EXPLORING THE ROLE OF AFFECT AND EVALUATIVE BELIEFS IN THE EMERGENCE OF WORKPLACE ATTITUDE: THE CASE OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

Affective events theory is used to examine the relationships between workplace events, affect and the emergence of attitude. We discuss the relationships between relational and transactional contracts, organizational commitment, and trust as a mediator. We propose that organizational commitment is a function of affective and belief antecedents that may influence attitude independently or together.

Within the organizational sciences, attitude is a widely studied variable and there is widespread evidence of the role that employee attitude plays in generating and sustaining behavior. The view of attitude as a key component for understanding, predicting and even shaping employee behavior has stimulated scholarly interest in questions about how it develops. Classic theories of attitude advance the idea that beliefs about attitude objects are the foundational elements of attitude. Variants of these classic theories have, over time, incorporated a role for affect in addition to belief systems, as a determinant in the formation of attitude. Contemporary theories support the idea that both evaluative beliefs and affective experiences function as antecedents to the development of attitude, and that the structure of attitude reflects the influence of each of these elements, both conjointly and independently.

Organizational commitment is one of the most studied attitudinal constructs in the organizational literature and the three-component model of organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991) may be considered the dominant model in this research stream (Solinger, van Olffen & Roe, 2008). The three-component model suggests that organizational commitment manifests in three distinct forms; an affective attachment to the organization (affective commitment), perceptions of the costs associated with leaving the organization (continuance commitment), and a sense of obligation toward remaining with the organization (normative commitment). This conceptualization of organizational commitment lends itself particularly well to the exploration of affect and beliefs and their interplay, in the formation of attitude. The theoretical arguments and empirical evidence around the three-component model of commitment facilitate a consideration of how various evaluative and affective antecedents may align directly with each component, or may interact to produce effects conjointly. As a multidimensional attitudinal construct, organizational commitment provides a special opportunity for examination of the proposition that workplace events influence attitude formation through both affective and evaluative belief systems, as independent mechanisms.
Affective events theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) is useful in understanding the antecedents of organizational commitment as a manifestation of attitude. According to AET, attitude is a summary evaluation of affective and belief antecedents. In making their arguments, Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) suggest that the formation of general attitude is influenced by affective and cognitive factors independently, citing empirical evidence that affective components better predict behavior than do beliefs (Millar & Tesser, 1986; Breckler & Wiggins; 1989, Edwards, 1990). It is generally expected that workplace events that generate affective responses will explain more variance in an individual’s positive or negative judgments than will events that trigger evaluation of beliefs alone.

In this paper, we consider how workplace experiences and events influence affective responses and evaluative belief systems, and how affect and beliefs relate to the manifestation of overall attitude. We are unaware of any study examining the factors that predict the emergence of unique profiles of organizational commitment based on differential levels of each distinct component. Given the contemporary view that attitude is a summary evaluation of affective and belief antecedents, we expect that it is the pattern of relations among the psychological states associated with each of affective, continuance and normative commitment, which will most closely reflect overall attitude.

While the prevalent approach to the study of organizational commitment has been a focus on the discreet components of commitment, there is theoretical and empirical evidence advocating for the investigation of the combined effects of the three forms of commitment. Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) theorized that the behavioral consequences of commitment would depend upon the commitment profile of an individual. Gellatly, Meyer and Luchak (2006) studied the combined effects of the three commitment components on both focal and discretionary behaviors, and found evidence of the differential effects of unique profiles of commitment. These findings of the varying behavioral implications of commitment profiles, highlight the need to better understand what experiences and conditions contribute to the development of unique combinations of affective, continuance and normative commitment.

Here we consider the effects of psychological contract violation on the components of organizational commitment using AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Specifically, we investigate the possibility that violation along relational versus transactional lines, will differ according to their impact on affective, normative and continuance commitment (Meyer, Allen & Smith, 1993), both as discreet dimensions and as a collectivity. Borrowing from AET, (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) we postulate that the mechanisms through which psychological contract experiences have their effects on the various dimensions of organizational commitment are distinct. We expect that relational contracts will have their effect through an affective mechanism, whereas a transactional contract experience will have an effect through an evaluative belief mechanism. In this regard, according to AET, both types of contract experiences as work events will influence the formation of attitude, but relational contracts will do so through affective responses like organizational trust, and transactional contracts will not.

This paper contributes to the literature on workplace attitude in at least three ways. First, we consider how perceptions of psychological contracts and contract violations, as workplace experiences and events, may operate as antecedents to the development of unique profiles of organizational commitment. Second, we augment the relatively nascent study of psychological contract breach that considers the content and breach effects of transactional versus relational contracts as distinct, by examining the effects of breach on affect (trust) and attitude (organizational commitment). Third we present theoretical evidence of the possibility that as a
manifestation of attitude, the three component model of organizational commitment is representative of a hierarchy of psychological mindsets, and that the pattern of relations between each mindset is reflective of the attitudinal orientation that is engendered by a particular constellation of workplace experiences and events.

**Psychological Contracts as Workplace Experiences**

Attitudes are conceived of as summary and evaluative judgments about a target, and this perspective has been broadly studied within the literature on organizations (Millar & Tesser, 1986; Breckler & Wiggins, 1989; Edwards, 1990). A foundational distinction of AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), in contrast to traditional belief-oriented theories of attitude, is that affective experiences in the workplace influence overall evaluative judgments independently of the influences of beliefs about the characteristics of the target, and that the affective component better predicts behavior.

Workplace events such as violations of an employee’s psychological contract are expected to have an effect on employee attitude either through affective reactions, or re-evaluation of beliefs, and it is possible that affective reactions might trigger changes in the employee’s evaluative belief systems. Psychological contracts consist of the implicit and explicit “promises” that employees believe their organization has made to them through various organizational agents, organizational practices or policies, or from other employer actions (McFarlane Shore & Tetrick, 1994; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 2001; Rousseau & Greller, 1994). Borrowing from the theory around social and economic exchange, two types of psychological contracts have emerged in the literature – relational and transactional.

**Relational Contracts**

In a social exchange, the relationship between an individual and his/her organization rests on unspecified future obligations that are socio-emotional in nature. Blau (1964) argued that only social exchange engenders feelings of personal obligation, gratitude, and trust. Relational contracts are characterized by qualities of social exchange, and are described as affect-laden, open-ended exchanges (Robinson et al., 1994; Rousseau, 1989, 1990; Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993) based on trust between two parties (Buch & Aldridge, 1991; Robinson, 1996; Rousseau, 1989, 1995). Relational contracts may be seen to promise employees an exchange relationship characterized by flexibility, emotional relatedness and an enduring quality, tapping these elements of human need.

**Transactional Contracts**

In contrast, an economic exchange involves a formal contract containing explicit monetary elements. Where relational contracts are open-ended, transactional contracts are characterized by defined timeframes and are limited to the exchange of specific economic resources (Rousseau, 1989; McFarlane Shore & Tetrick, 1994). Transactional contracts promise employees economic stability and a comparatively static exchange relationship.

Despite the apparent contrast of these two contractual types, scholars suggest that the transactional-relational divide is not an exclusive one. Millward and Hopkins (1998) argue that the exchange relationship is more accurately characterized as comprising varying degrees of both relational and transactional elements. In this sense, employees may be expected to possess
elements of both types in their psychological contracts to some extent (see also Robinson, Kraatz & Rousseau, 1994).

**Psychological Contract Violation as a Workplace Event**

There are numerous examples of studies examining the effects of psychological contract breach on organizational trust (Grimmer & Oddy, 2007; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), on organizational commitment (Bal, De Lange, Jansen & Van Der Velde, 2008; Grimmer & Oddy, 2007; Robinson et al, 1994) and on behavior (Deery et al, 2006; Restubog, Bordia & Tang, 2006; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Together, these studies provide strong evidence of the linkage between psychological contract violation, changes in attitude and behavior/behavioral intentions. In the context of such a chain of relations, scholars have recently questioned the mediating effects of contract type on the relationship between perceived contract fulfillment, and organizational commitment and trust. A differential effect has been found for the role of relational versus transactional psychological contracts. Relational scores have been found to mediate the effect of fulfillment of expectations on organizational commitment and trust, but transactional scores have not (Grimmer and Oddy, 2007). This suggests it is relational-type expectations that explain how expectations affect outcomes, and not transactional-type expectations.

Although employees’ psychological contracts may not be exclusively relational or transactional, and rather comprised of both elements concurrently, individuals typically perceive their contracts as being dominant in one orientation or the other (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Montes & Irving, 2008). Accordingly, one should evaluate the differential effects of violation along relational versus transactional lines, both in terms of employees’ perceptions of the psychological contracts they are party to, and the nature of the violation. While there are few studies in the literature on psychological contracts that distinguish between the effects of relational and transactional contract violation, it is also true that even among these studies few if any clearly delineate both which type of contract is held by an individual (relational or transactional) and what is the nature of the contract violation (relational or transactional). Without this clarity of circumstances it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw inferences about the effects of contract violation, and the mechanisms which may explain these effects, and yet this seems to be what researchers are endeavoring to do.

Grimmer and Oddy (2007) examined whether contract type mediated the relationship between perceived violation and various organizational outcomes. However, they did not specify the nature of the violation. Zhao et al. (2007) examined the possibility of differing effects of breach along relational versus transactional lines, but did not specify which contract type subjects perceived themselves to be party to. Montes and Irving (2008) capture perceived breach at the level of each inducement, but their research is not designed to specifically examine how perceived relational versus transactional violations influence an individual’s perceptions of the relational versus transactional composition of their contracts. In this paper, we are exploring how psychological contract events may influence attitudinal outcomes distinctly depending both the contract and the perceived violation as relational versus transactional in nature.

Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) suggest that some events have great affective significance whereas other events trigger primarily cognitive responses that lead to an individual re-evaluating his or her beliefs about something. Inherent in this conception of an event is the idea of change, and specifically a change in what the individual is experiencing. We believe that to make sense the mechanism through which the event precipitates change, there needs to be a clear understanding of the character of the individual’s experience as well as the character of the event.
In the case of psychological contract violation, it is possible and even likely, that someone in a predominantly relational contract will have a strong affective response to a violation along relational lines (e.g., trusted supervisor, or other agent of the organization, betrays a confidence), but not to a violation along transactional lines (e.g., a wage freeze). Likewise it is possible that for someone in a predominantly transactional contract, a transactional violation will precipitate a strong inclination to re-evaluate the perceived balance of opportunities of the work arrangement, whereas there will be small chance of any sense of perceived relational violation at all.

While there are numerous permutations and combinations of contract-violation type, in this discussion we focus on interpreting the attitudinal consequences of a contract violation that is maximally relevant to the individual in the employment arrangement. We believe that people self-direct towards employment arrangements that suit their vested interests, and as such will tend to be in relational or transactional style employment arrangements by choice. Following from this, we focus on the cases of people in relational psychological contracts who are violated along relational lines, and people in transactional psychological contracts who are violated along transactional lines. We expect responses to perceived contract violation to result in altered perceptions of that component of the contract specifically.

Proposition 1a. Individuals in a predominantly relational psychological contract who perceive a psychological contract violation that is relational in nature, will subsequently perceive a significantly lower relational psychological contract compared to individuals who are in a predominantly relational psychological contract but do not perceive a violation.

Proposition 1b. Individuals who are in a predominantly relational psychological contract, and who perceive a violation that is relational in nature, will subsequently not perceive a significantly lower transactional component as compared to individuals who are in a predominantly relational psychological contract but do not perceive a violation.

Proposition 1c. Individuals who are in a predominantly transactional contract, and who perceive a violation that is transactional in nature, will perceive a significantly lower transactional component as compared to individuals who are in a predominantly transactional psychological contract but do not perceive a violation.

Proposition 1d. Individuals who are in a predominantly transactional contract, and who perceive a violation that is transactional in nature, will perceive a relational component that is not significantly different as compared to individuals who are in a predominantly transactional psychological contract but do not perceive a violation.

Psychological Contract Violation and Organizational Trust

There is a considerable body of research examining the effects of psychological contract breach on organizational trust (Bal, De Lange, Jansen & Van Der Velde, 2008; Deery et al, 2006; Grimmer & Oddy, 2007; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Robinson & Morrison, 1995). Until recently however, no studies explored the possibility that this relationship differs depending upon whether the contract is predominantly relational or transactional. Grimmer and Oddy (2007) found relational scores, but not transactional scores, mediated the relationship between an individual’s perceptions of contract fulfillment and organizational trust. Montes and Irving (2008) found that trust was a central mechanism to relational, but not transactional breach effects. In this paper we distinguish transactional from relational contracts and theorize the differential effects of
contract violation on trust according to the effects of contract type, the effects of contract composition, and the effects of violation by contract type.

In considering why relational and transactional contract may exert different effects on the development of trust, we turn to the literature that conceives of trust as a multi-faceted construct. Young and Daniel (2003) argue that trust is comprised of both cognitive and emotional elements. Cognitive elements of trust are thought to include the calculation of costs, benefits and risks associated with a given situation, whereas the emotional component are believed to incorporate emotions that build trust (e.g. interest, admiration), sustain trust (e.g. affection, gratitude), and facilitate enjoyment of the relationship (e.g. contentment, satisfaction). In this research, there are also arguments supporting the idea that trust develops differently in the context of social versus economic exchange situations.

Weaker forms of trust result from economically-based principal-agent type contracts (Barney, 1994; Schoorman, Mayer & Davis, 2007; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard & Werner, 1998), but social exchange based psychological work contracts engender a stronger and broader form of trust. Tekleab et al. (2005) suggest that the development of high quality social exchange relationships result in heightened psychological closeness and perceptions in the fairness of others’ behavior over time. Similarly Young and Daniel (2003) suggest that trust is primarily an affectual phenomenon and expect it to develop only under circumstances where the character of the relationship is sufficiently emotional to stimulate an affective response. We therefore expect the emergence of organizational trust under the conditions of predominantly relational psychological contracts, but not where a contract is predominantly transactional.

Relational contracts address socio-emotional needs, leaving an employee with a true sense of belonging, and a belief in the promise of an enduring, caring type of employment contract. In contrast to transactional contracts, where the arrangement is understood to be of narrow scope and of limited duration, relational contracts, embody social exchange characteristics, and have been linked to the development of a stronger form of organizational trust. Young and Daniel (2003) suggest further that changed relational conditions generate modifications to the opportunities for trust.

Following from this logic, we expect primarily relational contracts, and not transactional contracts, to engender affectual trust. Also, we expect that while the composition of relational contracts will contain both relational and transactional elements, it is only the relational and not the transactional elements that will relate to organizational trust. Finally for holders of a relational contract, we expect the perception of a relational violation to cause a decrease in levels of organizational trust.

Proposition 2 a. Perceptions of a relational contract will predict organizational trust.

Proposition 2 b. Within the relational contract experimental condition, perceptions of the relational elements of the contract will predict organizational trust while perceptions of the transactional elements of the contract will not be.

Proposition 2 c. Within the relational contract experimental condition, perceptions of a relational psychological contract violation will lead to lower levels of organizational trust.
Psychological Contract Violation and Organizational Commitment

According to the three-component conceptualization of organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991), commitment in an employment context is a psychological state, or a mindset, reflecting feelings and/or beliefs concerning the employee’s relationship with an organization. Conceptually commitment has been discussed in a variety of different ways. It has been considered as a linking of the employee to the organization (Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982), an individual orientation (Sheldon, 1971) and specifically as work attitude (Eby, Freeman, Rush & Lance, 1999). In the psychological contracts literature, it is examined as an attitudinal outcome of contract breach (Grimmer & Oddy, 2007; Zhao et al. 2007; Kickul, Lester & Belgio, 2004). Throughout this research, commitment is conceptualized in a way that is consistent with commonly-held theoretical views of attitude: the internal state of being of an individual, that is influenced by feelings and beliefs, and guides behavior through the shaping of intentions (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

Psychological Contracts and the Discreet Components of Commitment

Reflecting back to AET (Cropanzano & Weiss, 1996), we are reminded that the emergence of attitude can be explained through the role of both affect and evaluative beliefs. In conceptualizing organizational commitment as an attitudinal phenomenon, we expect the work experiences that generate affective responses to correlate most strongly with affective commitment, and an employee’s sense of desire to remain in the employment relationship. Alternatively, we expect events that lead employees to reevaluate their beliefs about the employment arrangement will correlate most strongly with continuance commitment, and an individual’s sense of the balance of opportunity versus costs in remaining with the organization. On this basis we suspect that relational psychological contracts with their strong emotional component, and propensity to engender emotional responses, are likely antecedents to the development of the affective component of attitude. In contrast, we view transactional psychological contracts, with their explicit quid pro quo understanding, as evaluative in nature, and therefore as likely antecedents to continuance commitment. Lastly, we expect both relational and transactional contracts to relate normative commitment, owing to the fact that both contract types are based on a sense of reciprocity and normative obligation.

We expect relational contracts, with their strong socio-emotional component, to generate high levels of affective commitment. Relational contracts are expected to be enduring, dynamic and nurturing, and therefore to meet individual needs for flexibility and belongingness. Individuals in relational contracts typically derive benefit from the developmental opportunities and personal support they receive from the organization, and do not demonstrate a focus on an evaluative sense of what they would gain or lose by leaving. On this basis we do not hypothesize a significant relationship with continuance commitment. By definition, relational contracts are partnerships based on broad mutual agreement, where the ongoing maintenance of the relationship is perceived to be of benefit to both parties, and we therefore expect such contracts to lead to high levels of normative commitment.

In contrast, transactional psychological contracts are narrow, short-term, economically driven employment agreements. Without a socio-emotional component, we do not expect transactional contracts to lead to the development of affective commitment. We expect transactional contracts to generate continuance commitment. These contracts represent explicit exchange-based opportunities to reap rewards in return for effort and talent, and employees should be able to clearly evaluate the risks in leaving. Viewed as a stepping stone to the next opportunity, transactional contracts may be expected to engender a commitment to the exchange
relationship that derives more from beliefs about the opportunity-cost, than from desire. Last, we
expect transactional contracts to generate normative commitment reflecting the explicit nature of
the mutual obligations. When this type of contract is being clearly maintained, the norm of
reciprocity suggests that a sense of equilibrium would be fostered and a therefore normative
commitment would prevail.

Proposition 3. Relational psychological contracts lead to the development of (a) affective
commitment, and (b) normative commitment.

Proposition 4. Transactional psychological contracts lead to the development of (a)
continuance commitment, and (b) normative commitment.

Organizational Commitment as an Overall Attitude

In conceptualizing the three-components of organizational commitment as distinct
psychological mindsets, Meyer & Allen (1991) effectively supply organizational researchers with
a construct that embodies the multi-dimensional representation of overall attitude, conceived of as
a summary and evaluative judgment about a target of interest. We have said that it is widely held
that attitude formation can be explained through the influences of both affective (emotional)
experiences with the target, and more abstract beliefs about the target. It is also our opinion that
the three-component model of organizational commitment, with its inherent measure of affective
orientation, normative sensibility and instrumentality, provides a conceptually rich vehicle for
investigating the relative influence of affect and evaluative beliefs.

The central role of beliefs has long been established in research on the structure of
attitudes. Fishbein and Azjen (1975) discussed the propositional nature of beliefs and the notion
that there is some correspondence between attitudes and the evaluative content of beliefs about
these objects. It is suggested that beliefs may take a variety of forms in relation to attitudinal
objects, including beliefs as abstract attributes, beliefs as images, and beliefs as representative of
experiences.

Eagly and Chaiken (1993) suggest that beliefs derive their influence on attitude from the
evaluative meaning of their content, and further identify affect and behaviors as structural
elements of attitude. They suggest that affective reactions can contribute to the evaluation of
attitude objects either directly or as they shape evaluative beliefs, and that behaviors inform us
about our attitudes as beliefs may take the form of concrete representations of one’s experiences
with an attitude object.

The Eagly and Chaiken (1993) framework. Chronicling highlights from the dialogue of
attitudinal research, Eagly and Chaiken (1993) present a framework outlining the antecedents and
consequences of attitude formation. Following the central tenets of the Theory of Reasoned
Action (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975), “intention” to engage in a behavior is seen as a proximal cause
of behavior, and “attitude towards behavior” enters the model as a determinant of intention. The
Eagly and Chaiken (1993) model tells us that an individual’s attitude towards behavior originates
with any of habit, attitude toward a target, and the three categories of expected outcomes;
utilitarian, normative and self-identity.

In making this delineation between the idea of attitude toward a target and attitude toward
behavior, Eagly and Chaiken (1993) also address the question of what is the attitudinal referent.
The “target “ as an attitudinal referent is defined strictly as an “entity”, and is distinguished from
broader conceptualization of an “object”, which may include the target but also associated action,
context and temporal aspects. In their model, attitude towards a target pertains to the entity (e.g. thing, person) in the strictest sense, whereas attitude towards a behavior has as possible referents, any association embodied in the idea of the attitudinal object (e.g. target, action, context, time).

Eagly and Chaiken (1993) suggest that “although a behavior can be an attitude object, it cannot be a target because the target is the entity the behavior is directed toward .. in contrast to attitudes toward targets, attitudes toward behaviors (e.g., attitude toward attending church services) are evaluations of the respondent engaging in a single behavior or a set of behaviors. These attitudes necessarily name an action or a range of actions as their object and typically name a target or a range of targets” (p. 163-164). We highlight these fine points of the Eagly and Chaiken (1993) framework for two reasons; first to establish theoretical grounding of how to position the three-component model of organizational commitment within this framework, and second, to respond to a recent critique of the three-component model as representative of overall attitude.

First, we believe that organizational commitment, conceptualized as affective, normative and continuance commitment in combination, is representative of an overall attitude toward a behavior, where the behavior is maintenance of the organizational relationship. On this basis ‘attitude toward a target’ corresponds theoretically with ‘affective responses’ and the three categories of ‘anticipated outcomes’ (utilitarian, normative and self-identity) correspond theoretically with ‘evaluative belief structures’. These five elements of the Eagly and Chaiken (1993) model may be viewed as antecedents to the development of the overall summary judgment, or attitude, or in this case, overall organizational commitment. Seen in this way, organizational commitment is an overall, summary judgment about the status of the relationship, whereas the employee’s attitude toward the target is an influencing factor, or antecedent of this summary judgment.

Why is this an important distinction and how does this inform us about the emergence of organizational commitment as attitude? It is important because we need to be clear about the relationship between variables that represent affect toward an entity and those where affect is directed toward something that is broader. In their landmark paper on affective events theory, Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) explore the connection between affect and job satisfaction. The argument is made that as a summary judgment about one’s job, job satisfaction is an attitude, reflecting both emotional (affective) experiences at work, and also resulting from more abstract beliefs about one’s job. We see organizational commitment in the same vein, as a manifestation of more than simply affect (e.g. includes also evaluative beliefs), and as a psychological mindset that is directed to something broader than simply the entity (e.g. toward relationship behaviors with the entity).

Conceiving of organizational commitment in this way, it is entirely consistent with both the Eagly and Chaiken (1993) model, and the AET framework (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), to view the employee’s attitude toward the organization (affect), and evaluation of expected outcomes from maintaining the relationship (beliefs) as antecedents to the formation of the overall summary judgment about the relationship, rather than as constituent parts of it. Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) focuses on the structure, causes and consequences of affective experiences in the workplace. This theory centers its attention on events as proximal causes of affective reactions, in contrast to other explanations that focus on features of the work environment. The notion is that things occur to individuals in the workplace, and that these events precipitate emotional responses. These emotional responses in turn, have direct impact on the individuals’ attitudes and behaviors. This brings us to our second point.
Solinger et al. (2008) critique and the three-component model. In a recent critique of the three-component model of organizational commitment (TCM), Solinger et al. (2008) suggest that the TCM fits very well with, and in fact appears to be a specific application of the Eagly and Chaiken (1993) model. A composite diagram linking the central elements of each model is presented suggesting that; affective commitment aligns with attitude toward a target, continuance commitment with utilitarian outcomes, and normative commitment with both normative outcomes and self-identity outcomes. In this context the unitary underpinnings of the TCM are questioned. The authors outline a number of empirical criticisms of the TCM, and ascribe these to the possibility of conceptual inconsistency within the TCM; the conflation of an attitude toward a target with an attitude toward a behavior.

The central argument of Solinger et al. (2008) is that while affective commitment reflects an attitude toward a target, each of continuance and normative commitment reflect different points of attitudinal origination. The authors suggest that continuance commitment corresponds with “utilitarian outcomes”, and reflects merely the perceptions of instrumental outcomes of a course of action (stay of leave), or more specifically an attitude toward a behavior. Further, the authors suggest that normative commitment derives from both normative outcomes (anticipated approval or disapproval of others following enactment of the behavior) and self-identity outcomes (affirmations of repudiations of one’s self-concept that are expected following enactment of the behavior). On this basis, Solinger et al. (2008) conclude that the three-component model is not a unitary concept, and that the grouping of attitudes aimed at targets with attitudes aimed at behaviors is both confusing and incorrect.

We disagree that this conflation exists within the three-component model, and do not equate affective commitment with attitude toward a target. We view the three-component model of organizational commitment as a unitary concept, in that each of affective, continuance and normative commitment represents an attitude toward the status (continuing or leaving) of the employee-employer relationship. In this sense, the referent of individual attitude is the relationship status (e.g. an object incorporating the target and relevant relationship behaviors), rather than the organization strictly as an entity (e.g. a target).

An inspection of the items that comprise the Meyer et al. (1993) three-factor solution supports this interpretation. In the case of each of the eighteen items, the language speaks not to the organizational entity as the target, but instead to an attitude toward the maintaining the organizational relationship. Examples of this interpretation include items from affective commitment (e.g. I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization, I do not feel a strong sense of “belonging” to this organization (R)), continuance commitment (e.g. Right now staying with the organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire, If I had not already put so much of myself into this organization I might consider working elsewhere) and normative commitment (e.g. Even if it were to my advantage I do not feel it would be right to leave my organization now, I would not leave my organization right now because I because I have a sense of obligation to the people in it).

This conceptualization of organizational commitment, which we argue reflects an attitude toward the relationship status, stands in contrast to measures of attitude towards organizations specifically as targets. In the corporate and branding literature for example, we find scales measuring evaluative or attitudinal stances toward organizations, which do not incorporate the presence of a relationship. Examples of items from corporate reputation scales include ‘One of the most progressive companies’ (Cohen, 1963), ‘Is well managed’ (Fobrum, Gardberg & Sever, 2000) and ‘Ambitious, achievement oriented, leading’ from the widely used Corporate Personality Scale of Davies, Chun, da Silva and Roper (2003). Individuals might have a positive
attitudinal stance toward an organization (e.g. affect) by virtue of awareness, but have no attitudinal position regarding a behavioral relationship with that organization (e.g. organizational commitment), due to a lack of relational involvement with it.

The Three-Component Model as an Overall Attitude

The main purpose of the elaboration above is to have provided theoretical grounding of how the three-component model may align with contemporary theory about the formation of attitude. We suggest that the Meyer and Allen (1991) conceptualization of organizational commitment is well-aligned with both Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and the Eagly and Chaiken framework (1993), as theoretical approaches that attribute the formation of attitude to each of affective and evaluative belief factors. We see theoretical similarity between the various elements of Weiss and Cropanzano’s (1996) AET and the Eagly and Chaiken (1993) model; affective responses correspond with attitude towards a target, and evaluative belief structures correspond with the three categories of expected outcomes; utilitarian, normative and self-identity. Each of these theories reinforce the idea that there are two general types of antecedents to attitude formation; affective and evaluative.

Organizational commitment profiles. Earlier in the paper we hypothesized that relational psychological contracts would relate to the development of (a) affective commitment, and (b) normative commitment. We also hypothesized that transactional contracts would lead to the development of (a) continuance commitment, and (b) normative commitment. In this section we theorize that as a summary judgment, the three components of commitment will relate to each other in different but predictable ways, depending upon the circumstances of workplace experiences and events. Here we consider the possibility that a hierarchy of relations exists among the commitment components, where one component represents a primary manifestation of attitude, and influences the effects of the other components in response to precipitous changes in the workplace.

Eagly and Chaiken (1993) contemplate the degree of consistency between each of beliefs, affect, behavior and one’s overall evaluation of an attitude object. A number of different bases of inconsistency are considered, with implications for the ongoing dynamic of attitude formulation. Evaluative-cognitive consistency relates to the consistency between one’s abstract evaluation of an attitude object, and the evaluative beliefs one holds about it. Evaluative-behavioral consistency and evaluative-affective consistency pertain to the consistency between one’s overall attitude toward an object, and one’s beliefs about past behavior, or affective reactions respectively. The relationship between each of beliefs, affect and behavior and an individual’s overall attitude is pertinent to the question of how deficits of consistency may generate changes to bring them into closer alignment.

Our interest is in understanding how beliefs, affect and behavior have their effects either individually or in combination on attitude. We expect relational employment arrangements to lead to the development of attitudinal structures that are high in an affective orientation, and transactional conditions to generate more instrumental and evaluative attitudinal elements. Affective experiences are believed to influence attitude in that feelings may generate evaluative stances without necessarily impacting cognition, or beliefs about the attitude object. As an affectual phenomenon, attitude towards a target is thought to predict behavior through selective perception and the perceptual definition of an event, and behavioral experiences with the attitude object are thought to increase clarity, accessibility and activation of attitudinal responses. We therefore expect relational workplace situations, with their propensity to generate affective
responses, to lead to the development of affective, rather than an evaluative orientation in the structure of attitude.

In contrast, in the literature exploring the prediction of attitude from beliefs, the most popular framework for explaining this relationship is the expectancy-value model. According to this model, attitude may be interpreted as a function of beliefs in terms of the summed expected values of the attributes they ascribe to the attitude object. This suggests that for individuals in workplace situations characterized by more transactional arrangements, an evaluative orientation will manifest most strongly in the structure of attitude. We suspect it likely however, that changes in the level of affect, brought about by workplace events, will trigger an evaluative sequence regarding beliefs associated with the organizational relationship.

There is theoretical and empirical support from the literature on attitude structure, for this type of interplay between the affective and evaluative elements of attitude. Edwards (1990) examined the effects of the sequence of affect and cognition in an attitude’s formation, as a determinant of subsequent responsiveness to means of persuasion. The author also explored the possibility that there is an effect of the primacy of affect during attitude acquisition, on attitudinal conviction as an outcome. In two studies, support was found for the hypothesis that affect-based attitudes demonstrate greater change in the face of affective means, versus cognitive means of persuasion. Cognitive-based attitudes however, were found to respond equally to both forms of persuasion. In addition, affective-based attitudes were expressed with greater force of conviction than those that were cognitively-based.

In the context of our discussion, these findings support the suggestion that the various components of organizational commitment will respond differentially to affective versus cognitive antecedents, and that there may be both sequence and strength effects in the ontogeny of an attitude. Affective commitment, as a manifestation of an affect-based attitude, is likely to be emergent from and responsive to affective antecedents specifically, and is likely to correlate more strongly with these antecedents than its evaluative belief counterparts will with theirs. Continuance and normative commitment, as representations of cognitive-based attitude, are expected to be impacted by antecedents that are both affective and evaluative characteristically. Following from Edwards (1990), for cognition-based attitude, attitude formation initiates with the acquisition of domain relevant information, and affective factors enter the sequence later and only after considerable cognitive appraisal.

In the case of relational psychological contracts we expect affective commitment to manifest as the primary attitudinal outcome. We suspect that if not primed, individuals in relational contracts that they perceive as being mutually upheld, will not tend to engage in evaluative psychological behavior, and that affective commitment will be the primary emergent attitudinal component. In the case of a perceived violation along relational lines however, we expect a precipitous decline in affective attachment to the organization, and a corresponding inclination toward evaluative stances with regard to both normative obligations and the presence of external alternatives. In construct terms we are suggesting that for individuals in predominantly relational contract conditions, a work event that precipitates change in affective commitment, may be expected to invoke changes in the antecedents that predict normative and continuance commitment.

In contrast, for people in transactional psychological contracts, we expect continuance commitment to manifest as the primary attitudinal outcome. We suspect that if not primed, individuals in predominantly transactional contracts that they perceive as being mutually upheld, will tend to express their commitment in utilitarian terms. In the case of a perceived violation
along transactional lines however, we expect a heightened evaluative stance, with acknowledgment of a decline in the costs associated with leaving, and increased psychological consideration of external opportunities and normative obligations.

Proposition 5. Perceptions of relational psychological contract violation lead to (a) a decline in the level of affective commitment, which precipitates; (b) the development of continuance commitment and (c) the development of an inverse relationship with normative commitment.

Proposition 6. Perceptions of transactional psychological contract violation leads to (a) a decline in “perceived costs” continuance commitment, which precipitates; (b) the development of an inverse relationship with “lack of alternatives” continuance commitment and (c) the development of an inverse relationship with normative commitment.

Relational Contract Violation, Organizational Commitment and the Mediating Role of Trust

Earlier we presented propositions that relational rather than transactional contracts generate affective responses. In this final section of the paper we examine the possibility that relational contracts and relational contract violations have their effects on commitment through trust as an affective mechanism. Organizational trust is studied as an affectual phenomenon, where it is seen to comprise both emotional and cognitive components. Several studies show trust mediates the relationship between psychological contract breach and a number of organizational outcomes (Lo & Aryee, 2003, Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Tekleab et al., 2005; Zhao et al., 2007). Recently Montes and Irving (2008) hypothesized and found support for trust as the underlying mechanism through which psychological contract breach is responsible for decreases in job satisfaction, but only in the case of relational contracts.

The authors turn to social exchange theory to explain this finding, suggesting that relational and transactional contracts have frequently been considered in terms of the notions of social and economic exchange (Blau, 1964). It has been suggested that in economic exchanges, there are controls present to ensure the discharge of obligations, whereas in social exchanges, the parties must trust that fulfillment of promises will be reciprocated. Montes and Irving (2008) also argue that due to their unique characteristics as affect-laden, open-ended, subjective and intangible, relational contracts create more uncertainty in the minds of employees regarding whether or not promises will be kept. In the case of transactional contracts, employment arrangements are marked by lower levels of uncertainty, owing to the explicit and verifiable nature of the contract inducements.

Our paper seeks to extend the findings of Montes and Irving (2008) by exploring whether relational contract violations influence organizational commitment through organizational trust as a mediating affective response. Trust has been defined as a willingness to be vulnerable to another party (Schoorman, Mayer & Davis, 2007). The literature on psychological contracts provides evidence that contract breaches undermine employees’ sense of security that the organization will meet the ongoing obligations of a contract, and that these changes in belief are likely to exert a negative impact on the employees’ attitudes and intentions regarding the organization (Robinson, 1996). We therefore expect that trust will mediate the relationship between both relational contract content and relational contract violation, and each of affective and normative commitment as criterion variables.
Proposition 7. Organizational trust will mediate the relationship between relational psychological contracts and (a) affective commitment, and (b) normative commitment.

Proposition 8. Organizational trust will mediate the relationship between perceptions of relational psychological contract violation and (a) affective commitment, and (b) normative commitment.

Discussion

In this paper we consider the factors involved in the emergence of attitude, focusing specifically on the development of organizational commitment as a manifestation of overall attitude. We use Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) to explore the theoretical relations between psychological contracts, psychological contract violations and organizational commitment. We theorize about the distinction between affective responses and evaluative belief stances, considering the different work experiences and events that are expected to engender each, and how such stances may influence the formation of overall attitude. Specific focus is on the development and effects of trust as an affectual phenomenon, and we conjecture about the role of trust as a mediator in the case of relations between relational, but not transactional contracts and organizational commitment.

In contrast to most of the research that studies the components of organizational commitment individually, we provide theoretical arguments for the consideration of affective, continuance and normative commitment in combination. We use the Eagly and Chaiken (1993) framework to consider the theoretical grounds for employing the three-component model as a measure of overall attitude. Propositions are developed considering the possibility that there is a hierarchical structure among the commitment components that reflects workplace experiences (e.g. type of employment contract) and workplace events (e.g. contract violations) as precipitous of a sequence effect in the interplay between the three commitment components.

This research seeks to stimulate further theoretical and empirical study of the formation of attitude as a multi-dimensional phenomenon in the workplace. We are suggesting that work experiences as starting points, as well as work events influence the development of attitude. In effect, the context limits the range of attitude. We might also ask if it is individual differences that explain why an individual is occupied in a relational versus transactional employment arrangement. Do people self-select into a particular type of work environment, having greater need for a relational versus instrumental basis of understanding with their employer? This may have consequences for the question of how perceived violation impacts different individuals in the same employment situations.

Perceived violations of psychological contracts have been theorized to differ in terms of their effects, depending upon whether the individual is in a relational versus transactional arrangement. Ultimately we have proposed that these differences will have effects in the dynamics of attitude acquisition. It is also likely, that employers will need to consider this distinction in the development of recovery strategies for managing the aftermath of perceived transgressions. Psychological contract violations have been identified as a common occurrence in organizational life. From a practical standpoint, firms will benefit from research that explores the effects on employee commitment, of different strategies for organizational response following violations along relational versus transactional lines.
Finally, we believe that the field will benefit from more investigation on the emergence and effects of attitude as multi-dimensional, and that the three-component model of organizational commitment provides a special opportunity for this research. It is also possible that empirical study of the affective, continuance and normative commitment elements in combination, will illuminate answers to some of the questions around findings regarding the three components when they are studied discreetly. For example, in the discussion around the construct validity of normative commitment, researchers sometimes point to its high correlation with affective commitment, but lower comparative predictive validity, as evidence of its redundancy. In contrast, our arguments around the sequence and strength effects of affective versus evaluative antecedents to commitment, indicate that these relations between affective and normative commitment are precisely what we should expect to find.

One of the more interesting revelations from the commitment stream is the recent suggestion of a context effect for normative commitment, whereby it manifests as “moral imperative” in the presence of high levels of affective commitment, but “indebted obligation” when combined with high levels of continuance commitment. Ongoing research in this area could benefit from empirical study of the sequencing arguments we present, to understand how these combinations of affective-normative and continuance-normative commitment may develop contextually (e.g. work experiences), temporally (e.g. order of acquisition) and what the probable outcomes may be (e.g. behavioral intentions, behaviors).

The literature on attitude formation has a rich history, and is applied broadly throughout varied streams of research in the organizational realm. With this paper we hope to have made a small but significant contribution to understanding the emergence of attitude when considered in the context of different types of work experiences and events, and the balance of affective and evaluative belief responses they activate. We have built upon the extant literature that distinguishes between affect and beliefs as independently influential factors in the development of attitude. Specifically we have examined how consideration of organizational commitment as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, may facilitate to and contribute to greater understanding of attitude in the workplace.
References


