



Commitment profiles and employee turnover[☆]



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ABSTRACT

We examined how affective (AC), normative (NC), perceived sacrifice (PS), and few alternatives (FA) commitments combine to form profiles and determine turnover intention and turnover. We theorized that three mechanisms account for how profiles operate, i.e., the degree to which membership is internally regulated, the perceived desirability and ease of movement, and the within-person contextual effects among profiles. In a sample of 712 University alumni, we found evidence of six profiles of commitment, reflecting different combinations of commitment forms. The AC Dominant, AC–NC Dominant, and Committed profiles displayed lower turnover intention than the Continuance Dominant and Not Committed profiles. Moreover, the Continuance Dominant profile and the profiles in which AC was high displayed lower turnover rates than the Not Committed profile. We discuss the implications of these findings for the understanding of drivers operating within commitment profiles.

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1. Introduction

Organizational commitment plays an important role in the turnover process. Common models view commitment as an antecedent to turnover intention and actual turnover (Bentein, Vandenberg, Vandenberghe, & Stinglhamber, 2005; Griffeth & Hom, 1994; Tett & Meyer, 1993). Furthermore, the effects of commitment on turnover intention and turnover vary across commitment forms (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Affective commitment (AC), which represents an emotional attachment to the organization, shows the strongest negative relationship with turnover intention and turnover. Normative commitment (NC) or commitment out of moral obligation toward the organization shows a weaker negative relationship with these outcomes. Lastly, research has shown that continuance commitment (CC), which reflects attachment based on instrumental considerations, has two facets, i.e., the sacrifice associated with leaving (i.e., perceived sacrifice; PS) vs. the perceived lack of employment alternatives (few alternatives; FA) (McGee & Ford, 1987). Recent studies found PS to be negatively linked to turnover intention and turnover (e.g., Bentein et al., 2005; Lapointe, Vandenberghe, & Panaccio, 2011; Taing, Granger, Groff, Jackson, & Johnson, 2011; Vandenberghe, Panaccio, & BenAyed, 2011) while the results involving FA are mixed (Bentein et al., 2005; Meyer et al., 2002; Taing et al., 2011; Vandenberghe & Tremblay, 2008).

The majority of studies have treated commitment forms separately despite the view that commitment is a global psychological state characterized by varying levels on all forms of commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). Indeed, Meyer and his colleagues (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Meyer, Stanley, & Parfyonova, 2012) advocated that commitment

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dimensions combine to form commitment profiles (i.e., combinations of various forms of commitment). A burgeoning set of studies has emerged in which commitment profiles have been the focal issue (e.g., Gellatly, Meyer, & Luchak, 2006; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Meyer et al., 2012; Sinclair, Tucker, Cullen, & Wright, 2005; Somers, 2009, 2010; Wasti, 2005) and has begun to examine the combined influence of commitment forms on work behavior.

Although this trend is promising, commitment profile research suffers from a lack of theoretical principles that would guide predictions regarding how the various forms combine to form profiles and how those profiles differentially influence behavior. The current study intends to fill this gap and focuses on commitment profiles and their relationships with turnover intention and turnover. Our study makes the assumption that these relationships are influenced by three explanatory mechanisms. First, we draw upon work linking commitment to self-determination theory of motivation (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) to suggest that commitment forms display differential *salience of internal drive* for organizational membership (Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004; Meyer & Maltin, 2010). We predict that the more a profile is experienced as being associated with an internal drive for staying with the organization, the more likely the individual will be *willing to stay* and will *actually stay*. Second, the likelihood of a commitment profile to engender staying vs. leaving is also dependent on *perceived desirability* and *ease of movement* (March & Simon, 1958; Mayer & Schoorman, 1992, 1998). Desirability and ease of movement can be viewed as independent forces that influence the “decision to participate” in or stay with an organization (March & Simon, 1958). Third, following Gellatly et al. (2006, p. 342), we argue that “an employee’s commitment profile provides a ‘context’ that can influence how a particular component of commitment is experienced”. More specifically, we contend that, due to its being defined more broadly than the other forms (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001), AC has the capacity to *shape* the meaning of the other components (NC, PS, and FA) such that they appear more internally driven when they are combined with high levels of AC, leading to a *within-person context effect*.

This study makes several important contributions. First, the study of commitment profiles provides an opportunity to examine how the three theoretical mechanisms described above, which have been examined separately in previous research, operate together. For example, do these forces substitute for one another or do their influences add up in explaining turnover intention and turnover? Is there one force that dominates the others? As such, our study is in line with recent calls toward examining the combined influence of various forms of commitment on behavior (Johnson, Chang, & Yang, 2010; Meyer et al., 2012). Second, our study extends prior work that addressed the role of commitment profiles on employee withdrawal (Somers, 2009, 2010) by considering the possibility that the three psychological mechanisms described above do not act similarly when it comes to predicting turnover intention vs. behavior. For example, as will be discussed later, low desirability and ease of movement may lead to strong intention to quit but may at the same time refrain individuals from actually leaving. By conducting theory-based comparisons across the profiles in terms of turnover intention and turnover, we can establish more precisely the relative importance of the psychological forces at play.

Third, this study is the first to identify commitment profiles using a four-dimensional model of commitment. Most research used a three-dimensional model of commitment (i.e., AC, NC, and CC) despite evidence that CC consists of two separate dimensions (PS and FA). Our study will thus examine whether PS and FA cluster out distinctively within profiles. As previous research has reported, PS and FA relate to various outcomes in an opposite manner (e.g., Taing et al., 2011; Vandenberghe et al., 2007). Therefore, one may expect that these components will exert distinctive workings within profiles and in predicting intended and actual turnover. Fourth, as a methodological aside, we use latent profile analysis instead of cluster analysis (Somers, 2009, 2010; Wasti, 2005) to identify commitment profiles because this approach allows comparing the viability of alternative profile models that make sense on theoretical grounds (Meyer, Stanley, & Vandenberg, 2012). Finally, on a practical level, understanding how the forms of commitment operate together may avoid inadvertently implementing some change focused on promoting one form of commitment (e.g., raising organizational health-care and retirement benefits) at the potential sacrifice of other forms (e.g., decreasing the intrinsic value of belonging to the organization).

1.1. Determination of the profiles

As shown by Meyer et al. (2004), there are parallels between motivation and commitment, and motivation research has shown that individuals can be simultaneously intrinsically and extrinsically motivated (Model, 2005) and that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations can be additive (Atkinson, 1964). Similarly, individuals may attempt to reduce the cognitive dissonance associated with being unable to leave the organization (high PS and/or FA) by rationalizing that they want to (AC) or are obligated to (NC) remain within the organization (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). As such, in line with other studies (e.g., Gellatly et al., 2006; Meyer et al., 2012; Somers, 2010; Wasti, 2005), we would expect to find a committed profile of individuals holding high levels of AC, NC, PS, and FA (Committed profile). Furthermore, individuals can lack motivation altogether (i.e., amotivation), therefore we would thus expect to find a profile characterized by low levels of the four forms of commitment (Not Committed profile), as found in other studies (e.g., Gellatly et al., 2006; Meyer et al., 2012; Somers, 2010; Wasti, 2005).

Previous research also suggests that high levels of some forms of commitment may mask other forms of commitment (Somers, 1995). This may particularly apply to AC and NC as opposed to PS and FA, the former being more intrinsic and the latter more extrinsic in nature. Similarly, SDT (self-determination theory of motivation) suggests that either intrinsic or extrinsic forces will be more powerful in determining motivated behavior, depending on dispositional and environmental factors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, the presence of external contingencies (e.g., ease of movement) may reduce intrinsic motivation by causing one’s perceived locus of causality to shift from internal to external and vice versa (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Given these principles, we would thus expect to find profiles characterized by (a) high levels of AC and low levels of other forms of commitment (AC Dominant

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