

Commitment before and after: An evaluation and reconceptualization of organizational commitment

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Abstract

A review of the organizational commitment literature has pointed out several advantages as well as some limitations of the approach advanced by Meyer and Allen (Meyer, P.J. and Allen, J.N. (1997). *Commitment in the workplace: Theory, research, and application*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.). The advantages include good psychometric properties of the current scales, acceptable discriminant validity of the three dimensions, and research findings that showed the usefulness and acceptable content validity of the three-dimensional approach. Some of the limitations are limited predictive validity, conceptual ambiguity of continuance commitment, and concept redundancy between normative and affective commitment. This paper suggests a conceptualization that builds upon the strengths of the current approaches and minimizes their limitations. The proposed theory contends that organizational commitment is two-dimensional. One dimension is instrumental in nature and the second is affective. In addition, a sharp difference needs to be made between commitment propensity that develops before one's entry into the organization and commitment attitudes that develop after one's entry into the organization. The advantages of the suggested theory and its implications for the understanding of organizational commitment and future research on it are discussed.

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Keywords: Organizational commitment; Commitment propensity; Instrumental commitment; Normative commitment; Affective commitment

1. Introduction and goals

The concept of commitment in the workplace is still one of the most challenging and researched concepts in the fields of management, organizational behavior, and HRM (Cohen, 2003; Cooper-Hakim & Viswesvaran, 2005; Morrow, 1993). A great deal of research has been devoted to studying the antecedents and outcomes of commitment in the work setting. The maturity of the research on commitment has been exemplified by meta-analyses on these concepts (Cooper-Hakim & Viswesvaran, 2005; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnitsky, 2002; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005) as well as by several books that have provided a more quantitative summary of the knowledge on commitment(s) in the work place (Cohen, 2003; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Morrow, 1993). The conceptual and operational development of organizational commitment (OC) has affected the conceptualization and measurement of other commitment forms such as commitment to the occupation, the job, the workgroup, the union, and the work itself (Cohen, 2003; Gordon, Philpot, Burt, Thompson, & Spiller, 1980; Morrow, 1993).

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For more than 20 years, the leading approach to studying OC has been the three-dimensional (affective, normative, continuance) scales of Meyer and Allen (1984; 1997). This approach was rooted in earlier approaches to OC (Becker, 1960; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974) and was affected by their strengths and weaknesses. Each of the approaches, including the dominant one of Meyer and Allen (1997), contributed to the development of the concept of commitment. However, some of their limitations seem to be the reason for problems in the construct as well as in the predictive validity of organizational commitment dimensions (Cohen, 2003; Ko, Price, & Mueller, 1997). This paper will advance a typology that attempts to build upon the strengths of the dominant approaches to OC. The main argument of this paper is that by modifying some of the main postulates of the previous approaches and by revising some of the current conceptualizations, we can create a stronger theory with which to study OC.

The first part of this paper reviews the characteristics of the main approaches to OC. It will argue that while the dominant approach of OC is multi-dimensional (Allen & Meyer, 1990), there is controversy about the contribution of some of its dimensions to the understanding of commitment. Overlap between the two dimensions (e.g. normative and affective commitment) and unclear dimensionality in another dimension (e.g. continuance commitment) are some of the causes for the ambiguity in the current approach to OC. The later part of the paper will argue that some of the thinking and ideas developed so far do provide the basic building blocks for suggesting a conceptualization that will attempt to clarify and to better represent the concept of organizational commitment.

The suggested conceptualization of organizational commitment is presented in Fig. 1. The model suggests two dimensions to commitment — the timing of commitment and the bases of commitment. The timing of commitment distinguishes between commitment propensity, which develops before entry into the organization and organizational commitment, which develops after entry into the organization. The second dimension, the bases of commitment, makes a distinction between commitment based on instrumental considerations and commitment based on psychological attachment. Following the above conceptualization, the suggested theory advances four forms of organizational commitment.

As illustrated in Fig. 1, two of these forms develop before entry into the organization and two develop after. The first two forms that develop before one’s entry into the organization are instrumental commitment propensity, which is derived from one’s general expectations about the quality of the exchange with the organization in terms of the expected benefits and rewards one might receive from it, and normative commitment propensity, which is a general moral obligation towards the organization. The two forms developed after entry are instrumental commitment, which results from one’s perception of the quality of the exchange between one’s contributions and the rewards that one’s receives, and affective commitment, defined as a psychological attachment to the organization demonstrated by identification with it, emotional involvement and a sense of belonging. As the following sections will demonstrate, these forms are conceptually separate from one another, but they are related because the two pre-entry commitment forms are important determinants of the two post-entry commitments.

The four-component model I propose will advance several modifications to the current conceptualization. First, as a result of the distinction between organizational commitment developed before entry and commitment developed after entry, normative commitment, considered in the current conceptualization of Meyer and Allen (1997) as a situational attitude, is defined as a commitment propensity that reflects individual differences. Second, the distinction between instrumental and affective commitment leads to a shift of focus in the current continuance commitment from considerations about the costs of leaving the organization to perceptions about the benefits of staying. These

Commitment dimensions	Bases of commitment	
	<i>Instrumental attachment</i>	<i>Psychological attachment</i>
<i>Before entry to the organization</i>	Instrumental commitment propensity	Normative commitment propensity
Timing <i>After entry to the organization</i>	Instrumental commitment	Affective commitment

Fig. 1. A four component commitment model.

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