

Evaluating the “Few Alternatives” Dimension of Continuance Commitment: A Comment on Johnson, Chang, and Yang (2010)

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Researchers such as Klein et al. (2009) have recently argued that the organizational commitment literature is characterized by construct proliferation that has resulted in “confusion and ambiguity” about its nature and consequences. This research note addresses one such case—that of the “few alternatives” dimension of continuance commitment as described recently by Johnson, Chang, and Yang (2010). It is argued that this construct is not a form of organizational commitment and should not be treated as such by scholars seeking to understand the causes of continuance commitment and its impact on ethical, leadership, and citizenship outcomes of importance to work organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational commitment is regarded by many researchers in the field of organizational behavior as a key to understanding employee behavior in areas such as leadership (e.g., Avolio, Zho, Koh, and Bhatia, 2004) and ethics (Ponnu & Tennakoon, 2009) and indeed it is regarded as such in other business areas such as marketing as well (cf. Hunt, Wood, & Chonko, 1989). Research studies have provided strong evidence that highly committed employees are more amenable to transformational leadership efforts on the part of management, and are more willing to put forth effort to help an organization successfully change its strategic course (Jaros, 2010). Furthermore, highly committed employees tend to behave more ethically (as defined by compliance with corporate codes of ethics, Valentine & Barnett, 2003) as well and are more willing to participate in ethical practices and/or corporate social responsibility efforts (cf. Collier & Esteban, 2007; Oz, 2001). Thus, understanding how employees become committed to their organization, and the nature of that commitment, are important issues for scholars interested in understanding leadership and ethics processes in organizations.

Of particular concern is an employee’s level of *continuance* commitment to the organization, since this form of commitment is based on social and economic costs that would have to be incurred should the commitment be broken (Allen & Meyer, 1990), which raises issues related to how organizations can “tie” employees to the organization by raising the costs of breaking their commitment, and the leadership and ethical implications of doing so (cf. Ahmadi, 2011; Tsai & Huang, 2008; Jaros, 2010). Addressing these issues requires that the field of organizational behavior have a correct understanding of how continuance commitment develops and what it is, but this has not yet been fully achieved. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to clarify the nature of continuance commitment so as to assist scholars who are interested in understanding commitment and giving advice to practicing leaders interested in implementing change initiatives and fostering ethical conduct among employees.

CONTROVERSY OVER THE NATURE OF CONTINUANCE COMMITMENT

Recently, Johnson, Chang, and Yang (2010) highlighted the controversy over the nature of continuance commitment and attempted to address it. In their generally insightful article explaining how different motivational bases underlie commitment to organizational foci, Johnson, Chang, and Yang (2010) note that the dimensionality of the continuance form of organizational commitment has been debated in the literature (cf. McGee & Ford, 1987; Meyer, Allen & Gellatly, 1990; Jaros, 1997; Ko, Price, & Mueller, 1997; Powell & Meyer, 2004), and one of their stated purposes is to resolve this debate. Based on their evaluation of empirical research, and theoretical analysis of core motivations, regulatory focus and self-identity, they conclude that a two-dimensional formulation of continuance commitment (CC) is justified: “We subscribe to the view that CC is multidimensional, and the model we present supports this stance.” (p.229). They posit that one CC dimension reflects commitment that develops on the basis of investments that would have to be sacrificed, the other on a perceived lack of alternatives to maintaining the commitment to the organization (or supervisor, workgroup, or other target). Johnson et al. call this latter construct the “few alternatives” dimension of continuance commitment. The assertion that this few-alternatives construct is in fact reflective of continuance commitment and should be regarded as a dimension of it stands in contrast to researchers such as Jaros (2009), who argues that the few-alternatives construct does not actually reflect any commitment content, and thus should not be considered a form or dimension of commitment, continuance or otherwise.

This research note proposes that Johnson et al.’s (2010) perspective is incorrect, that what they call the few-alternatives form of CC is not actually a manifestation of commitment to the organization. Instead, it likely reflects an employee’s perceptions of the external labor market, their beliefs about their employability with other firms should they choose to quit their current job. Thus, it is recommended that the “few alternatives” construct be deleted from the Allen and Meyer (1990) three-component model of organizational commitment in future research. Allen and Meyer (1990) propose a three-dimensional model of organizational commitment comprised of affective commitment (commitment characterized by an emotional bond with the organization), normative commitment (commitment based on thoughts or feelings of obligation to the organization) and continuance commitment (commitment based on the costs that would have to be incurred in order to leave the organization). This model has evolved into the dominant paradigm in the organizational commitment literature (cf. Jaros, 2009).

Furthermore, it is recommended that practicing managers and leaders do not heed Johnson et al.’s recommendation, which implies that since a lack of perceived employment alternatives is a key component of continuance commitment (i.e., an employee who sees their labor market value decline experiences higher continuance commitment to their current organization), organizations should seek to enact policies that reduce the employee’s sense of their value in the labor market. In contrast, we argue that such an approach is conceptually incorrect because a lack of perceived employment alternatives is not actually an aspect of an employee’s continuance commitment, and furthermore that fostering such a belief in the mind of the employee will actually lead to other negative attitudes on the part of the employee that will make leadership, such as enacting organizational change initiatives, more difficult, and will also increase the chances that employees will behave unethically. The balance of the paper explains the rationale for this conclusion, and concludes with implications for future research based on the Allen and Meyer paradigm and for organizational practice.

EVIDENCE AGAINST “FEW ALTERNATIVES” AS A DIMENSION OF CC

One reason to object to Johnson et al.’s (2010) conclusion is that evidence against it, both theoretical and empirical, has been overwhelming, so much so that the original adherents of the belief that “few alternatives” is an aspect of continuance commitment have changed their minds about this. Controversy over the dimensionality of continuance commitment first emerged with a study conducted by McGee and Ford (1987), who factor-analyzed the continuance commitment scale (CCS) developed by Meyer and Allen (1984), and found that the CCS consisted of two factors, corresponding to sacrificed investments

and lack of perceived employment alternatives. McGee and Ford suggested that while the sacrificed investments component was consistent with the “side-bet” theory of continuance commitment as formulated by Becker (1960), the theoretical foundation for continuance commitment, the perceived alternatives component was not and thus measured something other than continuance commitment. Meyer, Allen, and Gellatly (1990) empirically confirmed the bi-dimensional structure of the CCS, but argued that the perceived alternatives component was in fact consistent with Becker’s (1960) theory, and thus continuance commitment should be regarded as a bi-dimensional construct. Meyer et al. argued that there is a difference between an employee’s perceptions of available employment alternatives (which is not a form of organizational commitment), and commitment which develops as a result (which they argued is what the “few alternatives” dimension of continuance commitment actually reflects). During the 1990s, a genuine debate played out, as the Meyer et al. view was supported (e.g., Dunham, Grube, & Castaneda, 1994) and challenged by those who supported the McGee and Ford position (e.g., Brown, 1996; Jaros, 1997; Ko et al., 1997).

However, in the past decade, this debate has largely ended, primarily because Meyer and colleagues, developers of the CCS and primary defenders of the notion that “few alternatives” is a dimension of continuance commitment, have come around to the view that only sacrificed-investments dimension of the CCS properly reflects the theoretical nature of continuance commitment while the perceived alternatives dimension does not. Allen and Meyer (2000) suggested that perhaps the critics were correct in that the high-sacrifices dimension might better reflect the theoretical notion of continuance commitment than the perceived alternatives dimension. Then, Meyer et al. (2002) reported meta-analytic findings that the sacrificed-investments subscale was a significant and negative predictor of turnover-related variables ($p = -.21$) but the perceived-alternatives subscale was not ($p = -.01$). Since the concept of continuance commitment implies a significant tendency to remain a member of the organization, Meyer et al. concluded that “In light of these findings, it appears that the CC:HiSac subscale is a better operational definition of Becker’s (1960) “side bet” view of commitment than is the CC:LoAlt subscale.” (p.41), and called on researchers to revise the CCS so as to include more sacrifices-related items and delete few-alternatives items. This call was heeded by Powell and Meyer (2004), who developed a revised CCS reflecting only sacrifice-related items, jettisoning the perceived alternatives items from the scale. Reflecting on Meyer et al.’s (2002) findings, and their own findings, Powell and Meyer concluded that:

“In light of this evidence, and Meyer and Allen’s reflections on the CCS subscales, we recommend that the six-item measure of high-sacrifice continuance commitment be used in subsequent research concerning the three-component model...” (Powell & Meyer, 2004: 171).

Thus, since on the basis of compelling theoretical reflection and empirical evidence, the original developers of the modern concept of “continuance commitment” and the CCS scale, and the champions of the notion that the perceived alternatives subscale of the CCS reflects continuance commitment have essentially conceded the argument that they waged during the 1990s, the debate has, in recent years, essentially ended (Jaros, 2009), and thus is not a live controversy requiring closure, one of the stated purposes of Johnson et al.’s paper.

HAS THE ARGUMENT BEEN MISTAKENLY CONCEDED?

Of course it might be the case that Meyer and colleagues mistakenly conceded the argument, that the perceived-alternatives construct really does reflect Becker’s (1960) “side bet” concept of commitment, and that Johnson et al. (2010) are correcting their mistake. But, even a generous reading of Becker’s theory offers much less conceptual space for a perceived alternatives dimension than Johnson et al. credit it with, at least not to the extent of allowing it to constitute one of two “sub-dimensions” of continuance commitment. Becker (1960) discusses four major categories of economic and social investments that may lead to the development of commitment: generalized cultural expectations (e.g., norms such as the

“Protestant work ethic”), bureaucratic arrangements (e.g., pension fund accrual), face-to-face interaction (e.g., avoidance of inconsistent behavior so as to maintain a desired image among peers), and individual adjustment to social position (e.g., an employee develops firm-specific skills). Of these, only the last one could plausibly encompass perceived employment alternatives as a basis for commitment, and this is in fact the theoretical claim made by Meyer, Allen, and Gellatly (1990: 717) in justifying its inclusion within the side-bet view:

‘As employees adjust to their roles in an organization, they may gradually change their perceptions of what is an acceptable alternative. In some cases, this redefinition could result in a much smaller set of alternatives. As the number of alternatives judged acceptable decreases, the potential for loss increases. This, then, justifies the inclusion of items assessing perceived alternatives in a measure of continuance (side-bet) commitment.’

This reasoning is somewhat sound in the sense that it comports with Becker’s explanation of the “individual adjustments” category of side-bets. The error is a proportional one: First, as Meyer et al. (1990) acknowledge, an employee’s adjustment to their work situation may just as readily enhance their value to other firms (by demonstrating their ability to handle a wide variety of job duties over an extended period of time), as cause them to be less valuable to other firms (and thus perceive fewer external employment alternatives). Second, while Becker considered this category to be just one of four, and possibly more categories of side-bets (he noted that these four categories may not be exhaustive), and one that wasn’t conceptually or practically any more important than the others, in developing their concept of continuance commitment and the CCS, Meyer and Allen (1984) elevated, without justification, the “lack of perceived alternatives” aspect to account for fully half of the conceptual “space” captured by the CCS. Meyer and Allen (1984: 375) describe the CCS thusly:

“This 8-item measure, also developed by the authors, assesses the extent to which employees feel committed to their organizations by virtue of the costs that they feel are associated with leaving (e.g., investments and/or lack of attractive alternatives). As such, the CCS is considered a measure of organizational commitment of the sort Becker describes.”

Thus, as empirically determined by Meyer, Allen, and Gellatly (1990), Meyer and Allen (1984) ended up writing 4 items to capture “lack of alternatives” and 4 items to capture all the other possible categories of investments, the three other major categories specifically identified by Becker (1960) plus any other as-yet unknown categories. This measurement strategy clearly places far too much emphasis on what Becker (1960) considered to be, at best, one of four possible categories of investments and side-bets, and as noted above, the concept of “lack of employment alternatives” is just one possible manifestation of this particular side-bet category. It was this measurement-development error that was revealed by McGee and Ford’s (1987) factor-analytic study. Had Meyer and Allen (1984) chosen to over-emphasize the “generalized cultural expectations” side-bet category, and wrote four of eight items to reflect it instead of “perceived alternatives”, *McGee and Ford (1987) would have probably found a “generalized cultural expectations” factor* and a debate would have begun over whether continuance commitment was bi-dimensional, with one of the dimensions reflecting this factor and not “perceived alternatives”. Thus, rather than being a true theoretically-derived “dimension” of continuance commitment, the perceived-alternatives subscale is a statistical artifact of faulty scale construction.

CONCEPT EVOLUTION?

One possible objection to this critique is that it treats Becker’s (1960) work as a kind of ‘holy writ’, not subject to later modification as additional evidence arose. Leaving aside the fact that Meyer and Allen

(1984) explicitly stated that they constructed the CCS to reflect Becker's original theory, perhaps in the 24 years between Becker (1960) and Meyer and Allen (1984), researchers testing Becker's theory determined that the "few alternatives" category merited more emphasis than Becker originally believed as a basis for continuance commitment, and Meyer and Allen (1984)'s approach fairly reflected that theoretical evolution. But if so, it's not readily apparent in the published literature. Tracing the evolution of cost/investments based commitment from Becker forward to Meyer and Allen (1984), through research by Kanter (1968), Hrebiniak and Alutto (1972), and Farrell and Rusbult's work (Farrell & Rusbult, 1981; Rusbult & Farrell, 1983) one searches in vain for any such change of emphasis. Kanter and Hrebiniak/Alutto do not mention perceived alternatives, whereas Rusbult and Farrell's work treats perceived alternatives as one of four categories of binding factors, with costs, rewards, and investments.

Importantly, Rusbult and Farrell consider these factors to be *causes* of commitment, antecedents, not dimensions or aspects of it such that they should be included in the item-wording of a cost-based commitment scale. Thus, there is no apparent theoretical rationale, either in Becker or in later developments of his theory, for the emphasis Meyer and Allen (1984) placed on perceived alternatives in constructing the CCS, and as noted earlier, later on these same pioneering authors (Allen & Meyer, 2000) came around to this point of view and no longer regard perceived alternatives as a separate dimension of continuance commitment.

CONTINUANCE COMMITMENT AND CONCEPT REDUNDANCY

Lastly, any attempt to argue for a perceived-alternatives based dimension of continuance commitment raises an issue of construct redundancy in organizational research. In this case, there already is a well-established "perceived alternatives" construct, one that is not defined as a form or dimension of commitment, in the organizational behavior literature (cf. Bar-Haim, 2007; and see Griffeth, Hom & Gaettner, 2000 for meta-analytic findings of perceived alternatives in models of employee turnover). This construct has a long pedigree, stretching back to March and Simon (1958), and is defined as the employee's perceptions of available employment alternatives. It's not clear how the alleged "few alternatives" continuance commitment subdimension construct tapped by the Meyer and Allen (1984) CCS differs from the construct tapped by other measures of "perceived alternatives" characterized as being a separate construct from commitment. As Brown (1996) compellingly argues, "First and foremost, this (few alternatives CCS factor) should be interpreted for what the questions ask: an assessment of the availability of alternative jobs. A perception of a lack of alternative work may bind someone to a job—a situation with which they may or may not be happy—but this is different from commitment and may be perceived to exist the very day a person joins an organization" (p.244). Since the wording of the 4 "few alternatives" CCS items seemingly captures an employee's perceptions of the labor market absent any commitment content, it's difficult to see how Meyer et al.'s (1990) distinction between perceived employment alternatives and perceived alternatives as a dimension of commitment can be sustained. Furthermore, empirical research has determined that this established non-commitment perceived employment alternatives is not a dimension of continuance commitment (cf. Powell & Meyer, 2004), again suggesting that the redundant "few alternatives" dimension of the CCS is not an aspect of continuance commitment.

In justifying their advocacy of a multi-dimensional approach to continuance commitment, Johnson et al. (2010) cite empirical support for the model, noting that when subjected to empirical tests, the CCS usually reveals two subdimensions with item wording that reflects perceived sacrifices and perceived alternatives, and that these subdimensions have different relations with other constructs, such as affective commitment and withdrawal cognitions. For example, Vandenberghe, Panaccio, and Ben Ayed (2010) recently found that the "few alternatives" sub-dimension of continuance commitment has a positive impact on turnover behavior for employees who are high in negative affectivity, whereas the "high sacrifices" sub-dimension has a negative impact on turnover behavior for employees high in negative affectivity. They also argue that they have different motivational bases, at least with respect to regulatory foci. However, the empirical findings only indicate that the perceived sacrifices and perceived alternatives

subscales measure somewhat different constructs, they do not necessarily mean that the perceived alternatives subscale measures a form or dimension of employee commitment, continuance or otherwise.

For example, if four job satisfaction items were included in a scale with four side-bet commitment items, no doubt a factor analysis would reveal two different subscales, and because side-bet commitment and job satisfaction are different constructs, they would relate differently to some antecedents and outcomes. And they would likely have different motivational bases as well. But that wouldn't mean that job satisfaction is a "dimension" of organizational commitment, which would be determined based on conceptual congruence between the scale items and the definition of "job satisfaction" as opposed to "organizational commitment". In this regard, Vandenberghe et al.'s (2010) recent findings are instructive, since all existing definitions of "commitment" propose that highly committed employees will be less, not more, likely to leave their organization. Thus, the finding of a positive relationship between the "few alternatives" sub-dimension and turnover behavior is actually evidence that this few-alternatives construct is not tapping a form of work commitment.

CONCLUSION

By identifying the differing motivational bases of several forms of commitment, Johnson, Chang, and Yang (2010) provide a valuable contribution to researchers in this area. However, based on the forgoing discussion, it seems advisable that their work as it pertains to the dimensionality of continuance commitment be revised in favor of a three-component model of commitment that treats perceived alternatives as one of many possible causes/bases of continuance commitment and not as a distinct dimension. As indicated above, the evidence against the Johnson et al. position seems compelling: Including "few alternatives" as a dimension of CC is counter to the theoretical underpinnings of the concept and the existing meta-analytic and other empirical evidence strongly suggests that it is not a form of continuance commitment. Doing so will also help address the problem of construct proliferation identified by Klein et al. (2009), who have argued that the organizational commitment literature is characterized by construct proliferation of a kind which has resulted in "confusion and ambiguity" surrounding the terminology, nature, and function of commitment. As a result, progress in identifying the causes and consequences of commitment has been hampered. Thus, they argue that one of the foci of commitment research should be to reduce or eliminate construct proliferation, by being careful about the introduction of new commitment constructs, and by analyzing the validity of existing commitment constructs and eliminating those that do not pass empirical or conceptual scrutiny as dimensions of commitment (as has been argued here), or are otherwise redundant with other established non-commitment constructs, thus paving the way for advances in understanding the nature, causes, and consequences of employee commitment to the organization.

And from an applied perspective, this clarification will help practicing leaders who want to foster high levels of continuance commitment among employees have clearer guidance as to how to do so. Rather than taking steps to limit the employment alternatives that employees have, leader focus should be on developing the categories of side bets actually posited by Becker (1960), including positive financial and social conditions at work (such as adequate pay and benefits, the opportunity to work in teams as opposed to as isolated individuals) so that the ties that bind the employee to the organization are viewed as positive by the employee. Work motivation theory (cf. Deci & Ryan, 1985; Higgins, 1998; Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004) suggests that autonomy is a fundamental human value. We are more motivated to put forth effort to achieve goals and objectives, such as ethical behavior or organizational change initiatives, when the source of our motivation is intrinsic and/or positive to us, represent our hopes and aspirations, as opposed to when we feel trapped or compelled by circumstances to do so, as is likely the case when we perceive a lack of employment alternatives to our present position. Thus, employees who feel "bound" to their organization because of positive factors such as fair pension plans and other benefits, satisfying relationships with supervisors, customers, and coworkers, and training opportunities should be willing to engage in ethical conduct, accept leadership initiatives, and engage in citizenship behaviors. In contrast, a perceived lack of employment alternatives tends to foster a negative sense of

being “trapped” in the organization, which has been shown to have a negative effect on employee willingness to implement organizational change initiatives (Jaros, 2010) and could make it more likely that employees will engage in ethical violations and other forms of misconduct on the job as well.

Since this paper has shown that having few employment alternatives is not a prerequisite for experiencing high levels of continuance commitment, leaders have little need to take actions that diminish their employees sense that of their value on the job market in order to foster a high degree of continuance commitment to the organization, which is fortunate for both the leader and the organization.

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