

BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENT AMONG THE AUTOMOBILE WORKERS IN SOUTH KOREA¹

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The research reported in this article evaluates the extent to which the theoretical constructs established as determinants of behavioral commitment in the U.S. have cross-cultural validity in South Korea. A causal model developed and validated in the U.S. is estimated among automobile workers in Korea and the results indicate 18 prominent determinants: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job search, met expectations, legitimacy, transfer costs, positive and negative affectivity, opportunity, role conflict and ambiguity, spouse and supervisor support, routinization, autonomy, job hazards, involvement, and distributive justice. These are fundamental explanatory constructs that have long been affirmed in the U.S., and, as such, this study suggests evidence to support their cross-cultural validity. In spite of several Korean cultural characteristics that are relevant to employee behavioral commitment, the theoretical constructs explaining behavioral commitment are generally the same between the U.S. and Korea. The findings are interpreted with discussions of the implications.

Scholars interested in employment relationships in the workplace have established a huge number of factors associated with behavioral commitment. Indeed, they cover a wide spectrum of factors ranging from those related with certain characteristics of an individual employee to those related with global market situations. Although these fundamental explanatory constructs have long been affirmed in the literature, their validity was confined largely to Western samples, and to the United States in particular. Not much is known as to whether the explanatory constructs have cross-cultural validity in South Korea, a non-Western society. Because of the cultural differences between the U.S. and Korea, a cross-validation effort for these constructs is an important research agenda.

Of the Korean cultural characteristics that relate to employee behavioral commitment, collectivistic and hierarchical orientations should be particularly

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important, especially as compared with individualistic and lateral orientations common in the U.S. With respect to the collectivistic orientation, the group has been more significant than the individual in Korean work organizations (Hofstede, 1980). Unlike the Western organizations in which an individual's rights and responsibilities are respected over those of the group to which the individual belongs, Korean workplaces value highly mutual obligations and responsibilities as the most critical virtues. In this group-conscious society, the principal actor is not so much the individual as the group or network in which the individual is embedded. Cohorts are hired, rewarded, and promoted typically on a group basis, and differences in individuals' performances, if any, are unlikely to be salient until relatively late in their careers. The hierarchical orientation is another cultural characteristic salient in Korean work organizations. Traditionally, seniority has been more highly valued and rewarded in Korea than has the individual merit or achievement (Steinberg, 1989). Most Korean work organizations are thus hierarchically structured in terms of seniority rules to a greater or lesser extent,² and a substantial amount of rewards and benefits are accrued to senior positions.

Korean workers tend to accept and value, up front, two of the cultural characteristics illustrated above as underlying principles regarding work in general. These characteristics, even if sketchy, are enough to expect that Korean workers may probably show behavioral commitment for different reasons than do U.S. workers. Although it is not easy to predict the specific pattern of differences resulting from these cultural characteristics, a case can still be made to suggest that the explanatory constructs identified in U.S. literature may be culture-bound and may thus be unable to account for behavioral commitment among the Korean workers. The current study, therefore, purposes to evaluate the extent to which the theoretical constructs established in the U.S. are also valid in Korea. Specifically, this is done by estimating a causal model of behavioral commitment among a sample of Korean employees. The proposed model draws largely on the works of Price and Mueller (Mueller & Price, 1990; Price & Mueller, 1986): validation evidence on the model is plentiful in the U.S. (Kim, Price, Mueller, & Watson, 1996; Mueller, Boyer, Price, & Iverson, 1994; Mueller, Wallace, & Price, 1992).

Conceptually, behavioral commitment is the extent to which an employee plans to continue membership with the current employer. The literature sometimes calls it intent to stay, propensity to leave, intent to quit, or attachment (Halaby, 1986; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Price, 1997). The construct, as defined and used in this study, differs from the attitudinal component of organizational commitment in that the former refers to the extent to which an employee is ready to respond on behalf of the organization, whereas the latter refers to the extent to which an employee is emotionally attached to the organization. As such, behavioral commitment indicates not so much the unconditional affective or emotional attachment as the calculated readiness or tendency to stay in the employing organization. This further suggests that organizational commitment is causally prior to behavioral commitment (Mowday et al., 1982). Characterization of the causal location of

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