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journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel)Values, commitment, and OCB among Chinese employees<sup>☆</sup>Ying Liu<sup>a,\*</sup>, Aaron Cohen<sup>b,1</sup><sup>a</sup> Institute of Organization and Human Resource, School of Public Administration, Renmin University of China, Beijing 100872, China<sup>b</sup> School of Political Science, Division of Public Administration, University of Haifa, Haifa 31905, Israel

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines relationships and interactions between (1) individual values, (2) organizational and occupational commitment, and (3) organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and in-role performance in a sample of 166 employees working for a public organization in northern China. The results show several differences between the Chinese employees and previously studied Western samples, some of them expected and others surprising. Among the notable findings, the results show a strong role for continuance commitment as both a dependent variable (affected by values) and independent variable (affecting OCB). A strong negative relationship between self-direction and all commitment forms is also interesting and quite unexpected. As one of the few studies to examine such relationships in a highly traditional, non-Western culture, the study offers a new perspective on the variables examined here. We conclude by emphasizing the need for further research on other non-Western cultures and by suggesting some directions for such research.

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## 1. Introduction

As the role of personality traits in work-related behaviors and values has received renewed interest over the past decade (Furnham, Petrides, Tsaosis, Pappas, & Garrod, 2005), researchers have begun to examine the effect of values on commitment (Cohen, 2007b; Cohen & Keren, 2008; Kirkman & Shapiro, 2001; Pearson & Chong, 1997; Wasti, 2003) and on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and performance (Ang, Van Dyne, & Begley, 2003; Cohen & Keren, 2008; Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007). Fischer and Smith (2006) highlight the importance of such an examination, arguing that employees from different socio-cultural backgrounds bring different career aspirations and value systems to their work. Their own research has shown that employees are influenced differently by justice perceptions depending on their value orientation (Fischer & Smith, 2006). But values are thought to play a functional role in all sorts of work-related processes and outcomes (Lam, Schaubroeck, & Aryee, 2002).

Most studies on values have focused on the national level of analysis, in that they have compared aggregated scales of values across countries (key examples are Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 1999). Few studies have examined the effect of values on attitudes and behaviors at the individual level (Fischer & Smith, 2006, discussed above, is a notable exception). Yet individuals both within and across societies may have quite different value priorities that reflect their heritage, personal experiences, socio-economic level, and acculturation (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). Values can influence how an individual perceives and interprets a given situation and the importance he or she gives it (Schwartz, Sagiv, & Boehnke, 2000), as well as how he or

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she reacts and behaves in given circumstances (Schwartz, 1996). Further, values play a central role in determining the fit between individuals and the employment organization (Berings, De Fruyt, & Bouwen, 2004). The underlying assumption is that people will be happier and more motivated, satisfied, and committed when their values are congruent with those emphasized in the group or organization (Berings et al., 2004). All of this suggests that an understanding of individual-level differences in values may offer insights into better ways of guiding different employees (Francesco & Chen, 2004).

Commitment, the other main concept examined in this study, has also seen a shift in researchers' approach. Traditionally, the organization was regarded as the only relevant object of commitment in the workplace. However, recent years have seen growing recognition that employees in the workplace are exposed simultaneously to more than one object of commitment: not only the organization, but also the work group, the occupation, work in general, and one's particular job (Cohen, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007a; Morrow, 1993; Randall and Cote, 1991).

This new approach has been spurred by two broad societal developments. First, as the workforce has become more educated, sophisticated, and flexible, one can no longer assume that organizational commitment – rather than, say, occupational considerations – will be the driving force behind an employee's decision to keep or leave a job (Cohen, 2003). Second, the study of commitment originated in a time of economic prosperity, and was aimed particularly at preventing voluntary turnover. Yet in a job-reduction economy, organizational commitment may be a less relevant concept (Baruch, 1998; Cohen, 2003). Employers are less interested in encouraging long-term commitment when they know they may have to break the news of layoffs to even longstanding employees during an economic crisis, whether general or specific to the given company. Employees, meanwhile, may be hesitant to commit too strongly to any given organization, knowing that their employment might be terminated at any time (Cohen, 2003). These broad patterns have made it important to better understand the origin, development and magnitude of commitment foci other than or in addition to organizational commitment. Indeed, the value of this approach has been borne out by studies showing that a multiple-commitment perspective predicts important work outcomes such as withdrawal, performance, absenteeism, and tardiness better than a single-commitment outlook (e.g., Blau, 1986; Cohen, 1993, 1999, 2003; Randall and Cote, 1991).

This study spotlights two objects of commitment, the organization and the occupation—that is, the traditional focus of commitment studies, and a new focus that has been examined extensively in recent years because of its relevance to growing segments in the workforce. We chose occupational commitment rather than other possible foci (like the work group) in part because we believe that in a job-reduction economy, employees are likely to shift their commitment from the unstable focus of the organization to the more stable focus of the occupation (Cohen, 2003). It should be noted that the term “occupation” is preferable to “profession” or “career” because the former covers all employees, non-professionals as well as professionals (Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000). It should also be noted that most studies which have examined organizational and occupational commitment together have found a positive relationship between the two concepts (Cohen, 2003).

The current study assesses the interplay between individual values, commitment, and in-role performance and organizational citizenship behavior. We chose to look at these outcomes because such behaviors are likely to be affected by commitment whatever the economic circumstances, in contrast to other outcomes, such as voluntary turnover, that are more typical of prospering economies. Because OCB is less dependent than voluntary turnover on the state of the economy, any findings should be more stable across different economic conditions.

The study first examines the relationship between individual values and the two commitment forms spotlighted here—organizational and occupational commitment. It goes on to examine how values and commitment are related to OCB and in-role performance. The findings will clarify the relative effects of values and commitment on performance and answer a number of important questions raised in the literature. For example, in light of Baruch's (1998) argument about the relevance of commitment in explaining work outcomes, this study will help us determine the effect of commitment on performance when individual values are included in the equation.

This study makes an additional important contribution by exploring the relationship between individual values and outcomes in employees from China, a culture rarely examined in the context of this conceptual framework. Most of what we know about values and work comes from studies set in North America or Western Europe. Setting the current investigation in a culture so different from the typical Western context will expand and enhance our understanding of the conceptual relationship outlined here.

## 2. Conceptual framework and research hypotheses

### 2.1. Schwartz's individual values model

Schwartz and Sagiv (1995) defined human values as desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in people's lives. The crucial content aspect that distinguishes these values from one another is the type of motivational goal they express. Schwartz (1992, 1996) derived a typology of the different content of values by reasoning that values represent, in the form of conscious goals, three universal requirements of human existence: biological needs, requisites of coordinated social interaction, and demands of group functioning. Groups and individuals represent these requirements cognitively as specific values about which they communicate. Values occupy a central position in a person's cognitive system, and for this reason values influence our attitudes, decision-making processes, and in general all human behaviors (Schwartz, 1992).

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