



Three-component commitment and turnover: An examination of temporal aspects[☆]

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ABSTRACT

SEM ($N=182$) was employed to examine implied temporal aspects of three-component commitment theory as they relate to turnover. Consistent with expectations, affective commitment predicted subsequent turnover in an immediate and relatively short interval of 4 months, but failed to do in a much longer but outlying interval of 5–12 months. Side bet commitment failed to predict turnover in the short, immediate interval, but did so robustly over the longer albeit more distant interval. Normative commitment predicted turnover in neither the near term nor outmonths. Turnover rates for employees with low affective commitment were much higher than those with high affective commitment in the first quarter of a 1-year monitoring period, but subsequent turnover rates were roughly the same for the two groups. In contrast, turnover for employees with low side bet commitment was only slightly higher than the high side bet group in the first quarter, but over the remainder of the year cumulative turnover for the low side bet group exceeded that for the high side bet group by increasingly large margins. These results are consistent with theory suggesting that decrements in affective commitment (1) often occur suddenly and just prior to employees' leaving and (2) reflect general disaffection and an impetus to leave that is already exists at the point of attitude measurement. Results comport with theory describing side bet commitment as (1) an appraisal of leaving costs that, in the aggregate, are unlikely to change suddenly and (2) a relatively stable attitude that serves primarily to prevent turnover should some independent motivation to leave arise.

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For decades organizational researchers have studied relationships between work attitudes and employee turnover. In the last 25 years, a number of these have been supported in meta-analytic reviews (e.g., Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Steele & Ovalle, 1984). Among these, organizational commitment and intention to leave have been identified as the best predictors of turnover behavior (Steele & Ovalle, 1984; Tett & Meyer, 1993). A consensus has emerged in the work attitudes literature that organizational commitment is a multi-faceted phenomenon (e.g., Angle & Perry, 1981; Meyer & Allen, 1991; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Multi-faceted commitment constructs are thought to enhance the prediction of critical organizational eventualities, particularly turnover, by accounting for a broader spectrum of employees' psychological attachments to the organization.

1. Three-component commitment and turnover

Among such constructs, Meyer and Allen's (1991) three-component model (TCM) of organizational commitment has received by far the most attention (e.g. Dunham, Grube, & Castaneda, 1994; Hackett, Bycio, & Hausdorf, 1994; Iverson & Buttigieg, 1999; Jaros, Jermier, Koehler, & Sincich, 1993; McGee & Ford, 1987; Ko, Price, & Mueller, 1997; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, &

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Topolinytsky, 2002; Solinger, van Olffen, & Roe, 2008). In theory, this construct is a heterogeneous combination of distinct forms of attitudinal commitment, each of which influences turnover in different ways (Allen & Meyer, 1996; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer & Allen, 1997).

Affective commitment refers to how much individuals identify with, are involved in, and enjoy membership in the organization, while continuance commitment is a function of perceived leaving costs or “side bets.” Though Meyer and Allen (1984) originally conceptualized continuance commitment as a unidimensional construct (commitment based on leaving costs per Becker (1960)), studies have consistently shown a two-dimensional factor structure (Dunham et al., 1994; Hackett et al., 1994; Iverson & Buttigieg, 1999; Jaros, 1997; McGee & Ford, 1987; Meyer, Allen, & Gellatly, 1990; Ko et al., 1997). The “high sacrifice” subscale seems to reflect perceived social and economic costs of leaving the organization, while the “low alternatives” subscale seems to tap employee perceptions that they lack alternatives to their present employment. The high sacrifice subdimension meshes well conceptually and nomologically with the large body of work following Becker (1960), but many researchers (Brown, 1996; Jaros, 2009; Ko, Price, & Mueller, 1997; Powell & Meyer, 2004) have argued that the low alternatives subdimension measures a construct called “perceived employment alternatives,” a common construct in turnover research (cf. Griffeth & Hom, 1988). Indeed, Meyer et al. (2002) suggest that, given their meta-analytic findings, the high sacrifice dimension is a better operationalization of the original Becker (1960) side bet concept than the low alternatives dimension. To avoid ambiguities associated with the low alternatives subdimension and emphasize continuity with work in the Becker (1960) literature stream, this study focused exclusively on Meyer and Allen’s high sacrifice subdimension, henceforth referred to as “side bet commitment.” A third TCM commitment component, normative commitment is based on internalized loyalty norms.

The respective psychological mechanisms in play for affective, side bet, and normative commitment are theoretically dissimilar with different antecedents and outcomes—excepting the turnover outcome, their common denominator (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1991). Thus, the TCM has been defined in terms of employee retention—individuals remain with the organization because they want to, need to, or feel obligated to do so (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993).

Despite hundreds of studies incorporating the TCM, conceptual problems within this line of inquiry persist. First, correlations between side bet commitment and the other two commitment forms are very low, indicating a lack of convergent validity. This is true whether measuring unitary continuance commitment with the Continuance Commitment scale (CCS) or the high sacrifice subdimension (CC:HiSac subscale). Second, correlations between side bet commitment and outcome variables are quite distinct from the nomological patterns of affective and normative commitment, both in studies outside the TCM literature (e.g., Mathieu & Zajac, 1990) and within it (Dunham et al., 1994; Hackett et al., 1994; Ko et al., 1997; Meyer et al., 2002; Solinger et al., 2008). Third, though meta-analytic work has marshaled bi-variate correlations in support of the TCM (Meyer et al., 2002), the relatively scarce but much needed multivariate studies multivariate tests have failed to show simultaneous independent contributions of the three commitment components to actual turnover (e.g., Jaros, 1997; Jaros et al., 1993; Meyer et al., 1993; Somers, 1995). Finally, relationships with actual turnover tend to be far weaker than those involving turnover surrogates such as withdrawal cognitions. The pervasive use of turnover surrogates to test the TCM also leads to major interpretational problems (see Dalton, Johnson, Daily, 1999). Nonetheless, even the sharpest critics of the TCM affirm its value for predicting turnover (e.g., Solinger et al., 2008), the model’s central outcome.

2. Turnover theories neglect the temporal dimension

The current study investigated whether a neglected but highly relevant factor in the TCM–turnover relationship—temporal aspects—may account for the lack of support when using multi-variate tests to investigate actual turnover. The TCM and turnover literature streams have neglected the role of time in both theory and research design. Indeed, few research papers in all of organizational science specifically address, from a theoretical perspective, the time elements involved in X causing Y (Mitchell & James, 2001). This is particularly problematic in turnover studies because they often incorporate decisions about turnover measurement intervals. Few turnover researchers justify the selection of time frames in any way, and even more rarely do they select time frames with reference to theory surrounding the causal variables in question.

Ignoring the role of time in variable relationships can misapprehend causal relationships (Griffin, 1991). One of the most serious consequences of misspecifying when events may be expected to occur is the over and under-estimation of X, Y relationships (Mitchell & James, 2001). In addition to the paucity of theory about temporal aspects, the tendency among turnover researchers to use intention to leave as a convenient turnover proxy—already misleading regarding the magnitude of respective relationships (see Dalton et al., 1999)—yields a completely static research design. This in turn makes the discovery of temporal aspects of attitude–turnover relationships even less likely.

2.1. Temporal aspects of the side bet commitment–turnover relationship

Regarding the TCM, turnover, and time, there is good reason to expect side bet commitment, measured at a given point in time, to predict turnover over much longer intervals than affective commitment. First, side bet commitment is a highly cognitive attitude, and would appear in some respects the obverse of affective and normative commitment forms—which are emotion-based (Jaros, 1997) and ephemeral. Low levels of side bet commitment do not necessarily coincide with disaffection, and unlike affective and normative commitment, side bet commitment correlates very weakly with affect-related constructs (Dunham et al., 1994; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002; Wasti, 2003). The continuance form of commitment is unique in the TCM because, in theory, it exclusively motivates *persistence* in a given course of action—i.e., retaining one’s current job—rather than a *change* in that

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