An event-based perspective on the development of commitment ☆

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper proposes a new perspective on the development of commitment. We propose that organizational events are evaluated relative to a person's values to determine whether the person fits or misfits the organization. The fit information is then organized into commitment *elements*, which reflect the extent to which workplace events fit (relative to misfit) a particular value across events over time. We propose that elements are organized around values, not events, such that values are the main effect and events are the moderators of said effect on elements. Elements are, in turn, formative indicators of the latent commitment construct. They are the proximal causes of commitment. Multiple elements contribute to a single commitment and they are weighted via the value hierarchy. Our perspective contributes to the literature by: (a) being developmental; (b) focusing on events; and, (c) having implications for both within-person and between-person questions about commitment development.

1. Introduction

Despite considerable theoretical and empirical attention to the antecedents of commitment (Cooper-Hakim & Viswesvaran, 2005; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002), little is known about how commitment develops over time (Beck & Wilson, 2001; Bergman, 2006). Most research to date on the causes of workplace commitments has focused on either *antecedents* of commitment or *bases* of commitment, rather than the *development* of commitment. Antecedents of commitment are individual or workplace characteristics that have been empirically linked to commitment in cross-sectional studies, but may or may not be causes of commitment (Meyer et al., 2002). Examples of antecedents of commitment include age, locus of control, positive workplace experiences, and role conflict (Meyer et al., 2002). Bases of commitment are processes that have been proposed to contribute to the development of specific mindsets of commitment (Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004) or to commitment as a whole (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). Several bases of commitment are typically described (e.g., identification, socialization, internalization, and investments), but little research has actually examined these processes in the development of commitment (Bergman, 2006). Further, bases are oftentimes part of the definition of commitment itself (Meyer & Allen, 1997; Mowday et al., 1982; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986), creating construct confusion (Klein, Molloy, & Cooper, 2009). Finally, some of the bases of commitment (e.g., familial and cultural socializations; Meyer & Allen, 1997) are difficult if not impossible to measure as causal, developmental processes by the time people join organizations and become part of research populations in the organizational sciences. The lack of attention to the development of commitment has hindered the progress of commitment research.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a theoretical model of how commitment develops through values that are activated by organizational events. By development, we mean the causal processes (Beck & Wilson, 2001) that transform input information
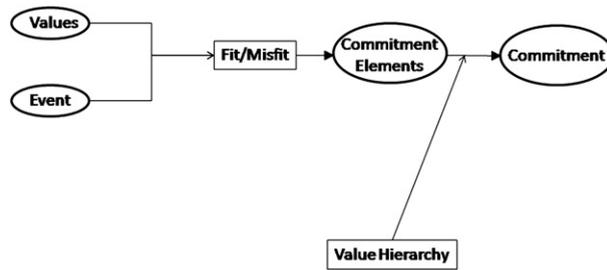
Fig. 1. Summary of the proposed framework on the development of commitment.

into commitments over time, and how these commitments become not only relatively stable but also amenable to change. This framework is explicitly causal, not merely correlational. Our individual-centered perspective addresses the development of commitment both at the event level (a.k.a., momentary experience; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and at a summative level, creating a coherent explanation of the development of commitment across intra-individual levels of analysis (i.e., events nested within individuals) over time. The major contribution of our work is the focus on how event-by-event experiences in the workplace inform workers about the organization (or other potential foci) as an object of commitment and how these events, due to their relationship with values, build commitment over time.

Our meta-theoretical framework positions events and values as distal antecedents of commitment (Fig. 1). We suggest that the values and goals[1] that a person holds are the most important individual differences for commitment and the hierarchical arrangement of these values and goals is essential to understanding the development of commitment. We further propose that the fit of these events to values provides information to workers about a new concept that we call commitment *elements*, which are more proximal causes of commitment. Elements reflect the extent to which workplace events fit (relative to misfit) a particular value across events over time. We propose that people make sense of the various events relative to their values via person–environment fit processes. That is, new information is organized into elements that summarize information regarding fit or misfit relative to a particular value. Then, multiple elements are weighted and summed to create commitment to a particular target. The weighting of elements reflects the position of the relevant values in the values hierarchy, such that values that are higher in the hierarchy are weighted more heavily. This information and the subsequent elements are necessarily evaluative, because fit/misfit is not simply knowledge but also perceived as good/bad, useful/not useful, etc. It is not simply affective – although affect can be a part – because one can fit with and/or be committed to something one does not like. Explicating this process is the major goal of this paper.

Our perspective differs from the previous research and theory on the causes of commitment in three ways. First, our framework focuses on how the interaction between momentary events and values creates commitment. The role of individual differences in commitment has generally been overlooked in the commitment literature (cf. Bergman, Benzer, & Henning, 2009), but we propose that it is a central factor in how commitment develops. As a consequence, our framework has both within-person and between-person implications. Second, our framework incorporates a clear and well-established mechanism (person–environment fit) to explain how values and events are transformed into commitment. Third, our perspective is explicitly developmental, as the focus of the framework is on how events lead people to gain commitments where commitments did not previously exist as well as how those commitments become relatively stable but still amenable to change over time. Although we appeal to "workplace experiences" as previous research has, the reason why workplace experiences matter is clearly articulated.

To that end, we review several theories that are relevant to our perspective, including trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000), person–environment (PE) fit theory (Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2010; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), and affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Then we describe our perspective whereby person–event interactions cause the creation of commitment elements that are formative indicators of latent commitment and, possibly, other bonds (Klein, Molloy, & Brinsfield, 2012). Next, we examine how commitment elements and the ultimate commitment become relatively stable yet also malleable to change over time. We then provide an exemplar application of our framework to the concept of normative commitment (Meyer, Becker, & van Dick, 2006). Finally, we discuss a research agenda and practical implications for this framework. But first, we turn briefly to a review of the prevailing conceptualization of commitment as well as a recent alternative view that positions commitment as one form of bond that people can experience in the workplace. We also briefly review previous efforts on the development of commitment.

2. Commitment and its development

The prevailing conceptualization of commitment was developed by Meyer and colleagues (Meyer & Allen, 1991, 1997; Meyer et al., 2004, 2006; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Meyer & Parfyonova, 2010). According to Meyer and Herscovitch (2001),

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[1] For simplicity throughout the remainder of the paper, we will refer to values and the value hierarchy to represent both goal and value hierarchies due to the linkages between the two described by Locke (1991).