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Organizational commitment and its effects on organizational citizenship behavior in a high-unemployment environment[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Organizational commitment is an important concept in management and a construct on which extensive research exists. This study considers the relationship of the three dimensions of organizational commitment (affective, normative, and continuance commitment) with employees' organizational citizenship behavior in a high-unemployment environment. By analyzing the effect of high unemployment on the displacement of the self-concept from individual toward relational and collective levels, this work predicts differences in the effect of unemployment on each of the organizational-commitment dimensions. The results show that in a high-unemployment environment the affective and normative dimensions have a similar behavior than in a full employment environment. Nevertheless, the continuance-commitment dimension increases significantly in a high-unemployment context. These results and the importance of the self-concept in organizational commitment can explain some empirical discrepancies in previous research regarding the relationships between organizational-commitment dimensions and their individual effects on employees' behavior.

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1. Introduction

Organizational commitment (OC) is an important concept in management. Researchers widely study this construct, especially in organizational psychology and organizational behavior (Jaramillo, Mulki, & Marshall, 2005; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnysky, 2002). Employees' commitment is crucial because employees' interests, goals, and needs have to dovetail with those of the organization to obtain the best of employees.

Research exists on the importance of OC in a variety of contexts, on different people and positions, and diverse labor contexts. Previous studies corroborate such importance and enable a certain consensus over how OC works. Results show that OC is decisive for variables affecting performance such as employee turnover, job satisfaction, and organizational-citizenship behavior (OCB) (Jamal, 2011; Khan et al., 2010). However, these results show certain discrepancies. Meyer et al. (2002) point out that empirical studies show sufficient differences across geographic locations to require more systematic research in different contexts. This study focuses on the change that a context of high unemployment can bring to OC and its relationship with the behavior of employees, specifically OCB.

The structure of the study is the following: Section 1 analyzes OC and its relationship with OCB, as well as the effect of a high-unemployment context on this relationship. Section 2 introduces the method. The study empirically tests the hypotheses using hierarchical regression analyses and structural equation modeling based on data from 163 middle managers working in Spain. Section 3 presents the results. Finally, the last section comments conclusions and limitations of the work and suggests future lines of research.

2. Theory

OC receives significant attention from organizational researchers (Riggle, Edmondson, & Hansen, 2009) because of the important role this concept plays in attitudinal, affective, and cognitive constructs such as job satisfaction and employees' behavior (Wang, 2015), employees' turnover and attendance, employees' health and well-being, and in performance effectiveness (Meyer et al., 2002). In addition to the numerous studies that assess the relationships between OC and its outcomes, researchers also profoundly study OC antecedents (Cohen, 1992; Kell & Motowidlo, 2012). These antecedents include personal characteristics, work experiences, job alternatives, investments, and socialization (Chih & Lin, 2009).

OC is the employee's level of involvement and identification with the organization in which he or she works (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). However, Bateman and Strasser (1984) believe this definition implies multidimensionality, including employees' loyalty to the organization, their willingness to make an effort on behalf of the organization, their

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degree of goal and value congruency with the organization, and their desire to maintain membership. Scholars (Baruch & Cohen, 2007) distinguish two schools regarding the conceptualization of OC: the side-bet or calculative approach, and the moral or attitudinal approach (Cohen & Lowenberg, 1990). According to Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982), attitudinal commitment refers to employees' conception of their relationship with the organization; whereas behavioral (side-bet) commitment refers to the process of locking that individuals suffer in a certain organization, and how those individuals deal with this problem. These two approaches are present in Allen and Meyer's (1990) model, the operationalization of OC that most research use and validate. This model considers three dimensions: affective, continuance, and normative commitment. The affective component of OC in the model refers to employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization. The continuance component refers to commitment according to the costs that employees associate with leaving the organization. Finally, the normative component refers to employees' feelings of obligation to remain in the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

On the one hand, affective and normative commitments are concepts that constitute a moral or attitudinal approach that includes involvement and identification with organizational values and goals that demonstrate the emotional relationship with the organization. This relationship explains the high correlation between these two dimensions common in empirical studies (Meyer et al., 2002), thus suggesting an overlap among dimensions. On the other hand, continuance commitment is the side-bet or calculative approach. The operationalization of Meyer and Allen (1984) of the continuance commitment shows that this construct is two-dimensional. The items of the first dimension represent the sacrifices an employee makes in staying with the organization, which McGee and Ford (1987) name "high sacrifice" continuance commitment. The other dimension of continuance commitment is "low alternatives" continuance commitment and comprises the items regarding available employment alternatives. Although several empirical studies explore the two-dimensional structure of the continuance commitment, the results are not consistent, some of them proving the unidimensionality (Ko, Price, & Mueller, 1997), and others confirming the two-dimensionality of the continuance commitment (Hackett, Bycio, & Hausdorf, 1994). However, these two dimensions generally present a high correlation (Meyer et al., 2002).

In general, the correlation between OC and performance is positive (Fu & Deshpande, 2014; Jaramillo et al., 2005), not only in terms of job performance, but also on a corporate level. Nevertheless, the study of the direct relationship between OC and performance has inherent drawbacks. For Angle and Lawson (1994), the link between OC and performance may depend on the extent to which ability rather than motivation underlies performance. For this reason, some authors prefer to use intervening variables, such as OCB (Johnson & Chang, 2006; Organ, 1997), to prove the importance of OC on employee motivation, behavior, and effort. This study uses this last approach to understand OC and its effects in a high-unemployment environment.

This study focuses on unemployment as an antecedent variable that modifies OC. The knowledge of the antecedents of OC is basic in the management of HHRR; researchers study variables such as personal characteristics, organizational tenure, job security, job satisfaction, role ambiguity, organizational culture, or company's layoffs policy (Grunberg, Anderson, & Greenberg, 2000; Wasti, 2003).

The conceptual differences between affective and normative commitment and continuance commitment make necessary considering the effect of unemployment separately on each dimension of commitment. Regarding the direct effect of unemployment on commitment, previous empirical studies show that socioeconomic conditions have a statistically significant but marginal effect on affective commitment. In countries with low levels of unemployment, affective commitment is slightly higher than in high unemployment contexts (Gelade, Dobson, & Gilbert, 2006). Besides, the effect of a high-unemployment environment should not particularly affect the relationship between affective

commitment and OCB, and the correlation between affective commitment and OCB should be similar to those contexts with low unemployment. This hypothesis builds on the surmise that affective commitment and its operationalization (Allen & Meyer, 1990) describes a state of commitment or attachment itself (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986), and then unemployment acts as an antecedent of affective commitment, not as a moderator in affective commitment's relationship with OCB. Then, the relationship between affective commitment and OCB must remain static independently of the unemployment rate.

H1. A high unemployment environment does not affect the relationship between affective commitment and OCB.

As affective and normative commitments are conceptually very close, their relationship with OCB should follow the same pattern. Then, like H1, the normative commitment relationship with OCB should not change in a high-unemployment context.

H2. A high unemployment environment does not affect the relationship between normative commitment and OCB.

The case of continuance commitment is different. Since Angle and Lawson's (1994), researchers consider that not all commitment typologies affect OCB equally (Kell & Motowidlo, 2012). Whereas affective and normative commitment show a significant and positive relationship, continuance commitment is not significant or even negative (Meyer et al., 2002). A high-unemployment environment can affect continuance commitment at two levels. Firstly, the employee's perception of how their professional career depends on the development and survival of their company change, because if the scarce options of improving their job opportunities outside the organization. A priori, a hostile environment increases both the fear of career development stagnation and the fear of job-market exclusion. In both cases, employees risk more. Hostile environment can modify the employee's behavior, if not qualitatively, at least by accentuating tendencies. Secondly, in an environment with plenty of opportunities, workers do not perceive that their personal advantage and well-being exclusively depends on the company's future. Thus, the individual level of the self-concept (Oyserman, 2001) prevails in continuance commitment, and behavior reflects motivation that derives from a concern for one's own interest (Johnson & Chang, 2006). In a high-unemployment context, the perception of one's own future is close to that of the organization. In this stringent economic context, a displacement exists toward the relational and collective level of the self-concept, favoring behaviors that benefit both the organization and the individual.

H3. In a high unemployment environment, the correlation between continuance commitment and OCB increases.

Regarding the direct effect of unemployment on OC dimensions, a high-unemployment environment can modify the average level of continuance commitment in a country. Under low or medium unemployment rate (less than 10%), in Meyer et al.'s (2002) meta-analysis, the weighted average corrected correlation between affective and continuance commitment is very low (0.16). However, in a high-unemployment context and assuming the surmise of hypothesis 3, continuance commitment can affect affective commitment because of the displacement of the self-concept from individual to collective level, augmenting the correlations between both dimensions of OC.

H4. In a high unemployment environment, the correlation between continuance and affective commitment increases.

In a similar way, unemployment rate can affect the relationship between normative and continuance commitment, being the normative commitment an attitudinal commitment too.

H5. In a high-unemployment environment, the correlation between continuance and normative commitment increases.

Table 1
Means, standard deviations and correlations.

	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	38.39	10.08								
2. Gender	1.79	0.41	0.25**							
3. Education	6.93	1.14	-0.10	0.074						
4. Low Alt CC	2.35	1.04	0.03	-0.10	-0.07	(.73)				
5. High Sac CC	3.14	1.05	0.10	-0.07	-0.28**	0.34**	(0.84)			
6. NC	2.77	1.10	0.05	0.06	-0.23**	0.02	0.48**	(0.88)		
7. AC	3.84	0.94	0.16*	0.04	-0.17*	0.01	0.33**	0.55**	(0.89)	
8. OCB	4.45	0.63	-0.11	-0.05	-0.18*	0.08	0.24**	0.26**	0.43**	(0.87)

Reliability coefficients for the scales are in parenthesis. CC, NC, AC, and OCB are between 1 and 5. Gender (female = 1; male = 2).

n = 163.

CC = Continuance Commitment; NC = Normative Commitment; AC = Affective Commitment.

* p < 0.05.

** p < 0.01 (two-tailed).

3. Method

3.1. Sample and data

Middle managers who worked in companies in Spain form the population of this study. When the survey took place (4th quarter 2010 and 1st quarter 2011) Spain was suffering an economic recession. In the first quarter of 2011, the number of unemployed workers stood at 4,978,300 with an unemployment rate of 21.52% (Spanish Statistics Institute's Economically Active Population Survey). Spain has had the highest unemployment rate in the OECD since 2009. Youth unemployment in Spain stands at 43.61%, with little gender differences. In terms of education, 39.2% of the Spanish population between 25 and 34 years of age holds a university degree. The unemployment rate for graduates in this age group is around 30%. In the 30–34 age group, unemployment among students who left school at 16 is double than the unemployment rate of those who completed higher education.

An online survey using an initial non-probability process of convenience sampling provided the data. The final number of valid questionnaires from middle managers amounted to 163, 93% of which hold a degree, 78% are male, 53% were under 39 years of age and 30% were between 40 and 49 years, and 93% of the sample has university education.

3.2. Measurements

The study measures all the variables perceptually on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

Organizational commitment: using Allen and Meyer's (1990) scale, the study measures OC with 5 items per dimension (affective, continuance, and normative commitment), instead of the 8 that the authors propose, to reduce the length of the questionnaire. Of the 5 items on the continuance commitment scale, two items belong to the "low alternative" aspect and three items to "high sacrifice" (McGee & Ford, 1987). Modifying the normative items was necessary to highlight feelings of loyalty toward the respondent's company instead of loyalty as a value in itself (Baruch & Cohen, 2007).

Organizational citizenship behavior: Academic literature reports several ways of measuring OCB (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). This study focuses on the altruistic aspect of OCB (Lievens & Ansell, 2004) because altruism is the most task-centered aspect and the one that holds the highest relationship with performance.

Control variables: For each manager, control variables were age (in years), gender (female = 1; male = 2) and education (1 = Pre-primary education; 2 = Primary education; 3 = Lower secondary; 4 = Secondary education; 5 = Post-secondary non-tertiary education; 6 = First stage of tertiary education; 7 = Second stage of tertiary education; 8 = PhD. or Master's degree).

4. Analysis

All the scales fit the data satisfactorily except for continuance commitment. An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) determines the possible grouping of the items of the continuance commitment in different factors. The EFA yields two factors. The two factors represent the "low alternative" (component 1) and "high sacrifice" items (component 2). Given the impossibility of using the continuance-commitment scale as a whole, the rest of the analysis uses the "low alternative continuance commitment" scale (2 items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.73) and the "high sacrifice continuance commitment" scale (3 items; Cronbach's alpha = 0.84), separately.

Table 1 presents the basic statistics and correlation coefficients between the variables. The study calculates all the variables as the mean of their items. Cronbach's alpha of the scales is in brackets.

A multiple regression analysis of OCB for all the OC dimensions tests the effect of the different types of OC on OCB (Table 2). The negative effect of education (control variable) on OCB derives from the negative correlation between education and all the types of OC (Table 1), because the significant effect of education on OCB disappears in models 2, 3, and 4. The second model (model 2) tests the "low alternative" and "high sacrifice" continuance commitment. The results show that "low alternative" Continuance Commitment had no significant effect on OCB (model 2, Table 2), whereas "high sacrifice" Continuance Commitment was significant at p = 0.016.

These results show a clear difference in the effects of continuance commitment with respect previous works with an unemployment rate below 10% (Johnson & Chang, 2006). To quantify the differences and similitudes of the results with previous works and to test hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, the study compares the correlation of the different dimensions of OC with OCB in the sample (high-unemployment environment) and in

Table 2
Stepwise regression with OCB as dependent variable.

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Age	-0.12	-0.16	-0.141	-0.18
Gender	-0.02	-0.00	-0.04	-0.04
Education	-0.18*	-0.13	-0.13	-0.11
CC: Low Alt		-0.014		
CC: High Sac		0.24*		
NC			0.25**	
AC				0.44***
F	2.08	2.64*	3.70**	9.55**
Adjusted R ²	0.02	0.06	0.08	0.21
Change in R ²		0.31	8.18	30.49

n = 163; CC = Continuance Commitment; NC = Normative Commitment; AC = Affective Commitment.

* p < 0.05.

** p < 0.01.

*** p < 0.001.

Table 3
Correlation between OC dimensions and OCB with and without high unemployment.

Correlation	High unemployment sample	Control sample ^a	Fisher Z	p
	r (n)	r (n)		
CCS: Low Alt–OCB	0.08 (163)	−0.01 (4367)	1.12*	0.13
CCS: High Sac–OCB	0.24 (163)	−0.01 (4367)	0.32**	0.00
NC–OCB	0.26 (163)	0.24 (3840)	0.26	0.40
AC–OCB	0.43 (163)	0.32 (6277)	1.60	.055

n = 163; r = correlation.

CC = Continuance Commitment; NC = Normative Commitment; AC = Affective Commitment.

* p < 0.05.

** p < 0.01.

^a Data from Meyer et al. (2002; Table 5).

a control sample appearing in Meyer et al.'s (2002) study (Table 4). The results (Table 3) show that the correlation between continuance commitment and OCB increases considerably in a high-unemployment context (H3), but only for the “high sacrifice” continuance commitment dimension.

No significant difference exists in the correlation between normative commitment and OCB in this study's sample (high unemployment) and the control sample, confirming hypothesis 2. The difference between samples is only significant at $p < 0.1$; this result partially confirms hypothesis 1.

Excepting the correlation between the “low alternative” continuance commitment and normative commitment, high unemployment environment significantly affects all the relationships between dimensions of OC ($p < 0.001$) (Table 4), confirming hypotheses 4 and 5.

5. Discussion

The results show a clear effect of a high-unemployment environment on OC, specifically on the continuance dimension. A high unemployment environment can explain the significance in the positive correlation between OCB and the “high sacrifice” component of continuance commitment, correlation that is non-significant or negative in most previous works (Meyer et al., 2002). Nevertheless, this result does not rule out the fact that similar significant correlations appear in low-unemployment contexts (Huang & You, 2011). This study considers that the self-regulatory mechanisms (Lord & Brown, 2004) that appear in certain contexts, internal and external to the firm (e.g. unemployment, cultural factors, etc.), can explain this phenomenon.

The hypotheses provide an explanation to the discrepancies found in the literature about the relationship between OC and the employee's behavior, focusing on the importance of the self-concept and the factors that can produce a displacement from the individual to the collective level. This result proves that continuance commitment is not at the same level than affective or normative commitment; continuance commitment is an antecedent factor that can have a strong positive

effect on affective and normative commitment if a clear attach exists between the company's future and the employees.

The results contribute to a better understanding of the relations among OC dimensions. In terms of managerial implications, the preponderance of affective commitment on OCB over all the other OC dimensions does not change in a high-unemployment environment. Nevertheless, continuance commitment, a theoretical constituent component of organizational commitment, moves to the organizational level under some circumstances, improves the affective commitment, and increases affective commitment's positive relationship with OCB. Future research should consider other variables, such as cultural factors or the human resource management (Conway & Monks, 2009) that can affect continuance commitment and how managers can act over these variables.

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Table 4
Correlation between OC dimensions with and without high unemployment.

Correlation	High unemployment Sample	Control Sample ^a	Fisher Z	p
	r (n)	r (n)		
CCS: Low Alt–NC	0.02(163)	−0.02 (2801)	0.49*	0.31**
CCS: High Sac–NC	0.48(163)	0.16 (2801)	4.45***	0.00
CCS: Low Alt–AC	0.01(163)	−0.24(3698)	3.16***	0.00
CCS: High Sac–AC	0.33 (163)	0.06 (3698)	3.50***	0.00
AC–NC	0.55 (163)	0.54 (9472)	0.18	0.43

n = 163; r = correlation.

CC = Continuance Commitment; NC = Normative Commitment; AC = Affective Commitment.

* p < 0.05.

** p < 0.01.

*** p < 0.001.

^a Data from Meyer et al. (2002) (Table 5).

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