



Within-person variation in affective commitment to teams: Where it comes from and why it matters[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Teamwork is crucial to organizational success and commitment to teams is an important predictor of team-related behaviors. However, theorists and researchers have typically assumed that commitment levels are generally stable within-persons, increasing or decreasing as a result of substantial organizational changes. This position is at odds with the evidence of systematic and regular intraindividual fluctuations in personal attributes and workplace behaviors. We draw upon affective events theory to present a model explaining how certain events and dispositions produce vacillations in affective reactions which, in turn, are likely to create within-person variation in affective commitment to teams (WPVC_{teams}). We further propose that WPVC_{teams} enhances prediction and explanation of intraindividual fluctuations in work behavior and, interindividually, moderates the relationship between level of commitment and behavior.

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1. Introduction

Employee commitment, the psychological bond that employees develop to workplace foci, has been of great interest to organizational scientists for years. Major issues have included the meaning of commitment (Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1996; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982); attachment to multiple foci, including organizations, interpersonal targets, and goals and action (Becker, 1992; Cooper-Hakim & Viswesvaran, 2005; Klein, Wesson, Hollenbeck, & Alge, 1999); relevant mental states (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer, Becker, & van Dick, 2006; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986); and building and maintaining commitments and, in these processes, the roles of individual differences, social influences, national culture, and other antecedents (Cropanzano, James, & Konovsky, 1993; Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Wasti & Onder, 2009).

A major reason for the continued attention to commitment is the relationships between commitment and outcomes such as job performance (Becker et al., 1996; Bishop & Scott, 2000), citizenship behaviors (Bentein, Stinglhamber, & Vandenberghe, 2002; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986), absenteeism, tardiness, and turnover (Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Glomb, & Ahlburg, 2005; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990), counterproductive activities (Becker & Bennett, 2007; Pearce & Giacalone, 2003), and organizational effectiveness (Siders, George, & Dharwadkar, 2001). Commitment influences these behaviors through its effect on motivational processes, including goal choice, goal regulation, and the direction and persistence of effort (Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004).

Our thesis is that greater recognition of the dynamic nature of commitment would contribute to understanding commitment-related behaviors. In a typical study, researchers measure commitment at one point in time to predict future outcomes, often six months to a year

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later (Jaros, 2009). This is consistent with the standard conceptualization of commitment as a fairly stable bond, changing as a result of profound external events such as mergers and layoffs, and changing in a similar manner and to a similar degree across employees (Gopinath & Becker, 2000; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Vandenberg & Stanley, 2009). If commitment is less stable, changing as a result of internal and external events, some pronounced and some subtle, with differential patterns of change across employees, then the standard assumptions limit prediction and explanation of behavior. To address this limitation, we introduce the concept of within-person variation in commitment (WPVC) to direct research attention toward intraindividual changes in commitment and the possibility of interindividual differences in such variation.

In subsequent discussion, for ease of exposition we limit our focus in two ways. First, compared to other commitment mindsets, affective commitment – employees' emotional connection with workplace foci – has the strongest, most consistent ties to other variables of interest (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Further, while we will argue that relevant within-person variation in affective commitment is likely, this may be less true for normative and continuance commitments. Cohen (2007) suggested that normative commitment is largely the result of early socialization and stable beliefs about work ethic and loyalty. If this is true then one would not predict a great deal of fluctuation in this form of commitment. Continuance commitment has not by itself demonstrated consistent relationships with outcomes of interest and so is less relevant for our purposes. Therefore, we will concentrate on affective commitment throughout our discussions.

Second, in illustrating and discussing our propositions, we will concentrate mainly, though not exclusively, on affective commitment to teams. Commitment to teams is likely to fluctuate more, and more often, than commitment to distal foci because change often happens at the level of teams (Hackman, 1992; Salas, Goodwin, & Burke, 2009; Thompson, 2004) and because teams have a particularly powerful influence on members (Moreland & Levine, 2001; Mueller & Lawler, 1999; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). This influence appears to be driven by the salience, vividness, and proximity of teams relative to other foci (Ricketta & van Dick, 2005) and probably explains why commitment to teams is a unique predictor of team-related behaviors, including intent to leave the team, citizenship behaviors directed toward the team, working overtime, and team performance (Becker, 2009; Bishop & Scott, 2000; Ellemers, de Gilder, & van den Heuvel, 1998). Better understanding affective commitment to teams should help us more adequately explain and predict these important behaviors.

As an aside, some have argued that affective commitment is largely indistinguishable from job satisfaction (Le, Schmidt, Harter, & Lauver, 2010). It is true that popular commitment and satisfaction measures are highly correlated but this, in itself, does not mean that the concepts are essentially the same. It is beyond the scope of this paper to resolve the long-standing debate regarding possible redundancy between commitment and satisfaction, but we note that if the concepts are largely redundant then at least some of our propositions apply to satisfaction as well as commitment. For the remainder of our discussions we will assume that affective commitment is a meaningful concept in its own right. In the sections to follow, we explicate the concept of WPVC, explaining its nature, antecedents, and consequences.

2. The nature of within-person variation in affective commitment

2.1. Room to operate

We propose that WPVC has state-like and trait-like properties, and that these are reflected in substantive, transient, and error components of variation. We will address these below, but first we must establish whether there is room for commitment variation to operate. If affective commitment is highly stable and consistent, then discussions about within-person variation would be moot. It is true that commitment has demonstrated a moderate amount of test-retest stability even across fairly long measurement intervals. For example, Sturges, Guest, Conway, and Davey (2002) found a correlation of .53 between newcomers' organizational commitment scores measured 12 months apart. Kammeyer-Mueller et al. (2005) measured newcomers' commitment to their organizations five times with four-month intervals in between, and reported an intraclass correlation [ICC(1)] of .62.

Although these correlations are substantial, Sturges et al.'s data leaves 72% of the variance in future affective commitment unaccounted for by prior levels, and Kammeyer-Mueller et al.'s study indicates that 38% of variance in commitment could not be explained by stable commitment levels. Further, the fact that some, or even a majority, of individuals may maintain their relative position in a commitment distribution at two or more points in time is not at odds with the notion that some of these individuals may fluctuate more than others in between measurements. For example, assume that, at a given point in time, one employee has an above average level of commitment while another employee has a below average level. Even if both employees exhibit the same level of commitment a year later, this does not imply that their WPVC between the times of measurement was trivial, or that both employees varied to the same degree or in the same manner.

In sum, considerable proportions of variance in affective commitment at one point in time are not explained by commitment at prior points, and even high correlations among commitment levels across time leave room for WPVC to operate. In addition, as discussed in the next section, there is reasonably clear evidence that an employee's commitment has an internal probability distribution in that different levels of commitment are observed within individuals over time.

2.2. Individual differences in commitment variation

2.2.1. Intra- and interindividual aspects

Workplace behavior fluctuates even over short intervals and in the absence of major organizational change (Fisher, 2008; Funder & Colvin, 1991; Motowidlo, Borman, & Schmitt, 1997). For example, in-role job performance vacillates significantly over a

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