

Research Article

Beyond Monotonic Motivation: A Theory of Volatile Motivators in Organizational Life

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Organizations often try to make dangerous motivators safer. But some motivators are built precisely out of the conditions that make them so dangerous; if those conditions are removed, the motivator is not purified but changed. This paper is about a kind of motivator that has been studied in organizational settings with construct-specific definitions but which has not really been treated as a class of its own: *volatile motivators*, in which motivational power and destructive potential can be generated by the same configurational mechanism. We argue that three properties make this a class — mechanism unity, containment without elimination, and paradox-managed sustainability — and we take *edge motivation* as the canonical case, the one we are most able to pin down and explain, since its constitutive conditions are empirically specifiable. Edge motivation is the psychological state in which the outcome of a task becomes an episodic test of identity in the face of material uncertainty and asymmetric consequences: the task is no longer simply a task but becomes an episode in one's own biography. The theory sets out four propositions and an attenuation-versus-containment research design that makes its predictions different from additive accounts of motivation. The basic idea matters for organizational design: some motivators cannot be optimized because the same mechanism that makes them powerful makes them dangerous. They do not need purification. They need containment.

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1. Introduction

Organizations often try to make dangerous motivators safer. But some motivators have their force derived precisely from the conditions that make them dangerous. Motivation theory has learned how to optimise many motivators. It has not sufficiently discussed motivators that do not keep their motivational character once they are made safe. In this paper we identify that category and develop a theory for it. The relevant literatures are not naïve to cost. Self-determination theory shows the costs of need frustration^{[1][2]}. The job demands–resources framework explains loss spirals and resource depletion^{[3][4]}. Challenge and hindrance stressors distinguish growth-related and impairing demands^[5]^{[6][7][8]}. Calling and meaningful work literatures show exploitation in the context of structure^{[9][10]}. Conservation of resources theory specifies how engagement under depletion becomes harm^{[11][12]}. What the dominant analytical orientation does, however, is treat these costs as moderators, boundary conditions, resource deficits, maladaptive forms of motivators, or contextual failures of motivators that can in principle be optimised with additive benefit-maximization and harm-minimization logic. Benefit and harm are two separate variables and the design problem is to find the right combination. Some motivators do not work this way. In those motivators the mechanism that creates extraordinary engagement is the mechanism that produces destructive consequence.

Interventions that can reduce harm operate either by diminishing the constitutive conditions — which reduces motivational intensity — or by strengthening containment that prevents destructive behaviour while leaving the underlying volatility intact. The destructive potential cannot be removed at the level of the mechanism without giving up the mechanism's full motivational force. We call these structures volatile motivators. The contribution is built on three layers. On the class level, the paper proposes a theory of volatile motivators with three properties: mechanism unity, containment without elimination, and paradox-managed sustainability. On the construct level, edge motivation is framed as the canonical case because the conditions for it are empirically specifiable, rather than because it is the most common volatile motivator. The empirical layer is the attenuation-versus-containment research design, which sets the theory's predictions apart from additive ones about motivation.

The phenomenon volatile motivators describe is organizationally widespread, and is not limited to extreme professions. The trauma surgeon carrying out a complex emergency procedure, the special operator in active deployment, and the founder entering a critical funding window are all paradigmatic. So are the senior manager leading a corporate turnaround whose career depends on the outcome, the

product leader making a launch decision in an uncertain market, the consulting partner dealing with a high-stakes client rescue, the public-sector executive facing an institutional crisis, and the academic leader defending an accreditation review. They differ in time horizon, outcome visibility, and recovery infrastructure. They share one structural signature: the conditions that lead to extraordinary engagement are the ones that lead to destructive consequences.

Two further consequences follow. Current organizational practice generally takes one of two approaches to handling high-stakes work: boost motivation or minimise harm. Volatile motivators show why both can fail. Intensification increases latent destructive potential through the same mechanism that leads to motivational benefit. Harm-elimination, when it works on the mechanism instead of on containment, kills the motivational mechanism itself. The design problem for volatile motivators is not additive optimization or harm-elimination but containment.

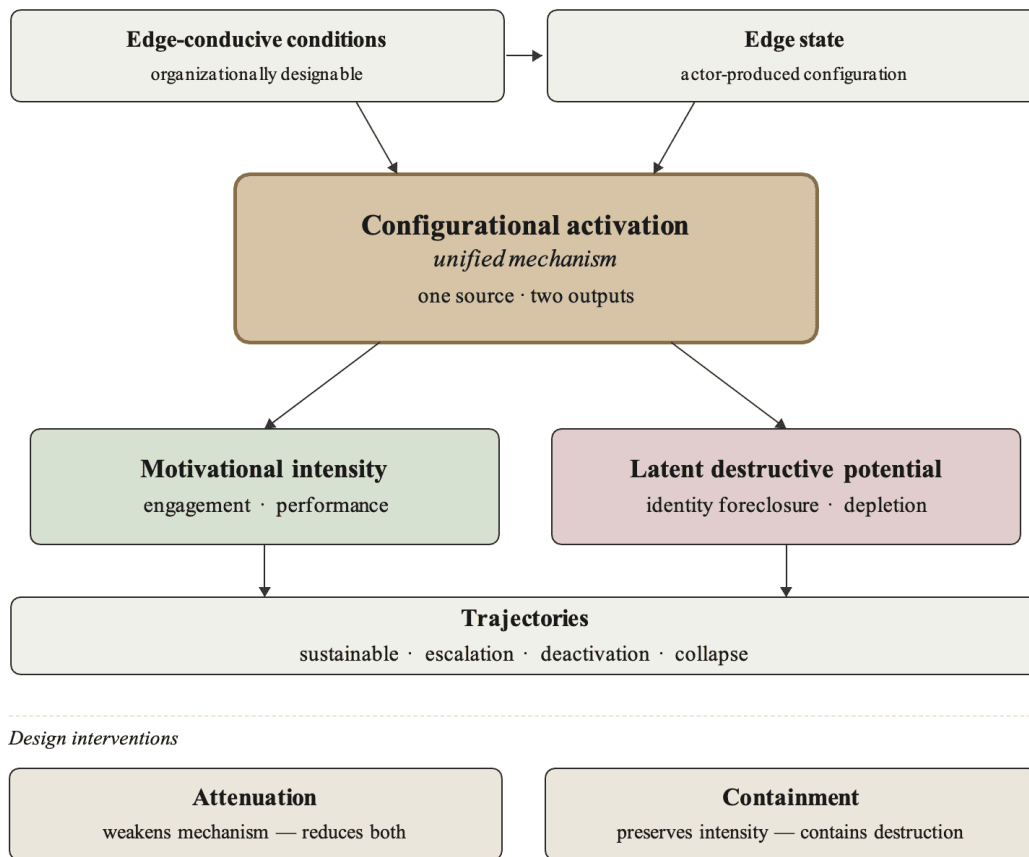


Figure 1. The volatile motivator architecture. Configurational activation is one source with two outputs — motivational intensity and latent destructive potential. Attenuation weakens the mechanism and reduces both; containment preserves intensity while reducing destructive expression.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2 we define the volatile motivator class. In Section 3 we introduce edge motivation as the canonical case. We develop the conditions-state distinction in Section 4. In Section 5 we distinguish edge from adjacent constructs. In Section 6 we develop the mechanism. In Section 7 we set out four propositions and the boundary conditions of the theory. Section 8 is devoted to the falsifiable research design. Section 9 deals with the implications.

2. Volatile Motivators: The Missing Class

2.1. The class definition

A motivational structure is volatile if it has three properties.

Mechanism unity. Motivational power and destructive potential are produced by a common underlying mechanism. Within this construct the parameters that amplify motivational benefit also magnify latent destructive potential. The two outcomes are co-produced consequences of a single mechanism instead of additive consequences of independent inputs.

Containment without elimination. The destructive potential cannot be eliminated at the level of the mechanism while the full motivational force of that mechanism is kept. Interventions either attenuate the mechanism, which reduces motivational intensity, or they contain the destructive expression while motivational intensity is retained. The destructive potential is inherent in the construct's operation; only its expression can be modified.

Paradox-managed sustainability. Engagement has to depend on accommodating contradictory demands rather than solving them. Following the paradox theory tradition^{[13][14]}, volatile motivators are not a simple case of adding trade-off logic to them; they are managed by dynamic equilibrium.

2.2. *Neighbouring theories and the gap that is left*

Each neighbouring literature is a part of the picture, but not the whole. The differentiations are meant to mark out scope, not to be criticisms of those contributions.

- **Job demands–resources theory** deals with demand–resource dynamics and loss spirals, but it does not make mechanism unity its object — the claim that demand-related arousal and resource-related depletion come out of the same activation.
- **Challenge–hindrance stressor research** theorizes the different appraisal of demands but not identity-exposing biographical episodes as the central mechanism through which motivational benefit and destructive effect are co-produced.
- **Calling and meaningful work** theorize long-term identity-laden engagement under structural purpose but not episodic outcome-contingent identity exposure as the primary motivational mechanism.
- **Flow** theorists hold that absorption happens in a skill-based way^{[15][16]}. Edge needs the phenomenological opposite: a persistent dual awareness of both moment and consequence, rather than the suspension of self-conscious awareness.
- **Edgework** is about voluntary risk as a social practice^{[17][18]}; it does not work out the organizational design and containment through which volatile structures are made manageable.

The volatile motivator framework synthesizes what these literatures can illuminate and theorizes what they do not: the structural class in which edge, charisma, intense identification, and certain forms of calling and high-performance work systems are located.

2.3. Candidate class members

The class is empirically populated. Charismatic leadership^{[19][20][21][22][23]} matches the class properties, especially in intense charismatic relationships where leader–follower influence is asymmetric and the follower’s critical autonomy is weakened. Not every charismatic leader has volatile motivation; the volatile structure emerges when there are configurational restrictions in which this identification-mediated engagement is also the mechanism through which complicity and collapse in charismatic behaviour can take place. Where there are organizational and individual safeguards that preserve followers’ autonomy, charisma works in a more monotonic way. In general, high-intensity organizational identification^{[24][25][26]} sits apart from ordinary organizational identification — which is a more monotonic resource — and shows the class properties under identity fusion and reduced individual autonomy. In high-intensity identification we have the class properties; identification at moderate levels does not. The configurational restriction is very important. The class is not “any motivational construct that has a dark side,” because then the class would have no content. The class is a group of motivational structures where the dark side is produced by the same configurational mechanism as the motivational benefit, in configurations where this is the case. Three other candidates still remain conditional: calling work (and deeply meaningful work) that is volatile only when meaning intensity is coupled with identity fusion and structural exploitability, high-performance work systems^{[27][28][29]}, and workaholism^[30].

3. Edge Motivation as the Canonical Case

3.1. Definition and rationale for canonical status

Edge motivation is the mental state a person enters when he or she voluntarily takes on conditions of material outcome uncertainty, asymmetric consequence, an identity-relevant stake, and legibility of the stake, under conditions that make recovery possible. The entry is voluntary; the actor goes into it rather than simply having it happen to them. The state can be described as a phase structure of the actor’s behaviour (anticipation, entry, sustained engagement, resolution, recovery). Edge motivation is canonical for the volatile motivator class not because it is the most common in people, but because its conditions

are the most feasible to test empirically. The four main parameters can be evaluated individually and tested with experimental data. The mechanism unity claim can be tested with the attenuation-versus-containment design in §8. Edge motivation is thus the case through which the class becomes empirically tractable. Extending the class to charisma and identification then proceeds from the architecture set out here. The construct has a signature ontology that sets it apart from any other motivational structure: the task is no longer simply a task but a biographical one. Edge motivation is not high challenge, not chronic pressure, not reputation contest, not symbolic risk, not steady absorption. It is when a particular engagement, bounded in time, voluntary in entry, but uncertain in outcome, defines who the actor is becoming.

3.2. Distinguishing reputation, status, and identity stakes

Identity exposure should be distinguished from reputation and status, which are empirically related to it but theoretically different. The distinction is a fundamental part of the construct.

Stake type	Actor's implicit question	Sufficient for edge?
Reputation stake	"How will others judge me?"	No
Status stake	"Will my position rise or fall?"	No
Identity exposure	"What will this outcome make true about who I am becoming?"	Yes

Table 1. *Three types of stake.*

The three stake types may co-occur in any engagement but are mechanistically distinct. Reputation and status concerns produce performance-relevant arousal, and related literatures on impression management and competitive motivation have long theorized about them. They produce performance under stake and do not produce edge by themselves. Identity exposure engenders engagement in which the outcome becomes a matter of selfhood — not just how others see the actor, not just the actor's relative position, but what the outcome makes true about the person the actor is becoming. An engagement with high reputation and status stakes but low identity exposure is reputation work, not edge. An engagement with strong identity exposure but limited reputation or status visibility (the

surgeon working in private with personal stakes, or the founder with private knowledge of venture consequence) can be edge in full configuration.

3.3. What edge motivation is and is not

Edge motivation is	Edge motivation is not
Identity-exposing engagement under uncertain consequence	Ordinary challenge or difficult routine
Voluntary entry into consequential uncertainty	Coercive exposure to threat
A high-stake state with structural conditions for recoverability	Chronic stress or sustained overload
A volatile motivator requiring containment	An optimizable motivational resource
Phase-structured engagement with consequence integration	Steady absorption like flow
A biographical episode marked by stake-conditional outcome	A reputation-neutral task however demanding

Table 2. What edge motivation is and is not.

3.4. Five organizational variants

Variant	Character	Classification
Authentic edge	Voluntary engagement; real stake; uncertainty; identity exposure; recoverability	Edge motivation
Coerced edge	Pressure; foreclosed choice; threat of sanction	Threat response, not edge
Simulated edge	High-fidelity training without biographical stake	Precursor state; partial activation
Performative edge	Risk constructed for status display	Pathological imitation
Chronic edge	Sustained overload without recovery	Strain trajectory; degenerates to burnout

Table 3. Five variants of organizational engagement labeled “edge.”

These labels are retained because organizations use them rhetorically to describe their own practices; analytically, only authentic edge meets the construct definition. The taxonomy protects the theory against conceptual appropriation: practices labelled as edge that fall outside the first variant are not instances of the construct but distinct phenomena exploiting its vocabulary.

4. Edge-Conducive Conditions and the Edge State

4.1. *The ontological distinction*

The most important ontological commitment of the theory is the distinction between *edge-conducive conditions* — objective or intersubjectively identifiable features of work environments that organizations can design — and the *edge state* — the subjective psychological configuration the actor produces. Two actors in similar conditions may produce a different state. The conditions are necessary but not sufficient; only the actor produces the state.

4.2. *Edge-conducive conditions*

Four conditions are core (edge-constituting) and two are process (entry and sustainability). Core conditions:

1. **Material outcome uncertainty.** Outcome variance is genuine; the outcome is not determined by competence.
2. **Asymmetric consequence.** Outcome variance is large enough that the actor is materially affected.
3. **Identity-relevant stake.** The outcome bears on the actor's biography.
4. **Stake legibility.** Conditions make consequence cognitively available — the condition-level analogue of dual awareness.

Process conditions:

5. **Voluntary entry availability.** The actor can in principle decline.
6. **Recovery infrastructure.** Institutional and material resources let the outcome be integrated.

4.3. The edge state

The state consists of four core features that correspond to the four core conditions, with voluntary commitment as the entry condition:

1. Perceived material uncertainty.
2. **Perceived consequence asymmetry.**
3. **Identity exposure** in the strict sense of §3.2 — not reputation or status stake.
4. **Dual awareness** — perception of moment and consequence together.
5. **Voluntary commitment** as an entry condition.

State features do not reduce to condition features. The same conditions create different state realizations for different actors. Voluntary commitment may move up and down across the later phases without dissolving the construct; entry-phase voluntariness is the constitutive threshold.

4.4. The four faces of recovery

Recovery sits at several analytical levels which cannot be lumped together.

Element	Analytical level	Function
Recovery infrastructure	Organizational condition	Ensures sustainability across cycles
Perceived recoverability	Psychological perception	Shapes willingness and resilience
Recovery phase	Temporal process within edge	Integrates outcome; restores resources
Containment	Design logic	Reduces destructive expression while preserving mechanism

Table 4. Recovery across analytical levels.

The actor in full configurational edge without recoverability is on an unsustainable edge trajectory that

can lead to entrapment, collapse, or withdrawal. The actor is in edge as initially constituted, and the trajectory will not settle into recurring edge engagement.

5. Differentiation from Adjacent Constructs

Construct	Outcome uncertainty	Consequence asymmetry	Identity exposure	Dual awareness	Phase architecture	Destructive potential
Flow	not required	not required	not required	not required	not constitutive	not inherent
Work engagement	not required	not required	possible	not constitutive	not constitutive	not inherent
Challenge stressor	possible	possible	not constitutive	not constitutive	not constitutive	resource dependent
Calling / meaningful work	not required	possible	enduring meaning	not constitutive	not constitutive	conditional
Edgework	required	required	often present	often present	partial	often inherent
High-intensity identification	not required	not episodic	constitutive	not constitutive	not constitutive	inherent (high)
Edge motivation	required	required	outcome contingent	constitutive	recurrent	inherent / latent

Table 5. *Edge motivation and adjacent constructs.*

Three differentiations carry the most analytical weight: challenge stressors, flow, and calling.

Edge versus challenge stressors. Edge motivation is not “high challenge.” A challenging task is a difficult task with growth potential and can be viewed as opportunity with enough resources. Edge is a state in which the outcome of the task is an episodic test of identity in the presence of material uncertainty and asymmetric consequences. The difference is actually ontological, not quantitative: not more challenge

but a different situation in which task performance and identity formation coexist. The challenge stressor model treats motivational and destructive potentials as separable consequences of the same appraisal^{[6][8]}.

Edge versus flow. Flow eliminates self-consciousness^[15]; edge requires dual awareness. Flow does not require consequence asymmetry, and edge is formed by it. Flow is taken to be steady-state within engagement; edge is phase-structured. These two constructs may interact (an actor in edge might experience phases of flow) but they are distinguishable if we measure self-conscious awareness and identity-stake activation at the state level.

Edge versus calling. In calling, identity stake is rooted in enduring purpose and role meaning^[9]; in edge, identity stake becomes acute around outcome-contingent episodes. Calling does not require outcome uncertainty or consequence asymmetry. The trauma surgeon might experience both calling and edge — calling is the meaning frame in which edge engagement happens — but the constructs are theoretically distinct. Calling has identity-laden meaning under structural purpose; edge has identity-laden engagement under stake-conditional outcome uncertainty. Both motivators can be volatile in their configurations, but calling does so only once the configurational restrictions are met; edge is volatile as a result of its structure.

6. Mechanism: Identity Exposure, Consequence Asymmetry, Paradox, and Phase Dynamics

Our mechanism arises from identity exposure, consequence asymmetry, paradox structure and phase dynamics. Figure 1 shows the design of the mechanism, where configurational activation is one source with two outputs.

Identity exposure works through possible selves^{[31][32]} being activated under outcome-contingent conditions (the actor's engagement creates or fails to generate certain identity outcomes). The process converts possible selves into realized ones through the consequence of the actor's action under stake. The mechanism extends possible-selves theory by adding outcome-contingency and draws on identity work theory^{[33][34]} for how the outcome is integrated. The motivational outcome of identity exposure is the intensity of engagement that biographical stake creates; the destructive outcome is the risk of identity foreclosure when the actor fails. Both come from the same activation. Sensemaking^[35] and self-

affirmation processes^{[36][37]} are at the recovery stage and determine whether identity exposure is sustainable across cycles or whether identity erosion is cumulative.

Consequence asymmetry stimulates arousal and meaning systems through the structural recognition that outcome variance matters. The motivational consequence is engagement-relevant arousal. The destructive consequence is cumulative arousal load under sustained or repeated exposure. The Conservation of Resources framework^{[11][12]} provides the vocabulary for the destructive side. Resources are depleted by sustained engagement with asymmetric stake; recovery infrastructure^[38] supports restoration; failure of recovery leads to loss spirals. The same consequence asymmetry that triggers engagement-relevant arousal also leads to resource depletion. Attenuation weakens the mechanism and leads to motivational loss and resource depletion; containment leaves the mechanism intact and holds back destructive expression.

Edge motivation is paradoxical in the deepest sense^[13]. Edge cannot be made non-volatile without ceasing to be edge. Interventions that remove destructive potential will either suppress the core (giving an adjacent state rather than a safer edge) or strengthen containment mechanisms that prevent destructive expression while leaving the volatility intact. The destructive potential can be contained, but it cannot be eliminated at the level of the motivational process while the full motivational force of that process is preserved.

Edge motivation has a recurrent phase nature: anticipation, entry, sustained engagement, resolution, recovery. Each phase corresponds to a dominant regulatory demand. The architecture is not an iron law but a recurrent tendency: at a discrete edge engagement the phases recur in sequence, while at a sustained engagement the cycling can be compressed or iterated. The empirical signature is not that a physiological response has been produced on its own — stress or flow can do that — but that it is accompanied by persistent dual awareness, identity-stake activation, and outcome-contingent affect. If measurements are sensitive enough to capture these combined state-level indicators, then sustained edge should show phase-related variation, and a failure to observe such variation under adequate measurement would question the phase-dynamics part of the theory.

7. Propositions and Boundary Conditions

7.1. Four propositions

Proposition 1 (Configurational activation). *Edge motivation arises only when perceived uncertainty, consequence asymmetry, identity exposure, and dual awareness co-occur under voluntary commitment.*

Partial configurations produce adjacent states — challenge, flow, engagement, threat, or compartmentalization — but do not produce edge. Voluntariness operates as the entry gate and may oscillate across subsequent phases without dissolving the construct.

Proposition 2 (Mechanism unity). *Under edge motivation, motivational intensity and latent destructive potential covary because both are produced by the same configurational activation.*

The covariation may be nonlinear and moderated by recovery capacity. Studies that find motivational benefit rising without corresponding destructive potential, or vice versa, within edge-engaged populations would be evidence against the proposition.

Proposition 3 (Containment versus attenuation). *Attenuation interventions weaken the mechanism and therefore reduce both motivational intensity and destructive potential; containment interventions reduce destructive expression while preserving motivational intensity.*

These interventions can be distinguished empirically because they have different effects on motivational and destructive outcomes. The difference in prediction is the most direct empirical feature of the theory.

Proposition 4 (Sustainability). *Without recovery or rotation, repeated edge engagement is increasingly likely to lead to escalation, deactivation, or collapse.*

Cohorts of edge-engaged professionals will show trajectories depending on the presence of recovery infrastructure or domain rotation.

7.2. Boundary conditions

A theory of paradox-structured motivation needs explicit boundary conditions. The construct does not apply to:

- *Jobs with high pressure but low identity stake* — challenge stressor territory; the work is difficult but not biographically active.

- *Tasks with high visibility but low outcome uncertainty* — performance display under predictable conditions; reputation work, not edge.
- *Crises where no voluntary responsibility can be taken on* — a threat response, not edge; the configurational state cannot begin without the actor's commitment, even though an imposed crisis may still leave room to take on responsibility voluntarily within it.
- *Constant overload without recovery* — a strain trajectory; the engagement degenerates instead of stabilizing.
- *Symbolic risk without any real consequence* — performative imitation; the construct's empirical signatures do not appear.
- *Pure reputation or status contests* — performance under social-comparative stakes; not identity exposure in the constitutive sense.
- *Existentially meaningful work without outcome uncertainty* — calling territory; meaning is enduring rather than stake-conditional.

The boundary conditions mark out the analytical reach of the theory. Phenomena outside this scope may share vocabulary with edge motivation but are not the construct as we have set it out here.

8. Empirical Agenda and Falsifiable Research Design

8.1. *The attenuation-versus-containment design*

The theory's central empirical test is whether attenuation can be distinguished from containment. Two approaches are sufficient.

Natural-experiment strategy. Policies that govern high-stakes engagement are set up differently across institutions. Some institutions adopt attenuation policies — case-rotation of responsibility, documentation systems that contextualize individual decisions, role redesigns that reduce solo-actor accountability. Others adopt containment policies — formal debriefing programs, peer support, protected time for sensemaking, protection of institutional reputation after bad outcomes. Matched

institutional or cohort comparison has ecological validity without manipulating consequential exposure.

Simulation strategy. High-fidelity trauma simulations, emergency training environments, military exercises and founder pitch simulations can be used to assess attenuation versus containment while holding the basic task structure constant. We would measure the four state-level features, voluntariness,

perceived recoverability, engagement^[39], distress, burnout symptoms, second-victim or similar post-engagement distress, and intention to remain.

Intervention	Edge state intensity	Distress	Motivational intensity
Attenuation of core conditions	Reduced	Reduced	Reduced
Containment strengthening	Preserved	Reduced	Preserved

Table 6. *Differential predictions.*

The differential prediction — attenuation brings down distress and motivational intensity together, while containment brings down distress but keeps motivational intensity — is consistent with mechanism unity (P2) and the containment-versus-attenuation distinction (P3). Symmetric effects support additive accounts against the theory.

8.2. *What the design tests*

The design tests the theory against three alternatives. Against additive JD-R: the framework expects resources to buffer strain and demand reduction to reduce strain with mixed engagement effects; edge theory predicts the specific attenuation–containment asymmetry. Against challenge stressors: the framework predicts that hindrance reduction improves engagement and challenge reduction reduces it; edge theory predicts that the mechanism-versus-containment distinction is decisive. Against calling: the framework predicts that meaning-structure interventions drive engagement variance; edge theory predicts that consequence-structure interventions affect edge-engaged populations specifically. The design is set up to generate discriminating evidence among the frameworks rather than associations consistent with all of them.

8.3. *Operationalization priorities*

Two measurement challenges need attention. Dual awareness needs instruments that distinguish concurrent task-and-consequence awareness from pure task absorption or pure consequence focus

— adapted mindfulness measures^[40] with concurrent attention to outcome stakes, and experience sampling during engagement. Identity exposure needs instruments that distinguish biographical-stake activation from reputation-active or status-active engagement: adapted possible-selves measures together with biographical-stake assessment based on the §3.2 reputation/status/identity distinction.

8.4. Broader empirical agenda

Five further priorities follow: configurational comparative analysis of P1 across edge-engaged populations; cross-actor variation studies under matched conditions; phase-dynamics measurement that combines physiological, attentional, and behavioural signatures; longitudinal sustainability studies across careers; and a class-extension study that asks whether the volatile motivator properties hold for charisma, identification, and configurational variants of calling and high-performance work systems.

9. Implications

9.1. The central design implication

Consistent organizational design strategies for high-stakes work generally follow two patterns: intensification (increasing the conditions that make people engage) and harm reduction (removing the conditions that create strain). Volatile motivators show why both can fail when applied to a class construct. Intensification increases the potential for destructive consequence through the same mechanism that provides motivational benefit. Harm reduction, if it works on the mechanism rather than on containment, destroys the motivational mechanism itself. The design problem is containment: keeping the motivational mechanism alive while preventing destructive activity through recovery infrastructure, voluntary entry maintenance and phase scaffolding. The reframing has real consequences. Structural recovery infrastructure is not a wellness benefit; it is a structural condition for sustainable edge engagement. Voluntariness is not a procedural formality; it is the constitutive entry condition that separates edge from threat. Phase scaffolding is not an optional ceremony; it is the temporal architecture through which mechanism unity is managed.

9.2. Theoretical implications

Motivation theory should treat volatile motivators as a category alongside monotonic motivators. Configurational analysis methods, intervention designs that distinguish attenuation from containment,

and longitudinal designs that detect co-distribution should be part of the standard toolkit. The conditions-state distinction should be developed beyond edge — wherever organizations design conditions intended to produce motivational states. Paradox-based analysis should be applied more systematically; the mechanism-unity, containment, and paradox-managed sustainability requirements also hold across the volatile motivator class.

9.3. The risk of appropriation

The vocabulary of the construct is open to intensification practices that, on the surface, look like edge but do not have the same substance. Critical management traditions^{[41][27][29]} have documented how engagement vocabulary is used in intensification to extract effort while lowering wellbeing. The five-variant taxonomy in §3.4 is the theory's defence: practices that produce apparent edge without genuine voluntariness, without recovery infrastructure, or without configurational state realization do not produce the empirical signatures. The difference between edge and its imitations is not only rhetorical but empirically detectable.

9.4. What the theory changes

Four implications follow for motivation research. First, the theory distinguishes attenuation from containment as fundamentally different design strategies with different consequences for motivational intensity — the falsifiable signature that separates the account from additive frameworks. Second, it shifts analytical focus from additive to paradox-structured motivation. Third, it builds on the conditions-state distinction as an analytical tool for motivation research more generally. Fourth, it identifies edge motivation as the canonical case of a class of volatile motivators that motivation theory has already described in a construct-specific way but has not treated as a class.

Some motivators cannot be optimized because the same mechanism that makes them powerful also makes them dangerous. They do not need purification. They need containment.

This is the theoretical commitment the paper develops. Edge motivation is the canonical case; volatile motivators are the class; attenuation versus containment is the empirical discriminator. The theoretical work is to make the category visible. The practical work — designing organizations that engage with volatile motivators sustainably — comes from the framework but is not entailed by it.

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