THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFFECTIVE
ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT

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# Table of Contents

List of Figures.  
List of Tables.  
Summary.  
Statement.  
Acknowledgements.  

Chapter 1.  *Introduction: Themes in the Organisational Commitment Literature.*  
1. The History of Organisational Commitment.  
2. The Study of Organisational Commitment.  
   (i) Conceptual Issues in the Study of Organisational Commitment.  
      (a) The attitude-behaviour debate.  
      (b) The dimension debate.  
      (c) The foci debate.  
   (ii) Nomological Studies of Organisational Commitment.  
      (a) Correlational Studies of Organisational Commitment.  
      (b) Cross-sectional Studies of Organisational Commitment.  
3. Evidence of a Developmental Trend in Organisational Commitment.  
4. Conclusion.  

1. General Theories of Development.  
   (i) Aspects of the Organisation.  
   (ii) Summary.
Chapter 2. continued


(i) Pre-entry Experiences and the Development of Organisational Commitment.

(a) Pre-entry expectations.

(b) Personal Characteristics.

(ii) Socialisation Experiences and the Development of Organisational Commitment.

(a) Socialisation tactics.

(b) Met-expectations.

(c) Experience of supervisors and work groups.

(iii) Advancement/Stabilisation Experiences and the Development of Organisational Commitment.

(a) Transactional rewards: Pay and promotion.

(b) Relational rewards: Recognition and influence.

4. Conclusion.


(i) Cross-sectional and Longitudinal Designs.

(ii) Confounding Influences in Developmental Methodologies.

2. The Cross-sequential Design.

3. Conclusion.


1. The Study of Development in Organisations.

(i) Selecting an Appropriate Organisation.

(ii) Generalising Attitudinal Data Across Countries.

(iii) Defining the Limits of the Cross-Sequential Design.
Chapter 4. continued

   
   (i) Method.
      
      (a) Participants.
      
      (b) Procedure.
      
   (ii) Measures: Organisational Commitment.
      
   (iii) Measures: Personal Characteristics.
      
      (a) Demographic data.
      
      (b) The Protestant Work Ethic Scale.
      
      (c) Commitment Propensity.
      
      (d) Cynicism.
      
      (e) Self Esteem.
      
      (f) Tenure-related factors: Investments and job availability.
      
   (iv) Measures: Role-related Characteristics.
      
      (a) Role ambiguity.
      
      (b) Role conflict.
      
   (v) Measures: Formal Organisational Climate.
      
      (a) Communication.
      
      (b) Participation in Decision Making.
      
      (c) Perceived Organisational Support.
      
      (d) Promotion.
      
   (vi) Measures: Informal Organisational Climate.
      
      (a) Peer cohesion.
      
      (b) Commitment norms.
      
      (c) Social involvement.
      
   (vii) Measures: Met-expectations.
      
      (a) Confirmed expectations.
      
      (b) Met-expectations.
Chapter 4. continued

(viii) Results and Discussion.

(a) Reliability and validity of the work measures. 55
(b) Reliability and validity of the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire. 57
(c) Response bias and organisational commitment. 60
(d) The developmental trend: Cross-sectional data from Australia and New Zealand. 66
(e) Factors related to individual differences in organisational commitment within the two samples. 68
(f) Factors associated with the decline in organisational commitment within police organisations. 72
(g) The development of organisational commitment with age. 75

(ix) Summary of Results and Conclusions. 76

3. Surveys 2 and 3: Cross-sequential Evidence for a Developmental Trend in the Organisational Commitment of Police Officers in Australia. 79

(i) Method. 79

(a) Participants and procedure. 79

(ii) Measures. 79

(iii) Results and Discussion. 80

(a) Reliability of Survey 2 and 3 measures. 80
(b) Cross-sequential evidence of a developmental trend in organisational commitment. 85
(c) Factors associated with the decline in organisational commitment within police organisations. 89
(d) Explanation of cohort and interaction effects. 90
(e) Promotion and the development of organisational commitment. 94

(iv) Summary of Results and Conclusion. 96
Chapter 5. Improving Organisational Commitment: Qualitative Validation of the Quantitative Results.

1. Introduction.
   (i) The Impact of Tenure on Factors Influencing Organisational Commitment in the Quantitative Data. 102
   (ii) Validation of Quantitative Data. 103

   (i) Participants and Procedure. 104
   (ii) Measures. 104
   (iii) Analysis.
      (a) Breakdown of responses. 106
      (b) Reliability. 106

3. Results and Discussion.
   (i) Methods for Improving Organisational Commitment. 108
   (ii) Officers' Perceptions of Organisational Support. 110
   (iii) The Provision of Feedback in the Organisation. 114
   (iv) Enhancing Investments in the Organisation. 119

4. Conclusion. 122

Chapter 6. The Development of Organisational Commitment Across Formal Training and Early Probationary Experience.

1. Introduction.
   (i) The Influence of the Selection Process.
      (a) Pre-entry commitment propensity. 124
      (b) Work ethic. 127
      (c) Pre-entry expectations. 128
   (ii) The Experience of Training: Socialisation Effects. 128
   (iii) The Experience of Training: Un-met Expectations. 132
   (iv) Conclusion. 134


Chapter 6. continued

   (i) Participants and Procedure. 135
   (ii) Measures: Pre-entry. 135
   (iii) Measures: Early Academy Training. 137
   (iv) Measures: Late Academy and Pre-field Training. 138
   (v) Measures: Post-field Training. 138
   (vi) Measures: End of Probation. 138

3. Results and Discussion. 139
   (i) Changes in Organisational Commitment. 139
   (ii) Factors Associated with Changes in Organisational Commitment. 142
      (a) Met- (Unmet-) expectations. 142
      (b) Expectations and experiences. 145
      (c) Commitment propensity and work ethic. 147
   (iii) Individual Differences in Absolute Levels of Organisational Commitment. 149
      (a) Commitment propensity. 161
      (b) Work ethic. 162
      (c) Expectations and experiences. 152
      (d) Met- (unmet-) expectations. 164
   (iv) Probationary Levels of Organisational Commitment:
       A Comparison of South Australia and New South Wales. 155

4. Conclusion. 156


1. Introduction. 160
   (i) Same Occupation, Different Organisations: Comparisons of Commitment Within an Occupation but Across Organisations. 161
Chapter 7. continued

(ii) Different Occupations: Comparisons of Commitment Across Occupations Within and Across Organisations. 162

(iii) Occupations Within Police Organisations. 163

(iv) Occupational Influences on Organisational Commitment. 164

(v) Conclusion. 166


(i) Participants and Procedure. 167

(ii) Measures. 167

3. Results and Discussion.

(i) The Influence of Status and Qualification on Organisational Commitment in the Nonsworn Police Employee Sample. 169

(ii) Comparisons of Police Officers and Nonsworn Police Employees. 170

(iii) Factors Influencing Absolute Levels of Organisational Commitment. 177

4. Conclusion. 179


1. Introduction. 183

2. Model Development. 185

3. Analysis of the Models.


(iii) Analysis of the Longitudinal Structural-Relations Model. 195

4. Results and Discussion.


(a) Measurement model, 1994. 197

(b) Measurement model, 1995. 199
Chapter 8. continued

(c) Measurement model, 1996.  
(d) Summary of results and discussion.  

(a) Structural-relations model, 1994.  
(b) Structural-relations model, 1995.  
(c) Structural-relations model, 1996.  
(d) Summary of results and discussion.  

(iii) Longitudinal Structural-Relations Models.  

5. Conclusion.  


1. Summary of Results.  
2. The Developmental Trend in Organisational Commitment.  
3. Experience and the Development of Organisational Commitment.  
   (i) Socialisation: The Influence of Training and Field Experience.  
   (ii) Tenure: The Influence of Continuing Experience of the Organisation.  
   (iii) Psychological Contracts and the Development of Organisational Commitment.  
5. Conclusion.  

List of Appendices.  
Appendices.  
References.
Summary

The study of employee morale has had a long and varied history. Earliest studies concentrated on enhancing job satisfaction, but attention was directed toward the impact of organisational commitment on employee performance in the 1970s (Katzell & Austin, 1992). The first extensive theory of organisational commitment was provided by Mowday and his colleagues (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982), and used the definition offered by Porter and Smith (1970). The literature devoted to organisational commitment presently includes over 2,000 articles. This work can be divided into two sections: the development of theory and the establishment of empirical support for the theory. In summary, the theoretical work has been devoted to determining the construct (form, dimensions or bases and foci) of organisational commitment, and generally indicates that there is an affective employee response to the organisation as outlined by Porter and Smith. The empirical work has concentrated on defining and demonstrating relationships between organisational commitment and its theoretical antecedents and outcomes, and has produced a "laundry list" of both (Reichers, 1985) that are rarely fitted into a theoretical framework. There are two major problems with this work. First, despite the fact that much of both the theoretical and empirical work has been based on the assumption that affective organisational commitment follows a developmental (i.e., maturation with time) function, there is yet to be a study demonstrating the existence of this function. Second, the theoretical framework linking antecedents to affective organisational commitment is not well defined.

The purpose of this thesis was to address these issues, using lifespan developmental theory as the basis for both theoretical and methodological design. The underlying concept of lifespan theory is that individual characteristics and attitudes develop as a result of experiences that occur with ageing. The present thesis was based on an extension of this theory and argues that employee attitudes to the organisation develop as a result of experience with formal (leader) and informal (work group) climate of the organisation, as well as because of individual personal
characteristics. The primary aim was to determine if commitment can be mapped as a developmental function. The secondary aim of the thesis was to test the relationships between commitment and potential antecedents within the framework of the experience of the organisation.

The major study collected cross-sequential data from a sample of 479 police officers in the New South Wales (Australia) Police Service. Questionnaire measures were administered to 10 cohorts (officers recruited from 1977 - 1979 and 1987 - 1993 inclusive) across 3 years (1994, 1995 and 1996). In addition, comparable data were collected from 328 officers from the New Zealand police department (1994) and from 855 nonsworn (public servant) employees of the New South Wales Police Service (1996). Finally, a longitudinal study of 20 recruits to the South Australian (Australia) police department was conducted, with 7 data collections over a 2 year period (1994-1996).

The results of a cross-sequential data analysis indicate that there is a developmental trend, free from cohort and time of measurement effects, in affective organisational commitment in police organisations. Furthermore, the importance of using tenure (years of experience) rather than biological age when examining the development of employee attitudes toward the organisation was demonstrated. The commitment levels of recruits began very high (about 6.0 on a 7-point scale) but decreased significantly as a result of field training. This decrease occurred rapidly, with significant decreases being observed over a three month period of field experience. Commitment then follows an asymptotic-type trend, with rapid decreases over the 12 month probationary and into the first 3-5 years of experience in the organisation followed by a continuing, albeit less steep, decrease out to 19 years of police experience.

This trend appears to be somewhat unique to the police occupation, since the trend is displayed in the New Zealand police sample. However, within the police organisation, the development of commitment in at least one other occupational group (unqualified nonsworn employees) seems to be similar to the police officers. This would argue that experiences of characteristics linked to the police organisation are
responsible for the trend. In contrast, the trend in commitment reported by another occupational group within the police organisation (i.e., qualified nonsworn employees) is different; increasing with tenure. This result suggests that it is important to consider the occupational group of employees when examining the development of organisational commitment.

The results of exploratory regression analyses and structural equation modelling indicate that, for all samples, experiences that influence perceptions of organisational support; that impact on role clarity; that confirm expectations held by the employee (particularly in relation to career development); and that enhance employee investments into the organisation, were found to be related to levels of commitment at all stages of an employee's career. These results were validated through content analysis of responses to a series of open-ended questions designed to assess employees' opinions regarding the improvement of organisational commitment. Consistent with Hofstede's cultural analysis (refer to Randall, 1993), higher levels of these factors were reported by the New Zealand sample, explaining in part their higher levels of commitment. Finally, the pivotal role of informal socialisation in reducing newcomer commitment, despite the best efforts of the formal socialisation agents (i.e., training officers at the police academy), was demonstrated in the recruit sample. Specifically, the only significant decrease in commitment for these newcomers, across 9 months of academy training and 3 months of field experience, occurred as a result of the field experience. Recruits who spent a greater proportion of their field experience in metropolitan, rather than rural, locations reported larger drops in commitment over the period.

To conclude, the results of this thesis provide evidence of a developmental function for affective organisational commitment. Furthermore, the results support a social exchange view of the formation of employee commitment, strengthening the argument that organisations must provide positive experiences relating to formal aspects of the organisation, as well as controlling the influence of informal aspects of the organisation, if employee commitment is an important outcome.