

# A CRITICAL REVIEW OF ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT OVER YEARS

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## ABSTRACT

There have been various researches on Organizational Commitment (OC) with various dimensions and perspectives. This paper reviews the main approaches of Organizational commitment since the inception of the term commitment to understand how OC should be viewed in an organization to make employees committed to their work. It also points out the various antecedents and consequences of Organizational Commitment. It takes into account the commitment construct right from being considered as a single dimensional earlier to multi-dimensional today. This paper points out a critical review and some recent developments of commitment to enhance the understanding of this construct.

**Keywords:** Organizational Commitment, Affective Commitment, Continuance Commitment, Normative Commitment, side-bets.

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of commitment in the workplace is still one of the most challenging and researched concepts in the fields of management, organizational behaviour and HRM (Cohen, 2003; Cooper-Hakim & Viswesvaran, 2005; Morrow, 1993). Over the years commitment has been variably defined, measured, and researched. For the employee, a stronger organizational commitment could result in enhanced feelings of belongingness, security, career advancement opportunities, increased compensation and intrinsic rewards for the organizational member (Rowden, 2000). Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979) defined Organizational Commitment (OC) as a multidimensional concept embracing an employee's desire to remain in an organization, willingness to exert effort on its behalf, and belief in and acceptance of the values and goals of the organization. There has been a lot of research to establish the relationship between commitment and organizational effectiveness for employers in desire of a motivated and committed workforce. Often commitment is seen as a force that binds individual to a course of action that is relevant to one or more targets (Cohen 2003).

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Uni-Dimensional Approaches**

The Side Bet Approach (1960): This approach is one of the earliest theories to put forward a comprehensive conceptual framework about commitment which represents the perspective of the individual's relationship with the organization. According to Becker (1960), "side-bets are often a consequence of the person's participation in social organizations". The employees are committed to the organization because they have some hidden vested investments or side-bets. Here side-bets or investment (e.g. time, effort, money etc.) is anything which is of value to the person concerned. According to this theory the commitment increases as the side-bet or the investment increases. The perceived cost of leaving may be increased by a perceived lack of alternatives to replace or make up for the foregone investments. It is the threat of loss that commits the person to the organization. Becker (1960) strongly argued that over a period of time, the accrual of the costs make it more difficult to disengage from the organization.

Becker's approach identified organizational commitment as a major factor leading to voluntary turnover. This assertion was also supported by the later researches on Becker's theory ( Alutto, Hrebiniak, & Alonso, 1973; Ritzer & Trice, 1969).Although Becker's theory was deserted as a leading theory of commitment, the relationship between organizational commitment and employee turnover as identified by Becker laid the foundation for further researches on organizational commitment. The influence of the Becker's side-bets is very much visible in the scales of Organizational Commitment by Meyer and Allen, as Continuance Commitment.

Porter's Psychological Attachment Approach (1974): This approach was advanced by Porter and his colleagues in 1974.The focus of commitment shifted from "side-bets" to psychological attachment that an employee had with the organization. Porter and his colleagues defined commitment as "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979;p. 226). It was also proposed that rather than job satisfaction, commitment acted as a better construct to predict employee turnover. It was thought that employee retention is not just concerned with economic factors but also affective influence which had more significance.

Commitment had three related factors (Mowday et.al., 1979):-

- 1) "a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values
- 2) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization.
- 3) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization."

Porter and his colleagues maintained that organizational commitment was an important construct in predicting turnover as depicted by Becker's "side-bets" theory.

Corresponding to the approach of Porter, Steers, Mowday and Boulian, a measurement tool in the form of a questionnaire was developed known as the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ). Although it followed the three-dimensional approach mentioned above, in practice the researchers still use this tool as one-dimensional instrument. This OCQ also included the items i.e. turnover intentions or performance intentions which were termed as the consequences of commitment by O'Reilly and Chatman (1986). The critics of OCQ asserted that all of the statements reflected more of behavioural intentions rather than the attitudes (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Due to the criticism of OCQ, the need for its alternative was felt supported from two sources – O'Reilly & Chatman (1986) and Meyer & Allen (1984).

### **Multi-Dimension Approaches**

O'Reilly and Chatman's model (1986): This approach was advanced as a conceptual and operational alternative to Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ). O'Reilly and Chatman's approach clearly differentiates among the antecedents and consequences of commitment and the basis for attachment. O'Reilly & Chatman (1986) argue that commitment is best defined as the basis of an individual's psychological attachment to the organization. This basis of attachment is distinct from either the antecedents of commitment or from its consequences.

They predicted that one's psychological commitment to an organization might be predicted through three dimensions:-

- 1) Compliance or instrumental involvement for specific, extrinsic rewards;
- 2) Identification or involvement based on a desire for affiliation; and
- 3) Internalization or involvement predicated on congruence between individual and organizational values.

Compliance is shallowest of them all and is connected to rewards. Person adopts certain attitudes and behaviour to gain specific awards. Identification is step closer into deeper commitment. Employee feels proud to be part of that specific organization and thus accepts and respects its values and accomplishments. The employee wants to establish or maintain good relationship with that specific group. However, what separates that from the internalization is that he or she does not adapt those values as his or her own. Therefore, internalization occurs finally when there is value congruence between the person and the organization. Employee accepts organization's values because those are very similar to his or her own (O'Reilly & Chatman 1986, 493). One more distinction between O'Reilly &

Chatman's theory and previous theories was that the previous theories suggested turnover as an outcome of organizational commitment while this theory suggested that Organizational Citizenship behaviour (OCB) was also a relevant outcome of organizational commitment.

The critics of this theory assert that internalization and identification appear to measure all the more same things and compliance does not really reflect the psychological attachment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). The measures correlate very highly with one another and other variables show quite similar patterns of correlations with these two dimensions. (Caldwell, Chatman & O'Reilly 1990, 257).

Meyer and Allen's Three Component Model (1990): Meyer and Allen's approach has been the leading approach in studying organizational commitment for more than 20 years (Cohen 2007, 337). Meyer & Allen's (1984) paper argued that the scales developed by Becker's (1960) followers (Alutto, Hrebiniak, & Alonso, 1973; Ritzer & Trice, 1969) did not actually measure the "side-bets" or investments but measure attitudinal commitment. They asserted that the best way to measure "side-bets" was to use measures which more directly assess individuals' perceptions regarding the number and amount of "side-bets" that they have made. They compared the inter-relationships among several common scales of commitment and two scales they had developed i.e. affective commitment and continuance commitment scales.

Affective commitment is employees' emotional attachment to organization, identification with organization and involvement in organization. Employees, who have strong affective commitment, stay in the organization because they want to. (Allen & Meyer 1990, 1-3). Meyer and Allen proposed continuance commitment as a better representation of Becker's side-bet approach. It was designed to assess the extent to which employees feel committed to their organizations by virtue of the costs that they feel are associated with leaving. After some years, the third dimension was added i.e. normative commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1991). Normative commitment refers to person's feelings of obligation to stay with the organization. In other words, employees remain in the organization because they ought to do so.

The three dimensions were characterized as a "three-component conceptualization of OC" and were described as "distinguishable components, rather than types, of attitudinal commitment, that is, employees can experience each of these psychological states to varying degrees" (Allen & Meyer, 1990, pp. 3-4).

Even though this approach is still one of the popular ones still there has been criticism laid against it. One such strong criticism by Ko et.al. focused on the discriminant and content

validity of the scale. Ko and his colleagues asserted that this approach did not give a precise definition of commitment that touched all the three components i.e. affective, normative, and continuance commitment. They simply noted that what is common to the three components is a “psychological state” that links the employee to the organization, but it is not clear what is meant by this psychological state. (Ko et al., 1997, p. 970).

More specifically, Ko et al. focused on two main problems they diagnosed in the approach. The first one was the continuance commitment dimension. They contended that Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993) argued that Becker's (1960) concept of commitment represents a component of attitudinal commitment because he emphasized the awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization. However, their argument is untenable. Becker defined commitment as a consistent line of activity (i.e., maintaining membership in the organization) and attempted to explain what causes this inconsistency...Therefore, Becker's view of commitment seems to be more congruent with the behavioural rather than attitudinal approach of Porter and his colleagues. (Ko et al., 1997, p. 970). Their second criticism focused on the relationship between affective commitment and normative commitment.

Based on their findings that showed a lack of discriminant validity between the two concepts, Ko et al. (1997) concluded that The concept of NC (e.g. normative commitment) is troublesome because it appears that there is considerable conceptual overlap between NC and AC (e.g. affective commitment). As indicated above, the normative component of commitment is based on the belief that it is the right thing to remain with the organization and that AC is attachment to the organization such that the strongly committed individual identifies with, is involved in, and enjoys membership in the organization. It is unclear how NC can be conceptually separable from AC. (Ko et al., 1997, p. 971).

Over the years there have been some changes in the scales proposed which have undoubtedly improved some of the psychometric properties of the scale.

Cohen's Four Component Model (2007): This approach is primarily built upon other approaches. The major goals of this approach were to minimize the overlapping of commitment with the possible behavioural outcomes of commitment. The general framework of this model was based upon the theory of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and Fishbein (1967) which suggested that attitudes, social influence and intention variables predict behaviour. Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) differentiated between attitudinal and behavioural commitment. The theory proposed by Cohen (2007) considered commitment as a two-dimensional concept i.e. time and bases of commitment.

Based on time, this model makes a distinction between pre-entry commitment and post-entry commitment. This theory asserts that an employee does not begin working in an organization without some attitude towards the organization and such attitudes are developed during the socialization process and is influenced by personal values, beliefs, expectations about the job and previous experiences. These attitudes are referred to as commitment propensity. Mowday et.al. (1982) and Lee et.al. (1992) differentiated between the commitment propensity and organizational commitment. They suggested that commitment propensity is developed prior to joining the organization and its higher levels lead to the development of actual organizational commitment after entry.

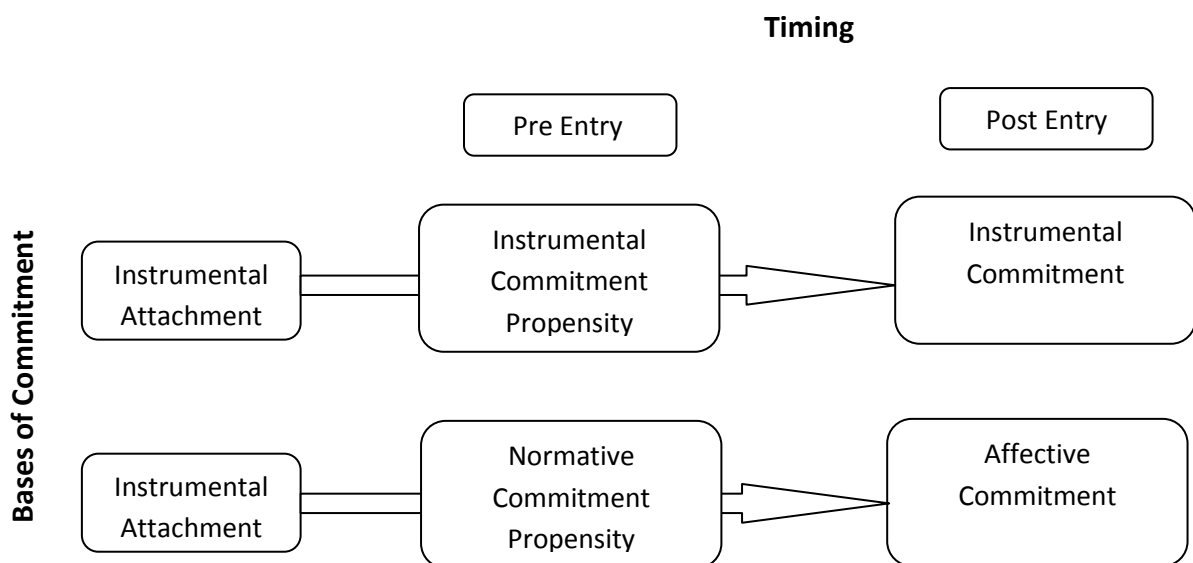
The theory also demonstrated that normative commitment as defined and measured by Allen and Meyer (1990) could be a commitment propensity rather than post-entry commitment which means that normative commitment is affected very little by specific organizational experiences and does not depend on any exchange process with the organization. Thus it was believed that normative commitment should be viewed as a commitment form which is more general rather than being specific to an organization. Thus, it showed that Normative Commitment demonstrates the individual differences which would provide information as to whether the employee would become morally committed to the organization.

Based on the nature of commitment, the theory suggested that it is also two-dimensional-instrumental and normative or affective. This theory suggested that to study the commitment of current employees of an organization, it is necessary to study their instrumental and affective commitments. The instrumental commitment refers to attachment based on more tangible exchange relationship with the organization. Affective commitment as defined by Meyer and Allen (1984) represented an employee's psychological attachment to the specific organization. Both, instrumental and affective commitments are to be measured post-entry to the organization. Instrumental commitment focuses on perceived benefits of staying in the organization rather focusing on the costs of leaving the organization.

Therefore, before entering the organization, person develops two types of commitment – instrumental commitment propensity and normative commitment propensity. The first is derived from an individual's general expectations about the quality of the exchange with the organization about the expected benefits and rewards person might receive from it in return of the contribution towards it. The second is defined by general moral obligations towards the organization. Then after entering the organization employee develops instrumental commitment and affective commitment. Affective commitment is a psychological attachment

to the organization, which can be seen as identification with it, emotional involvement and a sense of belonging. (Cohen 2007, 337).

Cohen (2007) tackles the issue of correlation between normative and affective commitment with the dimension of time. He demonstrated that normative commitment is a commitment propensity and therefore should be studied during pre-entry to the organization. It is mostly affected by the early socialization.



**Fig. 1 Four Component Model adopted from Cohen**

Thus this theory is based upon the following:-

- 1) Commitment is considered as an attitude.
- 2) Commitment is a multi-dimensional concept.
- 3) On the basis of time it differentiates commitment as pre-entry commitment and post entry commitment.
- 4) On the basis of nature of commitment it distinguishes it as affective commitment based on normative propensity and instrumental commitment.

Somers Combined Influence Mechanism Theory (2009): This theory is directed towards exploring the combined influence of commitment on outcome variables associated with employee retention and citizenship behaviour which is an extension of the O'Reilly & Chatman's theory that identified OCB (Organizational Citizenship Behaviour) as an outcome of the psychological attachment of employees towards their organization. Somers studied a sample of 288 hospital nurses whose commitment profiles were compared to turnover

intentions, job search behaviour, work withdrawal (absenteeism and lateness) and job stress. Meyer and Herscovitch's (2001) suggested that there are eight commitments in organizations that include: highly committed, affective dominant, continuance dominant, normative dominant, AC–CC dominant, AC–NC dominant, CC–NC dominant, and uncommitted. In the study from these five commitment profiles emerged: highly committed, affective–normative dominant, continuance–normative dominant, continuance dominant, and uncommitted. The results showed that the most positive work outcomes were associated with the affective–normative dominant profile which included lower turnover intentions and lower levels of psychological stress. There were no differences among the commitment groups for lateness, and the continuance–normative dominant group had the lowest levels of absenteeism (Somers, 2009).

Somers suggested that the commitment processes are highly complex as these involve the human psyche and emotions. The relative levels of commitment of each employee affect how the psychological state of commitment is experienced.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

After reviewing the various literatures, it can be concluded that each and every approach right from Becker's side-bets to Aron's four component theory to Somers combined influence theory have somehow or the other contributed in the development of the concept of organizational commitment till now. Although all these theories have their own critics, still the development of organizational commitment theory cannot be ignored. Considering the review of these theories and the pace with which the organizations are growing, it is suggested that the multi-dimensional approaches of commitment need to be adopted as these not only focus on the organizations but also takes into consideration the individual's perspective. For further investigation in the topic, it is necessary to dig deeper into the individual's psyche and their relationship with the organizations.

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