Location, Location, Location: Contextualizing Workplace Commitment

Abstract

The purpose of the present commentary is to discuss the nature and correlates of workplace commitment across cultures. We asked six organizational behavior scholars, who are intimately familiar with Brazil, China, Denmark, Germany or Israel as their country of origin or extended residence, to "contextualize" workplace commitment. They did so by explicating institutional and cultural characteristics of their context on the emergence, meaning and evolution of commitment by reference to their own research and extant local research. Their responses supported the utility of three-component model of commitment but also revealed the differential salience of various commitment constructs (e.g., components and foci of commitment) as well as possible contextual moderators on the development and outcomes of commitment. The commentators also described changes including the growing prevalence of multicultural workforces within national borders, changes in employment relationships and cultural values in their national contexts and considered future research directions in culture and commitment research.

**Commentary**

**Location, location, location: Contextualizing workplace commitment**

Since the 1960s, commitment has become a popular, if not a staple variable for organizational behavior (OB) scholars. Originating in the United States (US; Becker, 1960; Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979) and further developed by Canadian as well as American scholars (e.g., Becker, 1992; Klein, Molloy, & Brinsfield, 2012; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001), models of workplace commitment have been widely adopted elsewhere (Fischer & Mansell, 2009; Meyer, Stanley, Jackson, McInnis, Maltin, & Sheppard, 2012). Indeed, this international spread of theory originating in North America (typically the US) remains the most common trajectory organizational sciences (Peterson, 2001; Üsdiken & Wasti, 2009). When used outside their country of origin, such constructs and theories are often implicitly or explicitly tested against a backdrop of varying degrees of indigenous knowledge. In addition to confirming generalizable features of the original constructs and theories, such global applications can uncover limitations so that a second generation of local research can develop contextually sensitive alternatives or adaptations (Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999). This process has begun to occur for workplace commitment (e.g., Ling, Zhang, & Fang, 2000; Wasti, 2003).

Our commentary, and indeed our title, echoes for the workplace commitment literature an earlier editorial of this journal by Rousseau and Fried (2001) that exhorted scholars to explicitly incorporate context into their research questions, methodology and interpretation. The value of such a commentary became apparent during the 2014 Commitment Conference that brought together scholars from 14 countries and generated a stimulating discussion on the construct, antecedents and consequences of workplace commitment around the globe. Incorporating context in cross-cultural organizational research involves explaining the role of economic, cultural and institutional differences or specifics for the emergence, meaning and

evolution of phenomena, which in turn affect the measurement of concepts, mean levels of constructs, and relationships among constructs (Gelfand, Leslie, & Fehr, 2008). Country differences in organizational commitment associated with established culture dimensions are well documented in meta-analyses (Fischer & Mansell, 2009; Meyer et al., 2012).

Here, we have asked six OB scholars, who are intimately familiar with Brazil, China, Denmark, Germany or Israel, to contextualize workplace commitment based on their own work and/or a selective review of local research. Through this endeavor, we hoped to progress beyond what has been achieved by meta-analyses to accomplish three goals: Firstly, we sought to discuss the cross-cultural construct validity of workplace commitment and identify specific contextual features that may influence the meaning of commitment constructs. Constructs may be either conceptualized or operationalized differently across cultures (Leung & van de Vijver, 2008). The commentators initially evaluated the suitability and sufficiency of using the three-component model (TCM) by Meyer and Allen (1991) outside of North America. The TCM was selected as the reference model due to its familiarity to the commentators and most JOB readers. Secondly, by asking the commentators to appraise how the antecedents and consequences of commitment to various organizational foci would be best conceptualized in their own context, we explored the contextual salience of various commitment constructs. Last, we identified several future directions for cross-cultural commitment research based on the commentators' observations.

All commentators were participants in the 2014 Commitment Conference. Although this sampling strategy is no doubt limiting, our commentators bring together a wide range of expertise in indigenous and/or cross-cultural commitment research from a broad array of countries. Based in Germany, Heiko Breitsohl's earlier work focused on commitment of students towards their university and dual commitments of temporary workers; he is currently exploring residual affective commitment as a basis for the recruitment of former interns and

employees. Aaron Cohen's primary research interest is the relationships among multiple foci of commitment and their implications in the workplace. His quantitative studies are based on surveying different ethnic groups in Israel, mainly Israeli Arabs and Jews. Frances Jørgensen is a qualitative researcher in human resource management and development. As an American who has lived in Denmark since 1998 and who speaks fluent Danish, Jørgensen has extensively used action research methods in Danish public and private organizations. Ana Carolina de Aguiar Rodrigues' research interests include organizational commitment and entrenchment in the Brazilian context. In her survey and interview-based studies, she explores these constructs across samples ranging from rural-urban, high-low education, and public-private sector. Weng does quantitative research in different regions of China about the implications of career growth for organizational and occupational commitment. Xiaohong Xu is originally from China and now resides in the US. She has conducted both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies using person-centered and variable-centered approaches and has examined antecedents and outcomes of organizational commitment with samples of US army officers and faculty. She has also conducted meta-analysis studies using samples from different occupations and countries.

Readers may notice some imbalance in the coverage each country received. This does not reflect the importance of any particular context, but usually occurs because we had two contributors from China, and only one from the other countries. Also, more space was allocated to reporting research available in non-English outlets.

## TCM across Contexts

Of the various frameworks for conceptualizing commitment, the TCM by Meyer and Allen (1991) has become the dominant paradigm (for a critical review, see Klein et al., 2012). In this model, commitment is a force that binds an individual to a social or non-social target and or to a course of action relevant to that target (Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004).

This binding force can be experienced in different ways. It can be an affective attachment with the target (AC), an awareness of the costs associated with discontinuing involvement with the target (CC) and a felt obligation towards the target (NC). The initial question to the commentators asked their own experience of using the current TCM scales, and their general appraisal of the scales' suitability in their local language/context.

Breitsohl reports that the vast majority of German studies employ the validated translation by Schmidt, Hollmann, and Sodenkamp (1998) or the adaptation by Felfe, Six, Schmook and Knorz (2002). Schmidt et al. (1998), with the exception of one item, use a direct translation of Meyer and Allen's (1991) scale. Studies using this translation typically report internal consistencies around .80 (e.g., Fischer & Smith, 2006). In contrast, Felfe et al. (2002) combine some items from Meyer and Allen (1991), Meyer, Allen and Smith (1993) and newly created ones. The newly created AC items tap into shared values and pride whereas those for NC incorporate personal feelings of obligation toward the organization as well as descriptive norms for organizational loyalty. Breitsohl notes that there is no explicit justification for item selection, elimination or creation that assures construct validity but he suggests that the operationalization of NC as generalized or descriptive norms of organizational loyalty is actually appropriate for the German context. This, he argues, is because employee welfare is governed by the pro-labor legislation and the strong institution of codetermination rather than the organization's discretionary efforts, and consequently German employees tend not to feel a strong obligation towards their organization but place great value on the general notion of loyalty. Breitsohl also reports that Felfe et al.'s (2002) subscales show internal consistencies around .85 (e.g., Weber, Unterrainer, & Schmid, 2009).

In Brazil, Rodrigues reports that the first Portuguese translation and test of Meyer and Allen's (1991) scales found internal consistencies between .62 and .70 (Medeiros & Enders, 1998). Subsequent research sought to improve internal reliability by adding items from other

mainstream commitment scales or eliminating items that contained words whose connotations were different in Portuguese than in English (e.g., loyalty, to owe). There were also attempts to develop scales from scratch. For instance, Siqueira (2001) developed a three-component measure where AC and NC items loaded onto two distinct factors, but the CC scale split into four sub-dimensions (social losses, professional losses, losses of investments and losses of organizational rewards). Rodrigues adds that other scholars contested the content validity of the AC scale, which consisted of a list of emotions related to the organization. In an attempt to consolidate these efforts, Bastos, Pinho, Aguiar, and Menezes (2011) compiled and tested 62 items from national and international scales (Carson & Carson, 2002; Meyer et al., 1993; Mowday et al., 1979; Powell & Meyer, 2004; Rego, 2003; Siqueira, 2001) and settled on a final subset of 23. In this final subset, nine items remained from Meyer et al. (1993). Bastos et al. (2011) still found a high correlation (r=.62) between NC (α=.76) and AC (α=.88), but not high enough to indicate redundancy. CC demonstrated higher internal consistency than in other Brazilian versions (α=.80) and lower correlations with NC (r=.50) and AC (r=.30).

Using the Meyer et al. (1993) scales, Cohen observed that the three-factor solution shows a better fit than does a one-factor solution among Jewish Israeli teachers (Cohen & Liu, 2011). He also found evidence for discriminant validity as the 10 values of Schwartz (1992) were related differentially to the three dimensions. More generally, he noted that the three-factor structure was confirmed more consistently with the Jewish Israeli population than with Arab Israelis. For the Arab Israeli teacher sample, while AC and NC showed satisfactory construct validity, CC demonstrated low reliabilities (e.g., Cohen, 2010). Cohen explains that Arab teachers are seldom able to find work in Israeli schools and are unlikely to find work in other Arab cities because those would prefer their own citizens. He thus argues that due to the very high costs of leaving employment for Israeli Arab teachers, the items of the CC scale might be rated with low variance, thereby lowering the internal consistency of this subscale.

Consistent with other studies from China (e.g., Chen & Francesco, 2003), Weng confirmed the three-factor structure of the Meyer et al. (1993) scales (e.g., Weng, McElroy, Morrow, & Liu, 2010). While both Weng and Xu observe that most items translate readily into Chinese and reflect the Chinese mindset, they also mention studies that have used indigenous commitment scales (e.g., Ling et al., 2000; Song & Cai, 2005; Wang, 2004). For example, using an inductive approach, Ling et al. (2000) verified a five-factor commitment model, including three dimensions (i.e., economic commitment, ideal commitment, opportunity/choice commitment) beyond Meyer et al.'s (1993) AC and NC. Opportunity/Choice commitment is similar to the lack of alternatives subscale of CC, whereas economic commitment is akin to the high perceived sacrifice subscale. Ideal commitment, unlike the high perceived sacrifice subscale that involves a retrospective process that binds the individual, is operationalized as what the employee is standing to gain in the future (e.g., training and development, promotion opportunities; Ling et al., 2000; Liu & Wang, 2001). Subsequent research with Chinese teachers has identified ideal commitment as a separate factor that predicts performance-related outcomes (e.g., Song & Cai, 2005; Xu & Lu, 2008). Xu argues that Chinese employees put less weight on sacrifices associated with leaving or the lack of employment alternatives when deciding to remain in the organization. Instead, consistent with a relatively long societal time orientation (Minkov & Hofstede, 2012), they care much more about future opportunities if they continue to stay within the organization (see also Weng et al., 2010; Weng & McElroy, 2012). As detailed in the following discussion of *guanxi*, the tension between commitment to an organization and commitment to a supervisor creates other unique qualities of commitment and commitment measures in China.

Interestingly, Jørgensen's account of the Danish context resonates with Xu's observation regarding the relevance of a subscale of commitment, which captures what employees stand to gain rather than to lose. Her appraisal suggests that the current AC scale

with its strong affective emphasis (e.g., feeling like a member of family) does not quite fit the Danish mindset. The CC lack of alternatives subscale does not seem that relevant to the social security the Danish welfare state offers (see below for an elaboration) and perhaps more importantly this subscale has been argued not to reflect a commitment mindset (Powell & Meyer, 2004). The high perceived sacrifice subscale similarly does not appear to capture the instrumental attachment that Jørgensen observes. Indeed, what seems missing is something along the lines of the calculative attachment conceptualization by Penley and Gould (1988), or more recently by Maertz and Griffeth (2004).

## Antecedents and Outcomes of the TCM

Commitment researchers have investigated numerous antecedents (e.g., organizational justice, job satisfaction, and perceived organizational support (POS)) and outcomes (e.g., in-role and extra-role performance, turnover intentions) over the years (e.g., Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). The commentators report that the general pattern of correlations observed in the mainstream literature hold in other samples (e.g., Bastos, Maia, Rodrigues, Macambira, & Borges-Andrade, 2014; Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007). This observation is particularly valid for AC as most studies typically only use this subscale.

Nonetheless, the strength of the relationships between the three commitment components and these antecedents or outcomes as well as the endorsement of different components might be contextually dependent. For instance, in Cohen's samples of Israeli Jewish teachers, AC was strongly and positively related to organizational citizenship behaviors and/or in-role performance whereas neither NC nor CC predicted any aspect of performance (Cohen & Keren, 2008; Cohen & Liu, 2011). Cohen argues that the Israeli Jews constitute a Westernized society that prioritizes exchange relationships. In contrast, NC is more meaningful and important in the Israeli Arab society, which he describes as more traditional than secular Israeli Jews, and consistently finds their commitment to be higher and to have a stronger

effect on outcomes (e.g., Cohen, 1999, 2007). This observation is corroborated in Chinese state-owned organizations, where the older, presumably more traditional employees report significantly higher levels of AC, CC and NC than do the younger ones (Liu, 2010).

While accepting the role of traditional values, Cohen (1999) further proposes that the marginalized and deprived status of the Arabs operates only to increase the importance of organizational commitment as a mechanism that will assist them in coping with what might be perceived as a hostile environment. Rodrigues also reports a study that found Brazilian agriculture workers, who work in remarkably unfavorable conditions (e.g., low income, job insecurity, high temperatures, inappropriate clothing and tools) to endorse high levels of commitment, especially AC (Costa & Bastos, 2009). As the study involved qualitative inquiries, the research team was able to probe the rationale for the workers' responses. They realized that the workers' positive responses were influenced by their strong fear of losing their jobs. Their endorsement of items such as "This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me" seemed to reflect their dependency, their meekness stemming from their vulnerability rather than volition or dedication.

The Chinese commentators emphasize similar intra-national differences in commitment. Specifically, Weng notes that while AC plays the most significant role in predicting turnover intentions in regions with high employment, CC and NC are stronger predictors in disadvantaged regions (Weng & Xi, 2013). Xu draws attention to migrant workers, who are rural people leaving their farmland to work and live in big cities. Restricted by the *hukou*, a registration system that entrenches social distinctions between rural and urban citizens in China, migrant workers do not have the same rights and opportunities to work outside their home area as do other workers. Therefore, the majority of migrants are employed in the informal sectors (i.e., grey economy) or informal jobs (e.g., temporary positions). Xu proposes that these adverse working conditions render CC the primary mindset for migrant

workers in China. Although they are a substantial portion of the work force (Bechtel, 2004), Xu notes that the situation of migrant workers is not well captured by most research on China, which has narrowly focused on how collectivist values foster NC for Chinese employees (see Chan & Qiu, 2011; Miao, Newman, & Lamb, 2012 and Sun, 2010 for exceptions).

The accounts by Breitsohl and Jørgensen question the generalizability of commitment antecedents and consequences observed in a liberal market economy to a coordinated market economy or welfare regime (Soskice, 1999). In welfare states like Germany and Denmark, antecedents that lead to POS such as job security, training, and procedural justice (e.g., voice; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) are likely to have little variance among organizations because they are regulated by the law or labor arrangements. Jørgensen notes that many organizational practices like involvement in decision making, training and development are legally required by firms and that Danish employees consider themselves entitled to organizational and institutional support given their high taxes and their decision to work despite being able to afford not to do so. As such, Danish employees do not see why they should feel affectively committed to a particular organization. Indeed, Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli and Lynch (1997) reason that favorable organizational experiences contribute more to POS if employees believe them to be at the discretion of the organization.

Instead, Jorgensen notes that Danish employees' bonds tend to be more calculative. When surveyed for reasons to continue membership to an organization, Danes frequently refer to exciting work, good reputation, work that allows sufficient leisure time and/or growth opportunities (e.g., Holt, 2010; Jørgensen & Becker, 2015). A survey by the Confederation of Danish Industries found that young, highly educated Danes strongly prioritized development opportunities when seeking employment ("Unge højtuddannede er", 2012). Jørgensen suggests that the importance of varied development opportunities encourages a certain level

of job hopping, at least among professionals. In fact, she notes that Denmark has the greatest job mobility in the European Union (Andersen, Haahr, Hansen, & Holm-Pedersen, 2008).

Political-economic systems also have implications for the emergence of CC to organizations. Welfare states typically provide affordable health insurance, many paid leave days, strong barriers to lay-offs and individual dismissals and good unemployment benefits (e.g., Hult & Svallfors, 2002). Both Breitsohl and Jørgensen note that a lack of comparable alternatives (Powell & Meyer, 2004) is not as salient an antecedent to CC in their contexts as is typically reported. For instance, the Danish employment system is based on a 'flexicurity model' that combines *flexi*bility resulting from high levels of job mobility and se*curity* from extensive unemployment benefits (Hendeliowitz, 2008). Although policies for downsizing and firing employees are far less stringent in Denmark than in many other European countries, employees who are dismissed can rely on a strong social security system that generally includes new educational or training opportunities.

The mainstream literature is not limited to perceptions of comparable employment alternatives in its explanations for CC. Building on Becker (1960), Powell and Meyer (2004) operationalized impersonal bureaucratic arrangements, expectations of others, individual adjustments to social position, self-presentation concerns, satisfying work conditions and non-work concerns as other antecedents of CC. They also demonstrated that the expectation of others and satisfying work conditions also increased NC. Breitsohl argues that satisfying work conditions and expectations of others as well as impersonal bureaucratic arrangements would be salient NC and CC antecedents in the German context. This is because German organizations favor long tenures and individual privileges such as pay raises, autonomy, and employment security based on seniority (e.g., Papacostas, 2009). He argues that practices rewarding seniority are valued in the German culture characterized by high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001) and tightness (Gelfand et al., 2011) compared to the US.

**Work-related Foci of Commitment across Contexts**

The third question posed to the commentators, the salience of various commitment foci across contexts, revealed several foci of commitment besides organizations. In this section, we summarize the responses regarding workplace commitments; non-work commitments and their implications are discussed in a later section.

**Commitment to Organization, Union and Career**

Breitsohl's contention about the implications of the relatively high uncertainty avoidance in Germany applies to commitment foci by supporting the importance of organizational commitment over commitment to other people. As measured by House Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004), a high degree of uncertainty avoidance manifests in the strong tendency to create rules and regulations to make life more predictable. Breitsohl observes that Germans give paramount importance on having proper rules, and making sure they are followed. Given the society also values social equality, he adds that Germany's government fosters institutions for social welfare, where other cultures rely on informal ways of expressing social equality values. Thus, Breitsohl notes the German system of workers' rights, unionization and co-determination as well as its strong legal system enables an environment in which employees rely on their employer's conformity to institutional rules rather than on personal networks for their career development and fair treatment. Therefore, he proposes that the employing organization is a more salient commitment focus than the supervisor or the team. This organizational focus is arguably further perpetuated by long tenures, where people stay with the same organization, but not necessarily with the same team or supervisor.

The early extension of commitment research from employers to unions (Gordon, Philpot, Burt, Thompson, & Spiller, 1980) is also reflected in comments about union commitment. Breitsohl observes that the high degree of unionization makes union

commitment important in the German context (International Labour Organization, 2015).

Jørgensen indicates that labor unions play an important role in the Danish context as well. She

further argues that powerful unions actually separate employees from the employers, making

the organization a less salient focus of commitment (see Hult and Svallfors, 2002 for a similar

argument for Sweden). Based on research in Denmark, she proposes career or project

commitment to be especially meaningful, particularly for knowledge workers (Jørgensen &

Becker, 2015; Schoemmel, Jønsson, & Jeppesen, 2015). Similar observations are echoed by

Cohen for Israeli nurses and managers (Cohen, 1998; 1999; Cohen & Feund, 2005).

Rodrigues recognizes Bastos (1994) for conducting the pioneering study of

commitment to organizations, careers and unions in Brazil. She observes that subsequent

academic research in union commitment has declined with a corresponding increase in

organizational and career commitment research. She attributes both trends to Brazil's

economic growth. Rodrigues adds that in recent years, the unions have restructured

themselves, and that current tensions in the Brazilian economy may resuscitate the research

on union commitment. In fact, Rodrigues reports that Bastos (2014) is developing a measure

of political ideology that may help understand commitment to the organization versus the

union. Bastos proposes that political ideology is a set of beliefs that guide organizational

actors, but the research on commitment has disregarded the political tensions between work

and capital. He poses questions for the Brazilian context such as how the worker deals with

work-capital conflict, whether the worker values collective action or awaits organizational

actions, whether the worker is more likely to commit if he/she does not perceive work-capital

conflict. How changes in the economic context influences political ideologies and, hence,

commitment in Brazil may be reflective of a global trend in changes of psychological

contracts away from stable employer-employee relationships (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000).

**Commitment to Supervisor and Team: Chinese *Guanxi***

While Breitsohl observed that Germans deal with uncertainty by fostering a strong legal system, which in turn renders institutions such as the organization and the union as salient commitment foci, Xu provides an interesting contrast. She notes that for the Chinese, the sense that life is inherently ambiguous makes it futile to create detailed regulations. Rather, ambiguity promotes having organizations with few rules, and favors placing a stronger reliance on organizational leaders who make case-specific decisions. Xu explains that the Chinese culture supports the belief that value and truth are not absolute but rather depend on the context, situation and time (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Hence, managers need to override or interpret organizational rules. Such actions might be perceived as corrupt in Western cultures (e.g., Germany), but are reasonable and necessary in the eyes of Chinese employees. Thus, Xu and Weng concur that for Chinese employees, the organization is a less meaningful entity compared to the people, such as the business owners or CEOs, the managers, (particularly) the immediate supervisors as well as coworkers. This is especially true for employees in state-owned and private enterprises than those in Western multinational companies (MNCs), which have more bureaucratic human resource practices (Björkman, 2002).

Differing from the equality-based leader-member-exchange (LMX) type of relationship, traditional Chinese ethics mandate that the leaders should trust their followers, and the followers should be loyal to their leaders. This relationship is related to *guanxi*, which refers to close relationships between individuals based on mutual interests and benefits (Hwang, 1987; Yang, 1994), including relationships across hierarchical or status levels. Chinese employees who are committed to their leaders are willing to comply with the leader's decisions, be conscientious and enthusiastic about assigned work and duties, take extra-role responsibilities, and even sacrifice their own benefits for their leaders and work group (Chen, Tsui & Farh, 2002; Wang, 2004). Because committed followers are very important for

Chinese leaders to ensure the fulfillment of organizational as well as personal goals, they reciprocate with privileged access to organizational resources, delegation of important duties, reward and promotion opportunities. These dynamics have parallels to the side-bets outlined in Powell and Meyer (2004), namely expectations of others, self-presentation, indeed, face concerns and (as a result of contextual mutation) personal non-bureaucratic arrangements.

Not surprisingly, both Xu and Weng contend that in the Chinese context, NC to people within the *guanxi* network is more salient than the AC or CC mindsets. Interestingly, Xu notes that in traditional Chinese contexts, employees are expected to follow and obey their leader in the first place, irrespective of the leader's style, competency, or integrity (Cheng, Jiang, Cheng, Riley, & Jen, in press). Over time, if the above-mentioned reciprocity occurs repeatedly, *guanxi* develops and the employee may grow an affective attachment to the supervisor. However, if the supervisor does not return the employee's loyalty, the employee is still supposed to be committed (it would seem in an NC-CC mindset) until he/she changes the job and ends this relationship.

The distinctive character of *guanxi* suggests alternatives to the implications that distributive and procedural justice have for commitment in other contexts. As discussed above, Chinese leaders distribute rewards and valuable resources based on their particularistic relationships with subordinates rather than job performance. Although such reward practices compromise distributive and procedural justice, both Xu and Weng observe that Chinese employees accept using personal relationships to obtain special treatment. Xu argues that Chinese employees' sense of justice reflects whether employees' commitment to leaders is commensurate with the resources that the leaders reciprocate. Indeed, interpersonal and informational justice influence employees' commitment more than do distributive and procedural justice (Liu, Long, & Li, 2003; Wang, 2010).

Regarding the outcomes of *guanxi* commitment in China, Weng reports several studies that show commitment to supervisors to have a stronger effect on employees' attitudes and outcomes than has commitment to the organization (e.g., Chen et al., 2002; Cheng, Jiang, & Riley, 2003). Xu contends that when the interests of supervisors are well aligned with those of the organization, the organization functions well. Otherwise, subordinates have to "take sides" (Cheng, 1996). Given the centrality of *guanxi*, employees are more likely to be committed to their supervisors rather than to the organization (Cheng et al., 2003). Interestingly, Xu notes that the NC item "I would not leave my organization right now because I have *a sense of obligation to the people* in it" (italics added) in the scale (Meyer et al., 1993) is particularly problematic for Chinese employees, as this item mixes two very different foci.

**Non-work Commitments and Spillovers across Personal-Professional Boundaries**

As mentioned previously, Becker's (1960) "side-bet" view of commitment involved non-work concerns, as when an employee establishes roots in a community that would be disrupted by leaving the organization for a job in another geographic location. However, research on workplace commitment and turnover rarely looks beyond proximal work environments to consider the interrelationships between work and non-work commitments (Bielby, 1992; Hom & Xiao, 2011). Although the commentators were not explicitly asked about non-work foci, their responses suggested that social embeddedness is important to workplace commitment. For instance, Breitsohl observes that Germans are generally committed to and prefer to stay in their home region (e.g., Harhoff, 1999). He adds that this preference is fruitfully accommodated by the prevalence of successful medium-sized family firms which provide many jobs in the respective region over generations. Consequently, employees become committed not only to the organization, but also to the owner family, who is often highly visible and well-known to the employees (Institut für Mittelstandsforschung Bonn, 2008). Thus, regional commitment increases the attractiveness of local organizations

(e.g., likelihood of working with people from the same region, observing the same traditions, holidays, speaking the same dialect). Jørgensen notes that family firms are employers of choice with the Danes, too (Jørgensen & Sluhan, 2013), for essentially the same reasons proposed by Breitsohl.

It is interesting to note how the preference for family firms is completely reversed in other countries. In Turkey, for instance, family-owned, owner-managed organizations are typically characterized by informal authority structures based on persons not position leading to particularistic human resource practices (Koçak, Wasti, Yosun, Bozer, & Dural, 2014). Moreover, the country is prone to political and economic crises that force the small- to medium-sized family firms to lay off employees or lower wages (Hoskisson, Johnson, Tihanyi, & White, 2005). Thus, without the backup of a strong legal/political/economic system and safeguards for the working population, family firms are often perceived as a risky, and at the best, a dead-end employment prospect. This perception steers away the more educated workforce, which in all likelihood perpetuates the above-mentioned inefficiencies and vulnerabilities.

Similar to Breitsohl, Jørgensen notes the strong attachment Danes cherish to their home area and relationships that makes relocation highly undesirable. Jørgensen observes that making sacrifices for the sake of work, or being too involved in work is disapproved as the Danish culture highly values work-life balance (Holt, 2010). Indeed, she mentions that it is frowned upon to work more than the mandated 37 hours/week. Prioritizing work-life balance limits as how much an employee will go the extra mile no matter how committed he/she might be. The implications of work-life balance are amplified by the fact that Denmark is a horizontal individualist country where standing out with superior performance is not appreciated (Nelson & Shavitt, 2002). Jørgensen also emphasizes that the majority of the Danes are highly active participants in non-work associations ("Denmark", 2015).

Unlike the Danes, Xu argues that there is no clear boundary between professional versus personal life among individuals within the same *guanxi* network in China. The cultural basis for such ties between professional and personal life is reinforced by the *hukou* and state employment systems that constrain geographic mobility. Weng notes that spending long durations in the same residence and workplace (notably, he points out that state workers spend entire careers in one firm and inhabit company housing assigned by work unit), many Chinese employees form strong ties between one another and between families (e.g., Liu, 2003). Hom and Xiao (2011) propose that these ties may further inhibit employees from quitting or relocating, as it would disrupt family members' ties to other employees and their families. Members of *guanxi* share extensive information about work, salary, career opportunities such that they tend to have highly similar or shared organizational attitudes (Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002). This level of interdependency and influence may render the firm vulnerable. When a key member of the network like a supervisor with a group of loyal subordinates leaves the organization, others in the network are likely to leave as well (Hom & Xiao, 2011).

Rodrigues also finds the integration of work and non-work commitments, and more generally antecedents outside the organization, to be important to understanding employee bonds (Rodrigues, Gondim, Bastos, & Sakamoto, 2013). She further raises the importance of location in view of the intra-national migration of both unqualified and qualified labor in the Brazilian context (Serrano, Araújo, Pinto, & Codes, 2013). Her forthcoming research project involves organizations located in inhospitable places where coworkers live in the same community with their families versus organizations located in small cities in the countryside.

### Contextual Change and Implications for Commitment Research

The commentators also described cultural and institutional changes in their contexts that might affect commitment research, which we address under two main headings below.

### Governmental and Cultural Changes and Commitment

Jørgensen and Breitsohl described recent governmental changes in their institutional contexts in Denmark and Germany. In Denmark, these changes include a decline in the strength of labor unions, legal changes that limit unemployment and constrain the number of educational programs one can enroll in, and reductions in the amount of state funded education for companies and individuals. Jørgensen argues that these changes will shift responsibility of continuing education and development from the state to the individual organization so that those organizations choosing to invest in talent and career development initiatives will appear more attractive to potential and existing employees and be in a better position to foster commitment both to the organization and the profession.

Breitsohl points to the increase of *atypical employment*, which includes part-time jobs, marginal employment, temporary work, and fixed-term employment (Giesecke, 2009). While this development is expected to lead to more flexible labor markets, a growing concern is that atypical employees may receive considerably lower incomes while experiencing greater job insecurity. Atypical employees are more dependent on employer decisions to keep them employed, enjoy less protection by labor laws, and are often not represented by unions. Thus, they may perceive greater NC towards an organization for having hired them. In addition, as atypical employees often are not very qualified they are likely to perceive fewer job alternatives, which may increase their CC.

In contrast to the discussions of governmental policy changes in Germany and Denmark, Xu and Weng focused on cultural changes in their country. Although China is traditionally collectivistic, the rapid economic growth in China has moved the society toward individualism (e.g., Ball, 2001; Yan, 2009) especially in more economically developed cities like Shanghai and Beijing (e.g., Gamble & Tian, 2012; Koch & Koch, 2007). Generation differences are well known to appear as a result of personal maturation, but in some cases like China may well be accentuated by cultural changes. A cross-generations study shows that the

younger Chinese generations are more individualistic and less likely to follow the traditional collective ideology than are the older ones (Sun & Wang, 2010). Thus, managers in Chinese companies are increasingly dealing with value differences between employees from different generations. Managing the multigenerational workforce is a concern also for the Danish who are encountering the "Y" generation, according to Jørgensen.

**Immigration, Multicultural Workforces and Commitment**

All commentators agree that research on culture and commitment is needed to understand subgroup differences and intercultural relationships within national contexts. Jørgensen notes that Denmark has few foreign employees in most industries besides front-line service and cleaning but Danish MNCs like Lego, Danfoss, and NovoNordisk are trying to make their HRM more global and culturally sensitive. Unlike Denmark, cultural differences permeate German businesses due to immigration over roughly six decades (e.g., Martin, 1994; Seifert, 1998). Thus, German managers are constantly faced with a culturally diverse workforce having varying concepts of commitment. The differences among immigrant groups and generations, whether there is any convergence towards German workways, and how ethnic Germans are being shaped by this diversity are some of the questions that await answers, according to Breitsohl.

Multicultural workforces are a reality in Israel as well. Cohen reports high proportions of Arabs in all health care occupations including physicians. The construction industry, some food industries as well as the police and some municipalities have mixed workforces as well. The tendency, despite tensions, is toward integration of Arab and Jews in all organizations. Cohen expects that, given government support, the proportion of Arabs in Israeli organizations will only increase and the necessities of maintaining a committed multicultural workforce will require a deeper understanding of cultural differences in work settings.

Xu and Weng also note that multicultural workforces are increasing in China, thanks to the dramatic growth of outward investment and foreign direct investment. Xu speculates that employees with different cultural backgrounds are unlikely to accept that the organization is regulated by personal relationships. These employees are likely to perceive personalistic practices like performance appraisal being commitment- rather than merit- or performance-based as inappropriate and unfair. Xu notes that many MNCs in China recruit only new college graduates with little experience as they are less influenced by Chinese traditionality. Research has shown that traditionality adversely influences the effectiveness of many business practices like transformational leadership and delegation (Chen & Aryee, 2007; Cheng et al., in press; Spreitzer, Perttula, & Xin, 2005). Xu proposes a deeper understanding of Chinese traditional norms to counteract its detrimental outcomes. Carefully managing the kinds of commitments that typify the traditional system might also prove useful. For instance, Hom and Xiao (2011) suggest that foreign managers might promote personal commitment by involving themselves in the personal lives of Chinese colleagues and subordinates to forge *guanxi* ties with them. Similarly, they might manage existing commitments by retaining Chinese employees who are central in organizational *guanxi* networks (Chen & Chen, 2004).

Finally, perhaps less fraught or visible compared to regional or ethnic/religious differences in other parts of the world, but important nonetheless are regional differences within countries like China or Brazil. In a recent study, Gong, Chow, and Ahlstrom (2011) focused on the cultural differences of employees using different dialects within China. Weng explains that the Chinese language can be roughly divided into seven different dialect groups (Yuan, 1980) and that many people still speak dialects as their first language, in spite of the national efforts to inculcate Mandarin. Gong et al. (2011) have argued that when employees are able (and permitted) to speak their dialect at work to colleagues and supervisors, they will have higher job embeddedness; a point that echoes Breitsohl's narration of regional

commitment in Germany. Likewise, Brazil is a regionally multicultural society (Hofstede, Garibaldi de Hilal, Malvezzi, Tanure & Vinken, 2010; Lenartowicz & Roth, 2001). Thus, it appears that commitment researchers should be cautious about generalizing findings across samples from different regions within the nation.

## Discussion: Commitment Research in Sociocultural Perspective

Societal context can influence research through the cultural backgrounds of leading scholars (Peterson, 2001), the research programs and paradigms of scholarly communities (Sterman & Wittenberg, 1999) and the broader societies that sponsor and use scholarly research (Calverton, 1931). As in other areas of organization studies (Hofstede, 1980; Peterson & Hunt, 1997), commitment scholars have good reason to wonder whether the societal heritage that originally fostered commitment research may be impeding its future progress. In the following, we will first consider how the North American scholarly context shaped commitment research. Then, we will consider the implications of research in other societal contexts for directions forward in conceptualizing workplace commitment.

### The Conceptual Constraints of the North American Context

Commitment research reflects North America's unique culture, economic system, and governments during the late 20th century (Wasti, in press). North American individualistic culture supports personal choice and considerable organization autonomy from government control and its liberal market economic system promotes voluntary movement of labor. Consistent with cultural and economic systems, North American governmental systems give employers considerable responsibility for handling (or neglecting) many aspects of employee well-being. Commitment research has been shaped by the need to understand the psychological ties that promote an employee's voluntary contributions to an employer in this context.

The scholarly context of North American OB also has influenced commitment research. The OB field supports middle range theorizing (Weick, 1974) using predominantly questionnaire-based field research methods. The strength of middle range research over more comprehensive social theorizing is its focus on a small number of constructs that are amenable to survey measurement and hypothesis testing, like the three components of commitment, and connecting them to antecedents and outcomes. Comparatively comprehensive theories, like general system theories that middle range theories have largely replaced in OB, encompass very large areas of human knowledge and are more helpful for organizing knowledge than for hypothesis testing (Weick, 1974). The middle range theory orientation of commitment research trades off amenability to hypothesis testing against understanding how complex aspects of context have affected the choices about how to theorize social attachments, how they are formed, and what consequences they have. In considering here the societal context of commitment research, we do not suggest that middle range commitment models should be abandoned in favor of comprehensive theory. Instead, we have looked for ways in which omitting context has limited commitment research in order to provide guidance for future middle range research. We outline some of these directions in the sections that follow.

**Commitment concepts and measures.** Like any social construct, globally generalizing commitment constructs developed in one part of the world (like North America) needs careful evaluation. The research that has used mainstream commitment measurements in different countries varies considerably in whether authors report deliberately revising existing measures to incorporate local cultural context, to overcome generic problems of commitment measures known from the North American literature (e.g., Jaros, 2009), or to add new generic commitment constructs that are more intended for global than only local use.

Before considering local adaptations, we begin with the encouraging conclusion that the most frequently studied organizational commitment concepts and measures based on Meyers and Allen's (1991) TCM can be used for future research in most societal contexts. Nonetheless, there seems to be the need to "decenter" the scale items, i.e., revise the items to be more applicable both in meaning and choice of expression to many cultures (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). Further, this general assessment does not mean that they are absolutely universal, always relevant and sufficient, or capture the intricacies of the construct when applied to work-related commitment foci other than the organization. For example, some commentators suggest that future research should look carefully at new contexts to design measures of commitment that are present in North American research, but that show more variance, have higher correlations with criteria, or are otherwise more important in the local context. For example, studying anticipation of future gains rather than sunk costs may be more central to Chinese thinking than North American thinking about CC even though it is also present in North America.

Studies of commitment that emphasize the bond with an organization may be part of narrowly focused professionalism and may reflect the individualistic orientation of North American scholars (Sanchez-Burks & Lee, 2007). Commitment in collectivistic societies, in contrast, is more likely to be to groups to which individuals are attached for multiple purposes and of long duration (Triandis, 1995). This is reflected, for example, in the observations about *guanxi* and the preference to speak with others who share one's own dialect in China. Future commitment research in other cultural contexts has the potential to expand the focus of commitment beyond commitment to a temporary, narrow attachment to an abstract work organization. The sort of commitment to superiors and social networks described in the collectivist Chinese context or the regional attachments in the high uncertainty avoidance

German context (e.g., Oishi & Talhelm, 2012) suggests the possible importance of analyzing long term relationships in other cultural milieus.

Relatedly, the expansion of the scope of relationships from workplace to personal relationships is worth analysis. Indeed, the mainstream commitment literature does not consider the multiplexity of relationships, which refers to whether or not personal friendships and instrumental resources are exchanged in the same relationship (Morris, Podolny, & Ariel, 2000). Evidence from collectivist cultures suggests that work relationships are characterized by a strong emphasis on affective and personal components (Sanchez-Burks & Lee, 2007). The multiplexity of the relationships has implications for how commitment is best measured, how it develops, and whether interpersonal commitments play a greater role than commitments to foci like the organization or occupation. More generally, conclusions from the present commentators suggest the value of future research incorporating multiple commitment foci (e.g., unions, careers, supervisors, coworkers) in many parts of the world.

Future research can incorporate local ideas when adapting measures to improve their local metric properties in at least two ways. A scholar-centered approach is to contrast local measurement metrics with previously reported metrics to identify and rely on the local scholars' intuition to design and test replacements for problematic measures (Morris et al., 1999). A respondent-centered approach is to induce items and constructs from local respondents by using focus groups and interviews, designing new measures based on such material, and comparing their metrics with those of existing measures.

**Commitment antecedents and outcomes.** Whereas some findings about commitment antecedents and outcomes outside North America are consistent with those typically reported within it, the present commentators also offer a number of examples and explanations of why typical findings sometimes do not replicate. They do so by reference to cultural values, economic conditions, and government characteristics and policies to explain both country

differences *in* commitment antecedents and country characteristics *as* commitment antecedents. In many respects, culture, economics and government are complexly related such that economic situations and governments having certain characteristics are likely to emerge from certain cultural heritages (Kara & Peterson, 2012). Similarly, sustained economic conditions and governments may influence culture. We leave sorting out these macro-level interrelationships to sociological, economic, and political theorists, and we organize our discussion around the explanations for commitment that the present commentators provide.

Established culture dimensions such as individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, time orientation have been invoked by multiple commentators. Of these, the role of collectivism regarding socialization into commitment-related societal norms has been the predominant basis to the study of culture and commitment (Wasti, 2008). What appears to be a meaningful direction for future research is to consider multiple cultural dimensions as well as interactions among cultural dimensions, rather than focusing on a single dimension (Tsui, Nifadkar, & Ou, 2007). For example, some commentators propose that culturally-based long-term time orientation and large power distance promote high levels of attachment to supervisors, which develop into long-term family-like relationships for Chinese employees. Both more careful documentation of these findings in China and generalization to other societies that combine large power distance with long- versus short-term orientation warrants further study. The commentators also point to the relevance of other cultural dimensions along individualism that provide a contrast to North American individualism. For instance, the social goal element that Hofstede's (2001) model identifies as cultural femininity and that GLOBE (House et al., 2004) identifies as humane orientation may reduce the level of affective organizational commitment in Denmark's coordinated market economy.

Some commentators suggest specific ways in which for future research should consider economic antecedents to commitment. Using an economic explanation, CC may be

stronger for economically distressed groups like urban immigrants in China, rural workers in Brazil, and Israeli Arabs than for other communities. On the one hand, this explanation supports some of the original theory underlying individual circumstances affecting CC (Becker, 1960). On the other hand, it suggests that future research should consider not only individual and country circumstances, but also immigrant and other subculture differences in economic challenges.

Several commentators suggest that future research should consider basic governmental characteristics as well as policies for managing particular social conditions as commitment antecedents. In China, the recent history of urban migration is precedented by urbanization in Europe and the United States long ago. Chinese governmental efforts to control this internal migration and the socioeconomic situation of urbanization in China, however, are unique. For example, since Chinese who move from rural to urban locations often give up rights to many social programs, their survival requirements mean that CC takes on special importance for many personal outcomes. Similarly, AC and NC commitments are likely to be indirectly influenced by an employer's contribution to survival needs for urban immigrants in China. The economic challenges of Israeli Arabs noted above also reflect governmental policies that put Israeli Arabs at a disadvantage for employment.

Regarding outcomes, since the outcomes of AC have been replicated in many countries (Fischer & Mansell, 2009; Wasti, 2008) future research using large numbers of countries or comparing the outcomes of AC with the outcomes of other aspects of commitment would be more useful than single-country replications. For CC, in contrast to AC, there are reasons for future research to assess possible differences among countries in its relationship to outcomes. In particular, the kind of hypothesis suggested by the weaker relationship of CC to outcomes in the welfare economies of northern Europe as compared to

the liberal market economies of North America could be tested in large-scale, multiple-country research.

All of these examples support continuing future research about commitment based on overall societal culture characteristics, and perhaps more importantly, studying configurations of cultural dimensions as well as the economic, political and social resources that form the backdrop (Tsui et al., 2007; Wasti & Onder, 2009).  It is also important to note that culture is not the only predictive factor for organizational phenomena and the implications of relevant variables (e.g., organizational structure, reward systems, the industry) need to be accounted or controlled for (Gelfand et al., 2008). Furthermore, the impact of culture may be less evident in large organizations, organizations operating in high-tech industries, or multinational corporations with strong organizational cultures (Fischer, Redford, Ferriera, Harb, & Assmar, 2005; Gelfand et al., 2008). Future cross-cultural OB research, including the field of commitment is advised to build multilevel models which incorporate cultural as well as non-cultural sources of variance (Fischer, 2009; Gelfand et al., 2008). At the least, researchers should consider reporting greater detail regarding the samples studied (e.g., job and work group characteristics, industry, organizational structure, geographic region, ethnicity, socio-economic status) as the availability of this information will prevent unwarranted generalizations to other organizational contexts or an entire nation (Gelfand et al., 2008; Rousseau & Fried, 2001).

## Conclusions

A limitation of the present analysis is that several major world regions including Africa, central and eastern Europe, and central Asia are entirely missing. These omissions include parts of the world that are even more different from North America than some of the parts represented in this commentary. The countries we covered represent important differences from North America, but their characteristics should not be overgeneralized as

fully representing global variability. For example, Denmark's strong social goal orientation certainly differs from the weaker social goal orientation of North America. However, since this social goal orientation is combined with prosperity, it contrasts with the very different expression of a social goal emphasis in much of Africa (Wanasika, Howell, Littrell, & Dorfman, 2011). Similarly, Russia, former Soviet republics in central Asia and eastern Europe are not represented. Analyses of these areas (e.g., Meyer & Peng, 2005) show a tension between continuing to follow Soviet-era work norms, traditional local norms, or norms imported from neighboring countries. Soviet-era norms stressed commitment to the state (Puffer, 1994), traditional local norms vary but often emphasize commitment to other individuals, and imported Western norms suggest commitment to organizations or careers. In general, continuing to expand commitment research across contexts may well show additional challenges to improve measures, to clarify antecedents and outcomes, and identify foci of commitment beyond those that we have discussed.

While our commentary is limited in the number of regions and views its represents, it nonetheless offers several alternatives for analyzing employee bonds apart from mainstream commitment concepts and models. The analyses about these specific countries are not necessarily limited to these country contexts. Just as the TCM is indigenous to North America, and partly generalizable elsewhere, the distinctive commitment constructs, antecedents and outcomes, and foci in the countries analyzed here also are potentially generalizable. Generalization may be made more readily to contexts that are similar (e.g., Denmark to Nordic countries, China to transitional economies) than to others. Commitment phenomena typical in some countries may also emerge in subcontexts in other countries. For example, family firms in many countries may have the paternalism, relationship-based commitment that is typical in China. The contribution of contextualized research is not only to highlight potentially consequential differences, but to uncover cause and consequence

relationships as a function of contextual variables in order to study whether they also occur in other contexts (Smith, 2012). We hope that some of the insights we were able to share with this commentary will pave the way to an exciting, new generation of commitment research.

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