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A person-centered approach to the study of commitment☆

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ABSTRACT

Theories of workplace commitment have become increasingly complex with propositions regarding its multiple-component structure (e.g., affective, normative, continuance) and multiple foci (e.g., organization, supervisor, team). To date, most research has taken a variable-centered approach (e.g., regression, SEM) to address the additive and interactive effects of commitment components and foci on behavior and well-being. This assumes that research samples are homogeneous and that the same theoretical framework and empirical findings apply uniformly to employees in general. More recently, it has been proposed that a sample can contain subgroups and that the variables of interest (e.g., commitment components or foci) might combine and relate differently to other variables within these subgroups. Consequently, there has been an increase in the use of person-centered strategies (e.g., cluster analysis, latent profile analysis) to identify and compare these subgroups. We provide an overview of commitment theory and research to demonstrate how use of a person-centered research strategy can provide new insights into the nature and implications of commitment. We also provide a critical evaluation of person-centered strategies with the objective of encouraging greater use of more advanced analytic procedures in future research. Finally, we discuss the benefits of person-centered research for theory and practice.
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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, commitment theory has become increasingly complex. Among other things, it has been proposed that commitment can be divided into component parts (Meyer & Allen, 1991, 1997; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986), be directed at different targets (Becker, 1992; Cohen, 2003; Morrow, 1983; Reichers, 1985), or both (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). Moreover, the components and foci of commitment can combine in various ways that have implications for employee behavior and well being. We argue here that the complexity created by these potential combinations poses a challenge for the *variable-centered strategies* (e.g., regression; structural equation modeling) commonly used in commitment research. Therefore, we propose that there may be benefits to adopting the *person-centered strategy* (e.g., cluster analysis; latent profile analysis) that is gaining currency in the organizational sciences (cf. Vandenberg & Stanley, 2009; Wang & Hanges, 2011; Zyphur, 2009) as a complement to the more traditional variable-centered approach.

This call for the adoption of a person-centered strategy is not new. Indeed, in a critique of personality research written over forty years ago, Block (1971, p. 13) noted that there are limits to what we can learn from strict reliance on a variable-centered approach. Specifically, Block noted that variable-centered analyses are appropriate if the goal is to understand how individuals are different or to capture relationships among a limited number of variables within a group of individuals. However, he argued that researchers also need to understand configurations of variables and how they operate within individuals.

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More recently, Morin, Morizot, Boudrias, and Madore (2011. p 59) expressed a similar sentiment with regard to commitment research. They pointed out that, although we continue to learn a great deal about commitment using increasingly sophisticated variable-centered research strategies, these strategies have their limitations. Specifically, they stated:

> … the fact that most studies relied on variable-centered analyses (e.g., multiple regression or structural equation modeling) means that their results represent a synthesis (or averaged estimate) of the relationships observed in every individual from the sample under study, without systematically considering the possibility that these relationships may meaningfully differ in subgroups of participants. Results from *variable-centered* analyses are obviously very important in their own right, but they simply ignore the fact that the participants may come from different subpopulations in which the observed relations between variables may differ, quantitatively and qualitatively. Conversely, *person-centered* analyses strive to identify distinct profiles of employees (i.e., a typology; see Bailey, 1994; Bergman, 2000; Magnusson, 1998). Typologies, or taxonomies, represent classification systems designed to help categorize individuals more accurately into qualitatively and quantitatively distinct profiles …

It is important to note that neither Block (1971) nor Morin et al. (2011) argued that variable-centered strategies should be replaced by a person-centered approach. To the contrary, the two are viewed as complementary strategies that provide different perspectives on a phenomenon of interest (cf. Zyphur, 2009).

The person-centered approach is so labeled because it takes into account intra-individual variation within a system[1] of variables (Marsh, Lüdke, Trautwein, & Morin, 2009). That is, it acknowledges that variables can combine differently for some types of individuals than they do for others. Thus, rather than focusing on the variables per se, and how they relate within the population as a whole, person-centered research identifies and compares subgroups of individuals sharing similar patterns of variables within a population. Individuals are assigned to subgroups based on a configuration of variables and are therefore viewed from a more holistic perspective than is the case in variable-centered research (Vandenberg & Stanley, 2009). Consequently, person-centered research is well suited to addressing research questions regarding how commitment components and/or foci combine, how these combinations are experienced, and how groups with varying combinations differ with regard to other variables.

To make our case for more person-centered commitment research, we begin by elaborating on some of the recent developments in commitment theory. We then illustrate how these developments have been addressed using a variable-centered approach, and identify some of the limitations of this approach. Next, we describe how a person-centered strategy complements the variable-centered approach and can be used to address a different set of questions. This is followed by a brief review of recent person-centered research and a discussion of the strengths and limitation of the overall approach and specific analytic techniques. Finally, we provide an agenda for future research and discuss the practical implications of taking a person-centered perspective.

2. Developments in commitment theory

As noted earlier, over the last few decades, commitment theory has become increasingly complex. Theorist have moved from the more traditional unidimensional conceptualizations of commitment (e.g., Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982), typically directed at the organization, toward a multiple-component (e.g., Meyer & Allen, 1991, 1997; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986) and multiple-foci (e.g., Becker, 1992; Morrow, 1983; Reichers, 1985) perspective. To illustrate, we focus primarily on Meyer and Herscovitch's (2001) general model of commitment. This model evolved from Meyer and Allen's (1991, 1997) three component model (TCM) of organizational commitment and was based on the premise that the same three-component structure could be applied to all commitments regardless of their focus (e.g., organization, occupation, union, supervisor, team, customer). The general form of the TCM is ideally suited to our objectives here because it has been tested using both variable-centered and person-centered research strategies. Consequently, the contrast between the two approaches and their relative strengths and limitations can be clearly identified. Although Meyer and Herscovitch acknowledged that employees could experience commitments to multiple foci, they did not address the issue of how commitments to multiple foci might combine. However, this issue has been addressed by others (e.g., Gordon & Ladd, 1990; Gouldner, 1957; Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000; Wallace, 1993) and can further serve to compare and contrast the variable-centered and person-centered research strategies.

2.1. Multiple components of commitment

Meyer and Allen (1991) originally proposed that commitment to an organization can be accompanied by different mindsets (desire, obligation, perceived cost). In their pure forms, these are referred to as affective (AC), normative (NC), and continuance (CC) commitment, respectively. Meyer and Allen further argued that AC, NC, and CC would all correlate negatively to turnover intention and turnover, but that they would relate differently to on-the-job behavior. Specifically, AC was expected to have the strongest positive correlation with discretionary behaviors of benefit to the organization, followed by NC; CC was expected to be unrelated or negatively related to these behaviors. Predictions concerning CC were based on the premise that employees with a

[1] We use the term "system" here to refer to a set of variables that can combine in various ways that have implications for how they are experienced and relate to other variables of interest. We argue that the components of commitment and commitments to multiple foci constitute such systems. Other examples include personality traits (Martel, Goth-Owens, Martinez-Torteya, & Niggs, 2010), goal orientations (Pastor et al., 2007), motivational states (Stephane, Boiché, & Le Scanff, 2010), and self-regulatory dimensions (Klusmann, Kunter, Trautweing, Lüdke, & Baumert, 2008).

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