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Dual commitment to organization and supervisor: A person-centered approach

John P. Meyer [a,*], Alexandre J.S. Morin [b], Christian Vandenberghe [c]

[a] The University of Western Ontario, Canada
[b] Institute for Positive Psychology & Education, Australian Catholic University, Australia
[c] HEC Montreal, Canada

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ABSTRACT

A recent trend in commitment research has been to use person-centered analytic strategies to identify homogeneous subgroups with varying configurations of commitment mindsets (affective, normative, continuance) or targets (e.g., organization, supervisor, team). A person-centered approach takes a more holistic perspective than the traditional variable-centered approach and can reflect potentially complex interactions among commitment mindsets and/or targets. We extend application of the person-centered approach to investigate profiles of commitment to two interrelated targets, the organization and supervisor, in two studies (Ns = 481 and 264) involving Belgian university graduates. Using latent profile analyses, we found that a similar 5-profile model fit best in both studies. The mindset pattern for the two targets was similar for some profile groups, but differed for others. The groups differed on perceived organizational and supervisory support and voluntary turnover largely as expected from commitment and support theory. Implications for future research and management practice are discussed.

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There has been a recent trend toward the use of a person-centered research strategy in workplace commitment research. The person-centered approach is based on the assumption that commitment mindsets (e.g., affective, normative and continuance commitment: Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1991) and/or commitments to different constituencies (e.g., organization, occupation, supervisor, team: Becker, 1992; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Reichers, 1985) can combine and be experienced in different ways. The objective therefore is to identify subgroups within a sample that share a common configuration, or profile, with regard to these mindsets and/or constituencies (targets). Once identified, the groups can be compared on other variables, including those presumed to be antecedents or consequences of commitment. Thus, the person-centered approach views individuals in a more holistic fashion, and affords the opportunity to address complex interactions among the commitment mindsets and/or targets that would be difficult to detect using more traditional variable-centered analytic strategies (Meyer, Stanley, & Vandenberg, 2013; Morin, Morizot, Boudrias, & Madore, 2011; Vandenberg & Stanley, 2009).

To date, the person-centered approach has been used most often to identify mindset profiles of organizational commitment (e.g., Gellatly, Meyer, & Luchak, 2006; Kam, Morin, Meyer, & Topolnytsky, in press; Meyer, Kam, Goldenberg, & Bremmer, 2013; Meyer, Stanley, & Parfyonova, 2012; Sinclair, Tucker, Wright, & Cullen, 2005; Somers, 2009, 2010; Stanley, Vandenberghe, Vandenberg, & Bentein, 2013; Wasti, 2005). A few studies have been conducted to identify profiles of commitments to two or more targets (e.g., Becker & Billings, 1993; Carson, Carson, Roe, Birkenmeier, & Philips, 1999; Morin, Morizot, et al., 2011), but studies

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[*] Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario N6A 5C2, Canada. J.P. Meyer and A.J.S. Morin contributed equally to this article and both should be considered first authors.

E-mail address: meyer@uwo.ca (J.P. Meyer).

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involving multiple mindsets pertaining to more than one target are rare (e.g., Morin, Meyer, McInerney, Marsh, & Ganotice, in press; Tsoumbris & Xenikou, 2010). Given that both the target and mindsets characterizing commitment have implications for behavior (Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1996), more research involving multiple targets and mindsets is needed.

To extend research in this area, we conducted two studies to investigate profiles reflecting the three commitment mindsets for two targets — the organization and supervisor. We selected these targets because both have been found to predict employee turnover (e.g., Vandenberghe & Bentein, 2009; Vandenberghe, Bentein, & Stinglhamber, 2004), the focal outcome variable in our study. Moreover, the two targets are naturally interconnected (i.e., supervisors enact organizational policy and promote organizational goals: Levinson, 1965), but supervisors can also serve as independent targets in identity formation and commitment through their unique relationships with subordinates (Johnson, Chang, & Yang, 2010). This raises the possibility that employees will differ in the extent to which they develop commitments to one or both targets, as well as in the mindsets characterizing those commitments — a situation well-suited to a person-centered investigation. In what follows, we explain how this approach has been applied in separate investigations of multiple mindsets and multiple targets of commitment. We then use these findings in conjunction with the theory to develop our hypotheses regarding the combination of mindsets and targets.

1. Person-centered approach and its application in commitment research

1.1. Multiple mindsets of commitment

In the original formulation of their three-component model (TCM), Allen and Meyer (1990) proposed that commitment to an organization could be characterized by three distinct mindsets: emotional attachment (affective commitment: AC), sense of obligation (normative commitment: NC), and perceived cost of leaving (continuance commitment: CC). In addition, they argued that employees could experience each of these mindsets to varying degrees. That is, each employee will have a *commitment profile* reflecting the relative strength of his/her AC, NC and CC to the organization. A decade later, Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) offered a set of propositions concerning the development and consequences of eight hypothetical profiles reflecting high or low scores on each of the three mindsets.

An early strategy used to test Meyer and Herscovitch's (2001) propositions involved assigning employees to profile groups based on whether their scores on AC, NC, and CC fell above or below the sample mean/median (e.g., Gellatly et al., 2006; Markovits, Davis, & van Dick, 2007). These studies provided mixed support for Meyer and Herscovitch's propositions but, more importantly, revealed that relations between a particular commitment mindset and other variables varied as a function of the strength of the other two. Most notably, Gellatly et al. found that NC was associated with lower levels of turnover intentions and higher levels of discretionary efforts when combined with strong AC than with strong CC and weak AC. They proposed that NC might be experienced as a *moral imperative* (i.e., desire to do the right thing) when combined with strong AC, but as an *indebted obligation* (i.e., the need to meet social obligations) when combined with strong CC and weak AC. Thus, AC, NC and CC can combine to form profiles reflecting more complex mindset patterns.

The midpoint split approach has limitations, including the fact that the groups it identifies may not correspond to those existing naturally (Meyer, Stanley et al., 2013; Morin, Morizot, et al., 2011). Consequently other researchers have used cluster analyses (e.g., Sinclair et al., 2005; Somers, 2009, 2010; Wasti, 2005) or latent profile analyses (LPA: e.g., Kam et al., in press; Meyer, Kam, et al., 2013; Meyer et al., 2012; Stanley et al., 2013) to identify naturally occurring subgroups. Although there is variability across studies, some profiles emerge consistently, including *uncommitted* or *weakly committed* (low scores on all three mindsets), *CC-dominant*, *AC/NC-dominant*, and *fully committed* (i.e., high scores on all three mindsets). Other common profiles are *AC-dominant*, *CC/NC-dominant*, *and AC/CC-dominant*. In some cases, the profiles are highly differentiated (i.e., a mix of strong and weak mindsets), but in others the strength of the individual mindsets, and the differences among them, are less extreme.

The consistent emergence of multiple profiles suggests that the working population is indeed heterogeneous with regard to mindset configurations. Moreover, the relative consistency in the nature of the profiles across studies attests to their meaningfulness and justifies efforts to investigate their development and consequences. Recent studies have also provided evidence for profile consistency across subsamples from the same population (Meyer, Kam, et al., 2013) as well as stability of profile structure within a sample over time, even under conditions of large-scale organizational change (Kam et al., in press). Some profiles (*fully committed*; *AC/NC-dominant*; *AC-dominant*) tend to be associated with more positive organizational (retention, performance, citizenship behaviors) and personal (need satisfaction; well-being) outcomes than others (*uncommitted*; *CC-dominant*) (Meyer et al., 2012; Somers, 2009, 2010; Wasti, 2005). Not surprisingly, employees with optimal profiles from an outcomes perspective also report having better work conditions than those with less desirable profiles (Gellatly, Hunter, Currie, & Irving, 2009; Kam et al., in press; Meyer, Kam, et al., 2013).

There has been some inconsistency in previous research in the way that CC has been operationalized. Some studies (e.g., Kam et al., in press; Meyer, Kam, et al., 2013; Meyer et al., 2012) measured CC as a unidimensional construct as it was initially conceptualized (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). Others, based on the findings of McGee and Ford (1987), treated it as bidimensional (Stanley et al., 2013), with one dimension reflecting perceived lack of alternatives (CC:LA) and the other reflecting the sacrifices (costs) associated with leaving (CC:HS). Stanley et al. (2013) found that CC:LA and CC:HS interacted somewhat differently with AC and NC in the formation of profiles. In the present study, we measured both CC:HS and CC:LA as they pertain to the organization. Because there was no empirical basis for making the same distinction for CC to the supervisor, we treated it as a single dimension.

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