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# Organizational commitment and its effects on organizational citizenship behavior in a high-unemployment environment<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Organizational commitment is an important concept in management and a construct on which extensive research exists. This study considers the relationship of the three dimensions of organizational commitment (affective, normative, and continuance commitment) with employees' organizational citizenship behavior in a high-unemployment environment. By analyzing the effect of high unemployment on the displacement of the self-concept from individual toward relational and collective levels, this work predicts differences in the effect of unemployment on each of the organizational-commitment dimensions. The results show that in a high-unemployment environment the affective and normative dimensions have a similar behavior than in a full employment environment. Nevertheless, the continuance-commitment dimension increases significantly in a high-unemployment context. These results and the importance of the self-concept in organizational commitment can explain some empirical discrepancies in previous research regarding the relationships between organizational-commitment dimensions and their individual effects on employees' behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Organizational commitment (OC) is an important concept in management. Researchers widely study this construct, especially in organizational psychology and organizational behavior (Jaramillo, Mulki, & Marshall, 2005; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnysky, 2002). Employees' commitment is crucial because employees' interests, goals, and needs have to dovetail with those of the organization to obtain the best of employees.

Research exists on the importance of OC in a variety of contexts, on different people and positions, and diverse labor contexts. Previous studies corroborate such importance and enable a certain consensus over how OC works. Results show that OC is decisive for variables affecting performance such as employee turnover, job satisfaction, and organizational-citizenship behavior (OCB) (Jamal, 2011; Khan et al., 2010). However, these results show certain discrepancies. Meyer et al. (2002) point out that empirical studies show sufficient differences across geographic locations to require more systematic research in different contexts. This study focuses on the change that a context of high unemployment can bring to OC and its relationship with the behavior of employees, specifically OCB.

The structure of the study is the following: Section 1 analyzes OC and its relationship with OCB, as well as the effect of a high-unemployment context on this relationship. Section 2 introduces the method. The study empirically tests the hypotheses using hierarchical regression analyses and structural equation modeling based on data from 163 middle managers working in Spain. Section 3 presents the results. Finally, the last section comments conclusions and limitations of the work and suggests future lines of research.

## 2. Theory

OC receives significant attention from organizational researchers (Riggle, Edmondson, & Hansen, 2009) because of the important role this concept plays in attitudinal, affective, and cognitive constructs such as job satisfaction and employees' behavior (Wang, 2015), employees' turnover and attendance, employees' health and well-being, and in performance effectiveness (Meyer et al., 2002). In addition to the numerous studies that assess the relationships between OC and its outcomes, researchers also profoundly study OC antecedents (Cohen, 1992; Kell & Motowidlo, 2012). These antecedents include personal characteristics, work experiences, job alternatives, investments, and socialization (Chih & Lin, 2009).

OC is the employee's level of involvement and identification with the organization in which he or she works (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). However, Bateman and Strasser (1984) believe this definition implies multidimensionality, including employees' loyalty to the organization, their willingness to make an effort on behalf of the organization, their

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degree of goal and value congruency with the organization, and their desire to maintain membership. Scholars (Baruch & Cohen, 2007) distinguish two schools regarding the conceptualization of OC: the side-bet or calculative approach, and the moral or attitudinal approach (Cohen & Lowenberg, 1990). According to Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982), attitudinal commitment refers to employees' conception of their relationship with the organization; whereas behavioral (side-bet) commitment refers to the process of locking that individuals suffer in a certain organization, and how those individuals deal with this problem. These two approaches are present in Allen and Meyer's (1990) model, the operationalization of OC that most research use and validate. This model considers three dimensions: affective, continuance, and normative commitment. The affective component of OC in the model refers to employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization. The continuance component refers to commitment according to the costs that employees associate with leaving the organization. Finally, the normative component refers to employees' feelings of obligation to remain in the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

On the one hand, affective and normative commitments are concepts that constitute a moral or attitudinal approach that includes involvement and identification with organizational values and goals that demonstrate the emotional relationship with the organization. This relationship explains the high correlation between these two dimensions common in empirical studies (Meyer et al., 2002), thus suggesting an overlap among dimensions. On the other hand, continuance commitment is the side-bet or calculative approach. The operationalization of Meyer and Allen (1984) of the continuance commitment shows that this construct is two-dimensional. The items of the first dimension represent the sacrifices an employee makes in staying with the organization, which McGee and Ford (1987) name "high sacrifice" continuance commitment. The other dimension of continuance commitment is "low alternatives" continuance commitment and comprises the items regarding available employment alternatives. Although several empirical studies explore the two-dimensional structure of the continuance commitment, the results are not consistent, some of them proving the unidimensionality (Ko, Price, & Mueller, 1997), and others confirming the two-dimensionality of the continuance commitment (Hackett, Bycio, & Hausdorf, 1994). However, these two dimensions generally present a high correlation (Meyer et al., 2002).

In general, the correlation between OC and performance is positive (Fu & Deshpande, 2014; Jaramillo et al., 2005), not only in terms of job performance, but also on a corporate level. Nevertheless, the study of the direct relationship between OC and performance has inherent drawbacks. For Angle and Lawson (1994), the link between OC and performance may depend on the extent to which ability rather than motivation underlies performance. For this reason, some authors prefer to use intervening variables, such as OCB (Johnson & Chang, 2006; Organ, 1997), to prove the importance of OC on employee motivation, behavior, and effort. This study uses this last approach to understand OC and its effects in a high-unemployment environment.

This study focuses on unemployment as an antecedent variable that modifies OC. The knowledge of the antecedents of OC is basic in the management of HHRR; researchers study variables such as personal characteristics, organizational tenure, job security, job satisfaction, role ambiguity, organizational culture, or company's layoffs policy (Grunberg, Anderson, & Greenberg, 2000; Wasti, 2003).

The conceptual differences between affective and normative commitment and continuance commitment make necessary considering the effect of unemployment separately on each dimension of commitment. Regarding the direct effect of unemployment on commitment, previous empirical studies show that socioeconomic conditions have a statistically significant but marginal effect on affective commitment. In countries with low levels of unemployment, affective commitment is slightly higher than in high unemployment contexts (Gelade, Dobson, & Gilbert, 2006). Besides, the effect of a high-unemployment environment should not particularly affect the relationship between affective

commitment and OCB, and the correlation between affective commitment and OCB should be similar to those contexts with low unemployment. This hypothesis builds on the surmise that affective commitment and its operationalization (Allen & Meyer, 1990) describes a state of commitment or attachment itself (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986), and then unemployment acts as an antecedent of affective commitment, not as a moderator in affective commitment's relationship with OCB. Then, the relationship between affective commitment and OCB must remain static independently of the unemployment rate.

**H1.** A high unemployment environment does not affect the relationship between affective commitment and OCB.

As affective and normative commitments are conceptually very close, their relationship with OCB should follow the same pattern. Then, like H1, the normative commitment relationship with OCB should not change in a high-unemployment context.

**H2.** A high unemployment environment does not affect the relationship between normative commitment and OCB.

The case of continuance commitment is different. Since Angle and Lawson's (1994), researchers consider that not all commitment typologies affect OCB equally (Kell & Motowidlo, 2012). Whereas affective and normative commitment show a significant and positive relationship, continuance commitment is not significant or even negative (Meyer et al., 2002). A high-unemployment environment can affect continuance commitment at two levels. Firstly, the employee's perception of how their professional career depends on the development and survival of their company change, because if the scarce options of improving their job opportunities outside the organization. A priori, a hostile environment increases both the fear of career development stagnation and the fear of job-market exclusion. In both cases, employees risk more. Hostile environment can modify the employee's behavior, if not qualitatively, at least by accentuating tendencies. Secondly, in an environment with plenty of opportunities, workers do not perceive that their personal advantage and well-being exclusively depends on the company's future. Thus, the individual level of the self-concept (Oyserman, 2001) prevails in continuance commitment, and behavior reflects motivation that derives from a concern for one's own interest (Johnson & Chang, 2006). In a high-unemployment context, the perception of one's own future is close to that of the organization. In this stringent economic context, a displacement exists toward the relational and collective level of the self-concept, favoring behaviors that benefit both the organization and the individual.

**H3.** In a high unemployment environment, the correlation between continuance commitment and OCB increases.

Regarding the direct effect of unemployment on OC dimensions, a high-unemployment environment can modify the average level of continuance commitment in a country. Under low or medium unemployment rate (less than 10%), in Meyer et al.'s (2002) meta-analysis, the weighted average corrected correlation between affective and continuance commitment is very low (0.16). However, in a high-unemployment context and assuming the surmise of hypothesis 3, continuance commitment can affect affective commitment because of the displacement of the self-concept from individual to collective level, augmenting the correlations between both dimensions of OC.

**H4.** In a high unemployment environment, the correlation between continuance and affective commitment increases.

In a similar way, unemployment rate can affect the relationship between normative and continuance commitment, being the normative commitment an attitudinal commitment too.

**H5.** In a high-unemployment environment, the correlation between continuance and normative commitment increases.

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