

**GENDER AND EMOTIONS AT WORK: A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF
ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT**

Ron Fisher
Lecturer
Department of Management
GRIFFITH BUSINESS SCHOOL
Griffith University
Gold Coast Campus
PMB 50, GCMC
Qld 9726
AUSTRALIA
Ph: +617 55529022
Fax: +617 55528058
e-mail: r.fisher@griffith.edu.au

Maree V Boyle (Author for correspondence)
Senior Lecturer
Department of Management
GRIFFITH BUSINESS SCHOOL
Griffith University
Nathan Campus
NATHAN
Qld 4111
Australia
Ph: 617 38610256
e-mail: m.boyle@griffith.edu.au

Liz Fulop
Associate Dean Research and Research Training
Professor of Management
Griffith Business School Executive
GRIFFITH BUSINESS SCHOOL
Griffith University
Gold Coast Campus
PMB 50, GCMC
Qld 9726
AUSTRALIA
Ph: +617 555 28544
Fax: +617 555 28909
e-mail: l.fulop@griffith.edu.au

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In this paper we propose a reconceptualization of organizational commitment utilizing current theoretical developments on gender and emotions in the workplace. We contend that, as organizational commitment has been studied mainly from a functionalist and positivist approach, that an interpretive methodological approach should be utilized to further develop the concept of organizational commitment. The reasons for this reconceptualization are related to the fact that commitment has been predominantly studied from a psychological perspective with a focus on affective and behavioral aspects of commitment. Current approaches focus on measurement rather than on the meaning of commitment itself. Important issues such as emotions and gender are not considered. As a consequence, the commitment of women, and some men, is not accurately and clearly understood in the context of the modern workplace. This leads to the perception that women, and some men, are lacking in commitment to their organizations. We discuss preliminary themes that have emerged from early analysis of how university academics conceptualize commitment. These themes reflect gender-biased and emotion-laden indicators of levels of commitment.

KEY WORDS:

Commitment, emotions, gender, interpretive methods

Introduction

In this paper we propose the need for a reconceptualization of organizational commitment. The need for this stems from perceived deficits in current conceptualizations and subsequent application of the construct. We contend that the effects of gender and emotions upon how commitment is experienced and used, both at an individual and organizational level, are currently not adequately addressed. The paper will proceed as follows. First, we provide a critical overview of the literature on organizational commitment, with a specific focus on the operationalization and measurement of commitment. Second, we discuss how recent research regarding links between gender, emotion and perceived levels of organizational commitment indicates a need to fully understand how these interact in relation to organizational commitment. Finally, we discuss three preliminary themes that have emerged from early

analysis of how university academics conceptualize commitment. These themes reflect gender-biased and emotion-laden indicators of levels of commitment.

Commitment: Definition and Measurement

The substantial commitment literature contains a number of approaches to the study, definition, and measurement of commitment. Included in these are the divergent views that commitment is a psychological state (Meyer, Allen, & Gellatly, 1990), a situation involving individual choice (Weick, 1995), and a phenomenon that is not clearly understood due to flawed theoretical and methodological approaches (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000a).

Meyer, Allen and Smith (1993) proposed that three distinct themes can be identified in the psychological approach – first, as a psychological state that is mainly an attachment between employee and organization (affective); second, as a perceived cost associated with leaving the organization (continuance); and third, as an obligation to remain a member of the organization (normative). These measures include the attitudinal and behavioral components of commitment. Weick (1995) proposed a different approach to understanding commitment based on the notion that individuals invest greater effort in understanding actions to which they are most strongly committed, a behavioral view of commitment. Behavioral commitment is defined by Salancik (1977, p62) as “a state of being in which an individual becomes bound by his actions and through these actions to beliefs that sustain the activities and his own involvement.” Individuals become bound (committed) when behavior is public, explicit, volitional and irrevocable (Weick, 1995). These four behaviors act together to indicate that the action did occur, and that it occurred because the individual chose to do it. While organizations have the ability to change situations in order to encourage commitment, Weick (1995) suggested that many organizations, particularly bureaucracies, do not

encourage individual choice due to the nature of organizational control within these organizational forms.

Commitment has also traditionally been theorized and measured through the predominant psychological approach, utilizing quantitative methods designed mainly by men. Using this approach has resulted in little consideration being given to gender differences affecting commitment in the workplace. Qualitative research by Singh and Vinnicombe (2000a) suggested that the meaning of commitment, as discovered through the life experiences of individuals in the work place, differed between men and women. Consequently, when women's commitment is judged using the traditional quantitative approach we contend that the results may be inaccurate and misleading.

Singh and Vinnicombe's (2000a) research has important implications for the theory and measurement of commitment. In many workplaces women and some men, often the majority of workers, are incorrectly seen as having low commitment based on the traditional approach. This has the potential to impact adversely on performance appraisal and opportunities for promotion. While literature on commitment focuses on different sources, such as professional and work commitment (Morrow, 1990), this paper is concerned with pursuing the issue of gender and emotions through a study of organizational commitment.

Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment has been the subject of organizational studies for over thirty years (Hrebiniak & Alutto, 1972). As mentioned previously, most research tends to be psychological in nature, focusing in the main on whether commitment is an attitude or a behavior.

Attitudinal commitment tends to focus on the organization (Angle & Perry, 1983; Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979), with the needs of the individual being satisfied by interaction with the organization. The result is that the individual increasingly identifies him

or herself with the organization while wishing to retain membership in order that the relationship may continue (Mowday et al., 1979).

Behavioral commitment tends to focus on the individual, in the belief that the behavior of the member is central to organizational commitment (Angle & Perry, 1983; Mowday et al., 1979). An example of behavioral commitment is that of Becker's (1960) theory of side-bets, where side-bets or investments (e.g. long service leave, sick leave, flexible working hours etc) accrue on behalf of the individual and act to commit him or her to the organization. Individually, side-bets may appear trivial. However, taken together they accumulate to commit the individual to the organization.

Measures of organizational commitment tend to be quantitative, mainly involving factor, correlation and regression analyses. Organizational commitment has been measured in various ways by different researchers, mainly along behavioral (Hrebiniak & Alutto, 1972; Ritzer & Trice, 1969) and attitudinal or affective lines (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer et al., 1990; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974).

Affective commitment, as measured by the Porter et al. (1974), Allen and Meyer, (1990) and Meyer et al. (1990) instruments, was determined by responses made to pre-determined items. These items purport to measure emotional commitment. However, this is not accomplished, as organizational commitment has traditionally been defined by researchers rather than through the life experiences of workers themselves (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000a).

Moreover, few studies have focused on women's commitment specifically. Where women have been identified as a discrete group within research, the issue of gender, that is theorizing it, has tended to receive little attention. Where gender has been a consideration, no consistent relationship between gender and organizational commitment has been noted (Cohen & Lowenberg, 1990; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). It appears from the lack of a consistent

relationship, together with negligible measurable differences between genders, that gender has not been an important consideration for researchers using quantitative measures of organizational commitment.

Men, using male-oriented rationalistic approaches, have in the main developed measures of organizational commitment. Most studies have followed the functionalist paradigm, identified by Burrell and Morgan (1979) as the dominant paradigm used for organizational studies. The functionalist paradigm is based on a dualistic ontology and an objectivistic epistemology. A dualistic ontology proposes that phenomena exist as knowable, observable realities independent of those who may observe them (Locke, 2001; Sandberg, 2000). An objectivistic epistemology presumes that sense is made of the world by means of approaches like the hypothetico-deductive method where hypotheses are formed *a priori* then either confirmed or falsified by reality, means that are independent of the human mind (Locke, 2001; Sandberg, 2000). Consistent use of the functionalist paradigm in organizational studies has resulted in either the exclusion of an issue such as emotions or focusing predominantly on its measurement.

Through the consistent adoption of the functionalist paradigm no consideration has been given to attributes usually associated with women, though not excluding men, such as compassion and empathy. In keeping with the functionalist approach, emotions have been regarded as though they are atomized as separate entities independent of the individual. This is in contrast with the conceptualization of Fineman (2000), who argues that that emotions in fact co-exist and intertwine with so-called “objective” measures of reality.

Most studies of organizational commitment, for example Meyer and Allen (1997), have involved investigations carried out by external researchers. External researchers are those who develop measures and collect data with little or no input from, or interaction with, the individuals or groups participating in the research. Following the external researcher approach (Meyer & Allen, 1997) has meant that organizational commitment, as a function of

the life-experiences of persons in the workplace, has not been considered. Life-experiences are important avenues for exploring meaning, sense-making and social constructions of reality (Marton & Svensson, 1979). From this perspective, the experiences of individuals, and the contexts in which they occur, should be the main sources of information and “data”.

In a recent critique of commitment, Swailes (2002) suggested that researchers had concentrated on measuring commitment rather than the meaning of commitment itself. Further research is needed, including research across different occupational groups, in order to clarify the meaning of commitment (Swailes, 2002).

Gender, Emotions and Organizational Commitment

Recent research (Franzway, 2000; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000a) suggests that there is a link between gender, emotions and organizational commitment. Singh and Vinnicombe’s (2000a) research suggested that in an organizational context, women tend to experience different emotions to men in relation to organizational commitment. Also, within these differences, the level of seniority of women acts to modify the emotions displayed. “Differences” are often interpreted as a lack of commitment, which is not necessarily so.

Singh and Vinnicombe (2000a) also suggested that in the workplace women are perceived as having lower levels of organizational commitment than men, a view that they do not support. Their study showed that women’s commitment involved different emotional considerations to those of the men in their study. Their approach drew on the shared and different meanings of commitment between male and female engineers, utilizing a qualitative case-study approach. However, their analysis focused on trends and themes rather than utilizing an interpretive approach (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000b), suggesting that in-depth qualitative research is required into how emotions influence, or are linked to, work commitment as a whole.

This of course is not to say that gender has been wholly ignored in studies of organizational commitment. In meta-analysis carried out by Mathieu and Zajac (1990) involving 124 published studies of organizational commitment, based on the positivist approach mentioned above, only 14 studies identified women as a discrete group. Mathieu and Zajac's (1990) research concluded that women tended to be more committed than men, although the magnitude of the difference was small. It was found that in general there was no consistent relationship between gender and organizational commitment.

Similar analysis to that of Mathieu and Zajac (1990) was also carried out by Cohen and Lowenberg (1990), which involved 50 published studies of organizational commitment. Using positivist or quantitative approaches for analysis, ten studies were found where women were identified as a discrete group. Cohen and Lowenberg's (1990) research concluded that there was a weak relationship between gender and organizational commitment.

Although the meta-analyses carried out by Mathieu and Zajac (1990) and Cohen and Lowenberg (1990) were based on studies that differentiated between women and men in the sample, none of these studies were conducted to discover women's organizational commitment explicitly. Thus, the distinction was only made possible through the expression of gender made by participants, presumably captured as nominal data.

Other studies, using the measures of organizational commitment previously discussed, have shown mixed results. Studies of business executives (Ngo, 1998) and managerial and professional employees (LaVan & Banner, 1985) concluded that there was no significant relationship between gender and commitment. Graddick and Farr (1983) noted that women were found to have lower levels of organizational commitment. Bus drivers studied by Angle and Perry (1981) showed "the surprising result" that women appear to show higher levels of

attitudinal commitment than men. In a study involving human resource workers (Wahn, 1998) women were found to have higher levels of continuance commitment than men.

Singh and Vinnicombe's (2000a) study, utilizing 37 matched pairs of men and women workers, found that women's career prospects were adversely affected by male managers' perceptions of women's career and organizational commitment. Their research also proposed that women's adverse career prospects were due to the perception that male managers held of the capabilities of women as managers. The male perspective is implicitly reinforced by perceived low levels of commitment, rather than on experience of women as managers (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000a). A semi-structured interview approach, designed to reveal whether shared meaning of commitment existed between male and female workers, was used by Singh and Vinnicombe. Analysis revealed that the meaning of organizational commitment to males was mainly associated with task delivery and issues involving time frames or objectives. The meaning attributed to males was consistent with the existing objectivistic measures of organizational commitment, reinforcing the proposition that the existing measures are male-oriented, thereby not representing women's experiences. Other meanings associated with males included being proactive, innovative, value-adding, challenge seeking and quality minded. Meanings associated with women included enthusiasm, involvement, concern for people and being available for work. Organizational commitment clearly had different meanings for men and women (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000a). Also, the meanings associated with women were not considered in the items used by the measures developed by Allen and Meyer (1990) and Meyer et al. (1990).

The barriers to success faced by women who have to manage the complexities of family and career have been identified (Franzway, 2000). Current measures also fail to consider the dual role that some women (and indeed men) undertake in balancing family and work commitments. Consequently, it appears that women, together with men who display more "feminine" forms of commitment, are often incorrectly perceived as having different,

mainly lower, levels of organizational commitment than the majority of male workers.

Measures in current use, developed by Allen and Meyer (1990) and used by most researchers over many years, fail to identify the complex influence of emotions on commitment and the sources of these emotions.

The proposition that women express organizational commitment in a different way to men is supported by Franzway's (2000) research involving women working in the trade union movement. Her research was a case study based on interviews in the context of trade union practices. During the interviews, women expressed commitment in terms of passion, consensus, service to members, enabling and strengthening the capabilities of others, sacrifice and personal fulfilment. Also, that the dominant male notion of commitment was the myth of self-sacrifice based on working long hours, a mind-set unconsciously reinforced by the union movement itself (Muir, 1994 as cited in Franzway, 2000).

Organizational commitment has been predominantly measured and studied using approaches that may have little relevance in today's business environment. Different approaches to the study of commitment are required in order to present a balanced, more gender sensitive and inclusive perspective of the commitment of all members of the organization. Refocusing on gender and emotions presents a path to such a reconceptualization.

Excluding emotions from the measures of commitment, or distortion through quantitative measures, results in an important part of the meaning of the commitment of organizational members being lost. A large number of men and women, possibly the majority of workers in some instances, are affected by the exclusion of emotions in measuring commitment and the consequent original interpretations that are sought by managers weaken and flaw the theorizing of the concept. Consequently, the perspective of senior managers is

distorted when considering the organizational commitment of employees who are not seen as being committed in the traditional way.

Previous studies of commitment have not considered emotions but rather emotional factors. Also, new research (Franzway, 2000; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000a, 2000b) showed that, in the main, women's commitment has a greater emotional content than that of men or that the content is perceived differently. However, this does not necessarily mean that women have lower levels of commitment. As the emotional content of commitment has been suppressed or distorted, women's perspectives of commitment have been largely ignored. Consequently, women have been incorrectly perceived as having lower commitment than men, resulting in lost opportunities for promotion and inappropriate measurement of performance. Males who do not display "traditional patterns" of commitment may also be disadvantaged.

Methodology and Key Findings

It is proposed that emotions, and their gendered nature, are more appropriately dealt with through the interpretive paradigm, identified by Burrell and Morgan (1979) as an approach based on a nominalist ontology and anti-positivistic epistemology. A nominalist ontology presumes that reality is not prescribed, being built up over a period of time through the empirical experiences of people. An anti-positivistic epistemology presumes that the scientific method is not the way that sense is made of reality, instead reality can only be known through the interaction of the individual and the phenomenon. Thus, it is proposed to reconceptualize organizational commitment utilizing an interpretive approach. The methodology to be used in our pilot study draws on grounded theory. This approach was introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a description of the way in which qualitative information had been collected and interpreted by them in sociological research undertaken in a hospital setting during the 1960's. Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed that theory could be built inductively, based on empirical observation. Since this time the grounded theory

approach to data collection, interpretation, and theory building has been adopted by other disciplines, including management studies, and is widely used as a framework for conducting interpretive research (Locke, 2001).

Grounded theory allows researchers to understand people's experiences in a rigorous and detailed manner (Ryan & Bernard, 2002). This is achieved by obtaining text derived from interviews, identifying concepts and categories emerging from the text utilizing a process of constant comparison, and eventually building categories into theory (Locke, 2001).

The pilot study has involved interviewing staff working in our academic institution. There has been a deliberate effort to include an equal number of male and female academic staff respondents. We have not controlled for many other demographic details such as age, level of education etc., because for us gender is the most important characteristic of our respondents.

Interviews, using only a minimal amount of prompt questions, have been conducted each of approximately one hour duration. Examples of prompt questions include, "how do you feel about working here", "can you give me an example of what you find meaningful in your work life", and "what do other people in the workplace do that leads you to believe that they are committed to the organization". Interviews have been tape-recorded and the transcripts collected have been treated as textual material. Analysis of the material has been undertaken by the interviewer, the first author.

Preliminary analysis indicates the following themes emerging that can be differentiated along gender lines: (i) flexibility – being available when requested; (ii) presenteeism; and (iii) perceived ability to meet standards. In relation to flexibility, or being available when requested, this theme juxtaposes the discourse of workplace flexibility and work-family balance. It is well documented that many women, and some men who have significant home responsibilities, are "flexible" in term of family demands. Respondents

described a number of instances where their level of commitment was questioned due to their refusal to be totally flexible and always ready for work-related activities. More women than men reported this as a problem of negative perceptions by others of their level of organizational commitment.

In relation to the theme of presenteeism, there is a link between this phenomenon as an indicator of commitment and the number of hours worked. Along with the availability theme, presenteeism has increasingly been perceived as an indicator of organizational commitment. Several respondents described a double standard in relation to presenteeism. Men were more likely to be able to be absent for significant periods of time if the reasons for their absenteeism related to academic matters. While absenteeism was legitimized as an indicator of commitment for male academics, excessive displays of presenteeism in female academics were often grounds for stigmatizing women as over-committed. Thus, as an indicator of commitment, presenteeism can present challenges for women in terms of the perception of over as well as under commitment. Distinctions were also made regarding involuntary absences and commitment, such as illness versus parental or carers leave.

In relation to perceived ability to meet standards, respondents indicated that there still exist strong perceptions about women being more likely to “fail the test”. Women respondents, while aware of the male-centric nature of performance standards, also believed that these standards should be applied equally across all genders, and were loath to receive “positive discrimination”.

Conclusion

Reconceptualizing commitment qualitatively, as described above, will enable an area of organizational studies that has been neglected in several important respects, to be understood from the perspective of organizational members and in terms of their gender.

In the first instance the existing measures of organizational commitment are biased by virtue of their composition. Current approaches, largely devised by male researchers, are not appropriate measures of the organizational commitment of women and some men in our contemporary workplaces.

Secondly, the existing measures are based on an objectivistic epistemology and a dualistic ontology (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Sandberg, 2000), where pre-determined, structured questions are analyzed using quantitative methods. The use of this research paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) precludes or distorts consideration of emotions in organizations. Emotions are an integral part of organizational life that has been excluded, in the main, by the privileging of a dualistic ontology and objectivistic epistemology.

Studying organizational commitment using an interpretive approach and drawing on grounded theory, allows us to

include emotions in the reconceptualisation and hence, obtain a more realistic picture of the commitment of women as well of men. Our preliminary research reveals certain gendered aspects to commitment that are different to those found in other studies.

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