

Unravelling the foci of employee commitment*

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to extend understanding regarding the basis and foci of employee commitment. It does so by exploring the direction towards employee centric rather than an assumed organisation basis of commitment.

Design/methodology/approach

Survey data of over 300 employees from a variety of organisations in the Republic of Ireland were collected. Data focussed on worker orientations and their foci of commitment.

Findings

The findings confirm a more pluralistic and mixed basis to the antecedents of worker commitment, as opposed to an assumed human resource management unitarist ideology often promoted by organisational managers. At the level of individual workers, a dominant focus for commitment relates to career development and the milieu of an immediate workgroup.

Practical implications

There are three implications. First, mutual gains possibilities are not straightforward and there are practical pitfalls that employee interests may get squeezed should managerial and customer interests take precedence. Second, there remain competing elements between job security, flexibility and autonomy which can impact performance. Finally, line managers are key conduits shaping commitment and especially psychological contract outcomes.

Originality/value

This paper unpacks the relationship between ideological orientation and an individual's foci of commitment. The research found that traditional orientations and foci of commitment are deficient and that simplified individualistic interpretations of the employment relationship are complex and require more critical scrutiny.

Keywords: Ideology, Unitarism, Pluralism, Foci of commitment

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Unravelling the foci of employee commitment*

Introduction

Increasingly organisational commitment is seen to have a significant impact on organisational performance as well as workforce well-being (Yalabik et al., 2016). Levels of employee commitment are said to impact trust and knowledge sharing, and can ultimately serve to differentiate performance across firms. In human resource management (HRM) research organisational commitment is something that is frequently founded on the assumption that employers, with the right tools and techniques, can somehow easily construct among their labour force (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2016). This is especially the case in writings with a unitarist ideological bent, which assumes the alignment of employer and employee interests and the lack of any competing commitments (Cullinane and Dundon, 2014). While HRM research has gradually incorporated employees, this has been underpinned by a focus on enhancing employee outcomes (including commitment) in the service of enhanced performance (Guest, 2011). This paper offers insights to rebalance the focus and broaden the basis for incorporating employees into the analysis of HRM. Specifically, we explore the ideological bases and foci of employee commitment, that is, underlying employee beliefs and values in contrast to simply exploring employee outputs in the form of “responses” to various HRM practices (Geare et al., 2014). Indeed, our logic suggests that an understanding of the former is a prerequisite to understanding the likely nature of the latter.

Research which has recognised the complexity of employee commitment tends to explore particular contexts such as complex network organisations or specific categories of workers (Kinnie and Swart, 2012). Jørgensen and Becker’s (2015) qualitative study of professional workers in three Danish financial investment firms found that HR practices fostering more flexible work design were critical in ensuring a balance between employee’s commitment to their organisation, and their profession. Similarly, Yalabik et al. (2014) explored work engagement and commitment in professional service firms. Disaggregating commitment, they examined commitment to clients, teams and professions, respectively. This type of emphasis has typically not been extended beyond these specific types of workers and organisations. Indeed, despite general arguments related to changing workplace dynamics and flexible career types, much research has retained an assumption that the organisation and its objectives are the dominant focus of commitment (Redman and Snape, 2016). The latter trajectory is despite longstanding definitions which conceive of commitment in a broad, multifaceted way as “a force which binds an individual to a course of action relevant to one or more targets” (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001, p. 301).

In addressing the foci and bases of worker commitment orientations, the paper is structured as follows. An assessment of the role of ideology as a means to explore various foci of commitment is presented. A theoretical overview of commitment and the various forms that have emerged is then provided, followed by an explanation of the research methods used to explore the foci of worker commitment. The results show that the empirical foci of commitment cannot be assumed to focus on the organisation or employer as a referent point, as is often assumed in much extant theory. The discussion contributes knowledge concerning the importance of delving further into the concept of commitment and the multifaceted orientation of workers themselves. Practical implications are addressed in the final section of our paper.

Unpacking employee commitment

The role of workplace values and beliefs plays an important role in determining our understanding of organisational commitment (Geare et al., 2014). While traditionally organisational research has assumed a unitarist point of reference (“one team, one dream” philosophy), increasingly this

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rhetoric has become open to question (Yalabik et al., 2016). With wider social, demographic and global changes since the dominant organisational commitment studies (e.g. Mowday et al., 1974; Allen and Meyer, 1990), generational and structural labour market shifts mean there is an important rationale to examine the commitment from a contemporary perspective. Arguably, those regarded as the main organisational commitment generation (e.g. the “generation X” populace) are in fact a minority. In addition, work perceptions have changed from a traditional or collectivist orientation premised on longer-term work security to more individual and short-term expectations about career progression and the search for meaningful work (Bolton et al., 2013). Jobs for life can no longer be guaranteed and higher instances of the fragmentation of work via agency, part-time and seasonal jobs are commonplace (Rubery, 2015). It is therefore appropriate to consider a potential redirection in the ideological focus and worker orientations around organisational commitment given generational shifts and newer forms of work. At present, research has become more open to ideological scrutiny as a precursor to realising workplace values, with the latter mediated by HR practices which send “signals” of employer intentions and expected worker behaviours including clues about performance outcomes. The idea of such sense-making among employees can potentially be driven by ideological orientations as much as by managerial practice (Heffernan and Dundon, 2016). Important in this regard is that contextually driven understandings of the plurality of interests that shape the dynamics of people management provide a more formative basis to our understanding of potential performance outcomes. In order to provide a broad basis for this, we propose examining an underpinning ideology to begin unravelling the assumed singular organisational basis of commitment.

Early work on commitment recognised that employee commitment had a number of important antecedents and that it could also take a number of different forms (Allen and Meyer, 1990). Beer et al. (1984) asserted that “increased commitment can result not only in more loyalty but better performance for the organisation” (p. 19). The modus operandi of commitment largely hinged upon the notion of reciprocation and social exchange whereby if an individual perceives that through HRM an organisation makes a statement of intent about the well-being of employees, they are likely in turn to make a reciprocal statement in terms of commitment (Ferris et al., 1998). This called for, and perpetuated, a definition of employee commitment understood as the strength of employee attachment or identification to the organisation or workplace. A committed employee was one who readily accepted organisational goals and values, displayed a willingness to exert discretionary effort on behalf of the organisation, and expressed a long-term desire to stay working for the organisation (Allen and Meyer, 1990).

However, while definitions of employee commitment have been refined over time, including the disaggregation into the dimensions of affective, continuance and normative commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1997), they have not been refocussed to take into account the changing nature of work, workers, and employment relationships or potential external foci of commitment (Olsen et al., 2016). Indeed, it would seem the organisation has remained and continues to remain the assumed dominant referent point for employee identification and attachment, particularly in the HRM literature (Yalabik et al., 2014). Notably, Redman and Snape (2016) observe that organisation commitment does not necessarily lead to desirable citizenship behaviours.

There are three key points which help to question the proclivity to favour organisational commitment as the unit of analysis for exploring employee obligations. First, conventional commitment reflects an outmoded view of what organisations look like and how they function. The model is one of an industrial organisation with a full time workforce encompassing clear organisational boundaries, demarcations and divisions of work (Rodrigues et al., 2015). In practice,

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however, organisations employ multiple types of employees across multi-employer boundaries with segmented occupational and job boundaries (Rubery et al., 2003). The traditional employee is becoming more elusive to locate, has competing values and beliefs, and does not succumb to traditional norms regarding employment (Geare et al., 2014). Yet, research still predominantly regards the organisation as the utopian optimum which increasingly has no bearing on the contemporary employment relationship. Second, structures around command and control vs a more commitment orientated culture have shifted with increasingly disorganised organisational hierarchies. For example, occupational structures and organisational identities are increasingly more complex owing to multi-employer networks, where employee trust and commitment can be undermined by numerous layers of sub-contracting jobs and multiple employee contracts (Grimshaw et al., 2010). Finally, an implicit unitarist ideology inherent to much writing and understanding of commitment leaves little room for competing interests that may offer alternative bases and foci for employee commitment (Olsen et al., 2016). The unitarist assumption of organisational commitment tends to overlook various innate factors, such as values, beliefs and culture, of the individual employee which the organisation may have little or no influence on (Geare et al., 2006). Evidently, the focus of commitment is not a simplistic dyadic relationship between management/the organisation and its employees, where the foci of commitment are exclusively management determined. Debates reign as to the bounds of commitment where some authors indicate that there are multiple commitments simultaneously (Olsen et al., 2016; Kinnie and Swart, 2012), while others suggest individual commitments are factorially distinct (Schoemmel and Jønsson, 2014).

This leads us to proposition one (P1):

P1. We suggest that the unitarist assumption inherent in much HRM analysis that posits the organisation as the referent point is flawed, and alternatively propose that a plurality of interests prevail for contemporary employees at both societal and workplace levels of abstraction.

Alternative bases of employee commitment (non-organisational)

As organisations allegedly vie for talent, it is critical to understand the changing perceptions and values among employees and their varying attitude associated with work (Olsen et al., 2016). Interestingly, commitment bases outside the organisation have been largely omitted in HRM studies. Despite all the claims of talent management or employee engagement, worker loyalty cannot be assumed or guaranteed. The focus and motives of various commitments are increasingly multifaceted and relevant for competing agents and stakeholders (employees, their representatives and unions, supply chain firms, co-workers, managers, team leaders, etc.). The idea that commitment is focussed around organisational perspectives is outdated norms of tradition; formalisation and jobs for life are continuously being eroded (Torca et al., 2010). Against such change the principles of commitment and the desire of employees to be part of something remain valid concepts within organisational commitment theory. To some extent targets and identifications for commitments evolve and change. For instance employees can engage in a personal branding exercise, where no longer is one's belief system a private matter. To this end, identity and the occupational branding of it is potentially something that employees explicitly wear, either with pride, humility or even melancholy. In such situations, the organisation cannot be assumed to be the sole referent point and workers can and often do identify more with those whom they associate or interact with more frequently.

At present there are potentially multiple foci (i.e. groups to which an employee is attached) and bases (i.e. motives for attendant attachment) to commitment (Becker et al., 1996). The idea of different local and global foci of commitment was developed by Becker and Billings (1993) and Lawler (1992), who found that negative feelings towards a large community (organisation or union),

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stimulated by little freedom and sense of control, will shift the attachment of the individual to small and nested groups (e.g., work groups, line managers, trades or professions). With the increased prominence of the role of the line manager as a consequence of the devolution of HR tasks, the shift towards more proximal foci of commitment has gathered pace (Harney and Cafferkey, 2014). Becker et al. (1996) reinforce this point suggesting that within the organisation multiple commitments can simultaneously co-exist across work groups and with various levels of management; the development of which occurs through social systems of interaction. At present it is simply not a matter of unearthing these various foci of commitment but rather it is developing our knowledge about the processes and conditions under which they manifest. A further concern from a cognitive perspective is that both values and beliefs can be subject to change over space and time. For instance globalisation has opened up fundamental changes in attitudes to work as the workforce transitions through the generations X, Y and Z from a more organisational identity to a more individual focus. Simultaneously, internal dynamics of justice perceptions or psychological contract breaches (Heffernan and Dundon, 2016) would potentially cause shifts in the strength of one's individual identification to a particular foci at a given time. For example, if an employee felt wronged after an annual performance appraisal it is reasonable to assume that such an employee, for a period, would have very low levels of organisational commitment. In a similar vein success, or failure in some instances, could indicate a shift in commitment strength between the workgroup and an employee's individual career. In other words, commitment cannot be taken for granted and ought to be viewed in a more fluid manner where its focus and strength is largely determined by employees making sense of stimuli in their work environment. This highlights the merits of an empirically grounded assessment of commitment as opposed to assuming a pre-given status and foci. Various foci of commitment, both internal and external to the organisation, are now discussed in turn.

Contemporary foci of employee commitment

Commitment to individual career

Employee branding ideas, where employees actively seek purposeful careers based on corporate systems along with preferred personal well-being values that are aligned (Kinnie and Swart, 2012). In this instance employees may view themselves in the context of brand identity and seek to align or associate with those who share similar views. For instance knowledge workers are no longer prepared to patiently serve their time in the hope of potential career advancement; employees apparently embrace "boundaryless careers" where they take ownership of their own development or "brand" (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Enduring organisational loyalty to an employer has become increasingly less important as modern professionals on assignment-based work view themselves more in an independent entrepreneurial sense rather than a traditional employee (Olsen et al., 2016). Supporting this Tak and Lim (2008) found professionals, including those employed on temporary arrangements, to be highly committed to their own career. So to this end it can no longer be assumed employees are willing to sacrifice their careers in attaching themselves to one organisation in the long term without guarantees of development and career progression. Meister and Willyerd (2011) cite a UK study "Generation Y: Unlocking the talent of young managers" which finds "Generation Y preferences include wanting to "work for an organization that does something they believe in"; they want to "develop new skills and good career prospects with their employer"; and they want to "be self-directed when it comes to their learning and personal development" (p. 50). Also with the ever increasing instance of agency workers, temporal and seasonal employment, coupled with reduced instances of guaranteed job security, it is not surprising that employees often make the assumption their employers will not reciprocate any commitment offered (Liden et al., 2003).

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Workgroup commitment

As work can be viewed as a social process it is logical to suggest that employees would show solidarity with those they have more in common with and interact with most on a regular basis (Cafferkey and Dundon, 2015; Ferris et al., 1998). However, the role of interpersonal relationships and mutual dependency remains somewhat underdeveloped in commitment research (Torka et al., 2010). With local foci being more proximal (Becker et al., 1996) it follows that one's immediate supervisor and cohort of work colleagues with whom one has social interactions will become a focus of commitment (Buchanan, 1974). Riketta and Van Dick (2005) found attachment to a work group supersedes any commitment towards a corporation, while Wech et al. (1998) found that group cohesiveness was a key determinant of individual and group performance. Potentially, therefore, such "local commitment" may in fact be more important than organisational commitment in driving performance and/or effective relationships.

Professional commitment

Commitment to one's profession is particularly evident among knowledge workers (Olsen et al., 2016; Kinnie and Swart, 2012). Through their implied professional status and through self-regulated professional qualifications and membership to governing bodies can suggest that commitment to one's profession is a foremost concern for these workers (Redman and Snape, 2016; Blau, 1989). Alvesson (2004) argued that employees feel more committed to their profession than to their employer, as an employee will not jeopardise professional standards over organisational requirements. Somech and Bogler (2002) found that professional commitment may in fact be negatively associated with organisational commitment through conflicts of interest, as the latter places emphasis on conformity to the organisation's values, whereas professional commitment places emphasis on standards and ethics. Wallace (1993) suggested that both organisational and professional commitment have a positive association and are not mutually exclusive. Yalabik et al. (2014) argued professional employees (healthcare professionals) had high levels of commitment to various foci independently, including their profession. Kinnie and Swart (2012) suggest that working across boundaries, particularly in professional organisations, muddies the traditional demarcations and thus the definition of who the actual employer is becomes somewhat problematic. In such instances professionals may identify with their profession rather than with their organisation or with their clients (Yalabik et al., 2016). Olsen et al. (2016) suggest that, for knowledge workers, role conflict can put commitment to the client over and above that of the organisation.

Union commitment

Research on union commitment has predominately come under a protecting rights perspective (Redman and Snape, 2016). Rose (2002) suggests that union and organisational commitments are inversely related, which means there are fundamental competing interests that cannot be aligned, whereas Redman and Snape (2016) suggest the opposite, whereby dual commitment can exist under a positive people management climate. Deery et al. (2009) found a dichotomy between organisational and union commitment and suggested that incompatible factors influence each type of commitment (e.g. positive industrial relations climate predicted organisational commitment, whereas a poor climate predicted union commitment), and therefore ruled out duality. Guest and Dewe (1991), on the other hand, found that dual commitment does occur, albeit only in a small percentage of cases. Table I provides an overview of the varying foci of commitment discussed.

This leads us to our second proposition (P2):

P2. Having presented the varying commitments that represent contemporary employment relationships and having discussed the redirection of commitment taking a somewhat more person-centred rather than an institutional approach (Meyer et al., 2015), we suggest more diversity (as

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opposed to the traditional organisational referent) points to a more plural range of foci encompassing: individual career, workgroup, profession, organisation, and finally unions, which will form the foci of commitment for contemporary employees.

Foci	Individual career	Workgroup	Profession	Organisation	Trade union	
Key concepts	Boundaryless career Psychological contract	Local commitment Supervisor as architect	Communities of practice Explicit standards	Affective, continuance, normative commitment	Conflicting interest groups Negotiated order Justice	Table I. Summary of foci of commitment for alternative work groups
Underpinning values Indicative authors	Individualism Kinnie and Swart (2012)	Peer expectations Ferris <i>et al.</i> (1998)	Professional norms Yalabik <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Unitarism Meyer and Allen (1997)	Gall and Fiorito (2012)	

Methodology

To examine varying foci of commitment it was necessary to conduct an employee level survey. The survey was conducted in the Republic of Ireland. In total, 16 organisations in various industries agreed to take part in the research, with 316 usable surveys returned. Surveys were sent to firms with the instruction to take a stratified sample of 10 per cent of employees. The organisations spanned both the public and private sectors, giving a balanced approach and the participating organisations spanned a range of industries including manufacturing, retail, transport, health, services, information technology, finance, construction, education and government. The survey collected original data on workplace and societal ideological orientations which is distinctly lacking in existing employee research (Budd and Bhawe, 2008). In measuring ideology the first part measures values and beliefs at a societal level, while the second part measures the beliefs of respondents about their particular organisation. Our intention was to ascertain, through use of multiple questions, employees' overall ideological orientation (i.e. whether they had a unitarist or a pluralist view of their society, and their workplace). The measures had previously been used and indicated sound psychometric properties (Geare *et al.*, 2006). The questions were dichotomous in nature and randomly ordered. Ideological orientation used 11 groups of paired (one unitarist and one pluralist) statements each, with respondents asked to select the one they believed most accurately reflected their view of the employment relationship at both the societal level (i.e. their views about employment relations in general), and at the workplace level (i.e. what actually occurs in their workplace). For example, at a societal level one question asked "Workers in general see themselves as being: (a) An integral part of the organisation in which they work, or (b) Members of a group within the organisation in which they work", answer (a) indicated a unitarist perspective and (b) indicated a pluralist perspective. We summed and collapsed these data so that three ideological groups – pluralist, mixed and unitarist – could be identified. The findings explore the broad ideological preference of respondents framed by general unitarist vs pluralist categories prior to examining the foci of commitment for respondents.

Control variables considered gender, age, organisational role, occupation, work hours, length of service, union membership, organisational size, industry sector and finally whether the organisation employed a HR specialist. Regarding the foci of commitment, respondents were asked to rank the different foci distinguishing between organisation, union, workgroup, trade/occupational and personal career development.

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Findings

There is almost equal balance between males (54 per cent) and females (46 per cent), and the majority of the workforce is aged between 21 and 49 years of age (86 per cent). Of those surveyed management represent 15 per cent compared to 85 per cent for non-managerial employees. Full time employees represented 91 and 55 per cent were union members. The majority of organisations (65 per cent) had in excess of 500 employees and a HRM specialist was present in 60 per cent of workplaces. With regards sector, the distribution of organisations was 23 per cent public and 77 per cent private. Table II shows that at the societal level overall our sample holds either a mixed (54 per cent) or a pluralist orientation (38 per cent), ideological orientation. Notably only 8 per cent hold a unitarist orientation. A similar trend is evidence at the level of the workplace with only 16 per cent of employees indicating a unitarist ideology present in their current organisation, while only 27 per cent identified their workplace as having a pluralist orientation. Next, adding more specificity to these data, we compared responses for these two levels of abstraction (i.e. society and workplace) using statement data (see Table III). While we found statistically significant differences across all the ideological statements, the magnitude of this difference between responses across the two levels of abstraction examined, in most cases, was not particularly large. Open-ended survey comments concur with a pluralistic view of both the workforce and society in general. One employee quote compounds this finding: "I feel that as a whole, employees are very union/rights oriented, and not overly company oriented. Generally, employees do not see things from the company point of view" (Co. 9, Respondent 169, Accountancy Firm).

Next, we explored whether the ideological orientations at the societal and the workplace levels of abstraction differed dependent on a range of demographic characteristics. These results are reported in Table IV. For the societal level, we find statistically significant differences for the variables of role in organisation, occupation, past/present union

Table 2: Ideological Orientation

	Unitarist	Mixed	Pluralist
Societal Level	8%	54%	38%
Workplace Level	16%	57%	27%

membership, sector and industry. With two exceptions (i.e. occupation and workplace size) these same differences are evident for the workplace level ideology data. Review of these data shows respondents at the managerial level are more likely to be classified in our unitarist group than is the case for non-managerial workers. For occupation, professional and, to a lesser extent, semi-professional workers are more likely to be grouped into the unitarist or the mixed classifications than is the case for any other occupational grouping. Further, those who have had a past or present union affiliation, along with those in the public sector tend to be more heavily represented in the pluralist group. Similarly, so are those who work in retail, IT, education and government. Interestingly, for workplace ideological orientation we find that approximately 30 per cent of those who work in either very small or very large organisations are classified as pluralist. Overall, the findings lend support to our P1 that a plurality of interest prevails at both the societal and the collective workgroup level over and above a unitarist counterpart.

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Ideological orientation items	Total sample (%)		χ^2 ^a Yates continuity correction and significance	
	Society	Workplace		
<i>1. Workers in general see themselves as being</i>				
An integral part of the organisation in which they work (U)	26	36	13.427	0.000
Members of a group within the organisation in which they work (P)	74	64		
<i>2. Workers interests in general are</i>				
Looked after adequately by management (U)	56	59	21.363	0.000
Looked after adequately by their union/lawyer (P)	44	41		
<i>3. The principal objectives and interests of management and workers are</i>				
More or less similar (U)	50	54	18.903	0.000
Similar in some areas, but are very different in others (P)	50	46		
<i>4. Unions in general</i>				
Are a liability as they introduce distrust into the work environment (U)	22	28	22.448	0.000
Are an asset as they protect the interests of workers (P)	78	72		
<i>5. In the average organisation</i>				
Management and workers work together as a team (U)	28	41	24.135	0.000
Management and workers sometimes work as a team, sometimes are in conflict (P)	72	59		
<i>6. Collective bargaining</i>				
Does not win anything for workers they would not have got from management anyway (U)	31	46	5.863	0.015
Is probably the best means of settling differences between various groups (P)	69	54		
<i>7. The major causes of conflict in the workplace (e.g. strikes, etc.) is (are)</i>				
Basically poor communication or trouble-makers (U)	28	46	6.820	0.009
The fact that different groups have different objectives – which sometimes clash (P)	72	54		

Table III.
Sample comparisons
between ideological
orientation and levels
of abstraction

Note: ^aAs data are non-parametric and the tables are 2 × 2, χ^2 tests with the Yates continuity correction statistic are reported

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Table 4: Ideology and Demographics

<i>Demographic Variable</i>	<i>Chi-square</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Gender		
Society	.487	.784
Workplace	2.638	.267
Age		
Society	6.671	.352
Workplace	3.815	.702
Role in organisation		
Society	11.089	.026
Workplace	49.500	.000
Occupation		
Society	31.221	.001
Workplace	12.373	.261
Hours		
Society	1.308	.520
Workplace	1.930	.381
Length of service		
Society	8.294	.217
Workplace	11.681	.069
Union membership (past/present)		
Society	6.586	.037
Workplace	12.351	.002
Organisation size		
Society	5.466	.486
Workplace	21.750	.001
Sector		
Society	29.301	.000
Workplace	25.820	.000
Industry		
Society	76.817	.000
Workplace	78.126	.000
Worksite HRM Specialist		
Society	1.479	.477
Workplace	8.228	.016

This finding is further evidenced when we examine differences in terms of foci of commitment. Employees ranked five different foci and these data are reported in Table V. Three interesting observations emerge. First, two-thirds of our sample report personal career development as the factor they are most committed to. Open-ended questions concurred and suggested that professional goals may take precedence over and above organisational goals or interests: “In this profession everyone has to (circled) work towards the same goals” (Co. 7, Respondent 144, Private Hospital). Second, the collectivity of the workgroup is ranked higher by respondents than the organisation, as the primary foci of commitment. Of related interest in recent HR theory is the role of the line manager, as one employee highlighted the importance of the supervisor in terms of ameliorating the monotony of repetitive work for the whole workgroup: “It is my line manager that makes working in this organisation bearable. The nature of the job makes things very difficult” (Co. 14, Respondent 256, Hotel). Similarly, employee accounts highlighted the issue of collective identity

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and alternative levels of abstraction, whereby employees viewed themselves as having very little interaction with the organisation: “[...] relations at local level (workgroup) are generally good but I would not have many dealings with senior management so it is harder to comment on that” (Co. 1, Respondent, 7, Bank). Third, unions receive minimal direct endorsement as a single attachment for commitment. Given both the societal and the workplace ideological orientations among our sample population, this result appears somewhat surprising, as neither the strong pluralist nor mixed ideological orientations appear to connect directly with union identification. It may be that union commitment is more relevant for those employees who had reply on union support for a workplace grievance. Qualitative accounts gave a varied interpretation about union attachment; from views of indifference to suggestions that the union was the primary source of reliable information. Other explanations contextualised union’s vis-à-vis how management might react to union attachment among company employees: “Unions are not welcome here” (Co. 12, Respondent 221, Retail).

Table V indicates the variance in responses on foci of commitment and demographic variables. Most variance in responses came in length of service (foci: personal career development, and organisation), union membership (foci: organisation, and union), organisational size (foci: personal career development, organisation and union), sector (foci: personal career development, organisation, trade/occupation and union) and finally industry (foci: personal career development, workgroup, organisation and union). With one exception (organisation vs profession focus), the results generally provide support for our P2.

	Personal career development (52%) χ^2	Workgroup (23%) χ^2	Organisation (11%) χ^2	Trade/ Occupation (8%) χ^2	Union (6%) χ^2
Gender	7.314	3.680	5.835	3.053	4.586
Age	7.588	15.535	21.826*	8.595	20.692
Role in organisation	8.683	13.587	21.857*	6.630	10.277
Occupation	40.008*	16.352	29.396	19.016	20.484
Hours	4.561	3.170	5.134	3.300	2.854
Length of service	25.100*	11.547	22.859*	10.073	13.769
Union membership (past/present)	4.235	3.146	16.087*	2.565	25.918**
Organisation size	33.561**	13.629	45.783**	4.292	44.437**
Sector	20.146*	11.926	1.784**	17.495*	41.941**
Industry	152.142**	64.546*	95.855**	53.847	143.413**

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table V.
Foci of commitment

In relation to preference of foci for an individual’s second and third choice (Table VI), we see a consistent level of commitment towards the collective attachment to fellow co-workers and the jobs people do. Commitment to the organisation rises, as does commitment to the trade/occupation of respondents. Attachment to specific union values remains low relative to other higher reported preferences for personal career development.

Discussion

These findings present numerous areas of interest and avenues to further our understanding of foci of commitment and multifaceted basis to such commitment orientations. First, the evidence suggests that stereotyping of commitment to a single authority or corporate (organisational) identity is flawed (P1). The finding means the guiding principles of commitment – that is to say organisational interests ought to prevail over worker values – require revision; what Amitai (1961, p. 11) refers to as their “pure moral involvement”. The findings indicate that employees have a distinct pluralist rather than unitarist focus about their organisation and society. This plural identity suggests there

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are competing interests which warrant consideration of the potential for alternative mechanisms (individual and collective) that can shape the formation of commitment orientations. The significant differences from respondents in reference to the organisation as foci of commitment (P2) suggest that the traditional view of commitment does not take into account new psychological contracts (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006) and alternative work, organisation and segmented labour market boundaries (Rubery et al., 2003). We advocate a need to look beyond organisations as homogenous unitarist entities and acknowledge that organisations do indeed consist of competing interests.

Second, we also find various foci of commitment exist for employees. Employees were more focussed on their own personal career as well as concerned about their workgroup, than that of the organisation. This may represent a strategic choice insofar as some employees engage in areas where they actively seek to maximise their own situation first, followed by those of their immediate work group, then their occupation, organisation and lastly trade union attachment. Noordin et al. (2002, p. 36) suggest that the career orientated individual has “staying power” which empowers them to deal more effectively with adversity.

In relation to the collective group attachments, it is plausible to conceive that a tightly knit social group or occupational identity within an organisation would be a motivating force, and potentially more productive, than stimulus that would accrue from conforming to the ideals of the organisation. The group can also determine the foci of commitment, which suggests that there may not be a finite amount of commitment available and that individuals could equally display multiple commitments (Swales, 2002). Our research compliments the work of Swales (2002) in that there are few absolutes and that employees can potentially have multiple commitments simultaneously. Therefore it would be wrong to assume that one commitment occurs at the expense of another, and that an individual or group can simultaneously have dual or multiple commitments. Further exploration of these complexities between multiple foci of commitment would prove useful in this regard. It may be argued, therefore, that those who are more committed to their career may in fact outperform those who are more committed to the organisation. Similarly, commitment and identity to a collective work group is not negative, as a focus on increasing commitment to colleagues or workmates may in turn elicit greater effects on performance than increasing commitment to a corporate goal or organisational brand per se. To this end, a continuum of commitment is evident. It is rational to assume employees take more influence from proximal stimuli as opposed to global stimuli, thus, a redirection towards the variations of a wider plurality of values at the workplace level should theoretically have more influence on employee behaviours. The work of Gittell et al. (2010) on relational coordination has resonance here whereby those with whom one interacts with (foci) more frequently tend to be viewed in a more positive light. The results echo the findings of Gittell et al. (2002) in that relationships not only are critical to organisational function they are also something that matters to employees. This would mean a redirection of focus to proximal or “local” foci of commitment would prove fruitful. This in turn has implications for the HR levers and HR actors likely to have the most impact on employees.

Table VI.
Mean rankings for
commitment foci

Commitment foci	Mean	SD	Percentage ranked 1st	Percentage ranked 2nd	Percentage ranked 3rd
Personal career development	2.09	1.42	52	15	9
Workgroup	2.59	1.19	23	26	26
Organisation	3.05	1.14	11	25	29
Trade/Occupation	3.18	1.15	8	24	23
Union attachment	3.82	1.41	6	10	13

Note: Commitment was assessed from 1 to 5 representing the most to the least foci of committed

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Practical implications

Kinnie and Swart (2012) propose three ways of managing the foci of commitment. First, there is the mutual gains approach which is a balancing act between competing foci of commitment; this is done by careful recruitment and team management. The potential pitfalls are that employee interest may get squeezed as employer and customer interests take precedence. We extend the mutual gains thesis and suggest multiple advances as employees oscillate between various forms of commitment as contextual and environmental conditions change. Second, there is the high commitment management (HCM) approach, which is based on getting employees to have a high degree of identity with the firm and its goals thereby increasing instances of discretionary task and organisational citizenship behaviours. In essence the idea is to satisfy employee needs for professional development inside the firm rather than employees exploring opportunities for such development elsewhere. This is done through strong employer branding messages. However, issues arise in relation to delivering on these promises, particularly during a recession and that the realisation of HCM through line managers is often at odds with the original intention. Also there are competing elements within HCM such as job security vs flexibility, and autonomy vs performance appraisals. A further area of advancement is to extend the HCM beyond its inherent ideological unitarist bias and direct attention to commitment at the group/team level, potentially offering understanding of the social systems and the unique configurations concerning group loyalty that could potentially prove useful. Finally there is the line manager intervention approach. This approach suggests that line managers, as primary implementers of HR practices, are a key variable in managing the psychological contract and to this end their role in managing tensions or conflicting interests is significant (Kilroy and Dundon, 2015). As evidenced in our research, the importance attached to the role of the line manager should not be underestimated. There are two potential reasons for this: first, it is the immediate work group that is seen as an important foci of commitment for workers (not the organisation); and second, the individual's personal career development is also seen as very important to them and consequently needs to be given due consideration. It is the immediate manager who is the appropriate person to do this. Our research also extends the work of Kinnie and Swart (2012) in that occupation is a key determinant of the commitment of an employee towards their personal career progression goals, resonating with the contribution that managing multiple commitment is likely to be a complex balancing act for organisational managers (Olsen et al., 2016).

In practical terms, workers hold not only dual but also variable individual and collective work-related attachments. Organisational managers and stakeholders recognise and adapt accordingly to mirror a changing societal reality. Management and practitioners could benefit from realising that organisational commitment per se is not superior in advancing performance outcomes to other types of commitment, in this instance possible coexisting professional, co-worker, occupational or union identifies. Professional advancement can be achieved by investing in the continual education and in the upskilling of staff, while a redirection of focus to the role of the supervisor and group dynamics can ensure a solidaristic work group. The implications of emerging and alternative modes of pluralistic orientations also need to be considered.

Future research

First, future research could potentially analyse the individual foci of commitment and their impact on various indicators of individual, collective, group and organisational identity. Future research could also seek to unearth whether different organisational commitments outperform various, or cumulative, alternative foci of commitment. A critically informed synthesis about commitment foci that acknowledges its multiple forms and levels should prove extremely useful. Second, testing various forms of commitment among different employment groups would increase our institutional

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understanding of how organisations actually function as opposed to the normative rhetoric that dominates the majority of commitment research. It may also be useful to try to understand the motivations that underlie such attachments or foci of commitment. The latter would help us to understand not only why employees rank one form over the other, and in this regard contribute to theories of compliance and the formation of workgroup orientations. Finally, a focus on the multiple foci of worker commitment may better inform what appears to be becoming a solipsistic disciplinary debate around issues such as talent management or employee engagement. Future research should be capable of moving beyond the premise that employees are some undifferentiated mass without their own agentic capacity to shape their foci of commitment. Evidence demonstrates that a workers' propensity to form commitment, in various forms, may in fact stem from stimuli completely external to the firm. These suggestions could prove useful in moving beyond assuming a hierarchy of commitments based on organisational interests, with a view to organisational performance. In essence a clearer picture should emerge if commitment research focusses on what organisations and their people actually, do rather than what they ought to do, or what managers' hope their employees will do. Such advancement is most likely to come from deploying multiple theoretical lenses "in concert" (Greenwood and Miller, 2010, p. 82) and by explicitly recognising the opportunities of plurality and strength of difference emergent of constructive and critical engagement with dominant concepts (Delbridge, 2010).

Conclusion

This paper has unpacked the relationship between ideological orientations and individual employees' foci of commitment. The research found that traditional orientations and foci of commitment are changing and that employees hold both individual and collective postures shaping perceptions of people management, with an orientation towards the former than the latter. The implications is multifaceted foci warrant a new conceptualisation regarding commitment and its consequences for performance and organisational effectiveness. This research makes a number of contributions to a more informed and critical understanding of commitment and attendant stimuli that shapes employee commitment focus, which in turn opens up interesting avenues for future research to better understand how employees, groups and organisations function.

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