relationships' in the analysis for Question 1, as they are both relational in nature. I coded 3 responses to this element which are shown in 5.11.

**Figure 5.11: Responses to the Question: "How do you recognise an engaged employee?": 'Good relations with others', All responses**

|   |
|---|
| <p>"Treat colleagues with respect." (Public sector respondent)</p> <p>"Keen to listen to others' ideas." (Public sector respondent)</p> <p>"Curious about ...their colleagues." (Private sector respondent)</p> |
|---|

*Source: Survey of HR Professionals, North Wales, September 2010*

### *'Contributing actively'*

I developed this element to reflect those responses that viewed engaged employees as proactive and willing to contribute effort to their work and that of others. To the HR Professionals, engaged employees are 'willing' in a number of ways: willing to help out colleagues, and willing to contribute effort, ideas and knowledge. It seems that engaged employees are not being forced to contribute their effort to their job and to the organisation, but wish to do so. 12 responses were coded to this element (with samples shown in Figure 5.12), with more than half of these (7) offered by private sector respondents. Engaged employees appear to be willing to shoulder responsibilities and contribute to the wider organisation by offering suggestions and generally being active in their role.

**Figure 5.12: Recognising engaged employees: 'Contributing actively', Examples of responses**

"Contributes ideas."

"Keen to speak up and offer their ideas."

"People sharing knowledge."

"Willingness to contribute and learn."

"May work beyond hours."

*Source: Survey of HR Professionals, North Wales, September 2010*

### *5.2.6 Discussion of the analysis of responses to the Question 'How do you recognise an engaged employee?', with reference to scholarly and practitioner literatures*

Visible energy has been identified by a number of scholars as a characteristic of engagement at work, which provides support for the HR Professionals' 'energy and liveliness' element. Kahn (1990) describes engagement as an expression of the individual's preferred self in work tasks, that is visible to others, stating that "a person both drives personal energies into role behaviours ...and displays the self within the role...[...].engaging behaviours ...convey and bring alive self...[...].People become physically involved in tasks..." (p700). Macey et al also identify that engagement amongst employees should be visible to others through behaviours at work, and define engagement as "...focused energy, evident to others..." (2009, p7) while Bakker et al (2008) identified engagement as "a high level of energy..." (p189).

The 'contentment' element is more likely to be viewed by academic scholars as job satisfaction rather than an indicator of an engaged employee. Satisfaction with work has been associated with engagement (Harter et al 2002, Alfes et al 2010) and has been included in a number of measures of engagement such as the Gallup Q12 employee survey (Harter et al 2002). Job satisfaction has also been identified as a consequence of employee engagement (Saks 2006). For others, satisfaction with work is only viewed as a component of engagement when it is accompanied by a degree of activation of the individual worker: "simply put, satisfaction doesn't capture the aspects of urgency, focus, and intensity that are central to engagement." (Macey et al 2009, p40), who also state that satisfaction at work can lead to inertia amongst employees. MacLeod and Clarke (2009) state that satisfaction is insufficiently linked to business results, and

measuring satisfaction is of limited value. Job satisfaction has been found to be one of the least important factors in driving engagement amongst staff working in the UK National Health Service (Robinson et al 2004) with immediate line management, prospects for development and advancement and appraisal arrangements being much more important factors for strengthening engagement at work.

The 'dedication' element is supported in the academic literature by Kahn (1992) and his conceptualisation of personal engagement at work, when employees "channel personal energies into physical, cognitive and emotional labors." (p322) Work engagement scholars have identified dedication to work, alongside vigor and absorption, as one of the three characteristics of work engagement, where dedication is characterised by "being strongly involved in one's work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge." (Schaufeli and Bakker 2010, p13). The definition of vigor by the same scholars as "the willingness to invest efforts in one's work.." (p13) would also seem to be relevant to the HR Professionals conception of dedication as an indicator of an engaged employee. It would appear that involvement and dedication to tasks as identified by the respondents shares similarities with the work engagement stream of the literature in particular.

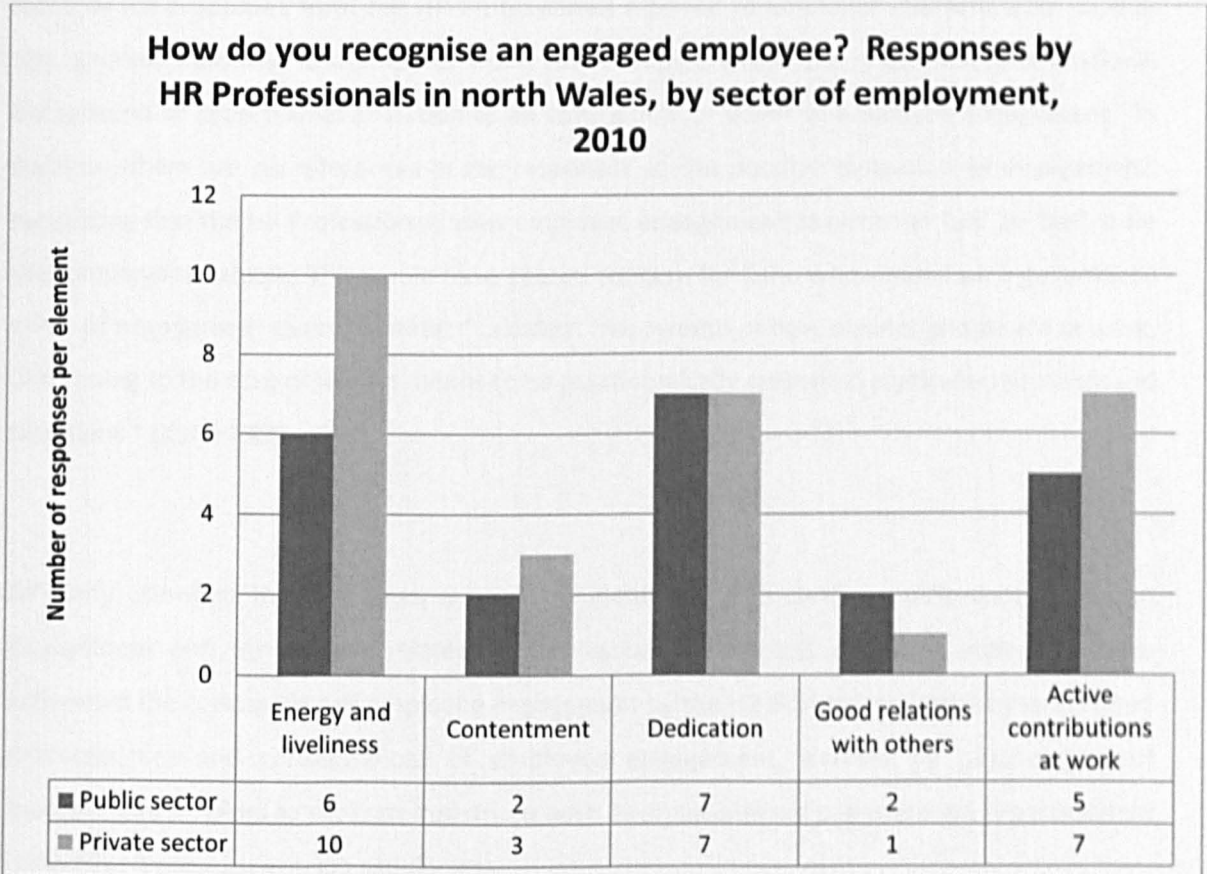
The 'active contributions at work' element receives support from Kahn's conception of personal engagement at work as "personal presence...and active, full role performances' (1990, p700). Kahn describes engaged employees as alive in their roles, expressing themselves in and through their work and actively involved in what it is they are doing (Kahn 2010). Macey et al (2009) also identify proactivity as a feature of an engaged employee, who is willing to embark on tasks before being asked and to address issues as they arise rather than wait to be instructed to respond.

In summary, four of the five elements that I have used to describe what an engaged employee looks like from the HR Professionals' point of view appear to have support in the academic literature. The 'contentment' element is less likely to be viewed by scholars as a positive attribute as it might signify satisfaction, and therefore a lack of urgency and proactivity on the part of the employee to work more effectively or to challenge established ways of working.

5.2.7 Summary of the analysis of HR Professionals responses to the Question ‘How do you recognise an engaged employee?’

From the 50 responses that I analysed for this question, I created five elements to reflect how the HR Professionals in north Wales recognise engaged employees. These were: ‘energy and liveliness’, ‘contentment’, ‘dedication’, ‘good relations with others’ and ‘active contributions at work’. According to the HR Professionals and as shown in the graph in Figure 5.13, engaged employees appear to be content, satisfied and enthusiastic people, who are happy in their work who demonstrate positive behaviours and emotions such as smiling and exhibit body language. Engaged employees demonstrate a high degree of agency, control, and motivation on a sustained level, and exhibit behaviours that are considered positive for themselves, and are pleasant for others to experience. The greatest absolute difference between public and private sector respondents was found for the ‘energy and liveliness’ element, followed by the ‘active contributions at work’ element.

Figure 5.13: How do you recognise an engaged employee? HR Professionals, North Wales, 2010





### *5.2.8 Employee engagement from the human resource professional perspective: summary*

My analysis of the first two questions from the survey of HR Professionals in north Wales can be characterised as multi-dimensional, consisting of thoughts, feelings and behaviours. I would also characterise the responses to both questions as positive, relational and active. For both questions, it is not clear whether the responses are descriptions of engagement that the HR Professionals have experienced for themselves, witnessed in others or are conceptions they have decided to create or adopt.

There appears to be some overlap of elements arising from Question 2 with the four elements that resulted from my analysis of responses to Question 1 (What does employee engagement mean to you?), specifically 'good relations with others' (similar to 'constructive relationships' from the analysis of Question 1) and 'active contributions at work' (overlap with 'facilitates proactive and extra effort by staff' from Question 1).

None of the responses from the HR Professionals referred to employee characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, location(s) of work, role occupied within the organisation, educational background or professional affiliation as a contributor or driver of employee engagement. In addition, there are no references in the responses to the possible dynamism of engagement, suggesting that the HR Professionals view employee engagement as either an "on" or "off" state that employees exhibit. This would have caused concern for Kahn who viewed such generalised views of engagement as problematic: "...context free sweeps of how present people are at work, [not] going to the core of what it means to be psychologically present in particular moments and situations." (Kahn 1990, p693).

Scholarly attention that has been devoted to identifying and clarifying differences between engagement and other work related or motivational constructs does not appear to have influenced the conceptions of employee engagement by the HR Professionals who have included characteristics and consequences of employee engagement, defined by psychology and management scholars as separate constructs such as organisational commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour and job satisfaction.

### **5.3 Conceptions of employee engagement in Wales: the Senior Public Servant perspective**

In the previous section, I presented an analysis of conceptions of employee engagement by Wales based HR Professionals using data that I collected with a short questionnaire of six open questions. I now propose to complement that analysis by considering how managers working in senior roles in the Welsh Public Service conceive employee engagement, drawing on a series of interviews that I conducted during 2011. I have discussed in Section 2.4.1 the limitations to the data I collected in Chapter 2, and my decision to combine responses from this group of respondents to the two questions 'How do you define employee engagement?' and 'How do you recognise an engaged employee?' rather than attempt a thematic analysis of the two responses separately.

#### *5.3.1 Responses of Senior Public Servants to the questions: How do you define employee engagement? And "How do you recognise engaged employees?"*

Most of the respondents appear to answer this question on a personal level, rather than refer to an organisational definition or to a definition they had found in either practitioner or academic literature (I also noticed this characteristic in the data collected from the HR Professionals). None of the Senior Public Servants I interviewed referred to the existence or content of a definition of employee engagement developed in 2009 for the Welsh Public Service, shown below:

**"When employees, wherever they are located in their organisation, contribute to their very best so securing high quality, relevant and valued outcomes for the service user because:**

- **They find personal meaning and motivation in their work.**
- **There is an open, fair and consistent commitment to their value as the organisation's greatest asset.**
- **They are enabled to mobilise their time, talent, energy and resources on a sustained and sustainable basis."** (Wales Public Service Workforce Forum 2009)

I understand that some of the individuals that I interviewed had taken part in the development of the above definition, although I did not ask any of the respondents if they had done so. On reflection, it would have been useful for me to do this, to understand the level of awareness of the WPS definition among senior managers. The majority of the Senior Public Servants categorised employee engagement as an orientation on the part of the employee towards the organisation. This is similar to the HR Professionals' 'organisational focus' element, and was concerned with ensuring staff understood and contributed to organisational objectives. Some responses appeared to me to be somewhat uni-directional, concentrating on staff meeting organisational needs:

“For me it’s about getting our staff aligned with our vision, our goals, things like that, there are various methods to do that, so maybe it’s about getting people aligned, so they are ultimately doing .... what we require.” (Male, all Wales role)

For others who cited 'organisational focus' as a characteristic of employee engagement, it appeared to describe the concept more as a bi-directional relationship between employees and their employers. This exchange oriented conception of employee engagement appears to share similarities with the 'constructive relationships' element identified by the HR Professionals, and also with definitions found in some of the practitioner literature that describes engagement as a two-way process (MacLeod and Clarke 2009):

“It’s a dialogue I think. You talk to people...And some sort of dialogue about future direction.” (Male, regional role)

Two of the ten senior public servants identified employee engagement as not only about a relationship between individual and the organisation, but also between the individual worker and their own job. This form of engagement was viewed as different from engagement between an employee and an organisation, also identified by Saks (2006) in his study of employees in the Canadian city of Toronto. As noted in the discussion in the HR Professionals section of this Chapter, some of the academic literature would view 'organisational focus' as

organisational commitment (Alfes et al 2010, Meyer et al 2010) as a separate concept to employee engagement:

“I guess there are two levels. One is engaging individuals in their role and secondly engaging them in the organisation and in the wider world I guess. I think the two are slightly different. The first one is trying to ensure that individuals are actually engaged in the job that they have. And that varies from the nature of that job, the context for that job, all the way through to performance management of that individual and all that. And then there’s engagement in the organisation. In the purpose, direction, so that individuals can put their jobs in context, yes, sense of direction, and engaging them to contribute to that something bigger, beyond the 9 to 5 and the pay cheque at the end of the month. (Male, all Wales role)

“Yeah, I think there probably is a difference between engagement with a job and engagement with the organisation. I think people can be happy with the task they are doing but not very proud of who they work for. I think that’s possible.” (Male, regional role)

I also found similarities between the HR Professionals’ ‘contributing actively’ element and the responses given by the Senior Public Servants. They characterised engaged employees as active and willing contributors to their own jobs and to the wider organisation. This characteristic has been noted by work engagement scholars as ‘vigor’ (Schaufeli and Bakker 2010) and also as a core element of employee engagement (Macey et al 2009):

“I would think that an employee is engaged if they were raising issues about their job. If they were coming in asking questions, going to their direct supervisor asking questions, suggesting different ways of doing things, even questioning how the organisation is being operated. I would think that somebody who has that level of care about what they’re doing, I would say they were engaged.” (Male, regional role)

As in the responses provided by the HR Professionals, the 'facilitating proactive and extra effort' element is also present in the Senior Public Servants' conceptions. This extra effort has been conceived as a different concept in the academic literature (Fleck and Inceoglu 2010) and also as a consequence rather than a core element of employee engagement. Engaged employees appear to be conscientious and willingly contributing more than is necessary. Engaged staff give to their jobs and to their employers, it seems, on an ongoing basis:

"...It's something above and beyond what you would expect an employee to do as part of their job. It's the discretionary bit...they offer something, you can't demand it from them, they offer it, ...they want to offer more...always looking for things to do, always making a really valued contribution...there are people here who don't offer normal customer service, they offer something extra, and that's what I'm looking for all of the time." (Male, all Wales role)

"Someone who is concerned about doing a good job, didn't take days off, they use their time constructively, when they're in work, if they were asked to do something they would always do their best to do it, to the fullest possible extent." (Female, all Wales role)

"They'll volunteer for things, for a first. In terms of supervision, people will ask "I want to go on a group, I want to be part of that. It's volunteering for projects. Engaged employees tend to be more proactive and want to be involved." (Male, all Wales role)

As with the HR Professionals, a 'basic' level of performance is not considered to be an indicator of the engaged employee, as it was not considered to be adequate to denote engagement, which involved additional effort:

"The engaged tend to be more proactive, they're more responsive, they change, more flexible, more willing to give things a go, willing to work with other people, lower sickness, and then probably saying, I'm pretty happy with my job here, broadly happy

with what I am paid, and I'm not looking for another job at the moment." (Male, all Wales role)

"...it's more about the extra mile. So if you receive a phone call at 5pm on a Friday, do you put it on answerphone or do you answer it?...If we have to deliver something in the evening because of the audience that we have, are people willing to do that? People willing to come in early? And that's what I mean by the extra." (Male, all Wales role)

Some of the Senior Public Servants described employee engagement by referring to other, deficient states that employees could exhibit. Engaged employees were individuals who were not disengaged, who exhibit behaviours and attitudes that are opposite to engagement at work. The responses here appear to be more associated with Kahn's concept of personal disengagement at work (i.e. being emotionally disconnected from others and cognitively unvigilant (Kahn 1990) and rather less than disengagement in the sense of burnout (exhibiting inefficiency, exhaustion and cynicism) (Maslach and Leiter 2004):

"They enjoy their work, they like going to work. They wouldn't be bad mouthing their employer down the pub! They're the opposite of a disengaged employee really." (Female, all Wales role)

"To me, employee engagement means that staff are aligned with the organisation, enjoying their work, eager to participate in discussions. At our last staff away day, as I was looking around the room, I saw people that didn't fit that picture. They weren't contributing, and they looked like they didn't want to be there." (Female, all Wales role)

"...whereas there are those that seem to be quite happy to hide really, and they don't want to be asked to take part in anything, and they won't volunteer, and taking part in even a staff away day, they won't go to any meetings or training, Generally, day to day, they tend to be the people who are more difficult to work with, they're not particularly open. So an engaged employee tends to share information, about their own area...and

then other teams keep it all to themselves...they don't want to engage with anyone else." (Male, all Wales role)

While the SPS's conceptions identified with those of the HR Professionals in terms of 'constructive relationships', I have identified a slightly different type of relationship in the senior managers' conceptions of engagement, that involves staff placing others, especially citizens and service users ahead of allegiances to themselves or their employers. Engaged employees put the recipients of public services first, were willing to work closely with service users:

"Loyalty to your organisation is secondary in a way to the public and I don't think in Wales that the employees have a very sophisticated understanding of the concept of ownership by, and responsibility to the public." (Female, all Wales role)

"Nudging staff into being more centered around the service and the patient, and rather less about terms and conditions." (Female, all Wales role)

Staff working in ways that did not, according to the senior managers, respect the needs and voices of users was considered to be outdated. The question as to whether citizens and users are willing and capable of working with service providers (and likewise staff with service users) is not questioned by the senior public servants:

"The old fashioned way would be to say that the professional has all the answers, and the member of the public is receiving their service in a sort of passive way...the patient have to be engaged...The public is part of the solution and the public services staff and the public working together to find better solutions....the workforce has to be part of that. It's an engaged model of public service reform with both staff with the public working together to deliver better outcomes for Wales. That's the way we're trying to work." (Female, all Wales role)

Overall, I propose that the SPS's conceptions of employee engagement share the HR Professionals elements of 'organisational focus' and 'proactive and extra effort at work', and consist of two particular elements of their own, namely 'orientation towards others' and 'not exhibiting features of disengagement'.

### *5.3.2 Summary of the analysis of the Senior Public Servants' conceptions of employee engagement*

I interviewed ten Senior Public Servants working in the Welsh Public Service to establish how they conceived employee engagement, and how they recognised engaged employees. Their responses appeared to bear some resemblance to those arising from the HR Professionals, but there were some differences. In particular, I identify particular gaps between conceptions of employee engagement held by the Senior Public Servants and those of HR Professionals working in the public sector, and also gaps with the definition of employee engagement that has been developed for the Welsh Public Service (the definition is in Section 5.3.1).

There were clear similarities in the conceptions of the Senior Public Servants and those of HR Professionals in terms of 'organisational focus', 'facilitates proactive and extra effort by staff' and 'active contributions at work'. Engaged employees, for both SPS's and HR Professionals display effort above and beyond the basic requirement of their jobs, and are motivated to meet organisational goals. This latter characteristic appears to be somewhat stronger amongst the SPS's than the HR Professionals. 'Organisational focus' was much more likely to be found in the responses of HR Professionals working in private, rather than public sector organisations, as were 'facilitates proactive and extra effort by staff' and 'active contributions at work'. It would appear in respect of these three elements, that the SPS's share more common ground with private sector HR Professionals than with those working in the public sector. This comes as a surprise to me as it was not a result that I was expecting to find, and has led me to think about why this might be. It would be useful to conduct with research with the Senior Public Servants, to understand more about how they form their conceptions of employee engagement, and to substantiate more clearly the extent and nature of gaps in conceptions of employee engagement held by two workgroups working in the public sector.



There appeared to be a degree of overlap between the SPS's conceptions and those of the HR Professionals with regard to 'dedication', 'good relations with others', 'contentment' and 'energy and liveliness', as aspects of each of these elements were mentioned by at least a minority of the Senior Public Servants.

The conceptions of the SPS's differed from the HR Professionals in respect of the 'pleasurable state for employees' element. This was mentioned in 7 responses by the HR Professionals, all of whom were working in public sector organisations. This would appear to provide further evidence that where the SPS's concur with the views of HR Professionals, it is more likely to be with those working in the private sector.

There appears a difference in emphasis between the responses from the Senior Public Servants and the content of the Welsh Public Service (WPS) definition of employee engagement (Section 5.3.1). The WPS definition appears to describe a state of organisational level engagement, consisting of engaged employees, who are recognised as an asset to be supported and resourced to do their best. A number of the SPS's viewed engagement with the organisation as the ultimate target and goal of employee engagement, while the WPS definition does not refer to engagement with an organisation at all and appears to be more employee than organisation centered. The WPS definition does refer to employee engagement producing positive results for users of public services, which I also identified in some of the Senior Public Servants' responses.

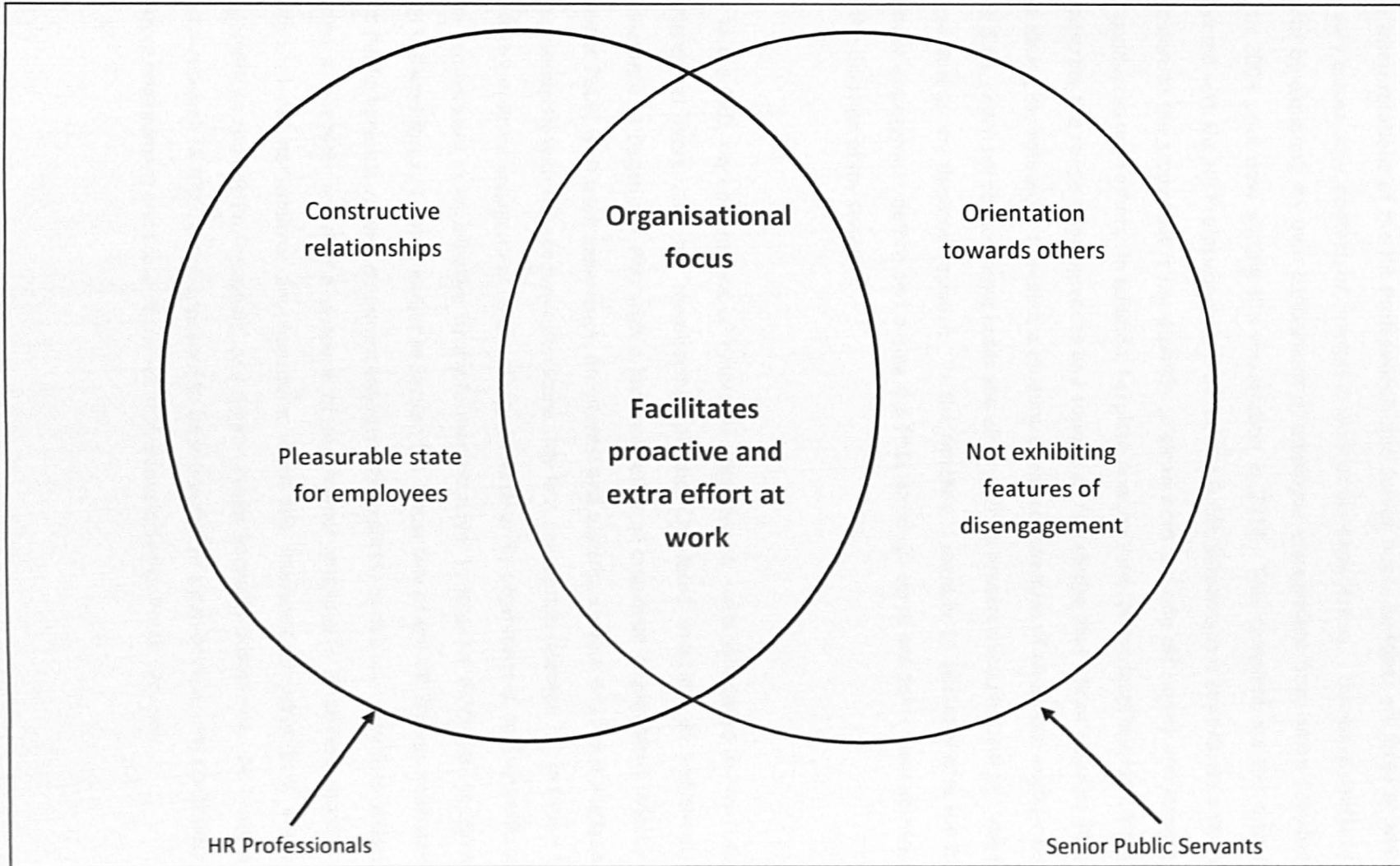
#### **5.4 Bringing together conceptions of employee engagement in Wales**

Having presented how I interpret how HR Professionals and Senior Public Servants conceive employee engagement, I now intend to show the common ground between them, using a diagram. To conclude this Section and this Chapter, I also intend to reflect on my own conceptions of employee engagement and how these have changed during this study.

#### *5.4.1 Synthesising HR Professionals and Senior Public Servants conceptions*

Like Meyer et al (2010), I conclude that there is no universally accepted definition of engagement either among the HR Professionals in north Wales or the Senior Public Servants working across Wales. However, there are clearly some common strands. I have identified four elements to the HR Professionals' conceptions of employee engagement, and five elements that describe how they recognise engaged employees. I identified four elements to the SPS's conceptions of employee engagement, two of them being common with the HR Professionals: 'organisational focus' and 'facilitating proactive and extra effort at work'. It is possible to discern a degree of overlap between other elements, but I have found these two elements to be the most likely to be found in the two workgroup's conceptions. I show the constituent elements for each of the workgroup' conceptions of employee engagement in the diagram in Figure 5.14 (using the four elements developed from the HR Professionals' responses to Question 1 on the survey only). I show how the two conceptions share the elements of 'organisational focus' and 'facilitating proactive and extra effort at work'. Along with the Senior Public Servants, these two elements were reported mainly by private sector HR Professionals, as discussed earlier (Section 5.2.4). The diagram shown in Figure 5.14 shows only where the sets of conceptions overlap in terms of two elements, and does not fully reflect how the conceptions do cross over in respect of some other elements (such as 'constructive relationships'). The purpose of the diagram is to give an indication of where there are clear overlaps rather than to demonstrate all areas of commonality. I recommend that a survey be developed, containing very carefully specified items, to be administered to HR Professionals and Senior Public Servants as well as other constituencies such as line managers, in order to establish the extent and nature of overlap between conceptions, in order to establish the reliability of my interpretations.

Figure 5.14: Conceptions of employee engagement in Wales by element, HR Professionals and Senior Public Servants, 2010-2011

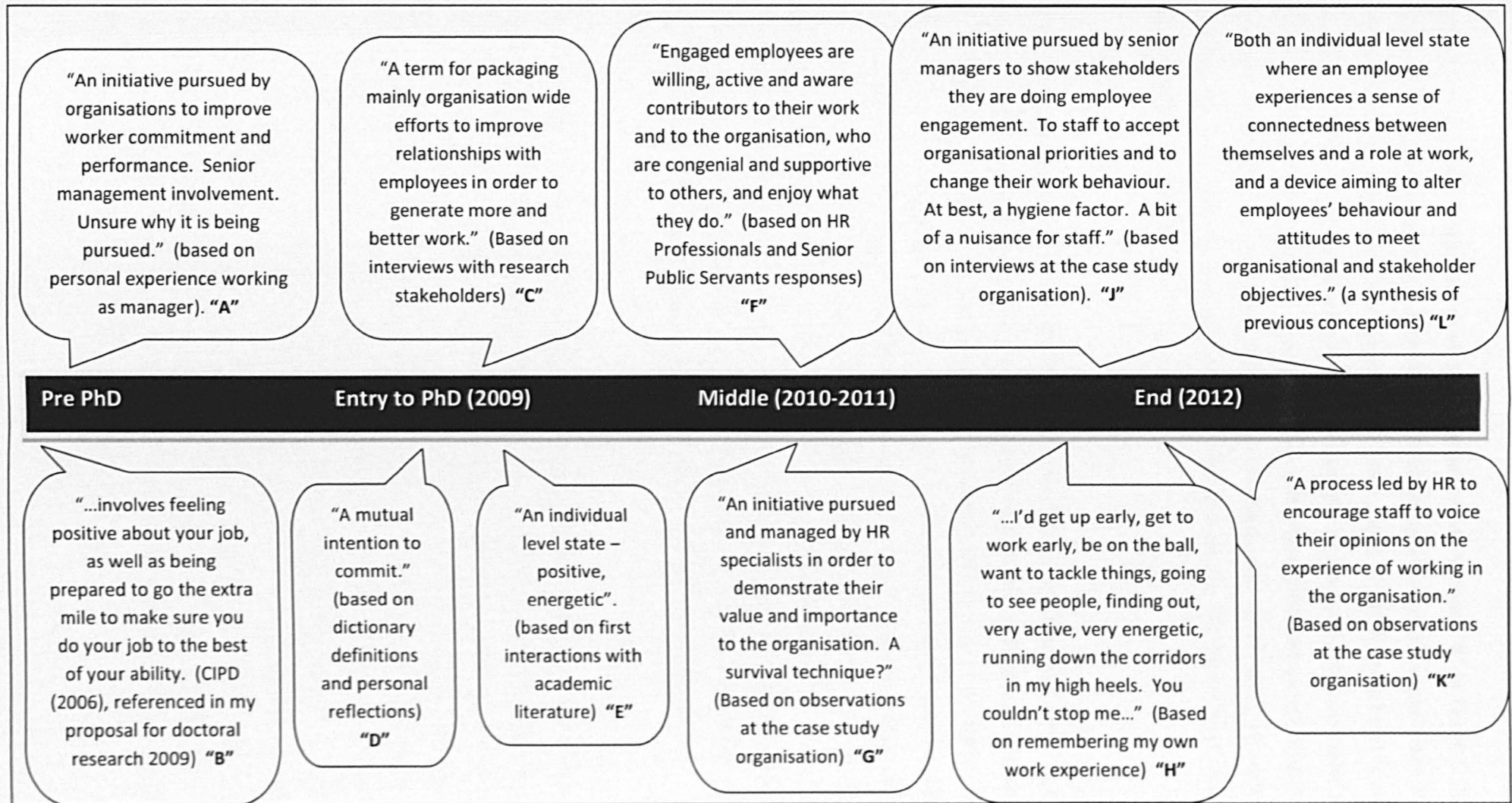


#### 5.4.2 *My conceptions of employee engagement*

In Section 5.2.2, I argue that it would be useful to know what has informed the HR Professionals and the Senior Public Servants' conceptions of employee engagement. In addition, I do not know if the interpretations of the HR Professionals and Senior Public Servants are fixed or whether they vary across time, context, or changes in work or life experiences. I therefore conclude this Chapter by exploring my own conceptions of employee engagement from when I started the PhD in 2009 until now writing this dissertation in 2012. This complements the research I conducted with the HR Professionals and the Senior Public Servants as it contributes a temporal dimension to the study that is not possible to glean from the one off survey and interviews I have conducted with others. In addition, I explore how my conceptions have been informed and demonstrate the range of experiences and sources of knowledge that I draw upon at different times during my research. I present a timeline of my conceptions of employee engagement in Figure 5.15, which I produced using notes and writings from research and personal journals prior to, and during, my doctoral research. In the timeline, I identify 11 personal conceptions of employee engagement before and during the PhD, although there are some clear continuities over the duration of my study.

Prior to the PhD, my conceptions of 'employee engagement' were influenced by my personal experience at work and my membership of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. I began the PhD with a lay knowledge of employee engagement (Macey and Schneider 2008) with work experience, an interest and questions about employee engagement but no familiarity with the academic literature. My first conception (marked "A" in Figure 5.15) describes employee engagement as an activity undertaken by organisations, and was influenced by my involvement in an initiative by my former employer to improve employee engagement across the workforce. I noted earlier in Section 5.2.1 how few of the HR Professionals and the Senior Public Servants viewed employee engagement explicitly in this way. My first conception included a question about the purpose of my former employer's employee engagement activities. I did not observe any questions about the relevance or purpose of employee engagement in the HR Professionals' and Senior Public Servants' responses. As I began my doctoral research in 2009, there appeared to be somewhat of a gap between my conceptions of employee engagement and those of the HR Professionals/Senior Public Servants.

Figure 5.15: My conceptions of employee engagement, 2009-2012



Layout inspired by Shuck and Wollard (2009). There is no association between the size of boxes and the significance of conceptions. The text in bold in boxes "A" and "L" signifies the first and the final conceptions that I held, and hold, of employee engagement.

I included a published conception of employee engagement (marked "B" in Figure 5.15) in my proposal for doctoral research (produced mid 2009), using a report on engagement from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD 2006), of which I have been an Associate Member. This conception is focused on the individual, has positive and active connotations, and comprises feelings and behaviours. I consider that part of the CIPD conception, that describes employee engagement as "being prepared to go the extra mile" (CIPD 2006, p3) reflects the 'proactive and extra effort' element that I identified in both the HR Professionals and Senior Public Servants conceptions.

As I explained in Chapter One, I started my doctoral studies by spending time speaking to public sector managers, former colleagues and fellow research students about employee engagement as well as engaging somewhat reluctantly with the academic literature on the subject. In early reports to my supervisors, I utilised the feedback gained from stakeholders, dictionary definitions as well as my own reflections to generate two further definitions of employee engagement, one rather abstract (marked "D") and another that continued to demonstrate a focus on organisational initiatives (marked "C"). Writing in 2012 about conception "D" shown in Figure 5.15, I notice that I have used the word "commit". Since engaging with academic knowledge, I note in this and other chapters that the organisational commitment literature offers a relevant and valuable body of knowledge for our understanding of employee engagement.

Based on my early interactions with the academic literature, principally personal engagement at work (Kahn 1990, 1992) and work engagement (Schaufeli et al 2002) which identified engagement as an individual level state marked by positive thoughts and feelings, I created a further definition (marked "E"). This conception bears some similarity with the one I used for my proposal for doctoral research (marked "B") which also identified a positive individual level state. It also overlaps with the element of 'pleasurable state for employees' from the (mainly public sector) HR Professionals as shown on the left hand side of the Venn diagram in Figure 5.14. Despite having been engaged at work myself, it was not until late 2009 that I understood that employee engagement could be conceived in such a way, and at that stage I did not relate the state engagement in the literature to my own personal experience. This took until 2011 when a fellow research student interviewed me about my experience of engagement at work where I was able to describe what the state had felt like for me (marked "H").

As I noted earlier in Section 5.2.1, viewing employee engagement in an abstract, non-personal way also seemed to be the norm for the HR Professionals and the Senior Public Servants that took part in my study. At the time, I was surprised that so few of the HR Professionals and the Senior Public Servants referred to their own experiences of engagement when discussing their conceptualisations. What comes across to me from their conceptualisations is that it appears to be a concept to be applied, or witnessed, in others, rather than in themselves. Why is this? Is it that these individuals have not experienced personal engagement at work? This is possible, given the research evidence that a lot of employees are moderately rather than strongly engaged with their work (Alfes et al 2010, MacLeod and Clarke 2009). Might the way that I asked questions about conceptions of employee engagement with the HR Professionals and the Senior Public Servants not have encouraged people to talk about their personal experiences? This is possible as I asked respondents to describe what employee engagement meant to them, when I could have asked respondents to describe a moment of personal engagement at work (Kahn 1990), which may have elicited more personal accounts.

Collecting and analysing the ethnographic data in 2010 and 2011 also led me to generate further conceptions of employee engagement. Based on the survey of HR Professionals and interviews with Senior Public Servants, I generated a conception that focused on the individual level state, with behavioural and affective dimensions (marked "F" in Figure 5.15). Reflecting on this conception as I write the dissertation, the focus on active contributions in support of the employer strikes me as bearing resemblance to the 'good soldier' conception of organisational citizenship behaviour (Organ and Ryan 1995) as does conception "B" that I used in my proposal for doctoral research. Early observations at the organisation that allowed me access to study their employee engagement activities formed the basis of a conception concerned with the possible underlying interests of HR Professionals in employee engagement (marked "G"). This conception was based on informal conversations with HR staff at the case study organisation, and introduced a focus in my conceptions that had not arisen before, i.e. the potential interests and motives of one particular set of stakeholders. This had not arisen in the conceptions of the HR Professionals in north Wales, or the Senior Public Servants that I interviewed. None of the HR staff that I spoke to at the case organisation explicitly stated that they were involved in employee engagement activities in order to advance their position and influence in the organisation. Indeed, based on further observations in the case organisation, I develop a conception of employee engagement as a form of employee consultation and involvement (Parkes et al 2007)

where the HR team actively facilitated non managerial staff in particular on several occasions to voice their opinions about their jobs, teams, line managers and the organisation as a whole, using the results of the annual staff survey as a platform (marked "K"), showing what appeared to be a genuine concern to enable employee voice. HR staff at the case organisation did speak of their concerns that HR's contribution was not always recognised by senior managers, and that HR across the Welsh Public Service was a potential target for outsourcing in order to reduce costs (WAG 2009a). Making the case, initiating and maintaining employee engagement initiatives could be viewed as one method for demonstrating HR's relevance by a set of professionals wishing to position themselves as strategic partners (and therefore an important resource to be retained in house) rather than a provider of transactional services (at risk of being outsourced). This conception of employee engagement should be tested in further research, but does raise the question of whose interests are being served directly or indirectly by employee engagement as a state or as an organisational goal, and whether there are multiple purposes to undertaking employee engagement, about which little is known at present.

As a result of gathering data through interviews from staff at the case study organisation in 2011 who were the intended recipients of employee engagement initiatives, I developed a conception (marked "J") that bore a degree of resemblance to some of my earlier conceptions from 2009 (marked "A" and "C") as I continued to conceive employee engagement as an organisation led activity. However, where some earlier conceptions described engagement as a device to generate discretionary effort (marked "B"), conception "J" introduces the possibility that engagement could be viewed as a device to encourage changed, rather than simply extra, behaviours. Further examination of the literature on organisational citizenship behaviour might lead to some insights into the soundness of this assertion.

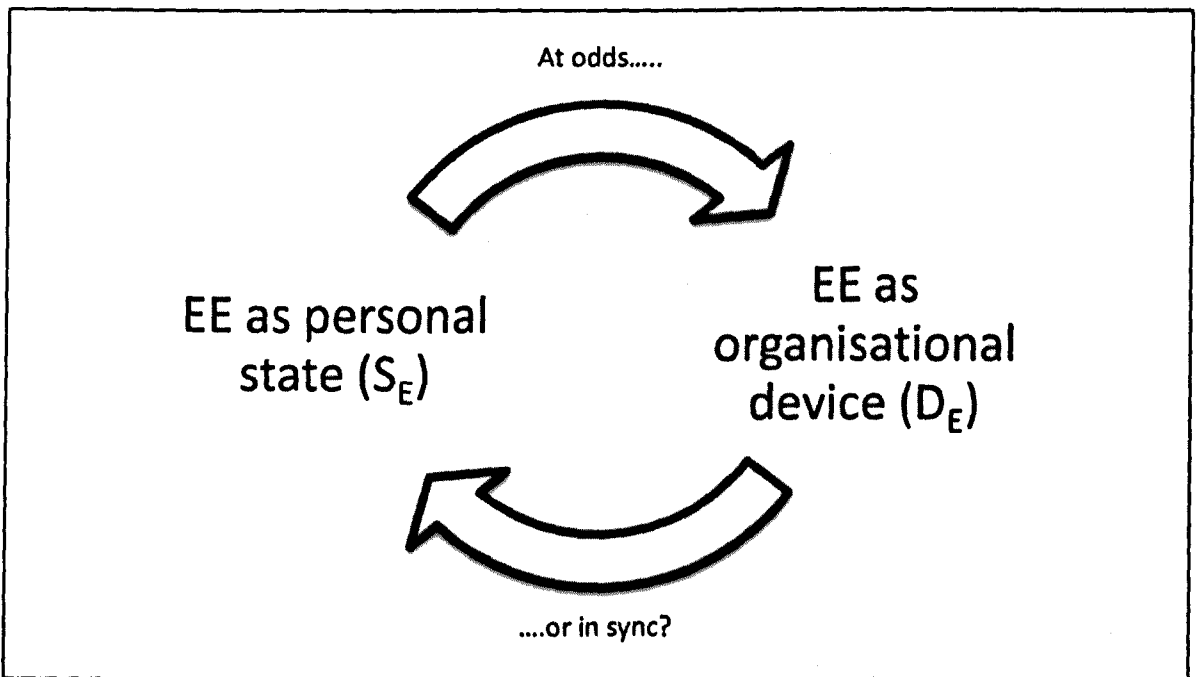
The importance of being seen to be undertaking employee engagement, as a signal to stakeholders, was an aspect that again had not arisen in the HR Professionals' conceptions, although one of the Senior Public Servants noted that they thought it was important to have an engaged workforce to demonstrate to key stakeholders the organisation was competent in its area of responsibility (Boon et al 2009, Sisson 2010). Conception "J" is also influenced by the views of some of the non-managerial staff that I interviewed in two focus groups, who indicated they felt employee engagement as an activity was a basic part of the employment package



(explored more fully in Chapter Seven). As I observed a degree of frustration amongst staff at having to spend time taking part in consultation events and meetings and staff events, I have included a reference to engagement (as an activity organised by the employer) being a nuisance.

Now that several months have passed since I collected the ethnographic data, I have generated a further conception (marked "L" in Figure 5.15) which is a synthesis of earlier conceptions and also informed by the academic and practitioner literature I discuss in Chapter One. This conception comprises two elements: an individual level state concerning an individual's connection with their work role (Kahn 1990, 1992) and a label for organisational activities seeking to produce behaviours that the employer consider desirable and necessary for organisational success. In Figure 5.16 I show my conception in the form of a diagram.

**Figure 5.16: My conception of employee engagement, synthesis, 2012**



My conception "L" shares more of the spirit of the broad umbrella concept developed by Macey and Schneider (2008) than it does with those narrower conceptions from work engagement scholars (Schaufeli et al 2002). Unlike some conceptions of employee engagement that similarly connect the personal with the organisational (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, Shuck and Wollard 2010), my conception is circular at this stage (a potential 'full circle') as it would appear sensible to ensure that state and device engagement integrate with one another in a virtuous cycle. I

examine whether this is the case later in the dissertation (Chapters Six and Eight). However, from my experience, I attempted to overcome my own state of disengagement at work by becoming involved in an organisational initiative to improve employee engagement. The organisational initiative that I participated in did not result in my re-engagement with my job or the wider organisation and did not in my view contribute positively to my sense of psychological meaningfulness, safety or availability (Kahn 1990). After volunteering to join the project's organising committee and participating in the initiative for several months I stood down, and left my employment soon after to pursue doctoral studies. In my case, an organisational initiative to increase employee engagement did not complement or strengthen my personal engagement at work. There is considerable room for researchers to examine the degree to which organisational initiatives support or impede the psychological conditions that Kahn states are necessary for moments of personal engagement to occur. Given the indications in my conceptions of engagement (marked "G" and "J" in Figure 5.15) that employee engagement may be being practised to meet the needs of particular stakeholders, the primary goal of such initiatives may not be to grow individual state engagement amongst employees. The two questions I include in my conception ('in sync' or 'at odds?') hint at the possible tensions between personal state and organisational device, in that the change in behaviour and attitudes being sought by employers might be at odds with individual's sense of meaningfulness and safety at work (Kahn 1990), as offered by the more critical management literature I describe in Chapter One. How these two kinds of engagement influence, complement or conflict with each other certainly merits further research investigation.

In summary, I consider my conceptions of employee engagement have widened as a result of undertaking this research, to include positive individual level state conceptions as well as organisational initiative versions. Six of the eleven conceptions I present in Figure 5.15 (marked "A", "C", "G", "J", "K" and "L") characterise employee engagement organisational device rather than an individual level state, a theme that has been present prior, during and at the final stages of this research.

## 5.5 Summary and Conclusions

In this Chapter, I have considered conceptions of employee engagement from three perspectives: HR Professionals working in north Wales, Senior Public Servants working in the Welsh Public Service and my own perspective. I have not included other perspectives which might also be relevant, especially those held by line managers, who are an important link in the delivery and interpretation of employee engagement initiatives (Luthans and Peterson 2002, CIPD 2011a). I have demonstrated that there are at least two common elements to conceptions of employee engagement held by HR Professionals and Senior Public Servants: ‘organisational focus’ and ‘facilitates proactive and extra effort at work’ which bear a resemblance to organisational commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour which would be regarded in the academic literature as separate to employee engagement. In my own conceptions of employee engagement, I have consistently identified an organisational dimension, although the meaning is somewhat different to the conceptions of the HR Professionals and the Senior Public Servants. My final conception of employee engagement comprises a synthesis of personal state and organisational device, which ideally will be mutually re-inforcing in the form of a circle although there is initial evidence from my personal experience that this is not necessarily the case. The critical school of management would assert that the needs and priorities of the individual and the organisation are in tension with each other and I consider how my empirical evidence from the case organisation supports this viewpoint in Chapter Eight. In addition, the role of the individual in managing their own engagement in the context of organisational efforts to do so, will be explored in the next Chapter. Whose jobs is it to manage employee engagement?

**19 January 2009, 08.30am**

*New year, new attitude. That's what I keep telling myself. So, I am here at the third meeting of the Council's newly established employee engagement committee, chatting with the Head of HR about the weekend just gone. I haven't been in the office this early in the morning for a while. On the agenda is a proposal to carry out a whole organisation staff survey. This sounds like just the job for my team. When I heard that the Council wanted to create an employee engagement plan for the organisation, I volunteered to take part. The idea of creating an agenda for employee engagement, using research evidence to inform our activities, putting together objectives and an action plan, well, it felt like it could be what I have been looking for from my job for quite some time. The Chief looks over to the Head of HR. "What proposals do you have for the staff survey?"*

*"Well, we've spoken to three external providers and they can offer the benchmarking service we're looking for, and of course we need a quick turnaround. It's ready to go. It'll cost...."*

*The Head of HR mentions a figure that would pay for a full time research officer in my team, including oncosts, for a year. I've just made one post redundant, as the Council has decided that we need to reduce our expenditure on inhouse research capacity. I start to explain how we could undertake the staff survey, at no extra cost to the Council. This would be a great learning opportunity for the team and I have prepared a proposal about how we would do it, which I pass to the Head of HR. "I can see what you mean Natalie. It's great you've gone to the trouble of writing this down. But we need to do this now, and going to an external contractor can also offer us the ability to see how we perform compared to other organisations." The Head of HR looks at the Chief and I know that the benchmarking comment has pushed one of her buttons.*

*"Yes, we must be able to benchmark, know how we compare, I agree. Well, this is a matter for HR, so will you draw up a specification for the contractors? Perhaps Natalie can have a look at it, to make sure we get our money's worth?"*

## 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I draw upon my survey of HR professionals, a case study of one organisation's employee engagement activities and my personal experiences of managing my own engagement at work to consider how employee engagement is managed at both the organisational and individual levels in the Welsh Public Service. I identify eight categories of employee engagement activities from the responses of the HR professionals. At CYMRUcyf, the case study organisation, I found that numerous employee engagement initiatives were being undertaken, led by the human resources (HR) team. These were mainly aimed at the organisational level rather than job or individual level interventions (Albrecht 2010). I identified a five stage process that CYMRUcyf undertook to promote employee engagement which was informed by the rationalistic perspective of strategy making which overlooked differences in motives and assumed that implementation by staff others than HR would be smooth and seamless (Mintzberg 1978 in Legge 2005). Direct impact on engagement levels, as measured in the staff survey, was also assumed to be a realisable objective. My own efforts at managing my personal engagement at work shared some similarities with CYMRUcyf in that I focused on short term objectives and the responses of my line managers were crucial to the delivery of the outcomes I sought.

### 6.1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this Chapter is to describe and analyse how employee engagement is being managed in the Welsh Public Service. Employee engagement has been identified as critical to the Welsh Government's plans for public service reform (WAG 2005). It is known that some organisations in the sector are attempting to engage their employees (Finnear 2009). However, little is known about how organisations are attempting to manage their employee's engagement, and in turn, how employees respond to such initiatives. It is not known why, or by whom, employee engagement programmes are initiated, what activities or processes they comprise, and the outcomes or responses they are designed to produce. In this Chapter, I intend to address some of this gap in our knowledge by describing the activities that HR Professionals in north Wales report they are undertaking in their respective organisations to manage employee engagement. Using this as a backdrop, I then describe how employee engagement is being managed in one organisation (CYMRUcyf) in the Welsh Public Service. Finally, I contribute an account of my experience of managing my own personal engagement at work (Kahn 1990), based on my last job before starting this PhD. This offers a perspective on managing employee

engagement that has not been included so far in either the academic or practitioner literature: the line manager. This is an important contribution given the priority that has been attached to the line manager as a factor in creating a sense of engagement amongst their staff (Truss et al 2006, MacLeod and Clarke 2009, Alfes et al 2010, Purcell 2012). I use my analysis of the responses from the HR Professionals, my description of the case organisation's approach and the story of my own efforts to manage engagement to extend the model I present in Chapter Five (Figure 5.16) to show how there were some similarities, and also some differences between the approach I took to manage my personal engagement and those taken by the case organisation and cited by HR Professionals.

In this Chapter, I intend to draw upon the following data:

- Responses by HR Professionals to a question in the survey I carried out in 2010 (more details in Section 2.4.1 of Chapter Two) where I asked what they, and their employers, were doing to manage employee engagement,
- A case study of an organisation in the Welsh Public Service that is seeking to manage employee engagement, comprising an analysis of documents, notes from observations of day to day and activities labelled by the organisation as 'engagement' related, and interviews with a cross section of staff,
- Personal recollections of managing my own personal engagement at work (Kahn 1990) between 2004 and 2009,
- Literature, mainly practitioner oriented, which discusses how employee engagement is being, and should be, managed in practice.

## **6.2 Management strategies for employee engagement**

"...organisations in many parts of the UK economy are actively pursuing strategies to raise levels of employee engagement. The management initiatives...take many different forms." (Alfes et al 2010, p12)

Although employee engagement has emerged relatively recently as a construct of interest to both academics and practitioners, the management of employees attitudes, behaviours and feelings by organisations in order to improve workplace effectiveness and organisational competitiveness is not new (Purcell 2012). Numerous initiatives such as team working (DeChurch and Mesmer-Magnus 2010), total quality management and lean manufacturing approaches (Abrahamson 1996) have been introduced by organisations to enable staff to have a closer or different relationship with their work and the wider organisation with the goal of producing better business results.

Both the practitioner and academic literatures have identified that employee engagement is a function of both individual and environmental characteristics (Kahn 1992, Alfes et al 2010). In my opening Chapter, I introduce Kahn's concept of personal engagement at work, which identifies three psychological conditions associated with engagement (Kahn 1990): meaningfulness, safety and availability. It would seem sensible to assume that managing employee engagement at the organisational level should therefore take into account the need to create or sustain the three conditions identified by Kahn. In this Chapter, I examine whether there is any evidence that the case organisation or my own approach to managing employee engagement took Kahn's psychological conditions into account.

An added complication is that while Kahn's three psychological conditions are necessary for personal engagement at work, they are not sufficient. This is because individual differences will affect the degree of presence, and thus engagement, that individuals experience at work (Kahn 1992). The influence of four individual differences identified by Kahn: models of Self-in-Role, security, courage and stage of adult development does not appear to have been tested in empirical research, including my own. This is a serious omission in the operationalisation of Kahn's work, which is regularly cited in both the academic and practitioner literatures (Rich et al 2010, Alfes et al 2010, Albrecht 2010). The individual differences identified by Kahn appear to be dynamic rather than fixed traits (both intra and inter-personal) and will clearly influence the management of engagement at both the individual and organisational levels. Future operationalisations of Kahn's model of personal engagement at work should focus more attention on the version that includes individual differences and psychological presence (Kahn 1992) rather than continue to give attention to earlier conceptualisations (Kahn 1990).

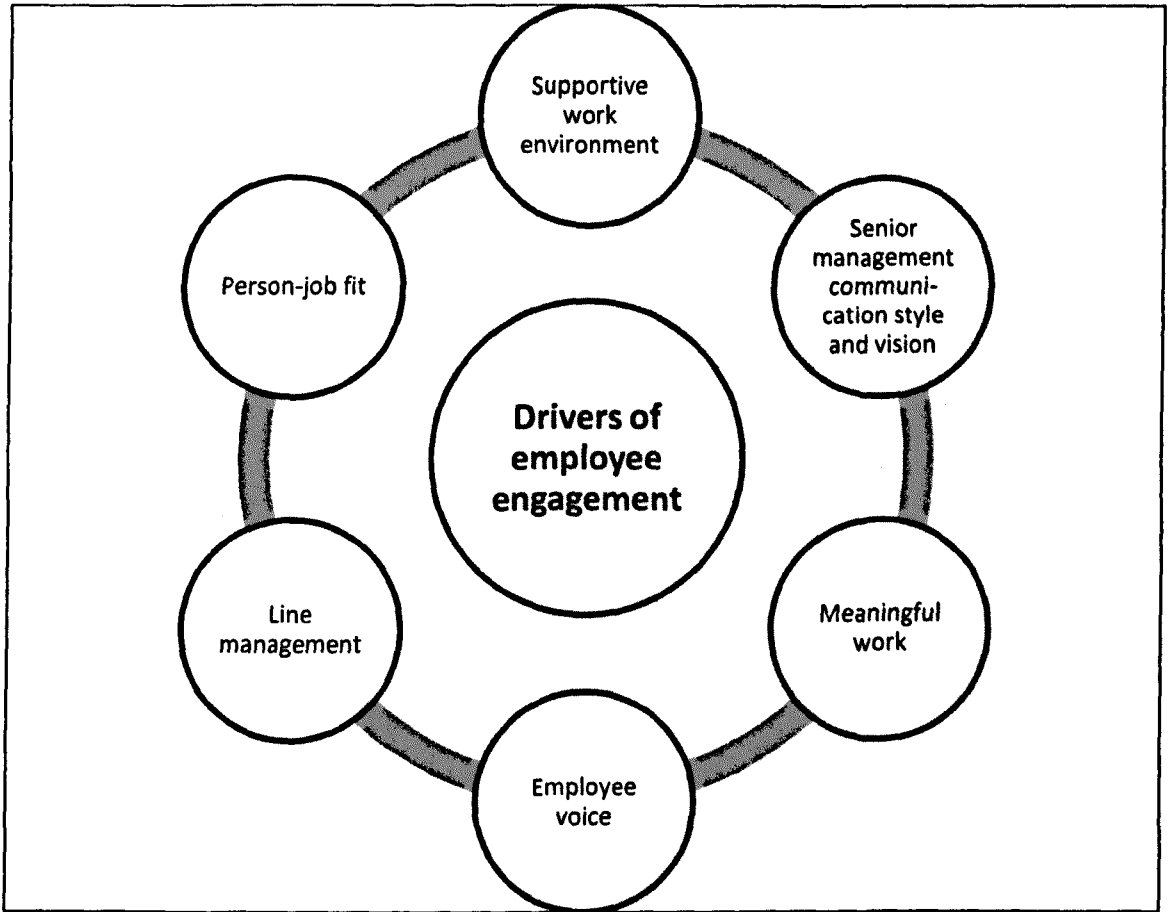
Material on how to manage employee engagement is dominated by practitioner literature. I have not been able to identify scholarly work which has examined the management of employee engagement although there is material on the implementation and process of human resource management (HRM), which employee engagement (if defined as an organisational level device) can be viewed as a component part. In this Chapter I concentrate on literature that is specifically related to employee engagement although I do draw upon some concepts that have been used in the wider HRM literature such as contingency, best fit, best practice to explain how employee engagement might contribute to organisational performance, which is one of the benefits attributed to the concept (Harter et al 2002, MacLeod and Clarke 2009).

In Chapters Three and Four, I describe what I consider to be some of the distinctive characteristics of the Welsh Public Service context in policy, socio-economic and workforce terms. It has been asserted that “there are no consistent or distinctive differences between public and private sector strategies around employee engagement...the details and underlying initiatives are very similar...” (Alfes et al 2010, p12) with many organisations regardless of background measuring engagement and employee attitudes through surveys, and describing a wide range of business and staff development activities as ‘employee engagement (Alfes et al 2010). While similarity in approach has been observed across sectors, it is argued at the same time that organisations ‘should’ develop initiatives that reflect their own circumstances, needs and characteristics (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, Alfes et al 2010). This assertion would lead me to believe that more rather than less variety would be observed in management strategies, which does not appear to be the case for the very limited research that is available. Across the public and private sectors, a universalistic approach (Legge 2005) to managing employee engagement seems to be observed, and be promoted, in the practitioner literature.

In the UK Government sponsored review of employee engagement, MacLeod and Clarke (2009) identified four factors that all organisations regardless of sector should ensure are in place (described in Chapter 1, Section 1.2.6). In research for the CIPD, Alfes et al (2010) have identified six drivers of engagement (reproduced in the diagram in Figure 6.1) which “create a virtuous cycle of engagement processes that employers can re-interpret in ways that fit with their own organisational context and circumstances.” (Alfes et al 2010, p55).



**Figure 6.1: Drivers of employee engagement, Alfes et al 2010, p56**



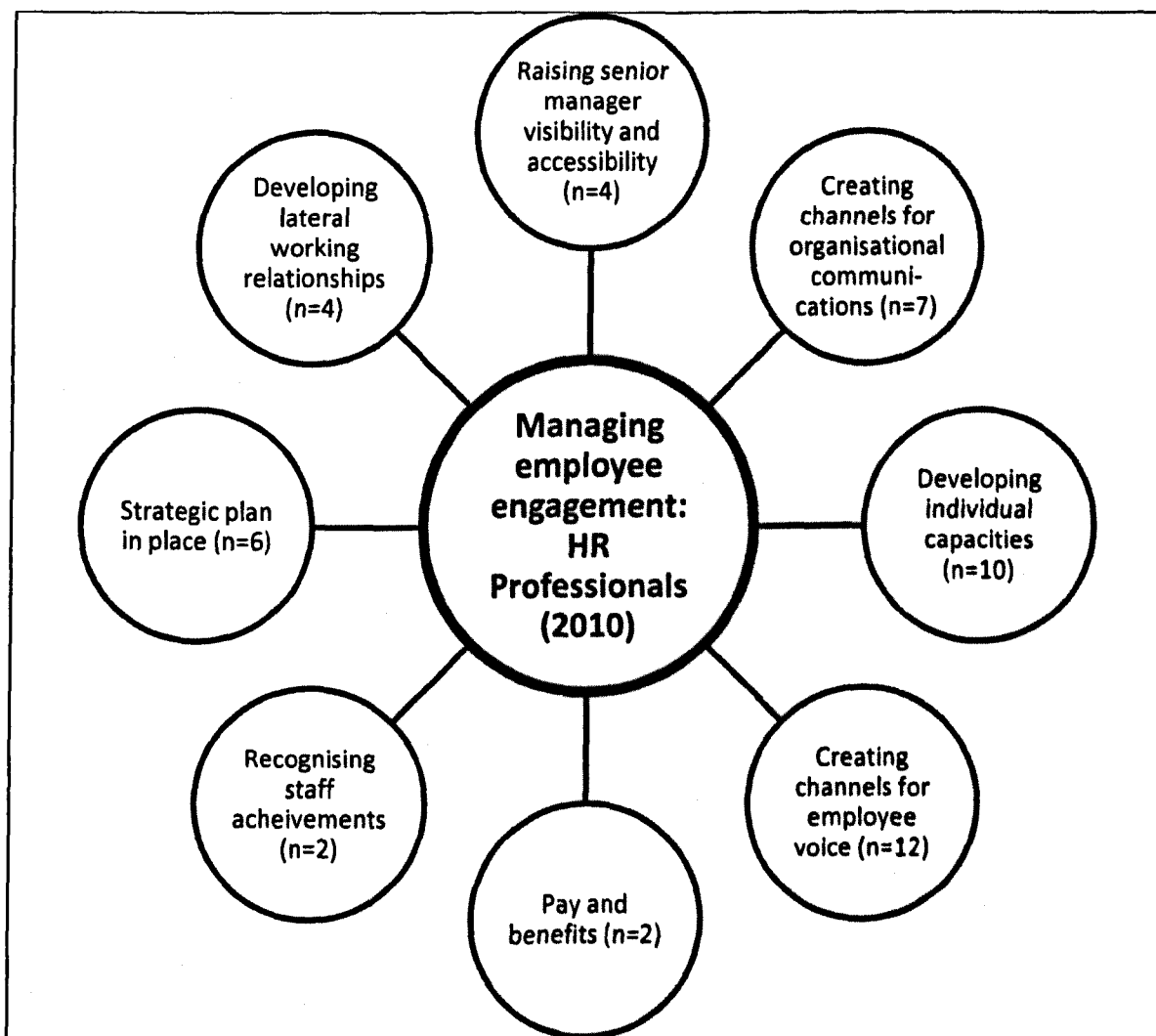
Clearly, organisations are being placed in the driving seat with regard to the management of employee engagement. As I have outlined earlier, HR professionals are often tasked on the part of employers to manage employee engagement processes and for this reason, I consider in the next Section, how a group of CIPD members from north Wales describe what they and their organisations are doing to manage employee engagement.

### **6.3 Managing employee engagement: the HR Professionals perspective**

In Chapter Two, I describe how I surveyed 18 members of the HR profession at a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development special event on employee engagement in September 2010. 49 responses were provided by the HR Professionals to the survey question about what they and their organisations were doing to promote employee engagement. I excluded two of the responses which did not seem to be relevant to the question being asked. It is interesting to note three quarters of the responses given to this question came from HR Professionals working in the

private sector. It is not known if this is because the private sector respondents are aware of, or are working in organisations that are undertaking more activities to promote engagement than their public sector counterparts. However, from the demographic information supplied by the respondents, more of those in private sector roles seemed to occupy senior positions (managers and directors) than the public sector respondents (administrators for example), who might be less aware or directly involved in employee engagement activities. Using the thematic analysis method that I describe in Chapter Two, I have identified eight elements to the management of employee engagement which are shown in the diagram in Figure 6.2.

**Figure 6.2: Managing employee engagement, HR Professionals, North Wales, 2010**



*Note: 'n' denotes number. Total number of coded responses: 47. Responses to the Question: What are you and your organisation doing to promote employee engagement?*

Two of the eight elements I have identified accounted for just under half (47%) of total responses. The first, 'Creating channels for employee voice', shares similarities with the 'voice' driver which was identified as one of the two most important drivers of employee engagement identified in research for the CIPD (Alfes et al 2010). I developed this element to capture those responses concerned with providing mainly formal routes for staff to voice their opinion about their employment and the wider organisation. The direction of travel in these responses appears to be mainly vertically arranged, from staff to senior management, and to a degree horizontally outward to staff from HR.

The second most cited element 'Developing individual capacities' includes building individual's skills and competencies through training, work opportunities and encouraging individuals to develop desirable work behaviours such as proactivity, willingness to contribute ideas and flexibility across teams and job roles (Halbesleben 2010) (but not to manage an individual's own state engagement or those of others such as subordinates). 'Developing individual capacities' does not appear explicitly in the list of six drivers of engagement identified by Alfes et al (2010) but could assist the development of high quality line management capacity and contribute to increasing the match between individuals and their jobs, two drivers that are identified as important (Alfes et al 2010).

I identified six other aspects to managing employee engagement from the HR Professionals' responses. The most important element after 'Creating channels for employee voice' and 'Developing individual capacities' was 'Creating channels for organisational communications' which included responses that described activities to provide staff with information about the organisation, its objectives and general activities. Like responses coded to the 'Creating channels for employee voice', these also appeared to be vertically oriented, but this time from the organisation (assumed to be senior management) to staff. All but one of the six responses coded to this element came from private sector HR Professionals. I categorised six responses to the element 'Strategic plan in place' which referred to the establishment of a strategy or plan to promote employee engagement. There was no explanation of the content of the plans in the HR Professionals' responses but the design of my questionnaire and the wording of the question I used may not have encouraged respondents to provide extended answers. Two further elements were allocated four responses each: 'Raising senior manager visibility and accessibility' (public and

private sectors equally divided) and 'Developing lateral working relationships' (all private sector responses) which described actions to promote team working and social events to encourage people to get to know one another. Two further aspects, 'Pay and benefits' and 'Recognising staff achievements' were allocated two responses each. It is interesting to note that so few responses have been categorised to the 'Pay and benefits' aspects and it would be useful to know why so few HR Professionals identified pay and benefits to be part of their approach to managing employee engagement. It might be that HR Professionals in the public sector feel that their organisations have little flexibility to change pay and conditions due to national agreements. HR Professionals in the private sector also may have experienced little or no increase in pay and benefits due to poor trading conditions. It may be that the majority of public and private HR Professionals do not consider pay and benefits to be an important driver of employee engagement. Interestingly it does not appear to have figured in the mainstream academic or practitioner literatures either, with the exception of George (2010). It would be interesting for academic researchers to consider the role of monetary and non-monetary rewards in supporting or undermining employee engagement, as some practitioner oriented researchers have started to explore (Suff and Reilly 2008, Reilly and Brown 2009).

In summary, there is clear crossover between the HR Professionals' reported employee engagement activities and the drivers of engagement identified by Alfes et al (2010) in respect of 'voice'. The activities identified by the HR Professionals as 'recognising staff achievements', 'developing lateral working relationships' and 'pay and benefits' could be associated with the Alfes et al derived driver of 'supportive work environment'. Two further elements from the HR responses 'raising senior manager visibility and accessibility' and 'creating channels for organisational communications' could be associated with the Alfes et al 'senior management communication style and vision' driver. While developing line manager capacities are not explicitly mentioned by the HR Professionals in their responses, the element on 'developing individual capacities' included responses about senior and line manager development. The element that appears to be missing from the HR Professionals' responses, when compared with the Alfes et al (2010) drivers of engagement is 'meaningful work' where "employees who believe that their work is important and that they can make a difference have much more positive perceptions about their work and their work environment...meaningfulness is largely attached to the type of work individuals are asked to carry out...the nature of the organisation might facilitate the process of helping employees find their jobs meaningful...managers play a crucial role through

regular communication...designing jobs...and match people to their jobs." (Alfes et al 2010, p24). Job level engagement initiatives seem to be less obvious in the HR Professionals' responses, compared with those activities relating to the individual and organisational levels (Albrecht 2010). Perhaps the HR Professionals viewed the creation of meaningfulness to be the responsibility of others in the workforce, such as line managers (as stated by Alfes et al 2010) or non-managerial employees themselves.

The role of different constituencies in the workforce in managing employee engagement is one aspect that I explore in the next Section, where I describe the approach being taken by CYMRUcyf, a small organisation operating as part of the Welsh Public Service.

#### **6.4 Managing employee engagement: the case of CYMRUcyf**

CYMRUcyf is a medium<sup>42</sup> sized public sector organisation belonging to the Welsh Public Service. It operates in the health and social care field and has an all Wales remit. It was established in 1999 soon after the formation of the National Assembly for Wales with a small workforce (fewer than 50 employees) and has grown to its current size, at which it is stable. The organisation directly employs its own workforce, and operates it's own terms and conditions of employment. While there is a recognised trade union, there are no members, which is at odds with the norm in public sector organisations in Wales (WAG 2009). The organisation receives both its budget and its annual objectives from the Welsh Government. The organisation comprises administrative, development and regulatory functions arranged in a three departments: Records and Inspections, Support Services and Learning and Partnerships<sup>43</sup>. The organisation is led by a senior management team consisting of a Chief Officer, and three senior managers who provide leadership to each of the CYMRUcyf's operational departments. The structure of the organisation is shown in the diagram in Figure 6.3, where it can be seen that the HR Unit is located within the Support Services Department. Three members of staff work in the HR Unit: Stella<sup>44</sup>, the HR Director, Rhodri, HR Officer and Tracey, HR Assistant.

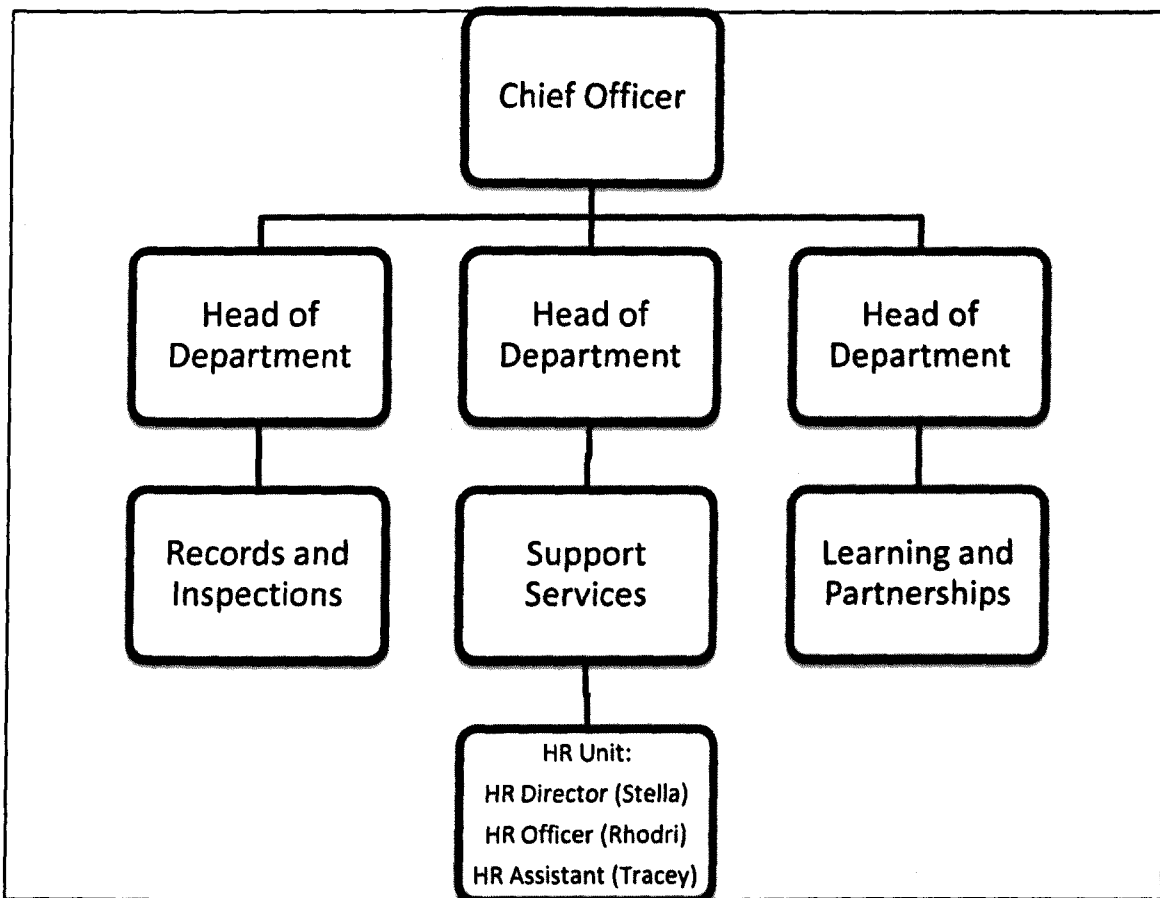
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<sup>42</sup> Employing between 50 and 249 people (European Commission 2005)

<sup>43</sup> These are pseudonyms.

<sup>44</sup> These three names are fictitious.

Figure 6.3: Organisational structure and senior management, CYMRUcyf, February 2012



*Note: Department names have been fictionalised, and organisational structure has been adapted, to minimise the risk of identification.*

As well as the HR Director's personal interest in employee engagement (later in this Section), it was stated to me by members of the HR Unit and one senior manager that a staff turnover problem within one part of the organisations had been a particular trigger to manage employee engagement across the organisation:

"We had some problems a few years ago, with losing a lot of people quickly from one Department. We found that people with degrees and the jobs that were on offer didn't match well. So we looked at the job descriptions, revised the recruitment criteria, and things got better. We started to take notice of staff matters then." (HR officer, CYMRUcyf).

“Well, it’s useful to have a plan when things are bad, or when you’re just starting out. When you find out you’re quite good, why would you have a plan for that?” (Head of Department, CYMRUcyf, June 2011).

Negatively perceived events (including external assessment of organisations) were also identified by a minority of the Senior Public Servants that I interviewed as triggers for managing employee engagement (Jones et al 2011):

“Just over twelve months ago, we were suffering.... a loss of confidence, in our management...we did an international peer review...one of the principal weaknesses that came through was insufficient engagement with staff which had led to concerns about transparency and openness in decision making, and staff feeling quite demotivated. Morale appeared to be quite low.” (Senior Public Servant, Male, all Wales role)

“We had a really bad external report two years ago....a group was established by one of the Directors to see what could be done, and employee engagement came out of that.” (Senior Public Servant, Male, all Wales role)

#### *6.4.1 Activities to manage employee engagement at CYMRUcyf*

Based on my observations, interviews, analysis of documents and discussions with informants, I have identified thirty one areas of activity<sup>45</sup> being labelled at CYMRUcyf as ‘employee engagement’. I have categorised these using the eight elements identified by the HR Professionals in the earlier Section and created an element specific to CYMRUcyf (job content and fit), and show these in the table in Figure 6.4. It can be seen that numerous activities are being undertaken, which has been noted as a characteristic of employee engagement in practice (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, Alfes et al 2010). Using the three levels of employee engagement intervention developed by Albrecht (2010), I have categorised each of the areas of activity

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<sup>45</sup> Each area of activity might include more than one individual initiative e.g. the Health and Well Being area comprises three individual actions. See Figure 6.4 for more details.

according to whether their primary focus is at the individual, job or organisation level<sup>46</sup>. The majority of the areas of activity (21 of 37 categorisations) were aimed at the organisational level, defined by Albrecht as creating "high engagement climate...employee opinion surveys, performance development systems, leadership development programs, team development programs, mentoring and coaching programs, and induction and socialization processes...assessing and evaluating employees, designing training and career management...developing and executing quality strategic plans..." (p12-13).

Job (nine areas) and individual (seven areas) level interventions were less frequently observed amongst the areas of employee engagement activity undertaken at CYMRUcyf, which is consistent with my analysis of the activities being reported by the HR Professionals, which were also mainly targeted at the organisational level.

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<sup>46</sup> I have categorised some areas of activity to more than one level, which has given rise to 37 categorisations of 31 areas of activity.



**Figure 6.4: Activities enacted by CYMRUcyf to manage employee engagement, 2010-2011**

| Aspect  | Observed and reported activities   |
|---|--|
| Creating channels for employee voice                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultative committee (ICE 2004 Regulations) (O)</li> <li>• Annual staff survey (O)</li> <li>• Use of intranet to publicise staff survey, staff led discussion forums (O)</li> <li>• HR initiated staff suggestion scheme (boxes in kitchens and form on intranet) (O)</li> <li>• Staff discussion sessions, led by HR (staff survey related) (O)</li> </ul>   |
| Raising senior manager visibility and accessibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief Officer's weekly blog on the intranet (O)</li> <li>• One Head of Department has principal base at satellite office rather than HQ (O)</li> <li>• <i>Chief Officer's coffee morning, where small groups of staff can discuss work and organisational issues with the Chief Officer</i> (O)</li> </ul>  |
| Developing individual capacities                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health and Well Being (I):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Exercise advice and clubs,</li> <li>-Healthy eating advice (on intranet and in office kitchens)</li> <li>-Health screening advice (on intranet and in office kitchens)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <i>Internal secondment opportunities/Some vacancies advertised internally before general advertisement</i> (J)</li> <li>• <i>Opportunities for staff to join working parties and internal committees</i>(J),(I)</li> <li>• <i>Extra responsibilities with no additional remuneration advertised as 'development opportunities' that staff can apply for e.g. departmental champion for environmental issues, IT trouble shooter roles, staff representatives on the Consultative Committee</i> (J),(I)</li> <li>• <i>Management development (Institute of Leadership and Management award)</i> (O),(J),(I)</li> <li>• <i>Individual performance management</i> (O)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Personal Development Plan (annual objectives and targets)</li> <li>-Annual and quarterly reviews with a line manager</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
| Creating channels for organisational communications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultative committee (ICE 2004 regulations) (O)</li> <li>• Intranet (announcement of events, new policies, pay awards) (O)</li> <li>• Annual workforce away day (O), (I)</li> <li>• Chief Officer's weekly blog on the intranet (O)</li> </ul>  |
| Developing lateral working relationships            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information sessions ('briefings') by senior management and teams for staff (O)</li> <li>• Encouragement of face to face contact between staff (I):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Monthly no email day</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Creating a friendly and informal atmosphere (I):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Monthly dress down day</li> <li>-Charity and promotion of event days (e.g. Comic Relief)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Internal communications survey and plan (O)</li> </ul>   |
| Strategic plan in place                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff survey to measure and benchmark engagement levels (O)</li> <li>• HR led discussion sessions with staff to discuss survey results and to identify actions to address issues raised in the survey (O)</li> <li>• <i>Preparation of departmental action plans, placed on intranet</i> (O)</li> <li>• Monitoring by HR, via intranet and management meetings (O)</li> </ul>   |
| Recognising staff achievements                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Announcements using the intranet (staff completing qualifications, baby announcements) (I)</li> </ul>   |
| Pay and benefits                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written policies for a wide range of employment issues (O),(J),(I),:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-25 available on the intranet, covering flexible working, whistleblowing</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Pay grades and pay increases controlled by Welsh Government</li> </ul>  |
| Job content and fit                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Jobs redesigned and recruitment criteria reviewed following evidence of high staff turnover in one department</i> (J)</li> <li>• <i>Internal secondment opportunities/Some vacancies advertised internally before general advertisement</i> (J)</li> </ul>   |

Note: (O) is for organisational level intervention, (J) is for job level, and (I) is for individual level, categorised by main (assumed) focus/recipient of the intervention (Albrecht 2010).

#### 6.4.2 Roles in managing employee engagement

“Senior leadership commitment to engagement will be essential...” (Albrecht 2010, p12).

Many of the engagement activities I show in Figure 6.4 were instigated by the HR Unit on the instruction of the organisation’s senior management, or were developed by the HR team independently. The Communications Team, responsible for marketing CYMRUcyf to external stakeholders, was considered to be a key partner in the employee engagement effort by the HR Unit. The Communications Team had been tasked to develop an internal communications strategy by the organisation’s senior managers, and Rhodri from the HR Unit was part of the steering group for this activity. It has been argued that internal communications and employee engagement strategies need to be more integrated (Welch 2011, 2012).

It did not appear evident to me that activities labelled as employee engagement included any activities initiated by non-managerial employees. In fact, the HR Unit seemed to be the main source of enthusiasm about employee engagement at CYMRUcyf. The HR Director was very personally interested in the engagement movement and had attended a number of seminars and events to find out more about the topic:

“I love all this stuff you know. I’m passionate about employee engagement. We’ve taken part in a comparative survey, and I go to the High Performance working group meetings that covers lots of organisations in the sector. I want to make engagement happen!” (HR Director, CYMRUcyf)

When asked where the impetus for managing employee engagement had come from, the HR Director admitted that she was the one that was pushing the agenda, rather than senior managers or the body of people who make up the organisation’s governing board:

Me: How committed are the senior managers to employee engagement?

Stella, HR Director: I think they're warming to it. They haven't taken the results of the staff survey seriously. Some of the survey results I'm most concerned about relate to the senior managers, and they've got worse. I think it's fair to say that it's not their greatest priority, and they're happy to let HR lead it. It's not being led by the senior managers, that's for sure." (Stella, HR Director, CYMRUcyf, June 2011)

"Employee engagement is not a priority for our governing board. I can't remember any item on their agenda about staff at CYMRUcyf in the ten years I've been here. Someone with an HR background might have brought up staff issues, but they haven't." (Head of Support Services, CYMRUcyf, June 2011)

The HR Unit appeared to be particularly responsible for activities that were concerned with five of the nine categories of activity that I identified in Figure 6.4: 'creating channels for employee voice', 'creating channels for organisational communications', 'developing lateral working relationships', 'developing individual capacities' and 'raising senior manager visibility and accessibility'. This final aspect appeared to be a particular matter of concern for the HR Director who felt that the senior managers at CYMRUcyf did not spend enough time visiting staff at the various offices. While HR's concern for this perceived lack of visibility was noticeable in my conversations with staff in the unit, it did not arise as a significant issue in the interviews with managerial or non managerial staff. There was less emphasis amongst the HR team on 'recognising staff achievements'. Celebrating the achievements of workers and service users in the wider health and social care system was an important activity for CYMRUcyf which culminated in an annual awards event for the sector. This could be seen as evidence of an 'orientation towards others' that I identify in the conceptions of employee engagement held by Senior Public Servants that I discuss in Chapter Five, that is a staff attitude being encouraged by the Welsh Public Service (WAG 2006).

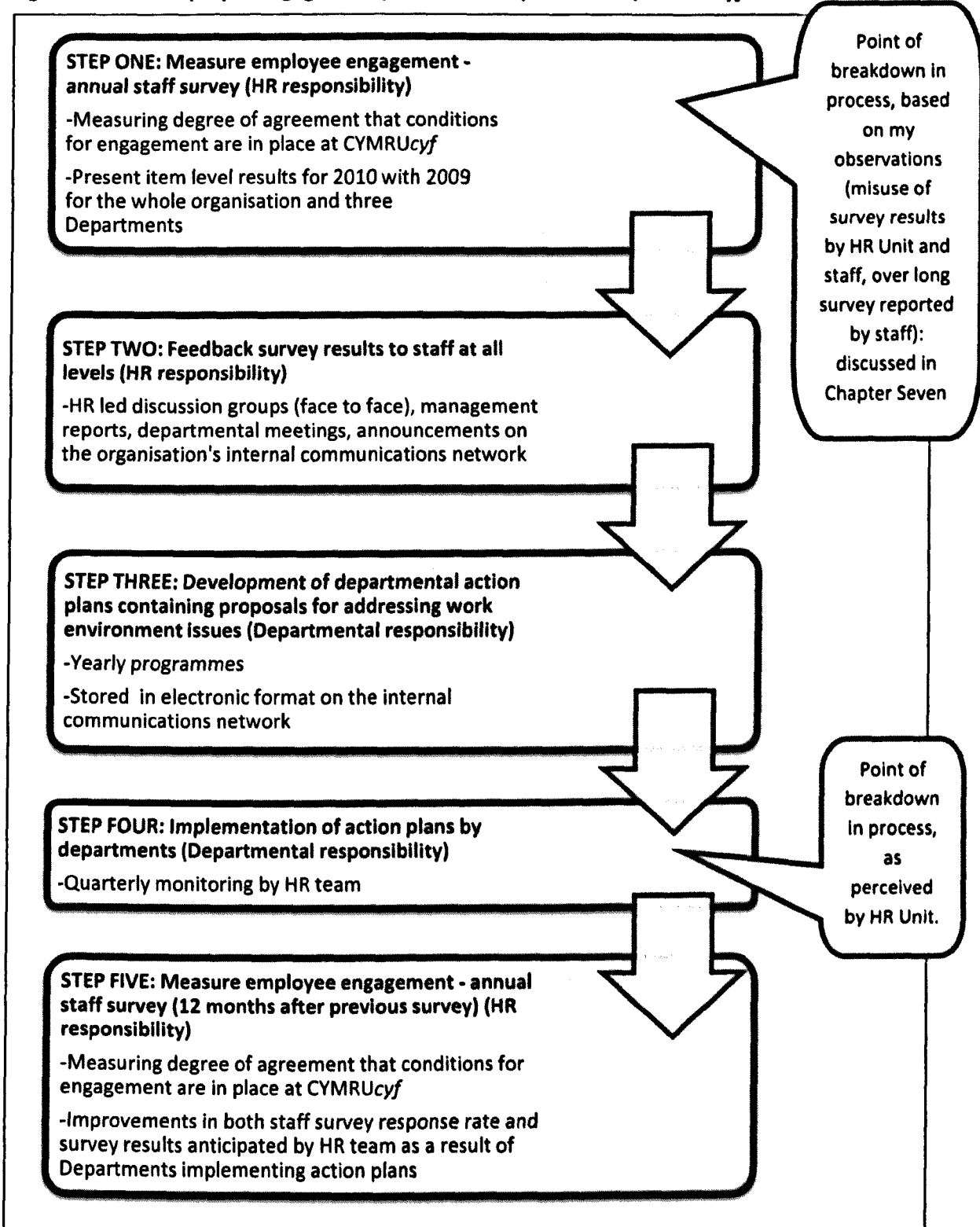
In conclusion, the HR Unit at CYMRUcyf were given responsibility by the organisation's senior management team to manage employee engagement. They also took responsibility due to personal interest in the field. As in my autobiographical vignette opening this Chapter (*"this is a matter for HR"*), the human resources function seem to be viewed as the preferred constituency for leading on corporate engagement activities. Managing employee engagement was influenced by the personal commitment of the HR Director and also a high degree of staff turnover in one part of the organisation some years before. Less than positive events acting as triggers for managing employee engagement was also reported to me by some of the Senior Public Servants that I interviewed as part of my research. I identified thirty one areas of activity being undertaken at CYMRUcyf to manage employee engagement, which I categorised into nine aspects. In comparison, constituencies other than HR (senior managers and the organisation's governing body) seemed subdued in their commitment to employee engagement as a management activity.

#### 6.4.3 *The process of managing employee engagement at CYMRUcyf*

Managing employee engagement at the case organisation appeared to take on the appearance of a conscious "workplace approach" (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, p9; Gatenby et al 2009, p30) consisting of formal processes culminating in activities contained in written action plans. The HR Unit took the lead in the development of departmental action plans (with a degree of support from senior managers) to improve employee engagement, although the HR Unit did not have identify these plans as a 'strategy'.

Based on the eleven month period I spent with CYMRUcyf, I propose a five part model to describe the organisation's process of managing employee engagement that I show in the diagram in Figure 6.5. The process I now describe was not presented to me explicitly as a five part model by staff but is based on the data I collected through observations, interviews and documents. The process appeared to operate on a 12 month cycle, beginning with a staff survey (which I discuss as part of Chapter Seven on experiences of employee engagement) to measure the level of engagement, which has been recognised as one of the key trends in managing engagement (Alfes et al 2010).

**Figure 6.5: The employee engagement process, descriptive model, CYMRUcyf**



Results from the staff survey were provided to both managerial and non-managerial staff (in different forums) in face to face or technology mediated meetings organised and delivered by the HR Unit. At these meetings, staff were encouraged by HR to contribute comments and ideas for addressing issues raised in the staff survey and to discuss work matters generally. As well as the meetings facilitated by the HR Unit with staff from across the organisation which generated ideas and comments from employees, each Department was required to produce an action plan to address issues arising from the survey, using results from the survey that had been customised by the HR Unit for each Department. Each Department was expected to involve staff in the process of developing an action plan although it appeared little guidance was provided by the HR Unit to facilitate this process. Action plans were then to be approved by the Head of each Department, lodged on the organisational intranet and a copy sent to HR, which would be responsible for ensuring that the Departments recorded their progress in implementing the plans on the version of the document that was on the intranet. The three action plans for 2010 to which I gained access had 120 separate actions.

The HR team expected the Departmental action plans to contain activities that would be implemented in advance of the next survey, planned to take place 12 month period after the 2010 survey. However, many of the actions were not completed by the time the staff survey was repeated, as only a few months had elapsed since the previous survey was undertaken and the action plans developed. The issue of action plan implementation was a source of conflict between HR and the Departments. Members of the HR Unit regularly reported to me their dissatisfaction with what they perceived to be a lack of commitment from Departments to delivering the plans. The HR Unit appeared to assume a lack of efficacy on the part of the departmental managers towards the preparation and implementation of the engagement action plans.

When discussing my feedback report towards the end of my time with CYMRUcyf, the HR Director asked me to indicate in my report that I agreed there was a lack of commitment by Departments to delivering action plans, and that they would appreciate some suggestions about how HR could get Departments to give more attention to this area of work. I did not revise my report following the request from the HR Director although I did include a suggestion that the contents of the departmental plans should be prioritised with focus being placed on a small number of actions

that would have the greatest impact on job meaningfulness (Alfes et al 2010) and management quality (MacLeod and Clarke 2009).

“Rhodri HR Officer: The one area we struggle on...the implementation of the plans. There are three plans, and not a lot has happened with them. We put them on the agenda of our managers group, and on the agenda of the staff committee, no one seems to take responsibility for getting things done. We had to send one departmental plan as they hadn't shown who was responsible for what.

Me: What happens once the plans are produced?

Rhodri: No idea! [Laughs and rolls his eyes]. I don't know. I don't think we have thought a lot beyond creating the plans themselves, other than repeat the staff survey. We look after our bits of the plans, I should say, report to the senior managers about what we've done. People get loads of opportunities to have their say and then don't hear anything has changed. I'm not sure there's a lot more I can do to push things.”

“Stella, HR Director: Each department has developed an action plan and I'm disappointed with the progress. The managers really have everything in their own hands. They really seem to struggle as to what to do...it's not someone else's responsibility, as some of them seem to think. The next thing on my work programme is to produce a checklist for managers about involving staff and delivering the plans. Really!”

While the HR Unit felt that the process of trying to improve employee engagement broke down at Stage Four of five, I observed actions that compromised the process at the earlier Stage One. There were issues with the design of the survey, and the reporting of its results (discussed more fully in Chapter Seven) which compromised the quality of information shared with staff which had implications for how staff responded to the survey findings and made their action plans.

#### 6.4.4 *Expected results from managing employee engagement*

It was assumed by HR that completion of the Departmental action plans would lead to additional engagement, which would be exhibited through higher scores on the staff survey. Beyond improving engagement scores and the response rate, expected results were vague:

“Me: What results do you expect from the employee engagement action plans?”

“Rhodri, HR Officer: Uhm. [Pause]. Improvement in the survey scores I suppose. Oh, and an increase in the number completing the survey.”

Me: What results do you expect from the employee engagement action plans?

Stella, HR Director: Better scores on the staff survey of course. That would be my performance indicator. I would like to see staff that are happy, enjoying their work more, and for the organisation, grievances, turnover will reduce and it will be a nicer place to work, and organisational objectives will be met.”

Me: What results do you expect from the employee engagement action plans?

Head of Department, Records and Inspection: Hmm. Not sure. Part of it is about it being the obvious way to go, we'll be more effective, jobs will be more enjoyable, it's also about justifying our existence out there.”

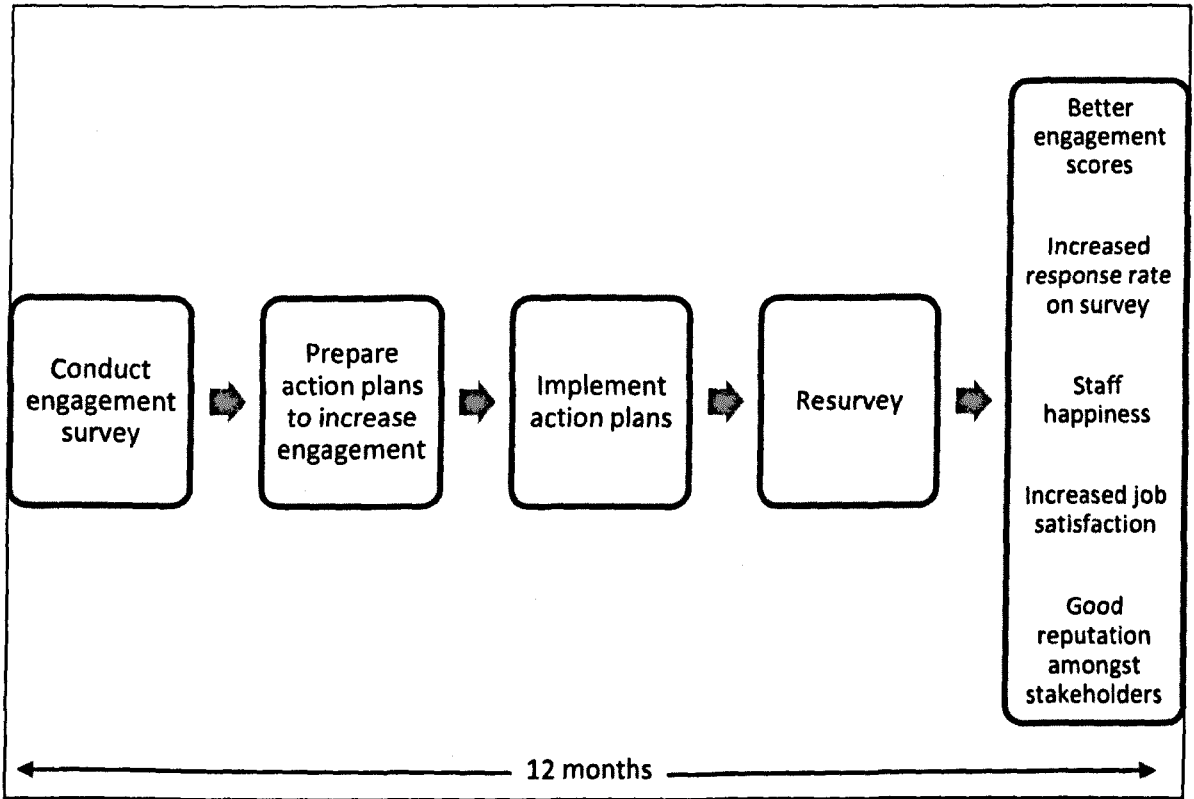
There would appear some fit between these responses (and my discussion in Chapter Seven covering employee perceptions of CYMRUcyf as an employer) and Sparrow's 'process improvement' model of employee engagement where “engagement is seen as part of a quid pro quo relationship...where motivated employees pay back the investments made by the organisation to motivate them by taking care in turn of the organisation and its customers. While no claims are made by managers that this engagement strategy necessarily improves bottom line performance, engagement is seen as a necessary ingredient for, or precursor of subsequent performance.” (Sparrow and Balain 2010, p284). Instrumental claims were made for the



engagement activities in terms of improvements in survey scores and increased response rate, but beyond this, outcomes expected by CYMRUcyf's senior and HR management were modest. The specific results expected regarding survey response rate and survey scores are very short term, as improvements are expected to be observed in a matter of a few months.

I demonstrate the assumed link made by the HR team at CYMRUcyf regarding the role of the departmental action plans in 'delivering' higher employee engagement as measured through improved scores on the staff survey in Figure 6.6. This model appears to be informed by the rationalistic perspective of strategy making where "a process of planning and implementation that is conscious, proactive...emanating from the top/centre of the organisation and moving smoothly to operating levels (responsible for implementation) in an iterative cycle of planning-implementation-feedback..." (Legge 2005, p71). This approach to strategy has been criticised as it underestimates the role of unconscious processes and patterns in implementation (Mintzberg 1978 in Legge 2005) and also that agreement between levels and functions in organisations are unproblematic (Legge 2005). In particular, the CYMRUcyf approach does not appear to have been informed by academic literature on the gap between intended and enacted HR policies (which employee engagement could be viewed as mirroring) and that "employee attitudes are influenced not so much by the way these policies are intended to operate as by the way they are actually implemented by line managers and team leaders on a day to day basis." (Kinnie et al 2005, p10). In addition, HR initiatives can take time to generate changes in employee attitudes (Truss 2001) and a 12 month timetable for the implementation of employee engagement initiatives to have produced increased engagement scores, assuming this direct relationship is likely, seems highly ambitious.

**Figure 6.6: Assumed link between action planning for employee engagement and expected results, CYMRUcyf, 2011**



In summary, CYMRUcyf's style of managing employee engagement appears to exhibit the characteristics of a transactional rather than a transformational approach, which is considered to be less than ideal (but an approach reportedly pursued by approximately three quarters of organisations in the UK undertaking engagement (MacLeod and Clarke 2009):

"...employee engagement as essentially a set of activities...reflects a degree of compartmentalised thinking...the Board takes the engagement strategy seriously: there is an annual or bi-annual survey to measure engagement levels and the views of staff are sought; departments including HR are then tasked to follow up the survey results. There is little about any of the component parts that can be criticised...nonetheless, in this model, employee engagement is still an 'add-on'. It is not integral to the overall business approach. It is essentially a set of transactions....[the other approach] sees employees as an integral part of developing and delivering the overall business strategy...this strategy

will cover the values and behaviours that are required from everyone in order to deliver the company's position in the market place...this is transformational engagement." (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, p72)

Managing employee engagement at CYMRUcyf was led by the HR function, supported by the Communications Team, but with little leadership from senior managers. A large number of individual activities were identified and much was expected of Departmental staff, who had to develop action plans comprising responses to the staff survey. Areas of activity mainly related to organisational level interventions, with job and individual interventions some way behind (Albrecht 2010). The personal interests of the HR Unit, as well as a trigger event perceived as negative in nature, were important in the decision to manage employee engagement. In the next Section I consider how similar or different my own approach to managing my personal engagement at work was to that I observed at CYMRUcyf.

## **6.5 Managing employee engagement: my personal experience**

### **6.5.1 My story**

In the previous sections, it has become clear that HR staff are an important stakeholder in the management of engagement as an 'organisational device' (described in Chapter Five). I note earlier (Section 6.4.2) that employee engagement activities recognised by the HR Unit at CYMRUcyf did not include any efforts initiated by staff, either in groups or individually. And in my personal vignette which opens the Chapter, I report how HR were seen by my employer's chief officer to be the natural constituency to take responsibility for undertaking a staff survey.

Line managers have been identified as a particularly important group of workers in promoting the engagement of the staff they are responsible for (Scase and Goffee 1989, MacLeod and Clarke 2009, Alfes et al 2010, Purcell 2010, 2012) as "while a professional human resource department will design appropriate policies it is line managers who bring them to life" (Purcell 2010, p8). Line manager confidence in their own abilities, or sense of self efficacy, has been associated with employee engagement and the manager's reported level of effectiveness (albeit using the Gallup Q12 items for measuring engagement which concentrate on conditions rather than state)

(Luthans and Peterson 2002). There does not appear to be any research that has considered the role and participation of line managers in either managing state or device engagement (although in the previous section about CYMRUcyf, I describe how HR identified line managers as responsible for developing and implement departmental action plans). As a former line manager who feels that I have experienced personal engagement at work and who also volunteered to take part in a corporate employee engagement in my last job, I am in an ideal situation to provide a contribution towards filling this gap in our knowledge.

In this section, I draw upon my personal recollections of attempting to manage my own personal engagement at work between 2004 and 2009, while occupying the role of line manager (using the timeline that I have developed showing my efforts to manage my personal engagement at work between 2000 and 2009 in Figure 6.7). I do not analyse my experience of being involved in my employer's corporate employee engagement initiative as my research question is wider than examining the management of employee engagement, and also my recollections of my experiences are poor<sup>47</sup>. However, as in the case of CYMRUcyf, line managers were not prominent partners in the design and delivery of device engagement at my last employer, but rather were part of the workforce that were either required to implement aspects of the programme that had been designed and decided upon by HR or senior managers, or were expected to change their attitudes and behaviours of managing through training and development initiatives. As this section from my research journal recounts, what I perceived as a blanket approach to manager training clashed with my perceptions of my own capabilities, which I considered were being ignored:

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<sup>47</sup> If I had a research question that focused entirely on the management of employee engagement, it would be very useful to explore my, and other line managers', experience of being involved in an organisational employee engagement initiative.

*Me: Have you had the email from HR about doing the ILM Level 3 course in management<sup>48</sup>? Apparently we all have to do that now! It's called First Line Management Award. I've already got a qualification from the CIPD in management, I read Harvard Business Review, what am I going to learn from some crappy ILM course?*

*Friend: You can be exempted from it, ask your manager.*

*Me: Can't. Apparently we have to do it in our Department. The Chief has decreed we have to set an example for the rest of the Council. If we're let off, everyone else will want to be.*

(Recreated from personal recollections 2008)

In Chapter One, I explain that I have derived much of my sense of personal identity from work. Managing my career has been important to me and I consider that I have been proactive in taking steps to increase my professional qualifications and seek new work experiences. My average length of tenure in a job, and with an employer, has been approximately two and a half years, perhaps indicating a transactional psychological contract on my part (Rousseau 2001) and an approach to managing my career reflecting the protean approach, where individuals "continually seek opportunities to learn new things and will see career as a series of learning cycles...individual values rather than organisational values." (Clarke 2009, p11). During my career in local government, I did not become a member of a trade union unlike the majority of employees in the public sector in Wales (WAG 2009).

I had been willing to take active steps to adapt the content and purpose of my jobs in positions before the one that I held between 2004 and 2009. I had not enjoyed the job I occupied previous to my last job (between 1999 and 2001 and where I begin my discussion of managing my engagement at work in Figure 6.7). During this time, I was experiencing a shift in my career interests from town planning and neighbourhood regeneration work to research and evaluation. I asked my then line manager if I could expand my job to include economic and labour market

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<sup>48</sup> Institute of Leadership and Management Level 3 First Line Management Award "is a concise qualification which gives an introduction to the basic skills, knowledge, and understanding required by today's first line manager. (ILM 2012, p1)

research (which was acknowledged as a gap in the organisation's capacity and commissioned from external providers at considerable cost). Despite being advised by my line manager on my appointment that adjustments to the content of my job would be considered, the change in focus I requested was refused. After ten years of working in local government and as I felt that a promise made to me by my line manager had been broken (Rousseau 2001), I decided to leave this job and gain experience as a researcher on a freelance basis (marked "A" in Figure 6.7). At this time, I became interested in using the Myers Briggs Type Instrument psychometric tool (marked "B") and sought advice from a career coach about how the Type I associated myself with (described in Chapter One) could help to me to find a job that I enjoyed. The demand for research expertise in the public sector was increasing in the early 2000's as a result of a UK and Welsh Government emphasis on evidence based policy making (WAG 2005). Adapting to changing external circumstances has been noted as a characteristic of a protean career (Clarke 2009). In 2004, I was appointed as manager of a local authority research unit in north Wales (marked "C").

Before I joined my last employer, I feel that I had taken steps to consider what career I would be suited to (in terms of job content and working environment) and had therefore been seeking to improve my sense of personal engagement at work compared with that I had experienced in the job I held between 1999 and 2001.

In my job from 2004-2009, I initially experienced a strong sense of personal engagement which waned during the final two years of my employment (Kahn 1990). Early on in my last job, I sought and gained funding from my employer to undertake training in social research methods which I completed in my own time (marked "D"). This training provided intellectual engagement for me and helped build my sense of self efficacy as a manager of experienced researchers (Luthans and Peterson 2002). Following the first two years of my employment and after taking part in a particularly intellectually engaging piece of work in 2006 (Marked "E" and recounted in Section 1.3.2 in Chapter One), I began to feel less interest and motivation towards my work. I brought this 'problem' to the attention of my line manager, who like constituencies outside HR at CYMRUcyf, was not so concerned about the issue as I was:

***My Line Manager:*** You seem fine to me, Natalie. You've done great things with your unit. Nothing short of a miracle. We never expected much, you know, given who you've got there.

***Me:*** But I feel that I don't perform as I used to. I'm plateauing.

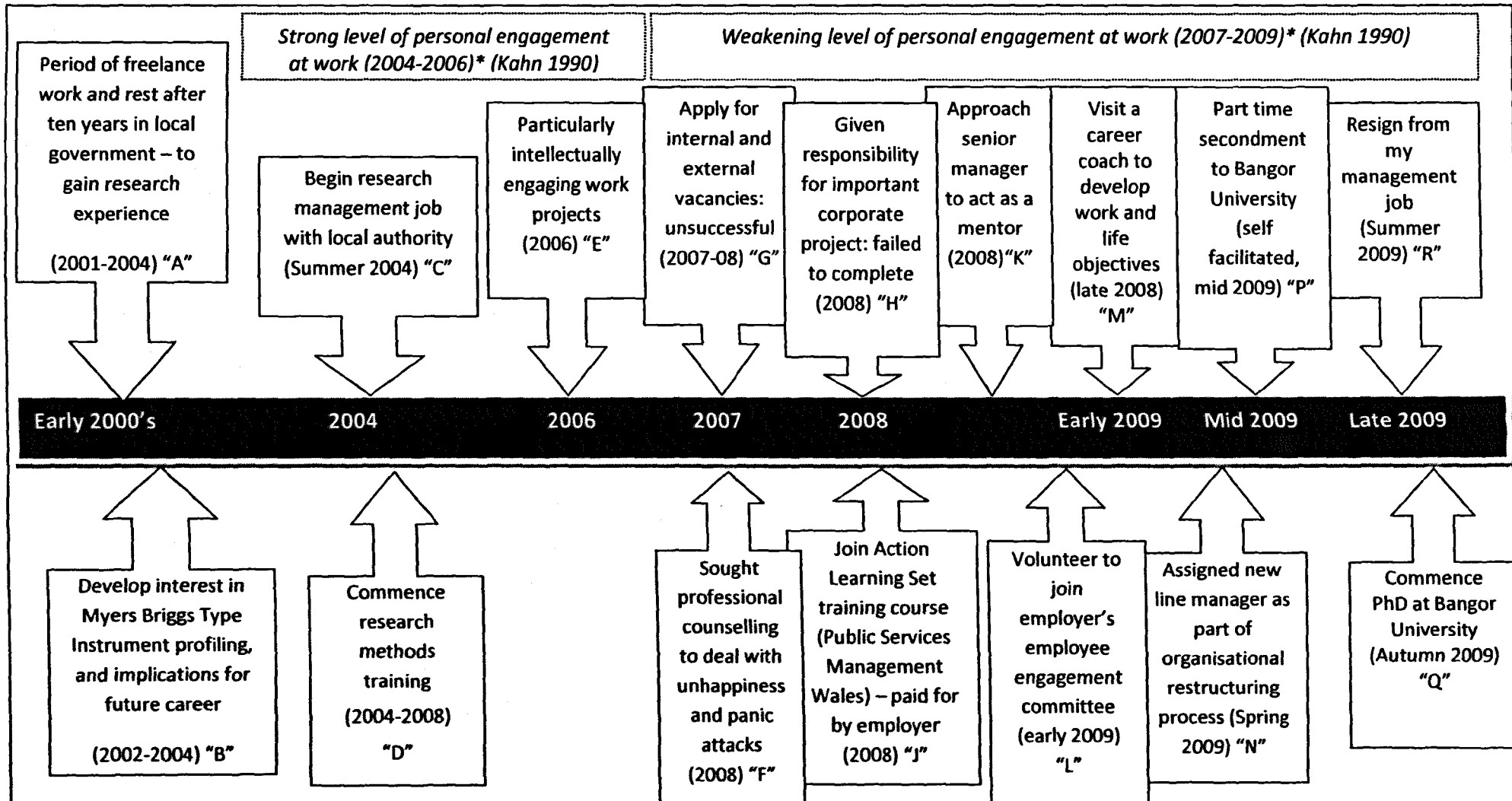
***My Line Manager:*** Welcome to the plateau! I've been on it for twenty seven years! It's not so bad you know. [My manager looks at me in a rather exasperated way].

(Reconstructed from recollections, 2007)

A further meeting with my line manager and the Head of Department that I initiated did result in a verbal offer to integrate my existing job with another managerial job in the Department that was vacant, which appeared mainly administrative in nature. This offer was later withdrawn, the reason given that all vacancies were frozen as the Council had decided to embark on wholesale organisational restructure which took place over 2008 and 2009.

My protean approach to managing my own career continued as I applied for jobs unsuccessfully both within my organisation and outside (marked "G" in Figure 6.7). As I struggled with my increasing boredom with work, a perception on my part of a lack of concern from my managers to help me find new intellectual challenges, a frustration with the organisational restructuring process and dealing with feelings of unhappiness following the failure of a personal relationship, I sought professional counselling in 2008 (marked Item "F") as I had begun to be troubled by feelings of anxiety which eventually culminated in frequent panic attacks. The idea of moving to a new location to take up a job (which I had been willing to do throughout my 20's and early 30's) felt beyond my capabilities as I felt that I had lost my sense of self-efficacy.

Figure 6.7: Managing my personal engagement at work, 2000-2009



Note: Size of boxes are not significant. \*: Self reported. Dates are approximate



As part of the review process that took place in the Council during 2008, I was required to reduce the headcount of the unit twice during this period (which I did so with the practical support of my line manager). This affected my personal sense of intellectual challenge as I felt that I had less people managing to do and this was my where my personal priorities and interests lay. On reflection, I had found a high degree of meaningfulness in the role of manager, and I didn't want to lose this (Kahn 1990). At this time, and as a result of asking my managers for more intellectual challenge, I was given lead responsibility by my Head of Department for a corporate project (marked "H") which involved working closely with elected politicians and the Chief Executive. Despite this project having a high profile in the organisation, I found that this project did not allow me the degree of intellectual autonomy that I valued and after several months, asked for the project to be assigned to another manager. This was not well received by my Head of Department.

*Me: I think another manager in the Department would be better suited to meet the Chief's expectations.*

*Head of Department: I took a risk giving that project to you. There were plenty of others after it...*

*Me: I'm sorry (starting to cry). I don't know what I'm doing here any more. I've tried with this project, but all my work gets red-lined<sup>49</sup>. I feel like I'm wasting my time.*

(Reconstructed from recollections, late 2008).

With financial support from my employer, I embarked on training to run Action Learning Sets (marked "J") which enabled me to meet managers from other parts of the Welsh Public Service and share work experiences. These managers perceived that I was unlikely to be able to progress to more challenging or senior positions with my current employer. I also asked a senior manager at the Council to act as a mentor to me for a brief period (marked "K") to help me develop my networking skills. Conversations with this individual led me to rethink my

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<sup>49</sup> "red-lined": where written documents I had produced for senior managers were returned to me via my line manager with sections (principally those to which I had given a lot of thought and presented ideas) being struck out with a red pen.

aspirations to become a senior manager as he recounted the pressures and expectations placed on him in their role. In late 2008, I volunteered to join my organisation's corporate employee engagement committee (marked "L"), which was to oversee the development of a plan to improve engagement across the workforce. My experience of this committee was frustrating, as I felt that I was not able to make the contribution that I had wished for (e.g. with regard to more involvement in the staff survey that I recount in the personal vignette that opens this Chapter).

As the new organisational structure for the organisation became established in 2009, I (along with other employees) was allocated a new line manager. I had benefited from a close and positive working relationship with my previous line manager, who I considered to have complementary skills to my own. I felt I wanted to be prepared for my new line manager and some months before they took over in 2009, I visited a career coach (marked "M") to explore my personal and professional priorities. I also responded to a secondment opportunity to join a commercially focused team within Bangor Business School to work on a regional research initiative (marked "P") which like the corporate project I managed in 2008 (marked "H") did not offer me the degree of intellectual autonomy or growth potential that I felt I needed. However, spending time at the University gave me the opportunity to consider pursuing a PhD. As I spent time at the University, I felt an increasing sense of detachment from my Department and my organisation. When in April 2009 I felt that the working relationship that I wished to develop with my new line manager was not reciprocated, my sense of detachment from my employer grew stronger. At this stage I would assert that weakened personal engagement gave way to disengagement (Kahn 1990).

On 02 June 2009, five years after starting my job at the Council, I submitted a letter of resignation to my Head of Department (marked "R"). I had been offered a bursary from Bangor Business School to undertake a PhD (marked "Q") and this felt like enough of a 'carrot' to prompt me to leave my job. My new line manager asked me to consider if I really wanted to resign and I agreed to meet with the head of Department two weeks later to discuss my final decision:

**Head of Department:** Well Natalie, what have you decided?

**Me:** I think I'm going to do it.

**Head of Department:** What?

**Me:** Leave.

**Head of Department:** OK. Remember, you can come back to do some of your PhD research with us, if you like.

(Recreated from personal recollections, 2009)

### 6.5.2 Summary of my personal experience of managing employee engagement

During the first two years of my last job, I felt a high degree of intellectual challenge and autonomy alongside strong self-efficacy. This had been supported by a period of reflection and analysis to identify a role and work environment where I could use my strengths. I wanted to maintain intellectual challenge and autonomy by finding roles in my organisation where I could continue to expressed my preferred self as a manager. New assignments were offered to me but these did not work out well and my sense of self-efficacy waned during the latter two years which I attribute to events in my professional and personal life that affected my sense of optimism and competency. This resonates with Kahn's assertion that personal engagement at work can be affected positively or negatively by an individual's outside life (Kahn 1990). In my case, I do not consider that I was as psychologically available for my work during the last two years of my employment compared with the first two years. As I note earlier, line manager self efficacy has been identified as a factor that can contribute to employee engagement (Luthans and Peterson 2002, Truss et al 2006). In my case, I feel there was an association between my sense of personal engagement at work and my sense of self efficacy, which was influenced by associating myself with a role that I valued: that of the line manager. I consider there was a degree of mismatch in the psychological contract that I held ("I am supposed to proactively manage my own career and I will be rewarded with new assignments by my employer" and "I enjoy a management role and my employer will support me to succeed") compared with that which I perceive that my line managers held ("career progress is made on the basis of time served and fit between the organisation's values and those of the individual"). I did not discuss with my managers the foundations of our psychological contract during the time I spent employed as a manager. Towards the latter part of my employment there were several instances where "harnessing people's selves to their work" (Kahn 2010, p21) was met with

rejection of my ideas. This reminds me of the opening vignette to Chapter Five where I wonder if employee engagement can be a risky endeavour for individuals (George 2010). On the basis of my experience, I have found that this can be the case.

I consider that my approach to managing my personal engagement at work shares a number of similarities with that taken at CYMRUcyf. There was a focus on individual activities (undertaking training, seeking the advice of friends, family and professional advisers, advising both line and senior management of my sense of demotivation and proactively presenting proposals for new work challenges) that were triggered by events perceived by me to be negative (in particular sensing a loss in the strength of my personal engagement at work). As the HR function at CYMRUcyf found in their relationships with senior managers, other parties in my employing organisation (e.g. my line and senior manager) did not appear as concerned as I was about my personal engagement at work 'problem' although my line manager and the Head of Department did respond to my requests for more and different work by offering me some new assignments. The attitudes and responses of line managers, both in my own experience, and at CYMRUcyf, was highly important influential to the outcomes that were being sought (in my case, a renewed sense of personal engagement with a managerial role, while at CYMRUcyf, increases in measured engagement through the staff survey). On reflection, I consider I was exhibiting a lessened sense of the third element of security that Kahn identifies to be part of psychological availability, where individuals sense of "ambivalence about their fit with their organisation and its purposes...it is difficult for people to engage personally in fulfilling work processes when organisational ends do not fit their own values...people are already engaged in inner debates that spare little room for external engagements." (Kahn 1990, p716)

I feel that I was adopting a transactional approach to managing my engagement at work similar to the approach taken by the majority of organisations in the UK (MacLeod and Clarke 2009) and was attempting to 'do engagement' to myself or apply 'engagement as a device' to my personal situation. At the time, I felt that taking proactive steps to improve my experience of work was an essential, and normal, thing to do.

In the next Section, I consider how my efforts to manage my personal engagement at work compared with the approach taken at *CYMRUcyf* to manage engagement at the organisational level, as well as the characteristics of the activities identified by the HR Professionals.

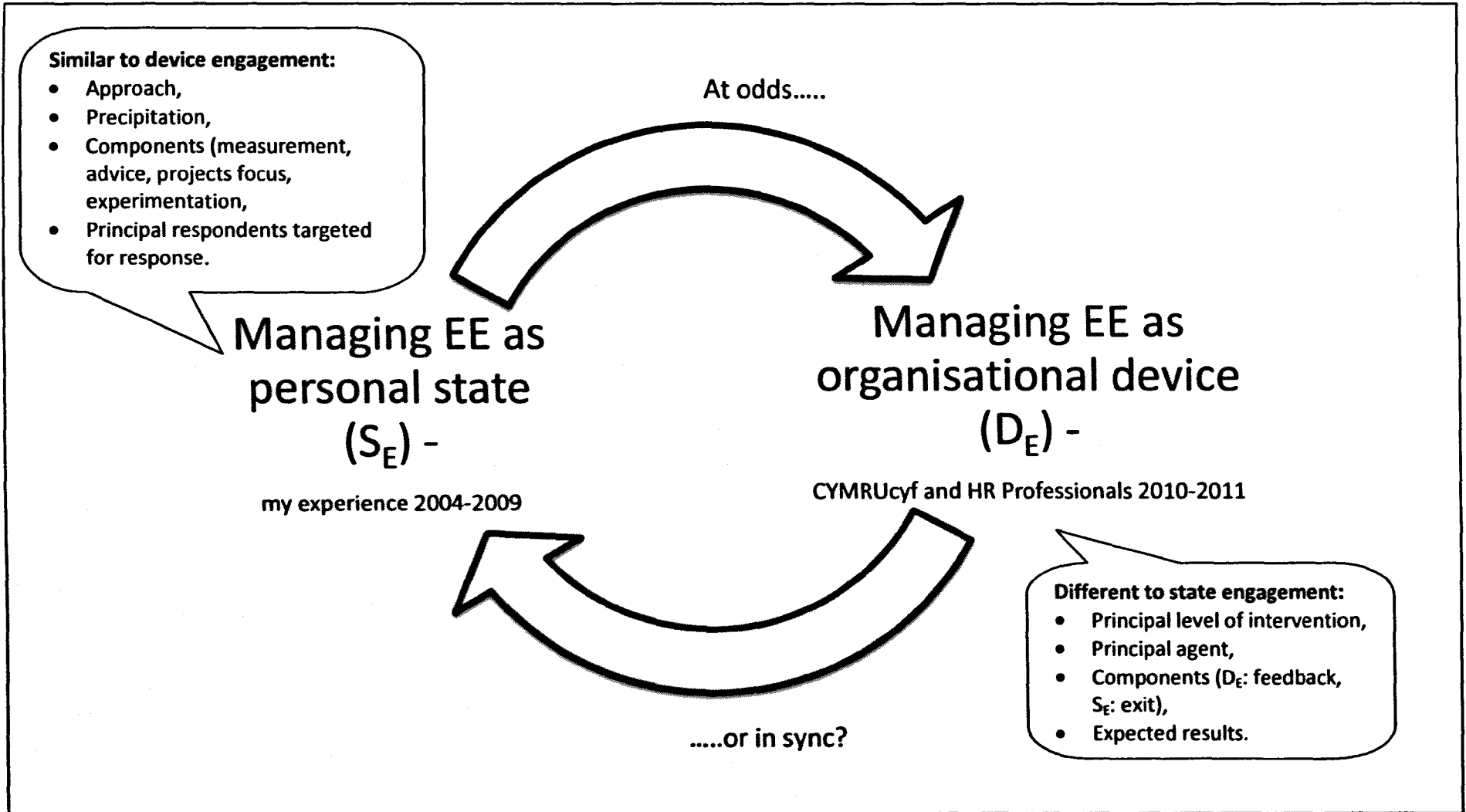
## **6.6 Managing employee engagement: synthesising individual and organisational approaches**

In this Chapter I have examined how employee engagement has been managed, or reported to be managed, from three different perspectives: HR Professionals, one Welsh Public Service organisation and my own experience. I have categorised the three approaches according to seven aspects in the table in Figure 6.8 using concepts from the academic literature (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, Albrecht 2010) and themes that I have developed from the data I have analysed inductively for this Chapter. I have found that transactional rather than transformational approaches to managing employee engagement dominate the HR Professionals, *CYMRUcyf* and my own approach (using these two terms in the MacLeod and Clarke 2009 sense rather than psychological contracts (Rousseau 1990) sense), where engagement strategy is “essentially a set of activities...an ‘add on’...essentially a set of transactions.” (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, p72). My assertion that my and others’ approach to managing employee engagement has been primarily transactional in nature could be tested through interviews with HR Professionals and further analysis of the ethnographic data I have collected.

**Figure 6.8: Managing employee engagement: individual and organisational approaches**

| Aspect   | Managing EE as personal state (based on my personal experience)  | Managing EE as organisational device (based on research with CYMRUcyf and HR Professionals)  |
|--|--|--|
| Approach (MacLeod and Clarke 2009):              | Transactional:<br>-lots of activity, "add-ons", potentially unrelated.   | Transactional:<br>-lots of activity, "add-ons", potentially unrelated.   |
| Precipitated by:                                 | (1999-2001): Dislike of job content, lack of support from line manager to change job content<br><br>(2004-2009): Loss of sense of personal engagement at work (especially preferred role), loss of line manager, loss of personal relationship, loss of staff from team through job redundancy   | Loss of staff through exit, loss of reputation, loss of staff morale   |
| Components:                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Psychological profiling (measurement),</li> <li>-Use of professional advisers (advice),</li> <li>-Selection of intellectually challenging work (job content),</li> <li>-Proactive search for ways to focus job with management role (projects focus),</li> <li>-Secondment to new organisational environment (experimentation),</li> <li>-Departure from organisation (exit).</li> </ul> | Five step process:<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Conduct staff survey (measurement),</li> <li>-External advisers (advice,)</li> <li>-Report survey results to staff (feedback),</li> <li>-Development of action plans to address issues raised in survey (projects focus),</li> <li>-Implementation of action plans (experimentation),</li> <li>-Resurvey staff (measurement).</li> </ul> |
| Expected results                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Increased sense of personal engagement at work (in role),</li> <li>-Congruence between self and role (manager rather than researcher),</li> <li>-Personal happiness.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Increased scores on staff survey,</li> <li>-Increased response rate on survey,</li> <li>-Staff happiness,</li> <li>-Increased job satisfaction,</li> <li>-Good reputation with stakeholders.</li> </ul>  |
| Principal agent(s):                              | Self   | HR Unit  |
| Principal respondent(s) targeted for response:   | Line manager, Senior manager   | Senior managers, Line managers   |
| Principal level of intervention (Albrecht 2010): | Job, Individual, Role  | Organisational   |

Figure 6.9: Managing employee engagement: characteristics of individual and organisation level practices, May 2012 (refers to Figure 6.8)



In Figure 6.9, I have developed the  $S_e$ - $D_e$  model that I first presented in Chapter Five (Figure 5.16) where I show where my approach to managing my own state of personal engagement at work ( $S_e$ ) was similar and different to the 'device engagement' ( $D_e$ ) which I observed at CYMRUcyf and that reported by the HR Professionals through my survey. As well as exhibiting a transactional rather than a transformational approach to managing employee engagement (MacLeod and Clarke 2009), I also consider the reasons that precipitated the 'engagement' activity (at both individual and organisational level) were similar, in that negatively perceived events or feelings prompted the interventions. Some of the components that I undertook and which CYMRUcyf employed were similar: measurement of the engagement 'problem', seeking advice, projects and experimentation. My personal approach deviated from that of CYMRUcyf by focusing on the content of my job (rather than being at the organisational level) and deciding to leave my employer (whereas CYMRUcyf's approach appears to continue despite a lack of obvious results for either staff or the organisation). The results that I expected from my efforts to manage my personal engagement focused on my job and role and my own sense of well being, the latter being an outcome that the HR team at CYMRUcyf wished to generate, although it was not clear how they would know if the employee engagement programme had achieved this (other than through staff survey scores). While the HR Unit were the main agent in the promotion and facilitation of the corporate engagement programme at CYMRUcyf, I was the lead agent in my personal management effort, seeking input from HR in only a limited way, as I was mainly focused on gaining support from my line managers. CYMRUcyf also targeted line managers to develop and deliver departmental action plans, which it could be argued could distract them from supporting individuals in their teams to find personal engagement at work. The impact of corporate employee engagement programmes on line manager workloads is an area worthy of further research.

It has been asserted that the HR practices most associated with high levels of employee well-being not always the same as those pursued by organisations to improve organisational performance (Peccei 2004) with staff valuing 'basic' employment practice such as rewards and communication ahead of those considered more sophisticated such as performance management and training and development (Conway and Monks 2008). From the assessment I have made of my efforts to manage my personal engagement at work, while I did discuss my aspirations with specialist HR staff as well as my line managers, I did not find that the organisational level engagement programme offered me support to maintain or strengthen the managerial role from which I derived a sense of meaningfulness. Other decisions made within



my organisation at the time that the employee engagement programme was underway (such as a requirement to reduce the number of posts in my team, undertake less intellectually challenging and less autonomous work) as well as the content of the engagement programme which I considered rather primitive, did not overcome my loss of sense of engagement.

At the beginning of this Chapter, I noted how managing employee engagement should take into account the need to build and sustain Kahn's three psychological conditions for personal engagement and how a set of individual differences identified by Kahn (1992) could affect individuals' willingness to become personally engaged even when psychological conditions were favourable. While CYMRUcyf's approaches to managing employee engagement did not appear to take into account the individual differences needed to Kahn's three psychological conditions, I consider that my efforts to understand my own personality and reflect on the kind of job I wanted before I started my last full time job could be construed as evidence of trying to accommodate individual difference. However, later on as my sense of personal engagement waned, I feel that I concentrated much more heavily on finding conducive conditions for me to rebuild my sense of personal engagement rather than consider my personal characteristics. On reflection there appeared to be limits to the extent of my being able to personally engage with my preferred work role, due in my view to a reduction in my psychological availability, as well as decreased psychological meaningfulness as a result of professional and personal experiences that I perceived negatively (Kahn 1990).

## **6.7 Summary and Conclusions**

In this Chapter, I have considered how the management of employee engagement at both organisational and individual levels have been approached, and have found there were some similarities and differences between the perspectives. The focus at CYMRUcyf and the HR Professionals' approaches were mainly at the organisational level of intervention (Albrecht 2010) but I have provided evidence in this Chapter to confirm that individuals, as well as HR teams on behalf of organisations, can seek to manage their personal engagement at work, outwith the presence of a corporate employee engagement initiative. It is possible that the organisation level employee engagement initiative I encountered in my last job should have meant that I did not need to embark on my own personal programme of activities. However, for me, my employer's programme did not help me to find a renewed sense of engagement at work. The tensions between individual and employer level interventions is already known from the career management literature (Inkson and King 2010) as well as the critical management literature that I discuss in Chapter One.

In the next Chapter, I consider the responses of staff at CYMRUcyf to their organisation's employee engagement activities and find that for many employees, the programme was at best an 'expected' part of the employment contract, or at worst, a nuisance to be endured.

07 November 2011

*I have asked to give a presentation to the Staff Forum at the case study organisation. It's going to be by video conference, but there's a problem.*

*"We're running late. Can't get into the video con room. Can you present on the telephone?" Lots of tension, rolling of eyes. I stand there, feeling embarrassed and thinking, the Staff Forum is always going to struggle to be relevant and engaging to staff if it's like this.*

*Coming here now, I feel quite different to when I started the project. I don't have my researcher face on any more. I know what employee engagement at this organisation means to staff: hassle. It's feels like a tick box exercise, with managers seeking quick fixes, off the shelf responses that have been tried elsewhere. Someone from outside with an answer, and they need to be cheap. After all, these are austerity times in the Welsh Public Service. I give my presentation about the organisation's current efforts to increase engagement and make what I perceive to be some practical suggestions. I get the sense that I'm not providing the right answers. It's hard over the phone. I can't see anyone, gauge their reaction.*

*"Tell me, Natalie, what tools have you come across from other organisations that would help us to improve engagement with our employees. Going forward, it is a big priority for us, you know." The director asks. The terms "tools" and "going forward" irritate me. This director is a new recruit and is critical to setting the tone of engagement activities in my view. Can't he think for himself? What does he need "tools" for?*

*I finish my presentation and start fiddling with my phone, which I consider to be bad behaviour in a meeting. The director and the head of HR ask for my views about the next staff survey they intend to carry on with. I suggest 20 questions max, concentrating on engagement with job and the line manager, and analysis by age or gender or length of service. That feeling "they don't want to hear this" comes back. I decide to leave the meeting, as my bit is over. Is this all there is employee engagement?*



## 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the experiences of staff on the receiving end of organisational level employee engagement initiatives in the Welsh Public Service. I consider responses to one aspect of CYMRUcyf's engagement programme, its staff survey, from multiple perspectives: front line staff, the HR team and myself as an observer. I found some unintended consequences from the organisation's management of the staff survey which generated a sense of frustration. Most staff were satisfied with working at CYMRUcyf and felt that the organisation was pursuing employee engagement for a range of reasons, only some of which were designed to benefit employees.

### 7.1.1 Introduction

"...workers are the primary recipients and consumers [of HRM] yet their voice has been strangely muted." (Guest 1999, p21)

"Interview studies of employee engagement are rare." (Gourlay et al 2012, p30)

The purpose of this Chapter is to consider employee engagement from multiple perspective. As well as attempting to manage my own personal engagement at work, and taking part in the management committee of an organisational level employee engagement programme, as a line manager I was also a recipient of the individual activities that made up that programme. In Chapter Six, I show in Figure 6.4 the large number of individual activities that were labelled as 'employee engagement' at CYMRUcyf. A common element to my previous employer's employee engagement programme, as with CYMRUcyf and a number of other organisations (Wiley et al 2010, Alfes et al 2010) is a staff survey. In this Chapter, I consider how the process of undertaking the staff survey at CYMRUcyf was perceived from a range of perspectives: the HR Unit that administered the survey to the rest of the workforce, staff who took part in the survey, and also my own experience of observing how the CYMRUcyf staff survey was reported to staff and used to inform the development of engagement action plans. The focus of this Chapter is to consider how staff at CYMRUcyf experienced employee engagement as an organisational device (introduced as a concept in Figure 5.16 in Chapter Five) using the staff survey as the primary 'lens'. I do not consider how staff at the case organisation experienced employee engagement as an individual level state as this was not the focus of my research question, and other research has considered the experience of state engagement (Kahn 1990, Shuck and Rocco 2011).

In this Chapter, I intend to draw upon the following data:

- Observations, interviews (group and one to one) with HR, managerial and non managerial staff working at the case organisation, CYMRUcyf, and internal documents,
- Literature, mainly from the human resource management field, that has considered the employee perspective of initiatives introduced by organisations to improve working relationships and increase organisational performance,
- My own research journal where I recorded my experiences of carrying out fieldwork at the case organisation.

I did not include a question in my survey of HR Professionals about their experiences of taking part or leading organisational engagement programmes. Neither did I ask if, and how, they found out how staff perceived or experienced such programmes. On reflection, it would have been useful to have included questions of this sort in my survey of HR Professionals, to find out the priority attached by this group of employees to finding out how employee engagement initiatives are perceived by recipients.

### *7.1.2 Employee engagement from the worker perspective*

“The dearth of research aimed at understanding how multiple (or systems) of HR practices impact individuals certainly suggest a ripe opportunity for future research. Much of the strategic HRM research assumes systems of practices impacting groups of people rather homogeneously, but given our knowledge of individual differences, this assumption is tenuous, at best.” (Wright and Boswell 2002, p26)

The body of material on the implementation of employee engagement as a device, and how it is supposed to “ensure employees are committed to their organisation’s goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well being” (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, p9) is meagre. For this reason, I have examined research on the application of human resource management (HRM) practices and how these have been received by staff. Even in this more established field, examination of the employee experience is rare (Boselie et al 2005). Given the assertion by Kahn (1992) that individual differences will impact on the extent to which employees invest themselves in their work even where supportive conditions for meaningfulness, safety and availability are in place,

it is important to consider the employee perspective. As employee engagement initiatives within organisations are often implemented by human resource professionals and appear to include activities that are associated with human resource management (Boselie et al 2005, Alfes et al 2010), and in the absence of any relevant literature directly related to the employee experience of employee engagement, I consider it appropriate to utilise knowledge of staff perceptions of HRM<sup>50</sup>.

Clark et al (1998 in Mabey et al 1998) assert there are a number of reasons why the perspective of employees is an important area of study for human resource management researchers. They say “after all, it is they [employees] who are expected to enthusiastically engage with and fully participate in HR strategies...and it is largely upon them [employees] that such strategies stand or fall, are seen to endure and succeed or wither and fail.” (Clark et al 1998, p7). Employees are said to be the primary consumers of human resource management initiatives (Guest 1999, Clark et al 1998), although I do provide some evidence in Chapters Five and Six that other constituencies such as external stakeholders might be ‘customers’ for an organisational employee engagement initiative. However, employees are certainly an important set of consumers for engagement interventions. Clark et al (1998) also state it is employees who are required to make the greatest contribution (through changed attitudes and work behaviours) to the successful implementation of an intervention and to deliver the outcomes required by the organisation. Certainly in the case of data I collected from the HR Professionals and from CYMRUcyf, employees (including line managers) were expected to behave differently and make adjustments to their work (e.g. creating departmental action plans to improve employee engagement). Finally, Clarke et al (1998) cite that listening to the voices of employees should be undertaken as they are “the central, non-passive co-creating actors in the conceiving, implementing and reconstructing of HR strategies.” (p8), and that organisational initiatives can create anxiety within individuals which reduce their willingness to voice their opinions.

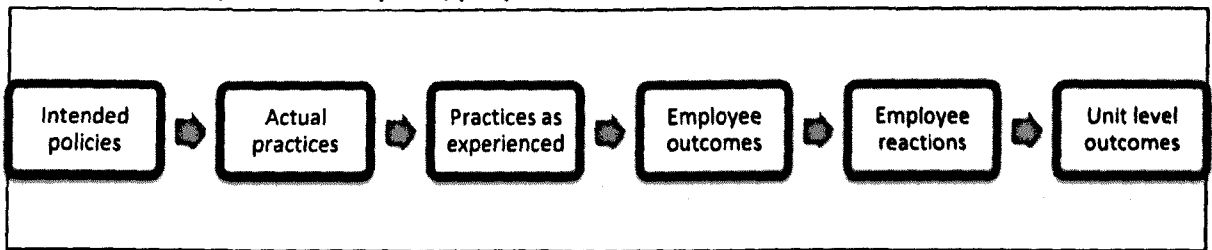
Scholars have argued that employee perceptions and experience of human resource management are an crucial step in understanding the link between HRM and better organisational performance, and it is likely that the link between employee engagement initiatives (given their HR provenance) and outcomes is affected in a similar way by employee

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<sup>50</sup> I could also have examined the literature on change management. I chose to focus on the HRM literature as the engagement activity at CYMRUcyf was mainly driven by the HR Unit and did not appear to have an overt change management agenda.

perceptions. HR practices aimed at improving employee attitudes and behaviours are said to operate indirectly, being mediated by individual experiences and characteristics (Guest 1999). Kinnie et al (2005), reproduced in the diagram in Figure 7.1, assert that employee experiences of HR practices influence worker attitudes and consequently behaviours, with positive emotions and thoughts (reflected in job satisfaction and organisational commitment) generating desirable behaviours (such as discretionary job and organisational oriented activity) should the experience of HR practices by employees be viewed as positive. This model assumes there will be beneficial effects at the business unit level from positive perceptions of enacted HR practices (Guest 1999) and for employee engagement, associations have been found between individual level engagement and business unit performance (Harter et al 2002).

**Figure 7.1: Links between HR policy and practice, employee experiences and responses and various outcomes, Kinnie et al (2005, p11)**



Similar to employee engagement, social exchange theory has been advanced as a framework for understanding how staff reciprocate HR practices from their employer, which are viewed as signs of perceived organisational support (POS) (Eisenberger et al 2002 in Kinnie et al 2005, Francis and Reddington 2011) which are incorporated into an individual’s psychological contract (Rousseau 2001). Later in this Chapter I introduce some evidence from staff at CYMRUcyf that substantiates the claim that employees view employee engagement initiatives, as well as wider HR policies, as signalling a form of POS (Guest 1999). A survey of local government workers in Wales also found that “staff generally feel very positive about the amount of support they receive...” (Redman and Gould Williams 2007, p7), albeit that employees were referring to their departments rather than their employing organisations. When the psychological contract is perceived to have been fulfilled by employees, it is asserted they will return to the employer positive attitudes and behaviours (Guest 2002). Likewise, “if expectations or promises and obligations are not met, then in the context of the broken psychological contract we are able to understand why workers might record a negative reaction...” (Guest 2002, p.325).

While some HR practices such as rewards, communication and work life balance have been found to be valued by employees generally, variation has been found in the combination of HR practices that affect different occupational groups' organisational commitment (Kinnie et al 2005):

"Managers' commitment is distinctively linked to their interest in internal career opportunities...the commitment of [non manager] workers appears to be linked to practices associated with internal fairness: openness, communication, being recognised for their performance and not being forced to make large sacrifices in their home lives....professionals...are mostly interested in challenging work." (Kinnie et al 2005, p19-20)

This is relevant to the case of CYMRUcyf which has a mix of administrative, professional and managerial occupations. Scholars have therefore argued that "one size fits all" HR practices are not appropriate in diverse workforces (Boxall et al 2007). So the component parts of an organisational level employee engagement programme are likely to be valued, perceived and responded to in different ways by different groups in the workforce. I brought the potential impact of workforce diversity on the content of employee engagement programmes to the attention of the HR Unit at CYMRUcyf in my written feedback report and identified how this issue in the workforce needed to be taken into account (as an example, by adjusting its analysis of its staff survey from focusing on Departments to considering other variations such as gender, length of service and occupational groups) in the construction of its employee engagement programme. The HR Unit felt that encouraging the development of departmental action plans rather than a single corporate employee engagement plan was an attempt to recognise diversity in the workplace:

"We used to have a single plan, but people complained that each Department was very different, so what we came up with was irrelevant to their needs. So we now have three Departmental plans. That does mean some duplication, so we're thinking about having a corporate and departmental plans, to cover all bases." (Rhodri, HR Officer, CYMRUcyf)



This response represented a focus on vertically arranged action plans which reflected the vertical analyses of survey data (by Departments) at CYMRUcyf rather than by demographic characteristics across the organisation. This verticality of survey analysis and subsequent action plan response reflects the approach taken in the three surveys of Welsh Public Service staff that I discuss in Chapter Four (Section 4.3).

It would appear sensible to suggest that staff are intended as the primary beneficiaries of employee engagement activities. However, it has been asserted that non managerial staff are not always the most important audience for HRM initiatives. Research on employee responses to culture change in a Scottish local authority found that the initiative was introduced for non employee oriented reasons:

“...non-rational reasons such as internal or external politics rather than to address organisational problems...the CEO led initiative was a rationally wise and politically aware attempt at image building...designed for two different publics...ministers and officials at the Scottish Office who were perceived to value such a change because it embraced ‘modern’ private sector thinking...the second public were the majority of employees who...needed to be redesigned to fulfil the authority’s organisational and individual careerist aims.” (Martin et al 1998, p90).

In the case of CYMRUcyf, there was some evidence from senior managers (reported in Chapter Six) of employee engagement being pursued as a form of impression management activity aimed at external stakeholders (Marchington 1995) and some staff also felt that employee engagement was being undertaken as an exercise rather than an approach centred on employees’ needs:

"Why they're doing all this? Probably to maintain their IIP<sup>51</sup>." (Non managerial employee, long stayer, head office, June 2011).

"It's like a tick in the box, we've said we want more of something, so they try and do something about it. So we took part in the survey before Christmas, they get the results, and then the Heads of Department come and visit us three times in one month because we've said we want to see more of them. A forced exercise." (Managerial employee, long stayer, head office, June 2011).

Mixed results have been found from the research available about employee responses to human resource management practices. "Workers like their experiences of HRM..the more HR practices they are currently experiencing...the more satisfied they seem to be and the better their psychological contract" (Guest 1999, p23) was the finding from a stratified random sample of 1000 employees across different economic sectors in the UK, while a mixed methods study of employees in two local authorities in the UK found a significant association between 'high commitment' HRM practices and job satisfaction, commitment, motivation and intention to leave a job (Gould-Williams 2004). From this study, it was interesting to note that the practice of communication, which the employee engagement programme at CYMRUcyf contained, was found to have a negative effect on commitment to the employer, which the author suggests might be associated with information overload. Recent research in organisations recognised as having more rather than fewer HR practices, which CYMRUcyf would probably reflect, found that variations in organisational commitment by occupational group could be explained by the presence of different HR practices (Kinnie et al 2005). While the above research could be placed within the scope of the 'optimistic perspective' of the impact of HRM on employees, others have adopted a more 'pessimistic perspective' of HRM, arguing that it "essentially harmful to workers, as having a generally negative impact on their interests and their well-being." (Peccei 2004, p4). Mixed responses to HRM at Hewlett Packard were found by Truss (2001) in a longitudinal study with staff reporting that high levels of loyalty and a tradition of secure employment were accompanied by increases in worker perceived stress and job redundancies thus contributing to a lower sense of morale. Local government workers in Wales reported particular satisfaction with practices concerned with the level of training and development opportunities, teamworking, job security and availability of grievance procedures but were less

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<sup>51</sup> IIP: Investors in People standard.

satisfied with rewards, opportunities for career advancement and promotion and feedback on personal strengths and weaknesses (Redman and Gould-Williams 2007). The research did not ask staff whether these practices had led to improvements or a deterioration in their working conditions or their personal sense of wellbeing or engagement at work. More than half of the staff questioned (52%) said they regularly worked beyond their contracted hours and more than a quarter (27%) said their work had a negative effect on the quality of their life. However, as noted in Chapter Four, most of the staff working in local government in Wales who took part in the survey reported a high level of job satisfaction and appeared to like their jobs (Redman and Gould-Williams 2007).

In conclusion, employee experiences of employee engagement are likely to act as an important mediator in the successful transfer of an organisation's programme from intentions to outcomes (such as changed employee behaviours and attitudes). Different groups in the workforce have been found to value different combinations of HR practices, and that a 'one size fits all' approach to HRM is not appropriate (Boxall et al 2007). The evidence for the impact of HRM programmes on employees is mixed, with scholars adopting either a optimistic, pessimistic or sceptical view of the effect of such interventions (Peccei 2004). In Wales, some public sector workers have been found to be satisfied with some HR practices more than others (Redman and Gould-Williams 2007), with lowest satisfaction with HR practices concerning rewards, career management and promotion opportunities.

In the next section, I consider how CYMRUcyf was perceived as a place to work, before discussing how the staff survey was experienced by the three different constituencies I describe at the beginning of this Chapter.

## **7.2 Working at CYMRUcyf: the perspective of employees**

### **7.2.1 *The employee experience of working at CYMRUcyf***

As a precursor for describing their experience of employee engagement activities, I asked both managerial and non-managerial staff working at CYMRUcyf for their opinion about the organisation as a place to work. Overwhelmingly, responses were positive with the organisation being described as supportive, friendly and comparing well with other employers. From the

positive responses provided by staff, it would appear that CYMRUcyf could be characterised as a model employer in terms of formal HR policies, access to training and development for all levels of employee and less of a focus on efficient use of resources than is the case reportedly in the private sector (Boyne et al 1999):

“Friendly, it’s easy to get on with each other generally, lots of social things going on inside and outside. What I’ve noticed from the start, the support is there, if you need any help from the teams, you get it.” (Non managerial employee, long stayer, head office, June 2011)

“Very good place to work. It’s another world compared to some of the places I’ve been in.” (Non managerial employee, new starter, head office, June 2011)

Staff reported they felt trusted by line and senior managers, and they had autonomy in how they carried out their work, which has been identified as a driver of employee engagement (Alfes et al 2010, Gourlay et al 2012):

“I’m not micro managed. They trust me to get on with the work and to put my hand up if I’m struggling, or if I need training.” (Non managerial employee, new starter, head office, June 2011).

“We organise our own work, we’re trusted to get on with it. They let you get on with your work, they’re not constantly hassling you, they’re encouraging you to use your initiative, if you think things should be done in a different way, you won’t get your head bitten off if you suggest something.” (Non managerial employee, long stayer, head office, June 2011)

Workloads and work intensity had increased since the organisation was established, but non managerial staff did not report that this was unmanageable. Efficient use of resources was

becoming more of a feature at CYMRUcyf, confirming reports by senior managers I discuss in Chapter Three:

“They’re definitely getting their money’s worth from me these days, It’s definitely more heads down for me than before. I just about have the time to do the work and that’s it.” (Managerial employee, long stayer, satellite office, June 2011).

“Work has increased over the years and they get more out of staff these days. But it’s pretty relaxed, it’s not as if we are in a sales environment, not too target driven.” (Non managerial employee, long stayer, head office, June 2011)

While the majority of the workforce were employed on permanent contracts, staff recruited in the past two years were employed on temporary contracts, reflecting a tendency observed in the UK public sector of an increased use of non-standard employment arrangements (Boyne et al 1999). From my group interviews with ‘long stayers’ and ‘new starters’, there were no discernible differences in attitudes towards the organisation or the regard in which it was held.

The organisation’s HR policies were cited on numerous occasions as being very comprehensive and beyond what was offered by other employers, enabling staff to vary their working hours, take unpaid career breaks, guidance and procedures to report incidences of bullying and harassment at work and whistleblowing. A number of staff reported to me they had stayed with CYMRUcyf longer than they expected, partly because of the HR policies that were in place, especially those relating to work flexibility, and had decided not to apply for jobs outside the organisation which were better paid. It is clear that many of the staff felt there was a favourable sense of perceived organisational support (Gourlay et al 2012), especially when dealing with changes and challenges to their personal circumstances. The demands of personal lives has been identified as influencing the amount of psychological availability that individuals can draw upon for engagement at work (Kahn 1990):

"It's the policies plus the work that have made me stay. It is very rare for a job at my level to be available on a part time basis and that's been possible here. I never thought I would still be here after nine years." (Middle manager, satellite office, June 2011)

"I had a knee operation a while ago and needed a lot of time off. They were very good to me, the policy allowed me to have the time. After that I decided to stay where I was." (Non managerial employee, head office, June 2011)

Staff were aware of the contemporary context in which the organisation operated and the pressures to cut costs and possible changes to their employment as a result of the Welsh Government instructing CYMRUcyf to commence closer working with two other health related organisations. However, it was felt that these issues were a concern for the public sector as a whole, rather than a reflection on the status of CYMRUcyf itself. When asked if they identified with the concept of a single Welsh Public Service, staff reported they had an affinity with CYMRUcyf rather than another structure:

"Hhmm, we're not a single Welsh Public Service. The Welsh Government might want us to be but they'll need to sort out the injustice on pay and conditions before then. We're only in the local government pension scheme, for example, not the Civil Service one. My dream job would be to work for Agency X, up your way, in the mountains. But I would need to leave this job and go and work there, it wouldn't be a simple transfer." (Managerial employee, long stayer, head office, June 2011).

"Well, compared to what I used to do, I now try and book train tickets some weeks before I travel, rather than leave it till the last thing, when the price goes up. We have to be more careful about costs, because we're in the public sector." (Non managerial employee, long stayer, head office, June 2011).

“Well, we all saw that Welsh Government policy document – that was a bit nerve wracking! Does it mean mergers? But there’s a huge question mark over working in the government generally but that reflects the current climate rather than this organisation’s position. I have confidence that if there was a difficult situation here it would be dealt with fairly and properly.” (Non managerial employee, new starter, head office, June 2011).

The size of the organisation was felt to lead to a friendly and supportive atmosphere although a number of employees felt that the organisation was not as friendly since it had grown in size. The small size of the organisation was felt to be a restriction on staff career development and the relatively high proportion of young people in the workforce meant that posts rarely became available through retirement. The issue of lack of progression opportunities was also identified by some of the Senior Public Servants I interviewed about the policy context for the Welsh Public Service (Chapter Three).

“If you’re younger, then there’s not much room for progression. The three supervisors in Records and Inspections aren’t going anywhere, but that’s what you get in an organisation this size.” (Non managerial employee, new starter, head office, June 2011)

“You can get from Admin Grade One to Two, that’s possible. But to get to the next Grade, well, someone has to die!” (Non managerial employee, long stayer, satellite office, June 2011)

“CYMRUcyf has definitely grown. When I started, there was about thirty of us. Since it’s grown it’s not so friendly as it used to be, there’s a lot of splits [nodding of heads by others]. There was first a two way split, then a three way split, we used to do things together as a group.” (Non managerial employee, long stayer, head office, June 2011).

### *7.2.2 Perceptions of employer motives for undertaking employee engagement at CYMRUcyf*

The reasons why an employer has introduced HR initiatives has been associated with different employee attitudes and linked to positive employee behaviours (Nishii et al 2008). It is therefore important to ask staff why they think employee engagement initiatives have been introduced. I asked non managerial employees why they thought CYMRUcyf was undertaking employee engagement. For a minority of employees, they felt it was an attempt by senior managers to increase their visibility amongst staff and to show they cared about employees, reflecting a perceived degree of impression management (Marchington 1995):

“They want to show us they’re human, have a better relationship with us. We get to know what sort of person the Chief Officer is through the blog on the intranet, that’s good. And we get to know more about who is doing what throughout the organisation, so we’re better informed. Then we can deal with problems more often.” (Non managerial employee, long stayer, head office, June 2011).

From these statements, it would appear that some staff felt that the impetus for the employee engagement programme had come from senior managers, with the HR Unit being tasked by the organisation’s management team to take the lead on the practical work involved. This is at odds with the HR Director’s assertions that I report in Chapter Six that senior managers’ commitment and leadership of the engagement agenda was lukewarm. For a large group of staff, employee engagement as an organisational device was an essential part of the employment deal, which would be offered by any ‘good employer’:

“If they want staff to do more, they’ve got to say ‘we’ll make this investment in you. We’ll support you with the increased workload.’ That’s what it’s about.” (Non managerial employee, new starter, head office, June 2011).



For a minority of staff, the CYMRUcyf the purpose of the engagement activities were more instrumental, about keeping staff happy and reducing employee turnover:

“They probably realise they have some really good people and so they have to do something to keep them. We all know the organisation is pretty flat so it’s about trying to keep up happy, with development for when opportunities when they arise.” (Non-managerial employee, long stayer, satellite office, June 2011).

Overall, managerial and non managerial employees I spoke to reported high quality working conditions at CYMRUcyf, with perceived organisational support to be high. Personal circumstances appeared to be accommodated by the numerous policies that were in place to facilitate flexible working, training opportunities and autonomous working. Progression opportunities to more senior positions for staff in administrative positions were reported to be very limited. Non managerial staff reported a range of instrumental reasons why they thought CYMRUcyf were undertaking employee engagement, such as wishing demonstrate a friendliness on the part of senior managers or to retain their accreditation as an Investors in People. Some employees felt that ‘doing’ employee engagement was an activity undertaken by any ‘reasonable’ employer.

### **7.3 Experiencing employee engagement as an organisational device: the staff survey**

In Figure 6.4 of Chapter Six, I list thirty one areas of activity that could be labelled as ‘employee engagement’ at CYMRUcyf. I have chosen to concentrate on one of these activities in respect of understanding employee experiences of employee engagement, rather than attempt to provide an assessment of employee reactions to a selection or all of the interventions. While I have done this partly on pragmatic grounds there are stronger reasons for concentrating my focus on the experience of the staff survey in particular.

Understanding the “workforce engagement profile” (Alfes et al 2010, p55) and measuring engagement with an employee survey is often recommended as the most appropriate way to begin to manage employee engagement at the organisational level by both practitioner and scholarly writers (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, Towers Perrin 2012, Best Companies 2011). Using

engagement surveys is particularly evident in public sector workplaces (Purcell 2010). Although guidance has been provided on how organisations should go about conducting staff surveys (Purcell 2010), little is known how organisations conduct staff surveys and how staff experience such interventions in a Welsh Public Service context. Using the approach of an enhanced ethnography (Humphreys and Watson 2009 in Wainwright 2010), I begin this section with a 'story' (Section 7.3.1) about the staff survey at CYMRUcyf which I have constructed using data I collected through one to one and group interviews, organisational documents and observation of events at the case organisation, which I follow with a discussion in the context of the academic literature. I incorporate some of my own thoughts and feelings that arose during my observations of the survey feedback sessions to CYMRUcyf staff.

### *7.3.1 Experiencing the staff survey at CYMRUcyf: a story*

#### **Why are traffic lights always stuck on red?**

"For the vast majority of statements contained in the staff survey, our results were significantly above the median scores..." (CYMRUcyf management report, 15 January 2011).

"Since last year, we've seen some very small decreases in areas that we would have hoped to improve on...our response rate is down since last year..."(CYMRUcyf management report, 15 January 2011).

"There's no room for complacency in the staff survey. Perfection is possible." (Stella, Director of HR, CYMRUcyf, personal conversation).

"....if no action is taken as a result of the staff survey, ...this may result in a lack of confidence amongst staff, and possibly an increase in the number of staff leaving...It is important that action is taken..." (CYMRUcyf management report, 14 January 2011).

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*Morning, 14 December 2010*

Stella, the Director of HR proudly introduces me to Rhodri, who looks at me kindly. "This is Rhodri, the stats king. He's responsible for the staff survey. He can tell you all about it. We've been doing annual staff surveys for five years, and this year we're taking part in a UK wide survey where we can see how we perform compared to other organisations in the public sector. We're quite proud of our response rate, but we could do better. It's been on the slide for the last couple of years, and there are parts of the organisation that just won't take part. Think they're different, and when I ask for meetings with the Head of Department, I get blown out. That's not right is it?"

Rhodri has a bundle of papers already prepared for me. I've been invited to sit in on a meeting this afternoon where Rhodri will be telling staff from 'Records and Inspections' the survey results for their Department. "We don't have managers there. We want to allow staff to speak freely about the organisation and sometimes they won't do that if the managers there. They get a report at the Managers' Committee" (Rhodri).

The report I am given contains a table which contains colour coded sections, with this year's and last year's survey results in two columns. At the top is the Green section showing survey questions where this year's results are better than last year's. The Amber section has the results for questions that are being asked for the first time, and questions where there has been no change since last year. And the Red section includes questions for which this year's results are a deterioration on last year. We used to use this kind of traffic light system in my old job, as part of the corporate performance management system, and I smile to myself. The top of the table shows the response rate for the survey. I'm pretty impressed with it for the current year – seventy one percent of the workforce responded to the survey. But I think there's a problem with the year on year analysis and I make a note to contact one of the researchers I used to work with before I started the PhD who really knows about surveys to confirm what I'm thinking.

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Rhodri has produced a report showing how Records and Inspections results compare with those of other Departments, and the organisation as a whole. I am interested in why results are reported for departments rather than other groups such as managers, men, women, people who've just joined compared with staff who've been here a while. Surely reporting results by Department reinforces vertical divisions in the organisation whereas one of the goals of the organisation, and the Welsh Government, is to encourage lateral working (CYMRUcyf corporate plan, Welsh Assembly Government 2005). I don't think Rhodri or Stella had thought about analysing the survey in any other way than by Department. "We get the Departments to develop action plans, to address the issues in the survey, which we then monitor, via the intranet. That's how we do it." (Stella) And I catch a look from Stella to Rhodri, and I feel slightly admonished for asking the question. Perhaps I should just listen for a bit. After all, it is only the first day of observations.

*Afternoon, 14 December 2010*

The room is stuffy and a bit too small for the number of people who have been invited. A blond wood meeting table occupies the centre of the room and staff from Records occupy red armchairs mainly to one side of the table, across from where Rhodri and Tracey from HR are sitting. Rhodri introduces the session, while Tracey writes in a notebook but doesn't speak during the meeting. The survey results for 'Records and Inspections' are flashed onto a projector screen and Rhodri starts to present the findings for each of the nine sections of questions. He then invites comments from staff. The atmosphere is pleasant, good natured, polite, with staff looking intently at the presentation slides on the screen.

What about the Red statements? What can we do about those?" (Rhodri)

The questions categorised as Red, where this year's performance is lower than last year's, are getting all of Rhodri's attention, and the discussion revolves around what can be done to address these perceived deficits. Ideas are what Rhodri's looking for from the staff. "Each department will be responsible for an action plan so your ideas are really valuable. How much do you use the intranet? Could we do more to publicise team achievements and success on the intranet?" (Rhodri).

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One or two people are yawning by now, and there are still lots of survey results to get through. My interest too is waning and I feel rather frustrated that the focus is on the areas of the survey where it is perceived that the organisation is not doing so well. What about the questions where performance is strong? From these, I can see that almost all respondents understand the purpose of the organisation and its values, people feel respected and that staff feel they have the skills to do their jobs, and agree they feel they can approach their line manager to discuss their performance.

Rhodri tries again, asking for comments on the quality of line management, the state of communications between different teams, the need for social events. There are a few more comments and the discussions peters out. Rhodri asks about the survey itself, quite proudly announcing that there were 117 questions.

**“Could it be shorter? There are a lot of questions. And maybe more space for us to write our own comments? I think the year on year statistics are pretty good though.” (Alun, non-managerial employee, Records and Inspection)**

The ‘problem’ that I think I have spotted in those ‘year on year statistics’ bites at me again. Have I got my facts right? Are a lot of them unimportant and misleading due to the small sample size and the rate of response? I wonder whether to say anything at this point. If I was still in my pre PhD management job, I would know what to do, but I’m here as a student learning to be an academic researcher. Should I try and fix the problem, or just note it down as an interesting piece of data to analyse later?

**“The bloody staff survey. It’s so unbelievably awful. Talk about dissecting a frog. You just get a dead frog. I don’t get cross very easily but I did get cross and grumpy about the survey. You are put under a lot of pressure to do the survey. Our Head of Department gets it in the neck for not getting our Department to do it” (Carys, Line Manager, Learning and Partnerships)**

(continues on next page)

Rhodri ends the session by thanking staff for coming along and contributing their ideas. Back in the HR room, I asked him and Tracey how they felt it went. I thought Rhodri had been genuinely interested in what staff had to say. "There weren't so many ideas this time. They don't seem to want to think outside the box, they're getting a bit resigned to it all, I guess. We used to get a lot of ideas, now it's more a struggle." (Rhodri) When talking to Stella later, Rhodri lists some of the ideas that came from Records and Inspection. "Oooh, I like that one. We'll try something like that." (Stella). Staff ideas seem to be categorised very quickly into 'good' and 'not so good', 'liked' and 'not liked'. When I mention that I am pretty impressed with the response rate to the survey and that overall, engagement as measured by the survey is high, both Stella and Rhodri seem to be dissatisfied with what I say. Dissatisfaction with the satisfactory survey results, the ideas coming from staff, and the satisfactory rate of response to the survey at company level, seems to be the order of the day.

### *7.3.2 Experiencing the staff survey at CYMRUcyf: discussion*

CYMRUcyf has conducted an annual staff survey for five years. I had access to two years' results, for 2009 and 2010, for the whole organisation and its three Departments. The survey used a model similar to the UK Civil People Survey (UK Civil Service 2011) where a five item Engagement Index score was generated, and CYMRUcyf could compare their results with other organisations operating in the public sector. The CYMRUcyf staff survey appears similar to the Gallup Q12 (Harter et al 2002) in that it seeks to measure the degree to which staff agree or disagree that conditions and resources that have been associated with higher employee engagement are present in their workplace. Unlike the Gallup Q12 which has thirteen items, there were 117 questions in the CYMRUcyf staff survey. 112 of these were scale questions, where staff indicate their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements arranged in nine sections (a summary is included in Appendix Item 18). In addition there were a small selection of questions specific to CYMRUcyf, mainly relating to the provision of training during the previous year. The remaining closed questions ask staff to indicate how likely they were to want to stay with the organisation, and to record if they have felt bullied or harassed in the last year. A single open question invited staff to make their own comments about the organisation or the survey itself.

According to CYMRUcyf's staff survey results for 2009 and 2010, the organisation's engagement levels were high, relative to other public sector organisations. These results could be associated with the strong sense of perceived organisational support identified by both managerial and non-managerial staff, which is then reciprocated by employees in the form of additional engagement (Gourlay et al 2012). In ninety percent of the questions, half or more of the CYMRUcyf staff responded that they strongly agreed or agreed with the statements, which described positive attributes in the organisation. Two of the questions that received support from fewer than half of the staff were reverse score questions, where a low score was desirable. The five questions from the CYMRUcyf staff survey that were weighted and grouped to form an Engagement Index score for the whole organisation (UK Civil Service 2011) are shown in Figure Sixty Seven. For all five questions, the proportion of staff at CYMRUcyf who agreed with the statement exceeded the results for the UK benchmark.

**Figure 7.2: Engagement Index questions, comparative results, CYMRUcyf, 2010**

| Statement   | Proportion of CYMRUcyf staff who strongly agree or agree | UK benchmark (UK Civil Service People Survey 2010) |
|---|--|--|
| I am proud when I tell others I am part of the organisation     | 87%  | 55%  |
| I would recommend the organisation as a great place to work     | 65%  | 42%  |
| I feel a strong personal attachment to the organisation         | 53%  | 46%  |
| The organisation inspires me to do the best in my job           | 65%  | 40%  |
| The organisation motivates me to help it achieve its objectives | 65%  | 36%  |

*Source: UK Civil Service People Survey 2010, and internal CYMRUcyf documents*

Using Purcell's framework (2010) for an "effective and authoritative employee engagement survey" (p6), I demonstrate in Figure 7.3 how the survey administered to CYMRUcyf staff was stronger in terms of the administration of the survey, encouraging staff to take part, making sure that responses were anonymous, benchmarking results against other organisations and feeding back results and encouraging action in light of the survey, and less strong in gaining senior management and governing body support, staff involvement, its approach to analysis and its integration with business objectives. This analysis provides further evidence of the survey at CYMRUcyf being an example of a transactional rather than a transformational approach

(MacLeod and Clarke 2009), as notes in Chapter Six on the management of employee engagement.

**Figure 7.3: Characteristics of an effective employee engagement survey (Purcell 2010):**

| Feature   | Present at CYMRUcyf | Evidence from CYMRUcyf  |
|---|---------------------|---|
| <p>Top management active support:</p> <p>“there must be strong support from top management...survey aims, design and actions should be on the agenda of the executive board/Board of Directors.” (p6)</p>   | Weak                | <p>Top management support was limited, according to HR Unit.</p> <p>No evidence of interest from members of governing body (according to senior managers).</p> <p>HR Director reported purpose and design of survey to the CYMRUcyf senior management team, its results, and asked for authority to lead on the development of departmental action plans. The survey was not reported to the CYMRUcyf governing body.</p>   |
| <p>Alignment with business strategy:</p> <p>“..the survey needs to be closely aligned to business strategy...this will involve discussions with appropriate senior managers.” (p6)</p>  | Moderate            | <p>Completion of staff survey and action planning process included as an activity in the organisation’s corporate plan.</p> <p>No evidence that the content or design of the survey adapted to reflect organisational priorities (e.g. working in partnership with other bodies).</p>   |
| <p>Involve employees in the design:</p> <p>“..the survey needs the support of the employees and must cover items of importance from their perspective...discussing...with trade unions or employee representatives...focus groups...can identify key issues that need to be covered in the questionnaire.” (p6)</p> | Moderate            | <p>Staff consulted via different fora on frequency and content of survey. HR Director with Head of Support Services decided whether the survey took place or not, its frequency, method of administration and content.</p> <p>I identified several members of staff at CYMRUcyf with research and data analysis skills that could be utilised to carry out more sophisticated analyses of survey results. I suggested in my feedback report that a working group be established so that these skills could be accessed.</p> |
| <p>Decide on the arrangements for the survey:</p> <p>“...the decision must be taken whether to survey all employees or rely on a sample...will the survey be filled in by hand...or completed online? Employees may be given a choice about which method suits them best.” (p6)</p>                                 | Strong              | <p>All employees surveyed.</p> <p>Primary method of survey administration was via the organisation’s intranet. The method was chosen by the HR Unit, but it was discussed and agreed at a meeting of the staff consultative committee.</p>  |



**Figure 7.3: Characteristics of an effective employee engagement survey (Purcell 2010)**

| Feature   | Present at CYMRUcyf     | Evidence from CYMRUcyf  |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| <p>Encourage everyone to take part:</p> <p>"Deliberate and considered action needs to be taken...to publicise the survey...most surveys can achieve a response rate of around 60-70% if there has been a concerted effort to 'sell' the survey". (p7)</p>   | <p>Strong (overly?)</p> | <p>Message on the organisation's intranet, face to face and video briefings directly to front line staff, and via line manager working groups.</p> <p>Reminder messages sent to all staff by email and messages placed on the intranet. Senior managers contacted by HR to promote the survey in their respective departments.</p> <p>Some complaints of pressure to complete the survey.</p> <p>Response rate has consistently been high (70%+ since being established in 2005).</p> |
| <p>Ensure confidentiality:</p> <p>"Staff must be confident that their answers cannot be traced back to them and that they are able to say what they really think and feel....data is never broken to groups of less than 10 people...collecting some demographic data is important but it must not inadvertently identify someone from a minority group." (p7)</p>          | <p>Strong</p>           | <p>Survey contains wording that stresses confidentiality.</p> <p>Results reported at Department level only, and not to smaller groups given the modest overall size of the workforce.</p> <p>Demographic data collected but not used to inform analyses (I suggested in my feedback report that analyses by gender, age and length of service would be safe in terms of confidentiality if they took place at the organisation level).</p>  |
| <p>What questions to ask:</p> <p>"The range of questions should include measures of engagement itself and those key parts of people management and employment relations...which are likely to be causal factors." (p7)</p>  | <p>Strong (overly?)</p> | <p>117 questions in the survey.</p> <p>Most staff I interviewed reported they felt the questionnaire was too long.</p> <p>Questions covered nine areas which have been identified through factor analysis to be associated with engagement.</p>   |
| <p>Benchmark the questions to compare results:</p> <p>"...it is important to be able to benchmark the results over time to plot changes in levels of engagement and compare the results with those in the same sector and the economy as a whole...the overall questionnaire should not take more than 15 minutes to complete otherwise response rates will fall." (p7)</p> | <p>Moderate</p>         | <p>Internal benchmarking of results and response rates (between departments) and with other organisations in the public sector, but not other sectors.</p> <p>Most questions have remained consistent since the survey was established.</p> <p>Some staff reported that the questionnaire could take 30 minutes to complete.</p>  |

**Figure 7.3: Characteristics of an effective employee engagement survey (Purcell 2010)**

| Feature  | Present at CYMRUcyf    | Evidence from CYMRUcyf   |
|--|------------------------|--|
| <p>Analyse the results:</p> <p>“Simple descriptive analysis..provides the basis for understanding the overall picture of employee engagement...more sophisticated analysis will allow questions to be grouped together to explore patterns of behaviour, what factors contribute to engagement and how these differ between types of employee, departments or locations.” (p7)</p>   | <p>Weak</p>            | <p>Simple descriptive analysis provided.</p> <p>Ranked list approach to categorising survey results, showing proportional and absolute changes between years. Any results that recorded a proportional decline from the previous year, marked as ‘red’, those recording a proportional increase were marked as ‘green’. Focus by HR on proportional rather than absolute changes in responses, and on results where decreases recorded.</p> <p>The majority of year on year changes reported to staff were within the margin of error for a survey of this size, given the response rate and the population size. Staff were not advised of this issue.</p> <p>Analyses using demographic characteristics not pursued. Vertical (by department) analyses undertaken.</p> |
| <p>Reporting back and taking action:</p> <p>“...it is good practice to report the results of the engagement survey within two months of the closing date. Full results need to be reported to senior management and...to employee consultative committees. There needs to be discussion of areas where action has to be taken to build levels of engagement or deal with weaknesses...the results to be provided to employees using various forms of company media but especially via team meetings...where there can be discussion...some employers make the engagement survey results one of the key performance indicators for line managers.” (p8)</p> | <p>Moderate-strong</p> | <p>Survey results fed back face to face and in written reports to managers and to front line staff.</p> <p>Discussion between HR staff and employees at all levels in the organisation to identify implications of the survey and suggest actions.</p> <p>Feedback on action plans provided mainly through company intranet.</p> <p>HR staff attended team meetings to advise on action plan development.</p> <p>Survey results not a KPI for line managers.</p> <p>Staff from the HR team reported frustration that departmental action plans were poorly designed and little commitment to implementation.</p>   |

### *7.3.3 Experiencing the staff survey at CYMRUcyf: the perspective of non managerial employees*

Using the 'story' from Section 7.3.1, I offer the following comments on staff experiences of the CYMRUcyf employee engagement survey. Non managerial staff were invited rather than principal protagonists in the survey process. A high proportion of the workforce at CYMRUcyf has consistently taken part in the survey (2010: response rate of 71%) and during the feedback sessions that I attended, I found that non-managerial staff were willing to listen to the presentation of survey results provided by the HR Unit, comment on its findings and contribute their thoughts and comments on what needed to take place in the organisation to address issues raised in the survey. However in each of the feedback sessions I attended, initial interest from staff gave way to reduced interaction as staff seemed to tire of being asked for their opinion and to contribute ideas and suggestions. As the sessions went on, the more constructive contributions offered by staff at the beginning of the discussion were replaced by complaints and criticisms of colleague' behaviour and attitudes. This seemed to reflect feedback I had during interviews that the survey when first introduced in 2005 had been greeted with enthusiasm which had given way to more of a sense of cynicism as staff reported that the same issues appeared to arise each year, and that while some visible actions were undertaken (e.g. increased number of 'walkabouts' by senior managers), staff did not feel the same sense of enthusiasm they once did. This resonates with Rousseau's finding that "people's past experiences with HR practices influences the way that they perceive and interpret HR and other organizational practices in their current organization." (Wright and Nishii 2007, p15). A minority of CYMRUcyf staff said they had 'learned' not to contribute so heavily to such consultation initiatives, as they felt that they had made efforts in the past which had not led to any significant changes (e.g. increased progression opportunities):

"Issues are the same year on year, and they are trying to tackling them. But the issues always seem to come up again, like communication." (Non-managerial employee, long stayer, satellite office, June 2011)

“You learn after a few years how much to give, or say. I’ve said things before, and then what? I go along now with what other people say, it all gets very repetitive, and it’s the same people who speak up each time. Same questions over and over. I can’t be bothered any more.” (Non-managerial employee, long stayer and served two terms on the staff committee, head office, June 2011).

The impact of the ‘life stage’ of the survey initiative at CYMRUcyf is a factor which is worthy of more exploration (Van de Ven and Poole 1995). The HR Unit felt that fewer ideas were coming forward from staff, and the response rate to the survey was falling (although in 2010 71% of staff took part). The appropriateness of organizational life course literature is certainly worth exploring to help explain how staff change their attitudes and willingness to contribute to an organisational employee engagement initiative, and how employers respond to this decline in interest and enthusiasm.

A large number of non managerial staff (and line managers) felt the survey was over-long, took too long to complete and as survey length has been associated with reduced response rate and a higher incidence of “don’t know” answers (Deutskens et al 2004), the quality of responses to the CYMRUcyf staff survey may have suffered. A minority of staff did feel pressured to take part in the survey and resented the numerous reminders sent to them by email and via their Head of Department.

I saw staff willing to take part in the survey feedback sessions, share their views and contribute ideas, although on a number of occasions I observed staff commenting that suggestions offered had been tried before. The team from the HR Unit asked a lot of questions about what actions the organisation should take to address the issues raised in the staff survey and towards the end of each session, I felt that staff were making suggestions for the sake of providing an ‘answer’ rather than considering what would really improve their engagement at work. However, I did not ask staff if this was the case, and no member of staff raised it as a matter during interviews. However, as I describe in the later section where I recount my experience of observing the staff survey feedback meetings at CYMRUcyf, I found myself contributing an idea because I felt that the HR team were asking for ideas very frequently.

#### *7.3.4 Experiencing the staff survey at CYMRUcyf: the HR Unit perspective*

Staff from the HR Unit were the principal agents in the employee engagement survey process at CYMRUcyf. Both Rhodri (HR Officer) and Tracey (HR Assistant) felt it was important to hold feedback events with non managerial staff from each department in order to provide environment for employees to discuss issues they might not be willing to do so with their line managers present.

There was a strong feeling amongst the staff of the HR Unit, and Stella the HR Director in particular, that increases in the already high survey scores was necessary and possible. From the interviews I conducted with members of the HR Unit, the principal measurable outcome they expected from engagement activities was improved engagement scores in the staff survey, as well as an increased rate of response to the survey, especially from one Department which was viewed as lacking in commitment to the project. Stella the HR Director felt it was particularly important to be able to compare their survey results with other organisations:

“Look Natalie, I’ve done a report for the Senior Management Committee, showing how our survey results compares with other organisations. We’re at the top end on almost all of the scores! And we’re so much better than them.” [pointing at the name of a large Welsh based organisation] “They’re really struggling.” [Stella, HR Director, observation note, March 2011]

The HR Unit placed considerable emphasis on quantitative measures of engagement. This was important in the management of employee engagement as their faith in numbers influenced how they viewed the results of the staff survey. Very small changes in survey results between the 2009 and 2010 that were within the margin of error for a small survey with the response rate achieved were presented to staff as important as larger changes in results. The survey items that receive most attention from HR and the staff were not only those where scores are considered to be deficient (items where a relatively low proportion of staff have strongly agreed or agreed that a driver of engagement is in place) but any question where there has been a fall in the percentage of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing with a statement between 2009 and 2010. Statements where scores were high, or which had increased between 2009 and 2010 (especially in the absolute number of responses) did not receive attention from the HR team or

staff in the feedback sessions, although in other forums, staff did comment at times on the changes in the number of responses to survey items between the two years.

As I observed at other events at CYMRUcyf, the team from the HR Unit did offer staff an opportunity to voice their opinions on the content of the staff survey, using forms and questions placed on the organisational intranet and reports presented to managerial and non-managerial staff forums, including the staff committee. As well as collecting these views, I observed the HR team collating the responses received and placing these on the intranet. I saw less evidence that they fed back to staff what changes, if any, had taken place to the content and frequency of the staff survey, as a result of consulting staff. The HR Director and the Head of Support Services made the final decision on the administration, timing and content of the staff survey.

The staff in the HR Unit appeared to experience the employee engagement survey as both an opportunity to provide non managerial staff in particular with an chance to voice their opinions and generate ideas for action for improving employee engagement, but also as a process where it was difficult to manage staff expectations as the responsibility for implementing actions was a Departmental responsibility. The team in the HR Unit also seemed to adopt a deficit mindset towards the quality and quantity of staff response to the survey which appeared to be influenced by the number of years that the survey had been operating. The team in the HR Unit appeared to view the staff survey as an activity which needed to generate action from other parties in the organisation and became frustrated by what they perceived to be a lack of commitment to the process by line and senior managers. In short, they felt they were doing all they could do, and were being let down by others in the organisation.

In response to a comment I made in my feedback report regarding some staff feeling pressured to take part in the survey, Stella, the HR Director, responded in what appeared to me to be a defensive manner to this suggestion, as shown in the extract from my feedback report (figure 7.4) and observation notes:

**Figure 7.4: Feedback on survey process, report and field notes, 2011**

“Taking part in a staff survey is voluntary and a small number of staff felt that they were being pressured to complete the questionnaire. Staff should be reassured that they can choose whether or not to take part in the survey, otherwise response, especially in terms of quality, could be adversely affected. If it is felt that poor response is concentrated amongst certain groups, other ways of eliciting staff views should be considered rather than stressing that the employee survey must be completed.”

(Extract from my feedback report to CYMRUcyf, November 2011)

HR Director, Stella’s response to this part of my report:

“We know that participation in the survey is voluntary. No one is forced to do it and we make sure that people know this. But some parts of the organisation won’t take part unless we nag them. We want to know how to increase the number of people taking part in the survey. That’s why we thought it would be good to have you here.” When she says this, her lips are pursed and her arms crossed over her chest. I feel she’s dissatisfied with me again for not having the answers she’s seeking.

(Recreated from research journal, 24 October 2011)

### *7.3.5 Experiencing the staff survey at CYMRUcyf: my perspective*

Like the non managerial staff who were receiving feedback on the staff survey from the HR Unit, I began with an enthusiastic attitude. I scanned the survey results and was impressed with the response rate and the amount of effort being employed by the HR Unit to make sure that staff from across the organisation had opportunities to receive feedback on the survey results for their department, and how they were encouraged to discuss ideas for improving their working conditions. I experienced an overload of information during the feedback sessions as there were so many survey questions that the HR Unit wanted staff to discuss. In each of the sessions, we ran out of time to cover each of the nine areas of the survey. I experienced concern regarding what I perceived to be misleading analyses of the survey data and also frustration due to the concentration (of both the HR Unit and the non managerial staff taking part in the feedback sessions) on items in the survey that were perceived to be weak, or declining (i.e. red

items). At no point did any employee taking part in these sessions, or when they discussed their experience of the staff survey in an interview, indicate they had thought what would make a significant difference to their personal engagement at work. Their answers, as in the case of the HR Professionals that I report in Chapter Three (Section 5.2.1), appeared abstract rather than personal and informed by their own experience.

I also experienced a sense of dissonance during the feedback sessions, not only when I became concerned about the focus on year on year changes in survey results that were small, but also that I felt I ought to provide some 'answers' to the HR's requests for ideas about how to improve employee engagement. I did this once, as I felt almost a degree of sympathy for Rhodri and Tracey from the HR Unit who had been repeating their requests for ideas about how to improve employee engagement and had been met with very limited response (this was during a particularly long feedback session). As soon as I had contributed my 'idea', I felt that I had gone beyond my role as an academic researcher and that I was there to observe and not contribute directly. By contributing a suggestion, I may have influenced the direction of the discussion. However, my experience was interesting in that I had reached a point in the discussion where I felt I ought to make a contribution in order to 'help HR out' with suggestions and this may also have been the case for employees present in the feedback session. Having made a contribution, I was interested to note Rhodri and Tracey's response which as for non-managerial employees present in the sessions, was to seemingly decide very quickly if a suggestion was appropriate or not, by providing a response along the lines of "oohh, nice one Natalie". The team from the HR Unit appeared to almost instantaneously evaluate each of the ideas that staff made, and did not appear to listen to staff suggestions without coming to what appeared an almost instantaneous judgement as to the attractiveness of the idea.

### *7.3.6 Experiencing the staff survey at CYMRUcyf: conclusion*

"...engagement is a complex issue which requires a greater depth of understanding that can be provided by engagement surveys alone....engagement is a multi layered concept that requires real depth of understanding to be influenced successfully." (Gourlay et al 2012, p3)



CYMRUcyf, like many other organisations interested in managing employee engagement, has conducted a staff survey (Alfes et al 2010). The instrument they used in 2009 and 2010 was lengthy, comprising 117 questions which all bar one, were closed. The responses were collated at organisation and department level and grouped into three different categories denoted by the colours red, amber and green based on differences in results between the two years. Documents and presentations on the survey results were shared with non managerial staff who were invited to suggest ideas for improving employee engagement. Although there was variation between departments, response rates at the organisation level were consistently high although there were some signs of a reduction in response rate. The HR Unit felt it was getting more difficult to get staff to contribute ideas that were considered novel or innovative, and were concerned about the relatively low response rate from one of the Departments. The non managerial staff that I spoke to felt the survey was over long and a minority of these employees felt pressured to complete the survey against their wishes.

My experience of observing how the results of the staff survey were presented to staff was one of frustration for two reasons: the focus in the staff feedback sessions on survey items where HR had categorised them as 'RED' i.e. there had been a deterioration in score between 2009 and 2010 and secondly, that many of the changes in survey items scores between 2009 and 2010 were within the margin of error for a survey of the size undertaken at CYMRUcyf and that the number of scores that merited attention given the size of change (either positive or negative) were in fact very small. Other researchers have found that research carried out in organisations as part of a change management initiative can be misinterpreted and only partially shared by the department responsible for its production (Weeks 2004).

Frustration also appeared to be experienced by the team from the HR Unit at what they perceived to be the reduction in both the quality and quantity of responses provided by staff in the feedback sessions for improving employee engagement, and also the non managerial staff who felt they were required to complete a survey which was over long which was unlikely to generate any significant change from previous years.

## 7.4 Summary and conclusions

In this Chapter I have examined only one of the numerous employee engagement interventions used at CYMRUcyf to gain an understanding of employee experience. In conclusion, there appeared to be some unintended consequences from CYMRUcyf's approach to conducting its staff survey which generated a sense of frustration and anger amongst HR, the wider workforce and myself. While staff surveys can provide data on the levels of employee engagement within and between organisations (and variations by work groups), the limitations to staff surveys have been noted and "the engagement survey must be well designed and have the confidence of the employees as well as the senior managers" (Purcell 2010, p6). They have been regarded as little more than "relatively 'blunt' instruments in the sense they can offer relatively few insights as to why attitude change has been observed or not...we feel it is essential to go beyond the results of surveys to examine in a more qualitative fashion..." (Martin et al 1998, p83). A common characteristic of the majority of employee engagement surveys undertaken in organisations, and the surveys used in academic research, is that they are cross sectional and collect information at one point in time from individuals (Martin et al 1998), whose responses are aggregated to produce measures of engagement at various levels in the organisation (e.g. Department, or groups of teams) thus reinforcing a vertical rather than a horizontal emphasis to survey analysis. This approach has been observed both at CYMRUcyf and also in the wider Welsh Public Service from my analysis of the three staff surveys in Chapter Four. While they can be repeated, point in time surveys designed to generate organisation level data cannot provide information on fluctuations and trends in individual level engagement. This means that survey data collected by organisations is not very useful for employees wishing to understand their own state engagement, which improvements at the collective level (Gourlay et al 2012) could build up into improved engagement scores at the organisational level. As well as leaving staff frustrated, taking part in a staff survey would leave many employees none the wiser on their own level of state engagement, their proximal colleagues and importantly, their line manager.

This Chapter completes the discussion of the conceptions, management and experiences of employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service. In the next and final chapter, I summarise how I have conducted this research, present my findings and set out a research agenda for the future.

**PART THREE: CONCLUSIONS**

**Chapter Eight:**

**Full circle**

01 June 2012

*We're overlooking the estuary, eating bacon baps and putting the world to rights. My friend has finally received his notice of redundancy from the Council, three years after I decided to leave. We talk about what could happen next.*

*"I have the dogs. I'm always being asked to do more fundraising." My friend says.*

*"There's no need to rush into anything. Take your time." Is my response.*

*"If I do that, Carol will find me plenty of things to do!"*

*I have come up here regularly since I left my job to meet up with my friend. It seems appropriate that as I am finishing at the University, he is finishing here. According to Gallup, having a best friend at work can help your sense of engagement. Was that important for me? What if I had stayed on and he had been the one to leave?*

*I think a great line manager makes a difference. I would have stayed for that. It started well but I stopped enjoying my job, and both my manager and the overall work environment changed. I didn't like the outcome and so I left and started this PhD. That's another story, for another day.*

*I have been asked if I would consider returning here. Rarely is going back a good idea in my view. Too much baggage, too much expectation.*

*So we both sit here, thinking of our respective futures. I have only a few weeks writing left, and then a new job, home and life to be made.*

## **8.1 Introduction**

In this Chapter, I summarise how I conducted my research and present my findings. I describe the strengths and weaknesses of the study and my principal contributions to knowledge and practice. I provide a research agenda for advancing knowledge of employee engagement in a Welsh public sector context. I develop a contextualised description of employee engagement (Figure 8.2) that demonstrates the tensions between organisational and individual level engagement where employees are likely to find it difficult, as a result of institutional conditions and the motives of organisational level initiatives, to find the resources and conditions necessary for personal engagement (Kahn 1990) to flourish. Using Kahn's framework for personal engagement at work and my personal experiences, I have learned why I felt strong personal engagement at work at the beginning of my last job and why this waned. I am now clearer what employee engagement means to me and to others. I also have a framework for understanding that while engagement at work may be transient, threatened and weakened by individual, organisational and institutional conditions and experiences, it is ultimately possible.

### **8.1.1 Introduction**

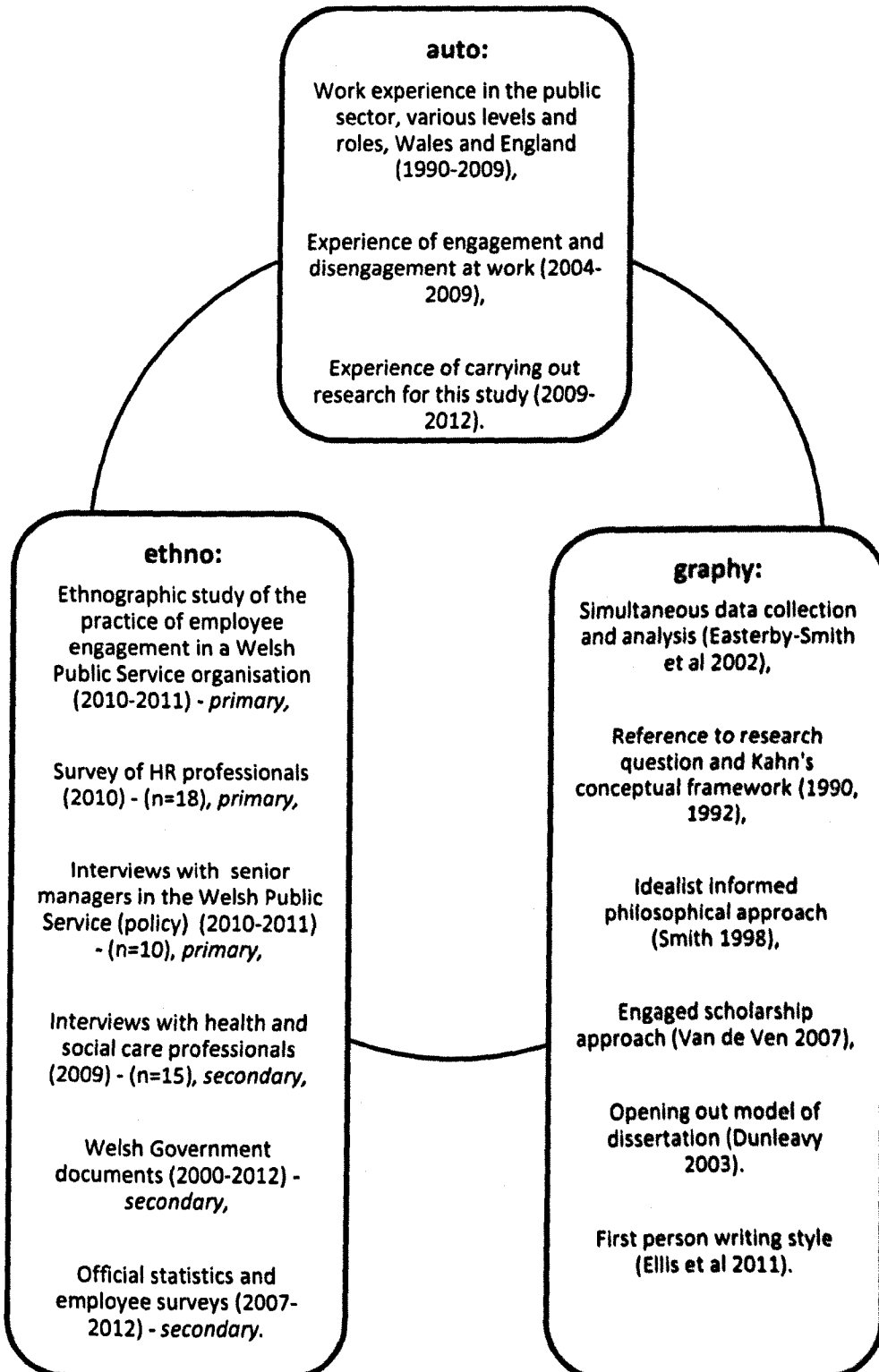
This study began primarily as a curiosity about the reasons why organisations in the public sector in Wales were undertaking employee engagement. As I have progressed, I have become more interested in identifying and understanding the connection between an individual's sense of personal engagement at work and organisational efforts to build engagement at the workforce level. In this final Chapter, I summarise how I undertook my research into employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service and describe the principal findings. I consider how my work has made a contribution to practice, method and subject area scholarship. Finally, I present a research agenda for taking forward the exploration of employee engagement in the specific context of the Welsh Public Service.

## **8.2 How I conducted this research: summary and reflections**

I describe in Chapter Two how I developed, adapted and implemented a research design that examined how employee engagement is conceived, managed and experienced in the Welsh Public Service, using my own experiences and recollections as well as those of others. I employed a number of research methods, mainly to collect qualitative data, to explore the topic of employee engagement in a public sector context. As a reminder of the methods I used to

collect and analyse the data I collected, I reproduce Figure 1.2 from Chapter One on the next page. Different parts of the dataset have been used to varying degrees to inform the different elements of the research question (as shown in Figure 2.2 in Chapter Two, Section 2.1.2). Findings from my research were presented in Chapters Three to Seven.

**Figure 1.2: Data collection and analysis components, my autoethnography, 2012**



### *8.2.1 Strengths and limitations of my study*

This study has been exploratory in nature, due to the nascent (Edmondson and McManus 2007) state of knowledge in the field of employee engagement (Shuck 2011, Truss 2012) and of knowledge concerning the public services in Wales in a post devolution context (Drakeford 2005, 2010). The research question was relatively wide and as I stated in Chapter One, my interest in grounding my research firmly within an understanding of the issues facing the Welsh Public Sector has meant that I have not devoted as much attention to other aspects of the research question, in particular the experiences of staff at CYMRUcyf. In hindsight, a more tightly focused study of one aspect such as management or experiences of employee engagement would have allowed space for me to devote more attention to describing processes taking place within the case organisation, and the responses of their workforce, in more detail. However, I do make recommendations in Section 8.5 of this Chapter on further research where I suggest that further analysis of the data that I have collected, particularly with regard to the management and experience of employee engagement at CYMRUcyf, would be useful for the advancement of scholarly knowledge in this respect.

### *8.2.2 My experience of writing this dissertation*

In terms of writing this dissertation, I have particularly enjoyed interacting with the material that I used to construct Chapter Three on the context facing the Welsh Public Service. I less enjoyed the research involved in Chapter Four on workforce characteristics as the gaps and quality of material I could find mean that I can only provide a limited and approximate picture of engagement amongst WPS staff. I found Chapter Five on conceptions particularly gruelling as it contains three sources of empirical data, all of which needed to be related to existing scholarly knowledge and to each other. However, it was in this Chapter that I realised the potential that autobiographical data has to complement the ethnographic data by bringing in a dynamic and a temporal element to understanding how conceptions of employee engagement can change and be influenced by a range of factors. I found writing the autobiographical element of Chapter Six somewhat challenging as it involved remembering times during the latter part of my last job that were difficult to deal with at the time. I have selected from a range of experiences that I had during this period which give an indication, rather than a full picture, of events and emotions I encountered. In this Chapter I came to understand how partial accounts of experiences and knowledge can be. This has made me reflect on the comments that I make in the interview extract I include in Chapter One (Section 1.3.2) where I say that I think

ethnographic research can improve on the quality and 'truthfulness' of knowledge collected through other means. I am not so sure now that using ethnographic methods will necessarily overcome the limitations I perceived of "people in surveys and focus groups sometimes tell us what they think we want to hear" (p11) but I consider that the extended involvement that ethnographic research entails is still more likely to identify inconsistencies and contradictions in accounts that can be questioned and explored once a degree of trust has been built.

I have struggled to find a sense of connection with the material in Chapter Seven on experiences, which is a surprise to me as one of my main objectives was to understand how staff perceive organisational employee engagement initiatives. I do not feel that I have achieved the quality of discussion in Chapter Seven that I have in the other findings chapters. It may be that I was experiencing a reduced degree of psychological availability for this part of the writing task as I was approaching the end of the period I had allocated for producing the dissertation, was feeling particularly tired and starting to give thought to what I was going to do after completing the PhD. Attempting to combine the writing of the dissertation alongside job hunting and working has been known to compromise both thesis quality and likelihood of completion and is not recommended (Cryer 2000, Bangor University 2009, Le Voi and Potter 2000).

In Figure 8.1 I show some of the strengths and limitations of the study that I have conducted, arranged according to the four constituencies I identified in my research question (practice, engagement scholarship, method scholarship and myself) (Figure 1.1 in Chapter One). Having summarised my research approach, reflected on my experience of writing this dissertation and listed the contributions of my research to different constituencies, in the next Section I offer a summary of the findings of my research, using the research question as a guide.



**Figure 8.1: Strengths and limitations of my study of employee engagement in the WPS**

| Strengths   | Limitations   |
|---|---|
| <i>For practitioners and policy makers:</i>   |   |
| Research heavily informed by a discussion and analysis of policy and socio-economic context particular to Wales.  | Single case study may limit value in terms of providing examples of D <sub>E</sub> approaches across organisations.   |
| Knowledge of both managerial and non managerial staff aspirations for, and experiences of, employee engagement will assist practitioners to understand the range of attitudes and responses to D <sub>E</sub> . | Lack of evaluation of impact of individual and groups of D <sub>E</sub> interventions limits the value of the study as a source of 'recipes' (Sparrow and Balain 2010 in Albrecht 2010) and 'answers' about which interventions are likely to be most effective in a public sector context. |
| Practical advice on autoethnography informed management practice, recommendations for practice generally and a context informed research agenda.  | Some aspects of the case organisation studied (CYMRUcyf) do not reflect wider norms in the Welsh Public Service (degree of unionisation, age profile and Welsh language speakers). Also small size of organisation is not a characteristic shared by the overall WPS.                       |
|   | Most statistics on the characteristics of the workforce relate to the wider public sector, due to lack of availability of data specifically for the WPS. Some data (e.g. WERS 2004) are somewhat dated.   |
| <i>For scholarship:</i>   |   |
| Research design (exploratory, mixed methods) fits with stage of theoretical development of both employee engagement and the Welsh Public Service (Edmondson and McManus 2007).                                  | No comparison with non public sector workplaces in Wales, or with public sector employers outside Wales, so comparative research would be valuable.   |
| Knowledge gained at multiple levels and from multiple perspectives about a multi-dimensional concept.   | Most data collected (other than auto) is cross sectional, which has been noted tends to dominate studies of employee engagement (Kahn 1992). Longitudinal study of the impact of a change in line manager recommended in the research agenda in Section 8.5.                                |
| Extension of knowledge about state and device engagement in a public sector setting, generally acknowledged to be under-researched for HRM (Boyne 1999).  |   |
| <i>For me:</i>  |   |
| Developed an expertise in a topic that is popular amongst practitioners and likely to be of interest to future employers.   | Study was conducted in a sector I previously worked which has very limited recruitment at present. Study not focused on a sector that I might be considering working in the future.   |

## **8.3 Employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service: summary of research findings and contributions**

### **8.3.1 Summary of research findings**

My study has been concerned with understanding employee engagement in a number of senses and from a range of perspectives. I sought to describe how employee engagement is being managed in practice and how interventions introduced within organisations to improve employee engagement are experienced by staff. My study was not concerned with evaluating the impact of initiatives either at the individual or organisational levels on employee well being or organisational performance. I do describe the outcomes being sought by senior managers (Chapter Three) and by the HR Unit at CYMRUcyf (Chapter Six) and the results that staff think their employer are seeking (Chapter Seven). My research question for this study was:

**“How is employee engagement conceived, managed and experienced in the Welsh Public Service?”**

I found that employee engagement was conceived in a number of ways by the different constituencies that took part in the research. The HR Professionals and senior managers from the Welsh Public Service conceived employee engagement as a positive state for individuals, particularly consisting of employee attitudes and behaviours that demonstrated a focus on supporting the organisation’s aims and a willingness to proactively provide additional work effort. The senior managers’ conceptions of employee engagement were more similar to those offered by HR Professionals working in the private rather than the public sector. The majority of respondents did not differentiate between engagement with a job or role and with an organisation. Respondents did not conceive employee engagement as an approach undertaken in organisations nor did they refer to the definition of employee engagement constructed by the Wales Public Service Workforce Forum (2009). There appeared to be crossover between conceptions of employee engagement with the longer established constructs of organisational commitment (Meyer and Allen 1991) and organisational citizenship behaviour (Organ and Ryan 1995) which are recognised as separate constructs in the academic literature (Alfes et al 2010). This crossover demonstrates a focus amongst HR Professionals and senior WPS managers on visible consequences from employee engagement for organisations. Employee engagement as a concept in the Welsh Public Service seems to bear little resemblance the concept of personal engagement at work as described by Kahn (1990) and more like the organisationally oriented concepts of organisational commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour.

My personal conceptions of employee engagement also demonstrated an organisational focus but more as an activity undertaken by employers rather than as 'visible results for the organisation' conceptions of the HR Professionals or senior WPS managers. I assessed how my conceptions of employee engagement changed between 2009 and 2012 and identified two main streams of my personal conceptions: individual level state engagement (conceived as "S<sub>E</sub>") where an employee experience a positive sense of connection with their work role, and device engagement (conceived as "D<sub>E</sub>") where activities are pursued by an employer with the intention of adapting employee attitudes and behaviours towards the organisation. I found that my conceptions were influenced by a range of factors including my past work experience, practitioner and academic literature, consultations with stakeholders in the spirit of engaged scholarship and different stages of the empirical data collection I undertook. Previous academic and practitioner conceptions have identified both individual and organisational aspects to employee engagement but have tended to treat them as separate (Schaufeli and Bakker 2010) or have assumed they are complementary and mutually reinforcing (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, Shuck and Wollard 2010). Literature from the more critical school of management studies (as discussed in Section 1.4) and from the career management literature have found tensions between organisational and individual level priorities and interventions (Inkson and King 2010). My research finds evidence of these tensions in the Welsh Public Service.

I found that employee engagement can be managed at both the organisational and individual levels but that these did not appear to be connected to one another in practice, which is further evidence of the fundamental tensions between the two levels as discussed in the critical management studies literature. I found that transactional approaches dominated both my efforts to manage my personal engagement at work and that at CYMRUcyf, with employee engagement being taken seriously by a minority of stakeholders but not fully integrated with business or personal objectives (MacLeod and Clarke 2009). Constituencies other than employees such as external stakeholders were one of the 'audiences' for device employee engagement at CYMRUcyf. HR Professionals were most likely to cite interventions concerned with creating channels for employee voice and developing individual capacities through training and development to encourage staff to demonstrate desirable work behaviours (although not to assist employees to know and manage their own state engagement). Organisational level interventions (Albrecht 2010) dominated the responses of the HR Professionals and the practices that I observed at CYMRUcyf. I found that job and individual level interventions

dominated the practices I undertook when managing my own personal engagement at work. Managing employee engagement at CYMRUcyf was initiated and sustained by the staff from the HR Unit, with senior and line managers less involved and showing relatively little support. Neither managers or non managerial staff at CYMRUcyf felt they identified with the concept of working for the Welsh Public Service ahead of their own employer, although staff did take into account Welsh Government priorities and objectives in their day to day work. There is evidence from CYMRUcyf, the senior WPS managers I interviewed and my personal experience, that decisions to manage employee engagement were precipitated by a negatively perceived event (Jones et al 2011).

I identified a five stage process for managing employee engagement at CYMRUcyf: measurement, feedback, action planning, implementation and re-measurement which was intended to deliver improvements in staff survey scores within a twelve month cycle. I identified some of these steps in my own management efforts although the level of intervention (Albrecht 2010), principal agent and expected results were different. Short term quantitative results appeared to be sought from the employee engagement interventions at CYMRUcyf rather than longer term outcomes while in my own case, more qualitative and personal outcomes but also of a short term nature were sought. In my case, managing employee engagement was focused on improving and strengthening my personal engagement at work by connecting with my work role rather than seeking to be more committed to the organisation or to explicitly generate additional discretionary effort (as the conceptions of the HR Professionals and the senior managers prioritised). As has been demonstrated in the academic literature, managing employee engagement at CYMRUcyf and for myself consisted of numerous activities (Alfes et al 2010).

Using one example of the numerous organisational level employee engagement interventions pursued at CYMRUcyf, the staff survey, I found that staff and myself experienced a mix of attitudes, behaviours and emotions in response to this initiative. During the meetings I observed where staff from the HR Unit provided feedback to non managerial staff on the results of the employee survey, both staff and myself exhibited positive attitudes and willingness to contribute comments and ideas about how to improve engagement. This gave way to weariness, cynicism and withdrawal of idea generation and sharing behaviours. Staff from the HR Unit expressed frustration with what they perceived to be a lack of commitment on the part

of departmental managers to act upon the staff survey findings. Staff also expressed frustration at what they perceived to be the lack of resolution of issues brought up year on year by staff in the survey, and also frustration towards the survey itself and its administration which was viewed by a minority of staff as a requirement rather than an entirely voluntary contribution. I also experienced frustration at what I perceived to be a deficit mindset amongst the staff of the HR Unit towards the results of the survey and others in the organisation affecting the ways in which they communicated and used the survey results to generate action plans. Improving individual state engagement did not appear to figure in the CYMRUcyf employee engagement programme objectives, design or implementation and no regard was given to the possible impacts (positive or less so) on the nature and strength of employees' state engagement, despite individual well being reported to be compatible with workplace approaches (MacLeod and Clarke 2009, Shuck 2011).

From the evidence I have gathered in this study, I conclude the Welsh Public Service is different to the majority of private sector workplaces in Wales as a result of the sector's not for profit focus, the political context and its workforce characteristics. The Welsh Public Service comprises a range of employers operating different terms and conditions which are having to contend with falling budgets, increasing Welsh Government expectations and a requirement to work in collaboration with other organisations in a less market oriented model of public service delivery than is being pursued in England. The WPS workforce is mainly female and unionised and more likely to speak Welsh, have higher qualifications and to be older than their private sector counterparts. Welsh Government policy documents and the senior managers I interviewed identified a number of issues which are likely to undermine rather than support individuals capacity to maintain a strong sense of personal engagement at work (Chapter Three). The demand for labour in Wales, especially that with higher skills, is limited (Felstead 2009).

Research has consistently shown that the majority of the UK workforce is moderately engaged at work (CIPD 2012, Alfes et al 2010, Truss et al 2006). I found employees working in both public and private sector settings in Wales recorded a relatively high level of job satisfaction and loyalty to their employer relative to other parts of Great Britain. I reported agreement amongst staff at CYMRUcyf that their employer provided them with working conditions and policy frameworks that could be viewed as signs of perceived organisational support (POS). Reported levels of employee engagement at CYMRUcyf, using survey methods, were relatively high and in

other selected WPS organisations where similar data exist, levels of reported engagement have improved. Despite this evidence, further employee engagement is being sought at CYMRUcyf and the wider WPS workforce (WG 2012d). Using Meyer et al's model (2010) linking the three types of organisational commitment to engagement states, I suggest that the high level of job satisfaction I observed may represent evidence of continuance rather than affective commitment. Should further research bear this out, finding that the WPS workforce is contingently rather than fully engaged is likely to be at odds with the full engagement state described in the academic literature and that HR Professionals and senior WPS managers appear to be seeking from their employees.

In conclusion, I consider that employee engagement in the WPS is mainly concerned with promoting a mindset in employees to meet organisational objectives and to place others before themselves in a context that prioritises a unitarist perspective of employment relations (Boselie et al 2009). The balance of employee engagement (both in the mainstream management and psychology literature and in practice in the Welsh Public Service) is tipped not only in favour of meeting organisational needs but also of external stakeholders (such as the Welsh Government) who are highly influential on organisational priorities.

I have developed the model that I first presented in Chapter Five (Figure 5.16) showing how employee engagement can be conceived as both a personal state ( $S_E$ ) and an organisational device ( $D_E$ ). Based on the evidence I have collected, while the connection of state and device engagement in the form of the "full circle" I introduced in Chapter Five may be desirable, in practice they do not appear to be integrated due to different foci, drivers and interests. In Chapter Five I posed the question whether  $S_E$  and  $D_E$  were in sync with each other or at odds, and showed solid arrows between the two elements. Now in Figure 8.2 on the next page I show a contextualised version of the same diagram with dotted rather than solid arrows to denote what I consider to be a lack of connection between  $S_E$  and  $D_E$  which are likely to continue to be in tension with one another as the critical management school suggest. In addition,  $D_E$  is shown as a larger entity than  $S_E$  to demonstrate the imbalance I have observed between the two elements.

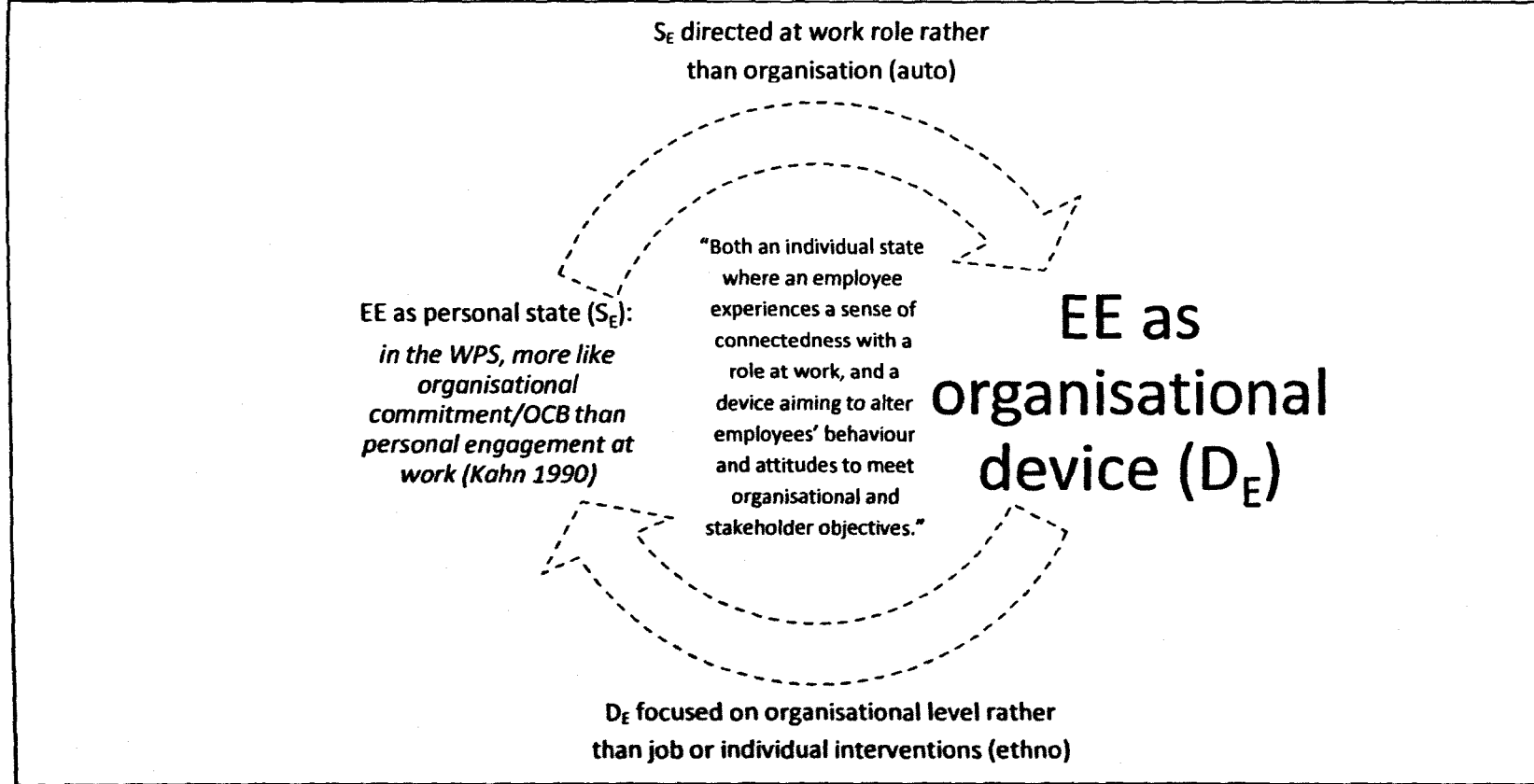
Creating the conditions for state engagement ( $S_E$ ) did not appear to be integrated into the CYMRUcyf device engagement ( $D_E$ ), and neither did my former employer's device engagement help me to rebuild my personal engagement at work ( $S_E$ ). This may be understandable given that I have found from both my empirical research and the academic literature that DE may be being pursued for reasons other than improving employee well being (Clark et al 1998), that the HR policies valued by employees are different from those that have been associated with high performance working (Kinnie et al 2005). The Welsh Government's focus on encouraging staff to focus on 'others' rather than themselves (WAG 2004), their professions and their institutions and contribute 'other' oriented behaviours (organisational commitment and organisational citizenship behaviours) means there is little encouragement for staff working in the WPS to appreciate that state engagement within themselves is possible, let alone capable of being managed.

**Figure 8.2: Employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service: contextualised model**

Evidence of autonomy at individual, job, organisation, sector and country level (CH3, 6, 7),  
 Evidence of lack of growth and progression opportunities at individual, job, organisation, sector and country level (CH3, 6, 7),  
 Limited management capacity (both quantity and quality) reported (CH3, 6),  
 High level of job satisfaction and perceived organisational support (CH4, 6, 7).

Transactional approach to managing employee engagement,  
 Limited management support (interest) in managing engagement (CH7),  
 Visible desirable work behaviours sought (CH3, CH6).

'Other' rather than 'self' focused conceptions of engagement (on  
 organisation) (HR Professionals, senior WPS managers) (CH5),  
 WPS workforce to focus on "others" (citizens, service users) (CH3),  
 Relatively short term objectives (CH3, CH7).



WPS workforce is mainly female, unionised and more likely to consist of older workers, professionals, be highly qualified and Welsh speaking (CH4),  
 Multiple employers operating within a single public service model (collaboration, citizen centred) and the WPS ideal values (CH3),  
 Public sector employment relatively important in Wales (CH3).



### *8.3.2 Contributions of my research to scholarship and practice*

In this section I consider how my study has contributed to academic knowledge and to practice.

As a result of this research I have contributed an empirically derived definition of employee engagement accompanied by an analysis of the institutional and economic context constraining the Welsh Public Service (Figure 8.2). Most definitions of employee engagement since Kahn's foundational work in 1990 have been created as normative context-less statements rather than being based on empirical research informed by a particular setting. My definition of employee engagement is generated from the meanings I have identified from the pre-existing literature, those of managerial and non managerial staff working in the Welsh Public Service and informed by my own meanings which have developed and changed as a result of conducting this research. I have shown how it is likely to be very difficult to maintain or strengthen personal engagement at work in the public sector in Wales given the prevailing institutional conditions (Boon et al 2009).

To date, I have not been able to identify any other academic studies of employee engagement in a Welsh Public Service context using either quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods. Wales, and its public sector, are acknowledged to be an under-researched context (Drakeford 2005). My study comprises a combination of elements that has not been attempted before: an examination of the conceptions, management and experiences of employee engagement taking into account multiple perspectives: managerial and non managerial staff, HR Professionals and myself. In my study of CYMRUcyf, I sampled different levels and groups in the workforce to provide different perspectives on the management of employee engagement.

Finally, I contribute an autobiographical account of seeking, finding and losing personal engagement at work (Kahn 1990), accompanied by an analysis of my attempts to manage my weakening sense of engagement, which is likely to be of interest to practising managers in the Welsh Public Service. Accounts of managerial work, especially line managers' experience of work, are rare (Scase and Goffee 1989). Given the expectation on line managers to support both the job and organisational engagement of their teams, my story and analysis could be used to influence management development programmes in the public sector to include more focus on line managers' own engagement with their work, roles and employing organisations.

## **8.4 Meeting the objectives of my study**

As well as carrying out research to examine how employee engagement is conceived, managed and experienced in the Welsh Public Service, I also identified four supporting objectives for my research. These were concerned with demonstrating the implications of my research for four different constituencies: practice, engagement scholarship, method scholarship and myself.

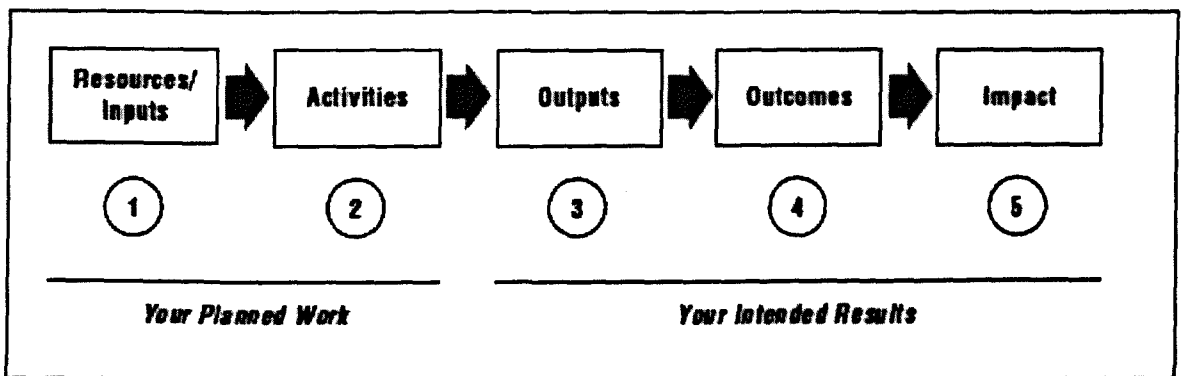
### *8.4.1 For practice: What are the implications of my study for employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service?*

From my research, device rather than state engagement is the focus for both senior managers and HR Professionals. Very few of the respondents discussed employee engagement in the context of their own personal experience. Rather it was a state to be sought and developed in others, with consequences mainly although not exclusively favouring the organisation and stakeholders rather than the individual employee. The engagement interventions that I observed at CYMRUcyf had little regard for individual differences and tended to be applied across the workforce with minimal recognition of occupational background, gender or job grade. There is a case for being clearer regarding the outcomes of device engagement and involving staff in defining how success is recognised. As “the psychological conditions that lead to job and organization engagements as well as the consequences are not the same” (Saks 2006, p613) it is important for the instigators of organisational initiatives to consider a number of issues when designing device engagement:

1. Ensure that staff have the skills and competencies to conduct staff surveys, in particular to be able to analyse results by demographic and occupational characteristics across a workforce as well as by department and organisation, and understand that changes between years are going to be subject to a margin of error,

2. Consider the outcomes that are being sought seeking from organisational initiatives and involve staff in the identification of desirable outcomes. The use of the logic model approach (Kellogg Foundation 2004), shown in Figure 8.3, which provides “a systematic and visual way to present and share your understanding of the relationships among the resources you have to operate your program, the activities you plan, and the changes or results you hope to achieve” (p1), would be useful as it would assist designers of engagement initiatives to consider how their D<sub>E</sub> programmes are expected to work.

**Figure 8.3: The Kellogg Foundation logic model template (2004, p1)**



3. Consider the most appropriate level for engagement initiatives, which may be at team or department or groups based on occupational characteristics rather than across an organisation as a whole,
4. Invite line managers to be active contributors, or leaders, of device engagement, working in association with HR specialists, who could adopt a facilitative rather than a leadership and management role,
5. Promote understanding amongst senior managers, line managers, non managerial staff and elected members of the concept of state engagement.

While HR Professionals have been found to be an important constituency in the design and management of device engagement, line managers are a surprising omission given the body of literature stating the importance of the line manager as a ‘link’ in the employee engagement chain (Luthans and Peterson 2002, Truss et al 2006, MacLeod and Clarke 2009, Alfes et al 2010). Given the size and purpose of HR functions across the WPS is under scrutiny and has been identified as an area where costs could be cut (WAG 2009), there is a risk that staff working in HR functions will find it difficult to find the time to lead employee engagement initiatives. This

provides an opportunity for senior managers to seek the direct involvement of line managers in the design and delivery of organisational engagement initiatives, with HR specialists providing ad hoc support of a facilitative nature. Research has found that transferring people management responsibilities to line managers from HR can have problematic results (Hope-Hailey et al 2005 in Francis and Keegan 2006). However, the association between the line manager and individual engagement (Luthans and Peterson 2002, Truss et al 2006) suggests that further rather than less support should be provided to line managers to prioritise people management activities that encourage engagement at work (CIPD 2011a). As an example of how management practice for engagement may be encouraged, in Figure 8.4 I show how the autoethnographic approach can be used to inform the behaviours of senior and line managers to encourage their own engagement and in others.

**Figure 8.4: Autoethnography informed management practice**

- Line and senior managers to identify the nature and drivers of their own personal engagement at work,
- Line and senior managers to consider the trajectory of their personal engagement at work: strengthening, weakening, remaining the same,
- Offering to share their experience of personal engagement at work with staff, and explaining the level of engagement, and its locus (CIPD 2011c),
- Invite staff to consider the nature and trajectory of their own personal engagement at work (using instruments such as the timelines I have produced to map out my career (Chapter One) and my own attempts to manage personal engagement at work (Chapter Six),
- Listening, observing and asking staff questions about the locus of their engagement (CIPD 2011c), with an intention to understand before offering solutions or judgements,
- Not being afraid of asking questions which might appear to have obvious answers but which may identify assumptions and create opportunities to identify levels and foci of engagement.

*8.4.2 For engagement scholarship: What are the contributions of my research to our understanding of employee engagement theoretically and conceptually?*

I identified the contributions that my study has made to scholarly knowledge in Section 8.3.2 of this Chapter. I have applied Kahn's concept of personal engagement at work to my own experience of managing my engagement at work between 2004 and 2009 and shown how the issues identified by senior managers working in the WPS represent a set of conditions that are likely to undermine rather than strengthen or even sustain personal engagement at work. One implication of my study for scholarship is the parallel rather than integrated nature of the two principal literatures that inform research on employee engagement: psychology (individual level focus) and business/management literatures (organisation level focus). This reflects the evidence I have found in my empirical work of the parallel rather than integrated nature of individual and job/role focused state engagement and organisational level device engagement, as discussed in Section 8.3.1. More integration of these two literatures is encouraged, as is the take up of the topic of employee engagement within the economics discipline (to examine the importance of economic exchange in the current austerity conditions), political science (given the importance of elected politicians in the direction of the Welsh Public Service, and their relatively closeness and accessibility to senior officers in Wales compared to England) and sociology (to consider the social nature of employee engagement and impact/integration with family life).

Kahn's concept of personal engagement at work is often included in academic and practitioner studies of employee engagement (May et al 2004, Rich et al 2010, Alfes et al 2010, Shuck and Rocco 2011,) as a key framework for understanding both the state itself and the psychological conditions that accompany it. I have shown how local political and economic context create conditions that challenge the likelihood of witnessing or experiencing personal engagement at work on a significant scale. Given that I have found that employee engagement in practice in the Welsh Public Service bears more similarity in conceptual terms to organisational commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour, perhaps it is appropriate to ask whether Kahn's concept of personal engagement at work was a product of a different place and time to the one that Wales and its public service workforce finds itself after the financial crisis of 2008. What seemed to interest the HR Professionals and the senior managers who took part in my study about employee engagement was its ability to trigger or create organisational commitment rather than individual level personal engagement (Kahn 1990).

*8.4.3 For method scholarship: What can a qualitative and autoethnographic approach to the study of employee engagement contribute to our understanding of the topic?*

When I began this study, I did not consider that my personal experience of either working in the Welsh Public Service or of experiencing and managing my personal engagement at work could be a useful and important source of data. I have found that integrating my personal experience in the form of memories from my job as a manager and responses to CYMRUcyf's efforts to manage employee engagement has complemented the other sources of data that I have collected and has contributed a longitudinal element to an otherwise cross sectional study. This is an important contribution given the dynamic nature of personal engagement as a concept (Kahn 1990). Collecting mainly qualitative data through ethnographic methods has provided a detailed description of the stages of managing employee engagement at CYMRUcyf not possible through more cross sectional or quantitative methods.

*8.4.4 For me: Why did I feel the high degree of engagement with my last job? Why and how did I become disengaged?*

Using Kahn (1990) as my primary sensitising concept (Parker 1983), I consider that I felt a strong sense of engagement during the first part of my last job as a result of finding a work role that I found psychologically meaningful within a context that I perceived to be sufficiently psychologically safe and for which I was psychologically available. In Figure 8.5 I provide evidence of how supportive "systemic mechanisms" (Kahn 1992, p337) in place between 2004 and 2006 provided relatively positive conditions for me to move towards rather than away from psychological presence at work (Kahn 1992) and for moments of personal engagement to occur over a relatively prolonged period (three years). In particular I can recognise that the role of line manager provided me with a strong sense of meaningfulness. As I perceived this element of my job becoming less significant as a result of job redundancies in my unit which left me with fewer people management responsibilities, I found that I experienced a much reduced sense of meaningfulness. In Figure 8.6 I show how the systemic mechanisms in force between 2007 and 2009 were far less positive, with reduced meaningfulness as I felt less congruence between myself and my work role as the restructuring process I describe in Chapter Six came to fruition. I felt less of a sense of psychological safety as cost cutting led to redundancies and a less expansive work agenda and a reduced degree of psychological availability on my part. During this latter period, I still experienced moments of personal engagement at work but they were less frequent and strong than had been the case during the first part of my employment.

Figure 8.5: Personal fit with Kahn's psychological conditions for personal engagement at work, recollections from 2004 to 2006 (Kahn 1990, 1992)

| <b>PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANINGFULNESS (work elements)</b>  | <b>PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY (social systems)</b>   | <b>PSYCHOLOGICAL AVAILABILITY (individual distractions)</b>   |
|--|--|---|
| <p><i>Task characteristics: Creative, autonomous, varied, challenging tasks (more positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenging management role: transform purpose and image of corporate research team,</li> <li>• Long standing health and performance issues amongst team members challenging to address,</li> <li>• Autonomy to manage the team both strategically (direction and purpose of work) and operationally (day to day allocation of work),</li> <li>• Wide and dynamic range of research topics, clients and organisations,</li> <li>• Lots of opportunity to learn and develop management and research skills, through training and experience.</li> </ul> <p><i>Role characteristics: Desirable identity, influence and sense of need by the organisation (more positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong personal identification with role of line manager,.</li> <li>• Corporate role, therefore potential to be influential.</li> <li>• Felt needed by the organisation (low level of research literacy).</li> </ul> <p><i>Work interactions: Like minded people (more positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team and Department consisted of individuals oriented towards strategic development,</li> <li>• Interactions with clients both inside and outside organisation (who also had resources to commission research).</li> </ul> | <p><i>Interpersonal relationships: supportive (more positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust with team members and line manager.</li> <li>• Sharing of ideas with line manager and team members met with constructive feedback.</li> </ul> <p><i>Group and intergroup dynamics: (more positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My unit had implicit role as 'experts and ideas team' which enhanced both our autonomy and image.</li> </ul> <p><i>Management style and processes: (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Line managers' bureaucratic style useful protection and source of support when managing senior managers,</li> <li>• Requirements of leaders not clarified.</li> <li>• Command and control model of leadership dominated within Department.</li> </ul> <p><i>Organisational norms: (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisation with a distinctive culture,</li> <li>• Hierarchical structure,</li> <li>• Progression and reward mainly given on the basis of time served.</li> </ul> | <p><i>Physical energy: (more positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Had been working part time for 2 years and felt rested and ready for new challenge.</li> </ul> <p><i>Emotional energy: (more positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manageable amount of emotional labour, with opportunities to withdraw from others attention.</li> </ul> <p><i>Insecurity (more positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of personal confidence,</li> <li>• Permanent employment contract,</li> <li>• Not overly concerned about others' perceptions and judgements,</li> <li>• Overlooked ambivalence about fit with the wider organisation (little ambivalence about fit with team and Department).</li> </ul> <p><i>Outside life: (more positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devoted to work (conducted research training in my own time).</li> </ul> |

**Figure 8.6: Personal fit with Kahn's psychological conditions for personal engagement at work, recollections from 2007 to 2009 (Kahn 1990, 1992)**

| <b>PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANINGFULNESS (work elements)</b>   | <b>PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY (social systems)</b>   | <b>PSYCHOLOGICAL AVAILABILITY (individual distractions)</b>   |
|---|--|---|
| <p><i>Task characteristics: Less creative, autonomous, varied, and challenging tasks (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work programme was more established and repetitive, less room for innovation,</li> <li>• Less autonomy in content of work programme,</li> <li>• Use of limited range of research methods (mainly quantitative) thereby little opportunity to utilise favoured skills.</li> </ul> <p><i>Role characteristics: Desirable identity, influence and sense of need by the organisation (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Due to shrinking of team, less people management activity to do (wished to retain this),</li> <li>• Role shifting from managerial to supervisory with new structure,</li> <li>• Other sources of intelligence and evidence gained prominence, thus reducing the sense of need by the organisation for research activity.</li> </ul> <p><i>Work interactions: Like minded people (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction of different professions into the new department: more process and operations focused,</li> <li>• Interactions with outside organisations weakened as focus on providing operational support to new work groups within the department,</li> <li>• Loss of personnel from my work unit and from the organisation (through job losses) who were like minded people to me.</li> </ul> | <p><i>Interpersonal relationships: supportive (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing of ideas met with more rejection (examples in Chapter Six) both within the organisation and with external projects.</li> </ul> <p><i>Group and intergroup dynamics: (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closer integration with more operational work groups reframed image of my unit as 'support service'.</li> </ul> <p><i>Management style and processes: (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Command and control model of leadership dominated within Department.</li> <li>• Perceived new line manager as less supportive than previous incumbent.</li> </ul> <p><i>Organisational norms: (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reducing operating costs became focus,</li> <li>• Organisation with a distinctive culture,</li> <li>• Hierarchical structure,</li> <li>• Progression and reward mainly given on the basis of time served.</li> </ul> | <p><i>Physical energy: (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lacking in personal energy due to reduction in personal resilience (results in panic attacks) (Chapter Six).</li> </ul> <p><i>Emotional energy: (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall, manageable amount of emotional labour, but with fewer opportunities to withdraw from others attention.</li> </ul> <p><i>Insecurity (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduction in personal confidence and sense of competency.</li> </ul> <p><i>Outside life: (less positive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coping with loss of personal relationship diverted my attention from work.</li> </ul> |



In the opening vignette in Chapter One, I state that I left my job because I had become disengaged. As I have written this dissertation, I feel that I have come to realise that I only experienced personal disengagement at work (Kahn 1990) during the last few months of my last employment. I feel that my personal engagement at work in my last job can be divided into three stages: strong sense of  $S_E$  between 2004 and 2006, a weakening sense of  $S_E$  between 2007 and the first part of 2009 and disengagement for the final months of my employment once I started to give thought to resignation. Looking back, I feel that I didn't decide to leave my job because I had become disengaged, I left because I felt that I had done all that I could to try and regain the sense of engagement that I had experienced during the first three years and decided that I was not going to succeed in meeting that objective in that environment. It was after this realisation that I "simultaneously withdrew and defended the person's preferred self in behaviours that promote a lack of connections, physical, cognitive and emotional absence and passive, incomplete role performances...removed personal, internal energies from physical, cognitive and emotional labors" (Kahn 1990, p701) on a more or less continuous basis from my role.

#### *8.4.5 For me: How can I use this research to help me to make better choices in the future about finding and maintaining engaging work?*

Based on my examination of my career timeline (Chapter One) and my efforts to manage my own personal engagement at work (described in Chapter Six), I consider that I have sought a transactional rather than a relational contract with employers. This opportunity to reflect on my career over twenty years has helped me to understand that my priorities have shifted towards building a more relational contract with an employer so that I can make longer term contributions in one setting. To what degree this will be possible in the current economic circumstances where more precarious employment arrangements are becoming more common in the public sector (WAG 2009) is difficult to assess.

The findings and the processes that I have used in this study have helped me to understand how important it is for me to find a work role that is meaningful and provides scope for three resources and characteristics in particular: space for growth, a high degree of intellectual autonomy and a supportive line manager. I am now clearer that I find a greater degree of psychological meaningfulness in the role of manager than I do in the role of researcher and I intend to use this knowledge to help me pursue roles that are primarily managerial in nature. As

I show in Figure 1.4 in Chapter 1, most of the places I have worked have been economically marginal and mainly rural in nature and in the future I may seek to live and work in more economically dynamic areas. This research has also prompted me to consider what is a realistic level, and duration, of strong personal engagement at work that I can expect and the importance of developing a life outside work which also can provide sources of meaningfulness, intellectual and emotional engagement which would help balance the periods of inevitable 'plateauing' I might experience in my engagement at work.

## **8.5 Future research agenda**

Throughout this dissertation, I have identified follow up research that would be useful to improve our knowledge of both state and device engagement in the Welsh Public Service. I have taken inspiration from Boxall et al's 'analytical' approach to studying human resource management (2007) to structure my future research agenda for employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service. They argue that researchers should "aim to build a rigorous understanding of what managers try to do in managing work and people, of what motivates their actions, of what affects their success and of the implications for organizational stakeholders of their actions" (Boxall 2012, p170). They suggest that research should be structured according to three considerations: 'what and why?', 'how?' and 'for whom and how well?' Using these three considerations as a framework, I produce a research agenda for employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service, shown in Figure 8.7. I consider that five areas from the research agenda merit particular attention from researchers, shown in Figure 8.8.

**Figure 8.7: Future research agenda for employee engagement, Welsh Public Service, indicative, 2012**

| <b>"Analytical" employee engagement (Boxall, Purcell and Wright 2007)</b>  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>What and why?</b><br><i>-What managers try to do in engaging people at work</i><br><i>-Why they do this</i>   | <b>How?</b><br><i>-The processes of state and device employee engagement in a Welsh Public Service context</i>  | <b>For whom and how well?</b><br><i>-Outcomes and for who from state and device employee engagement</i>  |
| The language used in WPS public service reform documents in relation to employee engagement, and how this is intended and interpreted by different parts of the workforce. | How are individual, and groups of EE practices understood and experienced by staff?<br><br>How does device employee engagement affect individual level psychological meaningfulness, safety and availability (Kahn 1990). | What measures of employee engagement "outcomes" are appropriate for public service organisations? Same or different to private sector? Who selects and chooses outcomes?   |
| Degree of identification with a single Welsh Public Service and its values amongst workforces: comparative study across WPS employers.                                     | Managing device employee engagement in a unionised environment, and amongst more and less precariously employed workforces (and groups within workforces e.g. temporary and casual employment)                            | What is the impact of device engagement initiatives, both singly and in combination, on individual engagement levels, employee well being team and organisational performance? Comparison between sectors, and UK countries. |
| Conceptions of employee engagement: where do HR staff, senior and line managers get their understanding?   | The role and impact of technology on mediating organisational level EE activities.  | How do HR staff measure and evaluate the impact of device employee engagement on a) themselves and b) others in the workforce?   |
| Politicians and members of governing boards: what priority is attached to employee engagement and employee well being? How does this affect senior management engagement?  | Impact of change in line manager on subordinate engagement (personal and with organisation): longitudinal study (possible diary method)   | What do senior and line managers know and understand about the level and drivers of their own state engagement?  |

Figure 8.7: Future research agenda for employee engagement, Welsh Public Service, indicative, 2012 (continued)

| <b>"Analytical" employee engagement (Boxall et al 2007)</b>   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <b>What and why?</b><br><i>-What managers try to do in engaging people at work</i><br><i>-Why they do this</i>  | <b>How?</b><br><i>-The processes of state and device employee engagement in a Welsh Public Service context</i>   | <b>For whom and how well?</b><br><i>-Outcomes and for who from state and device employee engagement</i>  |
| What prompts WPS organisations to initiate device employee engagement (internal vs. external factors).<br>Crisis or opportunity driven?   | Comparison of line manager competencies for enhancing employee engagement between public and private sectors (CIPD 2011d).   | How is device employee engagement understood by remote/home workers?   |
| What prompts people to work in the Welsh Public Service: choice or necessity? A comparative study of public service motivation in the public, voluntary and private sectors in Wales. | Reduction in vertical progression opportunities across the WPS: implications for engagement. Can training, development and lateral job moves provide a new source of engagement? | Trends in jobs satisfaction and commitment: regional and sectoral analysis of WERS 2012. To what degree is contingent engagement (Meyer et al 2010) present in the WPS, compared to the wider public and other sectors of the economy?   |
| "Reluctant managers" (Scase and Goffee 1989): how appropriate a label for line and senior managers in the Welsh Public Service? Updated study.  | Further analysis of the data I have collected on the management of 31 employee engagement practices identified at CYMRUcyf (Chapter Six).  | To what degree are line managers rewarded and recognised for encouraging employee engagement, if "the employee champion role is not seen as a viable career move for ambitious HR practitioners?" (Francis and Keegan 2006, p242). To what degree is this the case for senior and line managers? |
| Organisational citizenship behaviour: who decides the amount, content and degree of discretion?   | Recovering a stronger sense of engagement once a weakening has taken place. What's possible and how?   | Forced and voluntary leavers from the Welsh Public Service: economic and personal wellbeing post public sector employment.   |
| HR Professionals conceptions of employee engagement: comparative survey of CIPD and CIPD members.   | Moving from contingent to full engagement (Meyer et al 2010): processes and experiences.   | Impact on line manager workloads of taking part in device engagement.  |

**Figure 8.8: Key research questions about employee engagement in the Welsh Public Service**

'To what degree are line managers rewarded and recognised for encouraging employee engagement, if "the employee champion role is not seen as a viable career move for ambitious HR practitioners" (Francis and Keegan 2006, p242). Is it considered to be in any one's interest (HR practitioners, senior and line managers) to be an employee champion?

'What are the reasons for the reported lack of diversity in organisational approaches to managing employee engagement (Alfes et al 2010),

'How does the quality of line management in the public and private sectors in Wales compare, in terms of competencies for enhancing employee engagement (CIPD 2011)',

'To what degree are staff in the Welsh Public Service, compared with the voluntary and private sectors, working in the sector because of a motivation to do public service (PSM)? Is there a 'distinctively Welsh' (Seargant 2011) PSM?'

'What is the impact of a change in line manager on subordinate engagement (personal and with organisation and other constituencies)?'

## **8.6 Full circle**

"In the desert, you'll never quite know what things are, not at first. The absence of scale and the presence of heat will tend to mislead you: one man standing might just as easily be a rock, a truck, a camel, a tent: you can't tell. Unfamiliar elements will beguile you, but your best course is still to proceed. You'll only know if you go. And see. Then everything will show you itself, will tell you it's nature, when you're close enough."  
(Kennedy 2000, p154)

In the opening chapter of this dissertation, I explain how I came to research employee engagement. I had some questions about its purpose and impact as a result of being involved in my former employer's employee engagement programme. The process of trying to find some answers to the questions I liken to spending time in the desert: clarity is easily lost but can be found by proceeding. Going closer, both to my own experiences and those of a small section of the Welsh Public Service workforce, has helped me to understand some of the nature of employee engagement. As I have learnt through the selective presentation of data about myself in this study, not everything about employee engagement has shown itself. But I know more than I did, and I am grateful for that.

◆ **This is the end of the dissertation. References and appendices follow.**

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## Appendices

| Appendix Item Reference | Description  |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1                       | Areas of devolution to Wales (Government of Wales Act 2006).   |
| 2                       | Selected list of engagement survey instruments   |
| 3                       | Gantt chart/work programme for my study, 2010  |
| 4                       | Policy documents, public service and workforce, Welsh Government   |
| 5                       | My proposal for doctoral research to Bangor University, 2009   |
| 6                       | Questionnaire I administered to HR Professionals, north Wales, 2010  |
| 7                       | Example interview topic guide, Senior Public Servants, Welsh, 2010-2011                                    |
| 8                       | Example interview topic guide, Senior Public Servants, English, 2010-2011                                  |
| 9                       | Interview guide to collect autobiographical data, 2012   |
| 10                      | Interview guide to collect autobiographical data, 2012   |
| 11                      | Research information sheet sent to candidate organisations, 2010   |
| 12                      | Access agreement with CYMRUcyf, the case organisation that took part in my research, 2010                  |
| 13                      | Example consent form for one to one interviews with staff at CYMRUcyf, 2011                                |
| 14                      | Dates and locations of observations at CYMRUcyf, 2010-2011   |
| 15                      | Extract from my field work journal, showing substantive notes (right side), and analytic notes (left side) |
| 16                      | Email confirming access to interview transcripts, WISERD Knowing Localities, 2011 (anonymised)             |
| 17                      | WISERD Knowing Localities interview topic guide 2009   |
| 18                      | CYMRUcyf employee engagement survey: main areas  |

**Areas of devolution to Wales (Government of Wales Act 2006).**

Policy areas (known as “fields”) which are devolved to some degree to the National Assembly for Wales. Some, but not all exceptions are shown in the following list. Full information on the exceptions can be found in Schedule Seven, Government of Wales Act 2006, pp.118-125. Broadcasting, the criminal justice and social security systems, along with macroeconomic, foreign and defence policies are not devolved to the National Assembly for Wales.

**Field 1: Agriculture, fisheries, forestry and rural development**

**Field 2: Ancient monuments and historic buildings**

**Field 3: Culture (several exclusions including broadcasting)**

**Field 4: Economic development (several exclusions including fiscal and monetary policy)**

**Field 5: Education and training (exclusion: Research Councils)**

**Field 6: Environment**

**Field 7: Fire and rescue services and promotion of fire safety**

**Field 8: Food**

**Field 9: Health and health services (several exclusions including abortion, human genetics and regulation of health professionals)**

**Field 10: Highways and transport (several exclusions including driver licensing, drivers hours)**

**Field 11: Housing**

**Field 12: Local government**

**Field 13: National Assembly for Wales**

**Field 14: Public administration (includes Public Services Ombudsman for Wales and audit of public bodies).**

**Field 15: Social welfare (including social services, and excluding social security)**

**Field 16: Sport and recreation**

**Field 17: Tourism**

**Field 18: Town and country planning**

**Field 19: Water and flood defence**

**Field 20: Welsh language**



## Selected list of engagement survey instruments (commercial) (Doloriert and Sambrook 2012)

| Publisher  | Engagement (Disengagement) Constructed as:  | Key contribution & discipline   |
|--|---|---|
| Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002) Harter, Asplund & Fleming (2004) The Gallup Organisation (2009) Harter, Schmidt, Asplund & Killham (2006). Ott (2007) Harter et al., (2009) | <p><b>Engagement at Work</b> as 12 engagement conditions</p> <p>Gallup's engagement ratio is a macro-level indicator of an organisation's health that allows managers to track the proportion of engaged to actively disengaged employees</p> | <p>Gallup Workplace Audit™ a 12 scale &amp; engagement ratio</p> <p>Meta analysis studies that explore engagement in terms of business &amp; organisational outcomes</p> <p>(Psychology)</p>  |
| Transparent Consulting Employee Engagement Index (2011)  | <p><b>Employee</b> engagement</p> <p>Focuses on companies' actions – what they do to engage with employees</p>  | <p>Ranks FTSE-100 companies in terms of how they report on their relations with employees in annual reports and Corporate Social Responsibility reports, and in some case interviews.</p>   |
| Wiley, Kowske & Herman (2010)  | <p><b>Employee</b> engagement is a desired state (Macey &amp; Schneider, 2008) measured by an equally weighted combination of four elements: pride, satisfaction, advocacy and retention.</p>   | <p>Kenexa Employee Engagement Index (EEI) countries are ranked in terms of employee engagement. Global drivers of EE are measured and compared with country specific data. Country data is taken from WorkTrends™ survey.</p> <p>An empirical systems model of the prerequisites and outcome of employee engagement is offered</p>  |
| Best Companies (2011)  | <p><b>Workplace</b> engagement</p>  | <p>The UK based Best Companies offers an accreditation service for organisations, based on the results of an organisation wide engagement survey. Organisations are ranked according to their results and if found to have high levels of workplace engagement, are awarded the title "Best Companies to Work For" in different categories of organisation according to size and sector (Best Companies, 2010).</p> |

## Research work programme, 2009-2012

## Appendix Item 3

| Employee engagement in the Welsh public service: Outline timetable  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
|---|-------------|--------------|------------------|------------|-------------|---------------|------------|------------|-------------|---------------|------------|------------|-------------|------|
| Natalie Jones, Research Student, Division of Business Studies, Bangor Business School                               |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Activity  | Year 1      |              |                  |            | Year 2      |               |            |            | Year 3      |               |            |            | Y4 Q1       |      |
|   | Y1 Q1       | Y1 Q2        | Y1 Q3            | Y1 Q4      | Y2 Q1       | Y2 Q2         | Y2 Q3      | Y2 Q4      | Y3 Q1       | Y3 Q2         | Y3 Q3      | Y3 Q4      |             |      |
|   | Sept-Nov 09 | Dec 09-Feb 1 | Mar-May 10       | Jun-Aug 10 | Sept-Nov 10 | Dec 10-Feb 11 | Mar-May 11 | Jun-Aug 11 | Sept-Nov 11 | Dec 11-Feb 12 | Mar-May 12 | Jun-Aug 12 | Sept-Dec 12 |      |
| <b>LIT REVIEW AND RESEARCH SET UP</b>   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Literature Review: Concepts of engagement and WPS   |             |              | Draft 30/03/2010 |            | Draft Sept  |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Sector consultations  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| PhD presentation @ Bangor   |             |              | 26/05/2010       |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Revised proposal  |             |              |                  | 15/07/2010 |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Gain ethical approval: Bangor Business School   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Attend practitioners conference, London   |             |              |                  | 13/07/2010 |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Gain access to two case study organisations   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| <i>Prep information sheet</i>   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| <i>Consult supervision team on content</i>  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| <i>Revise and translate</i>   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| <i>Contact LA's, social care and NHS with research proposal</i>   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| <i>Internal ethical processes</i>   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Journal article (lit review based)  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Consultation event (CIPD north wales)   |             |              |                  |            | 15/09/2010  |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| <b>DATA COLLECTION</b>  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Documentary analysis: national policy and strategy incl. brief analysis of other UK nations policies and approaches |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Recruit national level interviewees   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Conduct national level interviews   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Case study organisations: interviews  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Case study organisations: observations  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Transcriptions of national level interviews   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Transcriptions of case study interviews and observations  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| <b>DATA ANALYSIS AND THESIS PRODUCTION/DISSEMINATION</b>  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Analysis of national and case study data  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Conference paper - theoretical and conceptual developments  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Conference paper - early findings   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Documentary analysis: refresh   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| BAM conference paper  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             | Sep-11        |            |            |             |      |
| Consultation event (CIPD north wales or PSMW summer school)   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Writing thesis  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Feedback for participant organisations  |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Journal article (findings/concepts based)   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             |      |
| Examination   |             |              |                  |            |             |               |            |            |             |               |            |            |             | Exam |

Note: As discussed in Chapter Two, there was deviation from this project plan (e.g. one case organisation rather than two). Items in italics denote detailed work tasks.

**Policy documents, public service and workforce, Welsh Government**

*First administration (1999-2003)*

National Assembly for Wales (2000): [www.betterwales.com](http://www.betterwales.com). Cardiff, National Assembly for Wales.

Audit Commission (2000): *People need people: releasing the potential of people working in social services*. Abingdon, Audit Commission.

National Assembly for Wales (2001): *Plan for Wales 2001*. Cardiff, National Assembly for Wales.

*Second administration (2003-2007):*

Welsh Assembly Government (2003): *Wales a better country*. Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

Welsh Assembly Government (2005): *Delivering the connections: from vision to action*. Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

Welsh Assembly Government (2004): *Making the connections: delivering better services for Wales*. Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

Welsh Assembly Government (2004): *Making the connections, putting the citizen centre stage*. Working document. Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

Welsh Assembly Government (2005): *Making the connections: connecting the workforce, the workforce challenge for health*. Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

Beecham, J. (2006): *Beyond boundaries: citizen centred local services for Wales*. Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

Welsh Assembly Government (2006): Making the connections: delivering beyond boundaries. Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

Welsh Assembly Government (2007): Making the connections: building better customer service. Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

*Third administration (2007-2011)*

Welsh Assembly Government (2007): One Wales: a progressive agenda for the government of Wales. Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

Welsh Assembly Government (2009): Better outcomes for tougher times. Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

*Fourth administration (2011-2015)*

Welsh Assembly Government (2009): Public services Wales: meeting the challenge of change. Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

Simpson, J.(2011): Local, regional, national: what services are best delivered where? Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

Welsh Government (2011): Programme for Government 2011-2016. Cardiff, Welsh Assembly Government.

## Application for Bangor University 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary PhD bursaries 2009

College of Business, Social Sciences and Law

### Employee Engagement in the Welsh Public Service: Definitions and meanings

#### Background to the proposal

This proposal fits with the College's plans to develop its strength in qualitative research for business, and will also be applicable to the development of future executive education programmes delivered by the Management Centre. Beyond the University, it proposes to meet an identified need for new management research that has been endorsed by Public Services Management Wales, the recognised body for management and leadership development in the Welsh public sector. Employee engagement has been defined by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2006, p3) as a willingness of staff to do more than what is required of them in their job, i.e. going the extra mile for their employer. The engagement of the workforce has been identified as a critical factor by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG, 2006) delivery of the Welsh Assembly Government's plans for transforming public services in Wales. According to Walkley et al (2006) public sector employment is particularly significant in rural Wales. Gwynedd, the county where Bangor University is located, has a particularly high rate of public sector employment, at 36.6% of the workforce in 2007 (ONS).

Staff surveys seem to be the predominant tool for gathering data on the extent of employee engagement in the Welsh public services. In fact work by Finniear (2009, p3) on behalf of the Wales Public Service Workforce Forum found that *"there has been a noticeable absence of research on employee engagement in the academic literature with insights largely being attributed to consulting firms and practitioner insights [...] reliable evidence which generates the much needed insight into what constitutes public sector employee engagement, and how this can best be understood, still elude us."* Finniear (p10) notes a lack of qualitative research in this field and calls for more research of this type.

#### Research question and methods

The research will seek to address the following questions:

- What are the dimensions of employee engagement in the Welsh public service,
- Differences in the nature and intensity of engagement between staff and their immediate co-workers and supervisors, and the wider organisation in which they serve,
- What meanings do public service employees attach to engagement,
- How do public service employees demonstrate engagement i.e. what behaviours or language demonstrate their commitment to an employer?

- What are the implications for future survey instruments and measures of employee engagement?
- What are the implications for learning and development programmes for managers and leaders that are designed to sustain and strengthen employee engagement?

The researcher proposes to undertake an ethnography in a public sector workplace in north west Wales. Using interviews and observation, the researcher intends to develop relationships with a work group to understand how engagement may fluctuate over a period of time and in response to changes in their working environment.

#### **Fit with College of Business, Social Sciences and Law Research Areas:**

Qualitative research in organisations and management, HRD in the public sector, Ethnography including organisational ethnography, phenomenology in business research.

#### **References:**

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2006): *How Engaged are British Employees?* Annual Survey Report, CIPD, London. Accessed on the world wide web at <http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/empreltns/general/hwngdbrempt.htm?IsSrchRes=1> on 01 June 2009.

Finnear J. (2009): *Welsh Public Sector Workforce Engagement Inquiry*, Report to the Wales Public Service Workforce Forum Engagement Task and Finish Group, University of Glamorgan Business School Working Paper WSPWF/2/09/Paper 5C. Accessed on the World Wide Web at [www.wlga.gov.uk/download.php?id=2757&l=1](http://www.wlga.gov.uk/download.php?id=2757&l=1) on 04 June 2009.

Office for National Statistics (2009): *Gwynedd Labour Market Profile*. Accessed on the World Wide Web at

<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/2038432109/report.aspx?town=gwynedd> on 04 June 2009.

Walkley C., Gardner G., Edwards B., Woods M., Goodwin M. (2006): *The significance of public sector employment in rural Wales*, report for the Wales Rural Observatory, Aberystwyth. Accessed on the world wide web at

<http://www.walesruralobservatory.org.uk/reports/english/FINAL%20PUBSECT%20report8.pdf> on 04 June 2009.

Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) (2006): *Delivering Beyond Boundaries: Transforming Public Services in Wales*, Welsh Assembly Government, Cardiff. Accessed on the World Wide Web at <http://wales.gov.uk/dpsp/publications/policies/delivering/responsee.pdf?lang=en> on 04 June 2009.



Bangor Business School, Division of Business Studies  
**Employee Engagement in the Welsh public service**

# QUESTIONNAIRE

## About this questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of an independent study into employee engagement in Wales, being undertaken by Natalie Jones, Research Student, Bangor Business School, Bangor University. All responses are confidential and your participation is voluntary. A summary report of the findings will be provided to the Merseyside, North Cheshire and North Wales branch of the CIPD.

*Thank you for taking part.* Natalie Jones, Research Student and Associate CIPD ([email address here](#))

## PART ONE: About employee engagement

1. What does employee engagement mean to you? *Please write your answer in the box below:*



2. How do you recognise engaged employees? *Please write your answer in the box*

3. How do you recognise disengaged employees? *Please write your answer in the box*

4. What are you and your organisation doing to promote employee engagement?  
*Please write your answer in the box below:*



5. What do you see are some of the main barriers to employee engagement?

*Please write your answer in the box below:*

6. How do you measure successful employee engagement?

*Please write your answer in the box below:*

## PART TWO: About You

7. What type of organisation do you represent? *Please tick one box only.*

Sole Trader or Micro business (2-9 employees)

Small business (10-49 employees)

Medium business (50-249 employees)

Large business (250 or more employees)

Don't know/Not sure

8. What sector does your company/employer? *Please tick one box only.*

Private sector

Public sector (including further and higher education)

Charitable or voluntary organisation

Other - please specify in the space below

---

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9. Please write in your current job title in the box below:



PRIFYSGOL  
**BANGOR**  
UNIVERSITY

Hen Goleg, Ffordd y Coleg, Bangor, LL57 2DG  
ffôn: 01248 382277 | ebost: [business@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:business@bangor.ac.uk)

**Ymgysylltu â gweithwyr yn y sector gyhoeddus**  
**Cam 1: Budd-dalwyr cenedlaethol (cyfweiliadau cyfrinachol)**  
Cyfwelai: Cyfrinachol (Awst 2011)

**Deall cyd-destun y sector gyhoeddus yng Nghymru, yn benodol y maes iechyd a gofal cymdeithasol**

Beth rydych chi'n adnabod fel y prif faterion/sialensau sy'n gwynebu'r sector gyhoeddus yng Nghymru ar hyn o bryd? Beth am y maes iechyd a gofal cymdeithasol yn benodol?

**Diffinio 'ymgysylltu â gweithwyr'**

Beth mae 'ymgysylltu â gweithwyr' yn ei feddwl i chi?

Sut mae eich gwaith personol chi wedi newid yn y blynyddoedd diweddar ( o ran blaenoriaethau, dulliau o weithio ayyb)?

Beth sydd fwyaf/lleiaf plerusus am eich gwaith?

**Sialensau sy'n gwynebu Cymru wledig**

Yn eich barn chi, beth yw'r prif faterion/sialensau o weithio yn Nghymru wledig a cheisio darparu gwasanaethau cyhoeddus mewn ardal mor wledig?



Hen Goleg, Ffordd y Coleg, Bangor, LL57 2DG  
ffôn: 01248 382277 | ebost: [business@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:business@bangor.ac.uk)

## **Employee Engagement in the Welsh public service**

### **Stage 1: National Stakeholder Interviews**

Interviewee: Confidential (June 2011)

#### **Understanding the context for employee engagement in the “Welsh public service”<sup>52</sup>**

What do you think are some of the key challenges and opportunities facing the workforce in the Welsh public service at the moment?

How would you describe the relationship between the public service workforce and their employers in Wales?

What do you think public service employers in Wales want from their staff at the present time?

#### **Defining employee engagement**

How do you define employee engagement?

#### **Reasons for employee engagement**

Why do you think that Welsh public service employers are doing employee engagement?

What are the benefits for staff from initiatives to promote employee engagement?

---

<sup>52</sup> My research is concerned with understanding the policy and practice of employee engagement in the Welsh public service, i.e those organisations that receive all or most of their funding from the National Assembly for Wales including the Welsh Assembly Government itself. For this first stage of the research, I will be consulting organisations who are not part of the Welsh public service but have an interest in it (e.g. Trade Unions, UK Government Agencies that operate in Wales) as well as bodies from within the service itself.

**Topic guide for autobiographical interview**

Conducted 11 August 2011

Interviewee: Natalie Jones, Research Student, Bangor Business School, Bangor University

Interviewer: Research Student, School of Social Sciences, Bangor University

Areas covered in the interview

Uhm, could I ask about your background. When I say background, I mean in terms of would you class yourself as being from a disadvantaged background, a middle class background or from an advantaged background?

Do you think there is anything different about being Welsh perhaps in comparison to being English, does your Welsh identity affect your childhood experiences?

I just want to get a sense of aspirations, from your family. Were they aspirational, did they want you to aspire to any particular employment? What sort of employment aspirations did you have as a child?

Going back to your childhood, did you see it as a happy time, what part of your childhood do you think has affected who you are today?

When and how were you aware that you were going to go to university? When did that awareness of going to university arise? Which universities have you attended?

Describe your work and life experience since University?

How do you think that your experiences and the person you are, are influencing the current research study?

What might be areas of bias/blind spots for you?

**Topic guide for autobiographical interview**

Conducted 10 October 2011

Interviewee: Natalie Jones, Research Student, Bangor Business School, Bangor University

Interviewer: Research Student, Bangor Business School, Bangor University

Areas covered in the interview

Introduction: biography, work experience.

Can you describe what it felt like to be engaged in your work (in your last job)? Was it entirely voluntary? How, and was it encouraged, in any particular way by your employer, your manager or other people?

What results/outcomes do you associate with your engagement at work? For you and for others?

You say you became disengaged? Why was this?

How did your disengagement manifest itself? Did it worsen, get better?

What impact did your disengagement have on your performance, your relationships with others at work?

What reflections or thoughts do you have now about your engagement and disengagement at work in your last job?

Would you like to draw how your engagement and disengagement at work changed during the time that you were working?



New Research Study from Bangor Business School

## Employee Engagement in the Welsh public service

Natalie Jones, PhD Student (email address here)

### Background

Public Services in Wales are going through a period of intense pressure and the workforce is likely to be exposed to profound changes in the future. Many public organisations have adopted employee engagement initiatives to deal with these changing circumstances but little is known about the details of these activities and what they hope to achieve. This new research project intends to fill the gap in our knowledge about employee engagement in the Welsh public service.

I am an experienced social researcher and former line manager who has worked in the public services in Wales and England for 18 years. I am conducting this research to gain a Doctorate in Management Studies. I am being supervised by Professor Sally Sambrook, who can be contacted by email at: [sally.sambrook@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:sally.sambrook@bangor.ac.uk) should you have any questions about this research.

### Aims and structure of the research

The purpose of the study is to find out what Welsh public service organisations are doing to promote employee engagement and how it is experienced by staff. There are two parts to the research: a national overview of the policy regarding employee engagement, and secondly, case studies of organisations who are carrying out employee engagement activities.

- Stage 1: An overview of the policy relating to employee engagement in the Welsh public service, involving an analysis of national policy documents and policy statements, and interviews with stakeholders with a responsibility/involvement in employee engagement,
- Stage 2: Case studies of two public service organisations to understand the practice of employee engagement and to generate insight into the experiences of staff involved in these activities. This stage will involve interviews with staff at various levels in the organisation, as well as observation of engagement activities.

### Principal outputs from the research

The results of the research study will be written up in the form of a doctoral (PhD) thesis and generate articles in peer reviewed academic journals and presentations at academic and practitioner conferences. It is intended that the work will be publicised within the Welsh public service community.

**How would your organisation benefit from taking part?**

Your organisation would be taking part in an independent study of employee engagement in the Welsh public service. Feedback can be provided in the form of a presentation or written report, available from Autumn 2011 onwards.

It is hoped that the results will inform the development of employee engagement policy and practice at both a national and local level, with benefits for managers and staff.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

It may be a stressful time for your organisation and your employees given the financial pressures facing the public service in Wales and you may be concerned about how your organisation will be perceived. Although there is no intention to identify your organisation in the research, we could discuss any comments and concerns you may have about the project in a no-obligation meeting or telephone discussion.

**Will I, or my organisation, be identified in the research?**

Individuals that agree to be interviewed will not be identified explicitly in any published work or presentations about the research. However, it may be possible that the identity of organisations can be inferred from descriptions of their work, although steps will be taken to avoid this as far as possible.

**Who has approved and reviewed the study?**

The study has been approved by the ethics committee of the College of Business, Social Sciences and Law at Bangor University.

**Contact for further information:**

Please contact me at the addresses below if you wish to find out more about the project:

Natalie Jones  
Division of Business Studies  
Bangor Business School  
Hen Goleg  
College Road  
Bangor, LL57 2DG

*Note: I also included an email address and mobile telephone number, as well as an address and email contact details for my principal supervisor.*





Hen Goleg  
College Road, Bangor, LL57 2DG

## Employee Engagement in the Welsh public service

### Agreement with CYMRUcyf

**Indicative research activities over an eight month period (November 2010 to June 2011).**  
**Please Note: These may well change, due to time available, access agreements and focus of the research. This is a normal state of affairs.**

#### Introducing the research at the outset

- I would like to attend events where I could meet staff, and make presentations and address queries from union representatives, staff council members, Elected Members.
- It would be great to include information about the study on CYMRUcyf's intranet, staff newsletter and notice boards at different sites. I would write the copy for these.

#### Documents (ideally)

- Access to corporate strategy and people strategies,
- Information on the characteristics of the workforce,
- Reports on sickness absence, and other reports on people performance and workforce health,
- Reports on employee engagement activities.

#### Interviews

- Interviews with HR and L+D specialists, e.g. lead officer for employee engagement, management development officer, occupational health lead officer,
- Interviews with a selection of senior and middle managers from across the organisation.
- Email exchanges with individual members of staff over the eight month period to gauge views on engagement initiatives.

## **Observations**

- Management development sessions e.g. training activities
- Staff consultation or involvement sessions should they take place,
- Meetings or events where the planning and design of engagement activities are discussed.

I have estimated that I would spend a maximum of 20 days (4 working weeks) at CYMRUcyf over an eight month period. I would study documents from home, and spend time at CYMRUcyf conducting interviews, focus groups and observations of engagement activities. If required, I am happy to present my research to the CYMRUcyf at a date to be agreed, in either Welsh or English.

## **Implications for staff at CYMRUcyf**

The assistance of staff at CYMRUcyf would be needed to source key documents, and to provide reports on people performance data. I myself would arrange interviews with staff. Staff would also be invited to be interviewed and may be asked to take part in focus groups (optional). It is unlikely that most staff would be interviewed more than once, for no more than 60 minutes each. Focus groups normally consist of 8 individuals, and last 90 minutes each.

It would be ideal if I had one main contact in CYMRUcyf to source relevant documents and provide background information, especially at the beginning of the research. I have estimated that the time commitment (exchanging emails, sourcing documents, responding to queries from staff about the research or who have an issue with being involved, and catch up meetings if necessary) would amount to a maximum of 3 working days over 8 months, most likely to be at the beginning and at the end of the project. The rest of the time I will be responsible for the conduct of the research, which would be wholly independent.

Natalie Jones  
Research Student, Bangor Business School  
Contact address here

email address here  
Home telephone number here



**Bangor Business School**  
 Hen Goleg  
 College Road, Bangor  
 LL57 2DG

**My email address here**

**Employee Engagement in the Welsh Public Service  
 Participant consent to interview form**

*Please tick the boxes that apply to you.*

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for this study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. If I decide to withdraw all the information that has been provided i.e. my name, contact details and any interview data will be deleted. I understand that I may contact Natalie Jones by telephone, email or letter (email address here), or (insert name here) in my organisation's Human Resources team by telephone, email or letter to withdraw my consent for data collected from me to be used in the research, should I wish to do so.

I understand that if I require further details regarding this study I am able to contact Natalie Jones via email (email address here) or mobile telephone (number here). I also understand that I am able to contact the supervisors of the study via email: Insert names and email addresses here.

I agree for this research interview to be recorded and for the recording to be used for the purposes that have been explained to me.

Name:

---

Address:

---

Post code:

---

Telephone number:

---

Signature:

---

Date:

---

## Dates and locations of principal observation sessions, CYMRUcyf, 2010-2011

| Date                                      | Event   | Location  | Duration      |
|---|---|---|---------------|
| 11 October 2010                           | Meeting to agree access   | Head Office                                       | Half day      |
| 10 December 2010                          | Introductory visit and attend staff consultative committee meeting                                | Head Office                                       | Full day      |
| 14 December 2010                          | Information briefing to staff by one Department   | Head Office                                       | Half day      |
| 22 December 2010                          | Introductory visit  | Satellite Office                                  | Half day      |
| 01 February 2011                          | Attended HR led feedback session on findings of staff survey and discussion of action plan        | Head Office (via video con from Satellite Office) | Half day      |
| 09 February 2011                          | General observation of offices while conducting interviews  | Head Office                                       | Half day      |
| 09 February 2011                          | Team meeting  | Head Office                                       | Half day      |
| 23 March 2011                             | General observation and chats with staff while conducting interviews                              | Satellite Office                                  | Half day      |
| 05 April 2011                             | Staff Away Day  | Head Office                                       | Full day      |
| 26 May 2011                               | Focus group recruitment – general roving around building and chats with HR staff                  | Head Office                                       | Full day      |
| 27 May 2011                               | Focus group recruitment – general roving around building and chats with HR and Departmental staff | Head Office                                       | Full day      |
| 01 June 2011                              | General observation while conducting focus groups   | Head Office                                       | Full day      |
| 02 June 2011                              | General observation while conducting focus groups   | Head Office                                       | Full day      |
| 08 June 2011                              | General observation while sorting out replacement data collection method (focus group cancelled)  | Satellite Office                                  | Half day      |
| Other dates between January and July 2011 | To conduct interviews with individual members of staff  | Satellite Office                                  | Two full days |



**Consent to access and use interview transcripts, Knowing Localities, WISERD**

From: \*\*\*\*  
Sent: 06 June 2011 09:32  
To: Natalie Jones  
Subject: Re: Access to WISERD Knowing Localities dataset - health and social care category

Dear Natalie,

Professor \*\*\*\* has approved your request to access the Knowing Localities Dataset. Please contact \*\*\* and/or \*\*\* to arrange how and where you access the data.

Best Wishes

\*\*\* on behalf of WISERD ([www.wiserd.ac.uk](http://www.wiserd.ac.uk))

\*\*\*\*\*

From: "Natalie Jones"  
To: \*\*\* representing WISERD  
Date: 31/05/11 04:04 PM  
Subject: Access to WISERD Knowing Localities dataset - health and social care category

Hello \*\*\*

I made a request in late April for access to 16 interview transcripts from the Knowing Localities dataset. I was wondering if access had been agreed? I attach a copy of the access request form.

Many thanks

Natalie Jones, Bangor Business School and WISERD associate.

----- Original Message -----

From: Natalie Jones

Sent: 28/04/11 03:09 PM

To: \*\*\* representing WISERD

**Subject: Re: Access to WISERD Knowing Localities dataset - health and social care category**

Hi \*\*\*

Thanks for the paperwork - I attach a completed copy of the WISERD data access request form as requested

Regards

Natalie

\*\*\*\*\*

Natalie Jones

email address here

**WISERD (Wales Institute of Social, Economic Data, Research and Methods) Knowing Localities interview schedule, 2009**

**Section 1: Stakeholder identity**

We are interviewing you with regard your role/job as ....

Can you describe your job? What do you do? How did you get in to your current role?

Who do you engage with and why?

What does success look like in your role?

Where do you see yourself in three or four years' time?

**Section 2: Stakeholder perceptions of place/locality**

What's your patch? Who are the people you work with - what are their patches?

How does your [patch] relate to those [patches]? (relationality across scales)

Are there any other key relationships to your [patch] and for your role?

What is your [patch] like now?

If you had to describe it someone who has not been here, how would you describe it?

In what way is this place different to others?

What are people like in the [patch]?

Ask about 'good' areas and 'bad' areas

Are there differences within the [patch]?

How has [patch] changed? For better for worse?

How have different parts of the [patch] been affected differently? Or, if no differences described above: Is this the case across [patch]?

How have people coped? How haven't they coped? (Coping strategies: how have people adapted their lives to these issues?)

How do you think the needs of [patch] will change in the future?

What has impacted on changes in your [patch]?

How have you come to know this? (what patch is like now and how it has changed and how it will change)

Do you do any data collection on this? Difference between personal and professional know



ledges (e.g. I have lived here all my life OR I have talked to these people with work)

## **Section 2: Stakeholder perceptions of place/locality (continued)**

What information / data would you like to know but don't, how would this improve your capacity to do your job?

Why don't you have this data (does it exist; do they have access)? How can this be changed?

What are the key issues that are going on here? And how does this relate to other places?

Follow up on issues:

How do you know this?

How do these issues impact + and - on the lives of those in the locality?

What was/is your role in helping to address or maintain these issues? Other people's roles in helping to address or maintain these issues. Barriers and facilitators to helping address or sustain them.

## **Section 3: Power and resources**

Who makes decisions that affect your patch

What are the crucial resources for you to conduct your work? To what extent are these available? Where do you get resources from? How could resource availability be better? How does the availability of resources impact on success? – what is available what is lacking and sharing and competition over these resources?

To what extent can people affect decisions about their locality? Who? How? Which decisions? To what extent? Is this the case across the [patch]?

Refer back to their definition of success – what are the barriers and facilitators to achieving this?

And Finally:

What is Wales?

What issues do you think will be the key things for us to follow and what would you hope would be the result of this?

**CYMRUcyf employee engagement questionnaire: extracts**

The questionnaire was organised in nine sections, and I provide sample closed questions from each section below which staff indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement. The survey consisted of 112 were scale questions, a further four were closed questions, and one was an open question.

*Section 1: Working for CYMRUcyf*

“CYMRUcyf motivates me to help me achieve its objectives.”

“I would recommend CYMRUcyf as a great place to work.”

*Section 2: Your job*

“Overall I enjoy my job.”

“I am sufficiently challenged by my work.”

“My work is valued by my department and by CYMRUcyf.”

*Section 3: Your team*

“I feel as I am part of a team working together to achieve shared objectives.”

“Overall I think team spirit is good within my team.”

“There is good co-operation with other teams in CYMRUcyf.”

*Section 4: How you are managed*

“I am able to discuss issues affecting my work with my line manager.”

“I am treated with respect by my line manager.”

“I am comfortable with the pressure under which I work.”

*Section 5: Learning and Development*

**"I have the skills I need to do my job."**

**"There are opportunities for me to develop my career in the organisation."**

**"The organisation is supportive of my identified learning and development needs."**

*Section 6: Terms and conditions of employment/working environment*

**"I am fairly paid for the role I perform."**

**"CYMRUcyf provides me with a reasonable working environment."**

**"I feel a strong personal attachment to CYMRUcyf."**

*Section 7: Communication in CYMRUcyf*

**"My team has regular team meetings."**

**"There are opportunities to make my views known to my line manager."**

**"The intranet is an effective communication tool."**

*Section 8: Innovation and change*

**"My line manager explains the reasons for changes which affect my team."**

**"I think it is safe to challenge the way things are done in the organisation."**

**"I am confident my line manager will use the results of this survey to improve things."**

*Section 9: Additional*

**"I know where to go to find out how to handle personal and sensitive information."**

**"I would feel confident to report any incident of bullying or harassment at CYMRUcyf."**

**"During the last 12 months, have you personally experienced discrimination at work?"**