



## The incremental validity of organizational commitment, organizational trust, and organizational identification



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### ABSTRACT

Organizational commitment (OC), organizational trust (OT), and organizational identification (OI) are three types of psychological attachment to an organization. Each of these three variables captures an organization-targeted attitude toward an employment relationship, but it is unclear whether they have incremental validity over each other. To address this question, this study examined the incremental validity of each variable in predicting job involvement, job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and non-self-report measures of task performance and citizenship behavior. It also examined whether perceived organizational support and psychological contract breach, two other organization-targeted attitudinal variables, were related to OC, OT, and OI when the latter were considered jointly. Meta-analytical evidence suggests that OC, OT, and OI have incremental validity over and above one another in their relationships with some, but not all, of the above correlates. This highlights the need for future research to distinguish these three types of psychological attachment to an organization.

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Many organizations strive to increase employee loyalty (Morrow, 2011; Rousseau, 1998), as employees who are psychologically attached to an organization are more satisfied and more productive (Hunter & Thatcher, 2007; Vandenberg & Lance, 1992). Three streams of research examine psychological attachment to organizations: research on organizational commitment (OC), on organizational trust (OT), and on organizational identification (OI). These three variables are all organization-targeted attitudes that reflect some degree of bonding with an organization. Despite their conceptual overlap, these streams of research have developed separately, with very little effort expended to establish the value of each variable above and beyond the other two.

This is an important problem for several reasons. First, many constructs in the organizational sciences are rather similar (e.g., LePine, Erez, & Johnson, 2002; Morrow, 1983) and such redundancy undermines theory development, as separate theories might be developed for slightly different constructs that could in fact be explained parsimoniously by a single theory (Le, Schmidt, Harter, & Lauver, 2010; Singh, 1991). Although OC, OT, and OI are certainly not identical, the extent to which they overlap or differ has not been assessed. Second, although researchers usually choose only one of these variables as a focal outcome of a study, they have seldom provided a justification for their choice; that is, the choice of one construct over another often seems arbitrary. Consequently, one can easily question, for example, a researcher's decision to focus only on OT rather than on OC and OI, given that all three constructs capture psychological attachment to the firm. There is, thus, a need to assess how focusing on one construct while omitting the other two affects empirical results. Third, from a practical standpoint, there is a growing need to better understand the intimate relationships between these three forms of psychological attachment, as organizations today find it harder to retain workers in a labor market characterized by a strong preference for job mobility (Briscoe, Henagan, Burton, & Muphy, 2012; Verbruggen, 2012). Discovering whether OC, OT, and OI are distinct forms of psychological attachment to a firm and whether each is strengthened by different means would be useful to organizations.

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The main goal of this study is to examine the incremental validity of OC, OT, and OI with respect to selected work outcomes (job involvement, job satisfaction, turnover intentions and behavior, task performance, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), perceived organizational support (POS), and psychological contract breach (PCB)). Incremental validity is a construct's predictive power over and above other constructs that are theoretically similar (Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989; Watson et al., 2008). Investigating the incremental validity of a construct is particularly important in applied psychology research because it helps to clarify the practical value of a theoretical construct to both researchers and organizations (Cortina, Goldstein, Payne, Davison, & Gilliland, 2000; Dudley, Orvis, Lebiecki, & Cortina, 2006; Lievens & Patterson, 2011).

## 1. Theoretical background

### 1.1. The nature of OC, OT, and OI

Psychological attachment is a stabilizing force that binds individuals to organizations.

OC is one of the most frequently examined forms of such psychological attachment (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). Allen and Meyer (1990) propose that three different mind-sets underlie OC: affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment. Affective commitment is driven largely by positive emotional feelings about an organization (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986), whereas normative commitment is driven by moral obligations and continuance commitment is driven by side-bets (Meyer & Parfyonova, 2010; Powell & Meyer, 2004). The focus of this study is affective organizational commitment, called simply OC hereafter. OC is an intense emotional attachment to an organization (Meyer, Allen, & Gellatly, 1990; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolyntsky, 2002), and is believed to be the result of a high-quality exchange between an organization and its employee (Colquitt, Baer, Long, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2014; Song, Tsui, & Law, 2009); an employee responds to an organization's positive treatment with positive affective feelings toward the organization, manifesting in high levels of OC.

OT is the extent to which employees are willing to become vulnerable to an organization's behavior, because they believe that the future conduct of the organization will be positive (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998). Individuals with a high level of OT are willing to rely on an organization despite the risk that it might not follow through on its obligations (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). This willingness to become vulnerable to organizational actions is a defining characteristic of OT (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; McAllister, 1995). Due to the risk involved, a high level of OT represents an intense form of psychological attachment to an organization (Williams, 2001). Mayer et al. (1995) argue that OT emerges when individuals believe that an organization has the virtues of ability, benevolence, and integrity. These virtues enable employees to assume the risk associated with depending on the organization in the future. Empirical research has also shown that trust is related to the removal of psychological barriers that stifle improvement in the quality of a relationship, such as the delegation of crucial tasks to others, full disclosure of information, and rejection of safeguards (Colquitt et al., 2007).

OI is the extent to which employees see an organization as part of their identity (Ashforth, Harrison, & Gorley, 2008; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). However, it captures more than just a cognitive self-categorization, representing also a sense of oneness with the organization. Individuals with strong OI see the essence of an organization as self-defining. In addition, individuals with strong OI are particularly likely to experience pride; they are proud to be a member of the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). OI thus often refers to a deep-level psychological phenomenon rather than a surface-level attachment (Rousseau, 1998). Ashforth et al. (2008) argue that a high level of OI emerges through a continuous cognitive process of sense-making and sense-breaking. Identity cues in the workplace help employees to define who they are and who they are not, until the most satisfying and stable self-concept is attained (Brickson, 2013). For instance, when employees come to believe that their values and those of their organization are congruent, they are likely to develop a strong OI (Riketta, 2005).

### 1.2. Similarity of OC, OT, and OI

The concepts of OC, OT, and OI certainly overlap. First, all three variables represent organization-targeted attitudes. They capture employees' feelings, perceptions, and assessments of the core characteristics of their organizations, independent of their supervisors, co-workers, or occupations. Second, all three concepts serve the same functional purpose: they help employees to find personal meaning in their daily job activities. Organizational membership becomes a salient social category that motivates individuals to work hard on behalf of their organization (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Previous research has identified a wide range of positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes associated with high levels of OC (Meyer et al., 2002), OT (Colquitt et al., 2013), and OI (Riketta, 2005), suggesting that all three generate important psychological benefits for workers.

Third, and most importantly, all three variables represent some form of psychological attachment to an organization; that is, all three are a stabilizing binding force in an employment relationship. Cooper-Hakim and Viswesvaran (2005) argue that there is likely to be a common psychological construct underlying different forms of organizational attachment. OC reflects a highly favorable emotional reaction to an organization; so favorable that employees feel a strong sense of belonging to that organization (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). OT is a binding force based on positive expectations about the future conduct of an employer. Schoorman, Mayer, and Davis (2007) emphasize that OT defines the strength and nature of an employment relationship. Employees with high levels of OT are psychologically attached to an organization because they anticipate that it will treat them fairly and favorably. Finally, OI reflects a form of psychological attachment that is identity-based; employees with high levels of OI see their fate and that of their organization as convergent and inseparable (Ashforth et al., 2008), because the organization has become part of their identity and it cannot readily be detached.

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