



Regulatory foci and organizational commitment [☆]

Yannis Markovits ^{a,*}, Johannes Ullrich ^b, Rolf van Dick ^b, Ann J. Davis ^a

^a *Work and Organizational Psychology Group, Aston Business School, Aston University, Aston Triangle, Birmingham B4 7ET, UK*

^b *Institute of Psychology, Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany*

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ABSTRACT

We use regulatory focus theory to derive specific predictions regarding the differential relationships between regulatory focus and commitment. We estimated a structural equation model using a sample of 520 private and public sector employees and found in line with our hypotheses that (a) promotion focus related more strongly to affective commitment than prevention focus, (b) prevention focus related more strongly to continuance commitment than promotion focus, (c) promotion and prevention focus had equally strong effects on normative commitment. Implications of these findings for the three-component model of commitment, especially the 'dual nature' of normative commitment, as well as implications for human resources management and leadership are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Several decades of research demonstrate that organizational commitment can have positive consequences for the organization and the individual employee (e.g. see the meta-analyses of Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Riketta & van Dick, 2005). Organizational commitment is defined as "a force that binds an individual to (an organization) and to a course of action of relevance to (that organization)" (Meyer, Becker, & van Dick, 2006, p. 666). Relatively little, however, is known about the sources of this force, especially if one subscribes to the common view that commitment is comprised of three distinct components, i.e., affective, normative, and continuance commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1997). Meta-analyses provide strong evidence that higher affective commitment is associated with the presence of organizational support and fairness and the absence of work-stressors such as role ambiguity or conflict. As for the antecedents to normative or continuance commitment, however, little or no empirical data are available.

It is timely, therefore, that research has begun to integrate the commitment construct with the broader domain of motivation (Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004), which is the domain traditionally concerned with the forces that make people act in the way they do. As suggested by several authors, regulatory focus might account for the strength of different commitment components (Johnson & Chang, 2008; Kark & Van-Dijk, 2007; Meyer et al., 2004; Van-Dijk & Kluger, 2004). In the present paper, we build and elaborate on these suggestions and report the first empirical test of relationships between regulatory focus and commitment. First, we briefly review the theory of regulatory focus. Then, we discuss how the two regulatory foci theoretically map onto and may feed into the different components of commitment.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: yannis.markovits@otenet.gr (Y. Markovits).

1.1. Regulatory focus theory

Regulatory focus theory (RFT, e.g. Higgins, 1997) is a theory about how people pursue goals. Although all (or at least most) people seek to approach pleasure and avoid pain, RFT assumes that these goals can be represented very differently, depending on which self-regulatory system is activated. RFT posits that there exist two fundamental self-regulatory systems: *promotion focus* and *prevention focus*. In a promotion focus, people represent goals as hopes and aspirations. In a prevention focus, people represent their goals as duties and obligations. These representations are assumed to lead people in a promotion or prevention focus to use eagerness or vigilance means, respectively, to pursue their goals. Eagerness means are concerned with ensuring positive outcomes and ensuring against the absence of positive outcomes, whereas vigilance means are concerned with ensuring the absence of negative outcomes and ensuring against negative outcomes (Higgins et al., 2001).

Clearly, as both regulatory systems are important for survival, they can in some sense be considered human constants. Indeed, a promotion or prevention focus can be situationally induced by priming or problem framing (e.g. see Higgins, 1998). There are nonetheless reliable individual differences in the preferred regulatory focus that are assumed to reflect subjective histories of previous promotion or prevention success in goal attainment in childhood and beyond (Higgins et al., 2001).

1.2. Regulatory focus and commitment

Organizational commitment is a multi-component construct which describes individuals' feelings of attachment to their organization. Here, we use Allen and Meyer's (1990) three-component model of affective, continuance and normative commitment; employees remain in an organization because they feel they *want to*, *need to* or *ought to* remain, respectively. Affective commitment is viewed and felt individually by the employees based on their emotional attachment to the organization. Continuance commitment is more of a calculative form derived from the individual's ongoing investment in the organization and the lack of alternative employment options of similar value (Dunham, Grube, & Castañeda, 1994). Normative commitment in contrast is a cognitive form of commitment, where the employee views commitment as either a moral imperative or indebted obligation based on their evaluation of relative individual versus organizational investments (Meyer, 2005).

Previous theorizing has linked commitment and regulatory focus, but these references are indirect and scattered (Johnson & Chang, 2008; Kark & Van-Dijk, 2007; Meyer et al., 2004; Van-Dijk & Kluger, 2004). Meyer et al. (2004) presented a broad theoretical framework of work motivation and noted in passing that individuals who are affectively organizationally committed (i.e., individuals being emotionally attached to, identified with and involved in the organization) may be expected to have a stronger promotion focus, whereas those individuals having a strong feeling of normative commitment (i.e., employees feeling obligated to remain with an organization) or continuance commitment (i.e., employees assessing the costs associated with leaving an organization) may have a stronger prevention focus. Van-Dijk and Kluger (2004), similarly argue that continuance commitment corresponds to a prevention focus and affective commitment should correspond to a promotion focus, however, the authors did not examine these relationships empirically. Finally, Kark and Van-Dijk (2007) recently presented a theory of how the chronic regulatory focus of leaders might affect their leadership style and the behavior of followers. Regarding the regulatory foci of the followers, they argued that the "promotion-focused individuals are intrinsically motivated and are mostly guided by their inner ideals and not by external forces. Thus, they are likely to be committed to the organization in an autonomous form (affective commitment). In contrast, prevention-focused individuals are more influenced by external or social pressure and attempt to fulfill obligations and avoid losses. Thus, they are more likely to be committed to the organization out of a sense of obligation or necessity (normative or continuance commitment)" (Kark & Van-Dijk, 2007, 517).

In summary, previous theorizing suggests that promotion focus should map onto affective commitment, whereas prevention focus should map onto normative and continuance commitment. More recently, however, Gellatly, Meyer, and Luchak (2006) have speculated on the possible 'dual nature' of normative commitment. More specifically, they considered "the possibility that the nature of employees' NC changes as a function of the strength of the other two components. When employees feel a strong sense of AC, obligations might be experienced as a *moral imperative* (i.e., 'this is the right thing to do and I want to do it'). In this case, employees may be inclined to do whatever it takes to achieve organizational objectives even if it is not required by the terms of the commitment. In contrast, when AC is low and CC is high, NC might be experienced as an *indebted obligation* (i.e., something one has to do to meet obligations and/or save face)." (p. 342)

Thus, it seems plausible that promotion focus might relate to the moral imperative part of NC and that prevention focus might relate to the indebted obligation part of NC. In contrast, the affective and continuance components appear to be more dominantly related to a promotion and a prevention focus, respectively. The following testable hypotheses can be derived:

Hypothesis 1. Promotion focus relates more strongly to affective commitment than prevention focus.

Hypothesis 2. Promotion focus and prevention focus relate equally to normative commitment.

Hypothesis 3. Prevention focus relates more strongly to continuance commitment than promotion focus.

The primary goal of the present research was to provide a first empirical test of these hypotheses by surveying a large number of employees.

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