



The application of social exchange to commitment bonds of pro-union employees: cognitive calculations of reciprocity



Rebecca A. Thacker*

College of Business, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701, USA

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ABSTRACT

Relying on the concept of commitment bonds proposed by Klein, Molloy, and Brinfield (2012), the model presented herein suggests that, due to changes in the union's power status, pro-union employees will have to re-calculate their cognitive equations of reciprocity with the union and organization when the union is decertified, or right-to-work legislation is passed, or pro-union employees are unsuccessful in winning a union certification election. The norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) provides the basis for understanding social exchange in the workplace, suggesting that with a diminution or absence of union power, the union's ability to provide support is reduced, resulting in a lowering of felt obligation to the union. The model suggests that exchange ideology will mediate the relationship between felt obligation and commitment bond to explain how employees' relationships to the union and organization change as a union's power status declines.

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In recent work, Klein, Molloy, and Brinfield (2012) suggest that commitment is a multi-faceted construct, not the single “umbrella” measure that has been applied in research studies in the past. They make distinctions among commitment and other related but separate constructs, describing a continuum of bonds, rather than a single commitment construct. Recognizing a void in the literature concerning a distinction among commitments to different workplace targets and how those distinctions affect workplace behavior, Klein et al. (2012) point to the need for further study of these relationships.

The construct of “commitment” is an appropriate measure to capture the work-related cognitive and behavioral consequences for pro-union employees experiencing reduced union power or participating in unsuccessful union organizing efforts. In general, union membership continues to decline in the United States. For example, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 40, one of four councils in Wisconsin, experienced a membership decline from 31,730 in 2011 to 20,488 in April, 2013, a decline of 35.4% (from Bureau of Labor Statistics, as reported in Rocha, 2013). In Indiana, right-to-work legislation took effect in March, 2012, resulting in a loss of 56,000 members in 2012. Even before right-to-work legislation was passed in Michigan in December of 2012, union membership had declined from 17.5% in 2011 to 16.6% in 2012 (from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as reported by Hananel, 2013). Recently, labor's challenges to Wisconsin's right-to-work law were unsuccessful, as the Wisconsin State Supreme Court upheld the state's right-to-work provisions.

The model presented in this paper contributes to the body of research on commitment by using the concept of “bonds” (Klein et al., 2012) to understand how employees' relationships change as a union's power status declines (see Table 1 for a replication of Klein et al.'s “Continuum of Bonds”). Misunderstanding or mistaking antecedents and consequences of “commitment” due to use of a contaminated construct can lead to erroneous conclusions about workplace relationships and organizational behavior.

* Tel.: +1 740 593 2087.
E-mail address: thacker@ohio.edu.

Table 1
Bond categories from Klein et al. (2012).

<i>Identification</i> : Merging of oneself with target; self-defined in terms of the bond
<i>Commitment</i> : Volition, dedication, responsibility; embracement of the bond
<i>Instrumental</i> : High cost or loss at stake; calculated acceptance of the bond
<i>Acquiescence</i> : Perceived absence of alternatives; resignation to the reality of the bond

In addition, the model contributes to a limited stream of research looking into how employees' attitudes and behaviors change in a dual reporting relationship – union and organization – relative to one another as opposed to independent of one another. As part of their work, Klein et al. (2012) build upon Meyer, Allen, and Smith's (1993) admonition to distinguish among various “targets” when studying commitment. Meyer et al. (1993) found differences regarding predictability of outcome variables such as intention to leave, loyalty and voluntary absence depending upon the commitment target, either organizational or occupational. Relying upon social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Gouldner, 1960), the model herein takes the approach that a change in power status for the union results not only in an adjustment in bond category as to how employees think about their union, but also an adjustment to how employees think about their organization; in other words, changes take place simultaneously. By using social exchange as a framework, the model suggests a more strategic approach to understanding how dual commitments are affected by individual characteristics during the social exchange processes accompanying loss of union power.

The proposed relationships provide ideas for future research that will test the theory proposed by Klein et al.'s (2012) work on commitment bonds. In particular, adjustments to bonds by employees experiencing either a decline in their union's power or a failure to achieve their goal of union representation will be explored. It should be acknowledged at the outset that dual commitment to a union and to the organization is not unheard of, or outside the realm of possibility; however, research suggests that this situation is more likely when management and the union have a positive working relationship (Beauvais, Scholl, & Cooper, 1991).

The model also builds upon the work of those who conclude that organizational commitment should be viewed as a consequence of social exchange processes (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). At the basis of social exchange theory is the notion that relationships are interdependent and contingent on the actions of others (Blau, 1964), and that the employment relationship is defined by the exchange of resources (Emerson, 1976). The norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) provides the basis for understanding social exchange in the workplace and leads to the suggestion that with a diminution or an absence of union power, the union's ability to provide support is necessarily reduced, thus resulting in a lowering of felt obligation to the union. The model presented herein concurs with that general interpretation of social exchange theory, but goes one step further in suggesting that exchange ideology plays an important role in determining whether and how workplace behavior changes when the union loses or fails to attain power. The model suggests that, due to changes in the union's power status, pro-union employees will have to re-calculate their cognitive and behavioral equations of reciprocity with the union and the organization because the union's power status has been diminished. Exchange ideology (cf. Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001) plays a role in how a pro-union employee's relationship between felt obligation and workplace relationships will be affected; thus, the model suggests that exchange ideology will mediate that relationship.

Using the framework of commitment bonds proposed by Klein et al. (2012), the model shows how pro-union employees' relationships to both the union and the organization can be expected to change when the union loses or fails to gain power. Although Klein et al. stress both the flexibility of one's position in the bond framework and the overlap between and among bonds that can occur, the model presented herein suggests discrete bond categorization and defined movement from one category to another depending upon the union's power status.

1. Commitment bonds for Pro-union employees: the starting points

Klein et al. (2012) describe four types of commitment bonds: Acquiescence, Instrumental, Commitment and Identification (see Table 1 for a replication of the Klein et al. framework). Movement among bond relationships is fluid. An employee's place in the continuum is dependent upon how employees “make sense of, experience, and react to the bond.” (Klein et al., 2012: 133). An employee's place in the continuum also depends upon the target of the bond. Depending upon the target, employees experience differential outcomes (Meyer et al., 1993). For purposes of the proposed relationships - see Fig. 1a and b - employees' bond targets are the organization and the union. As such, cognitive calculations concerning costs vs. benefits of adopting a certain bond type rest on the relationship with the target; that is, does the employee internalize the values of the target? Does the employee want to work hard for the target? How much psychological investment does the employee have with the target? How much does the employee need the job? How much does the employee believe is owed to the organization?

Fig. 1. A. Klein et al.'s (2012: 134) continuum of bonds depicting pro-union Members' bond relationship to *union* depending upon union power situation.* NM = No Movement; WEI = Weak exchange ideology; SEI = Strong exchange ideology.** The arrow extension with the dotted lines indicates a potential movement from the *Instrumental* bond with the union to an *Acquiescence* bond. B. Klein et al.'s (2012: 134) continuum of bonds depicting Pro-union Members' bond relationship to *organization* depending upon union power situation.* The arrow extension with the dotted lines indicates a potential movement from the *Instrumental* bond with the organization to an *Identification* bond.

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