

# **Trajectories of Organizational Commitment: A Grounded Theory Model**

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**Abstract:**

Developmental issues of organizational commitment have received little attention and have been mainly examined through quantitative cross-sectional or longitudinal designs. The present study aims to address this gap by examining the developmental processes as well as relationships among the commitment components. Using a constructionist grounded theory methodology, twenty-five interviews with employees of a Greek organization with different tenure length were conducted. According to the findings, identity orientation emerged as the core theme in the way in which employees constructed their commitment to the employing organization. The evolving experience of employees' organizational commitment was also interwoven with the notion of psychological contract which gave rise to different motivators depending on tenure length. The study concludes with the development of a grounded theory model of organizational commitment trajectories. Findings are discussed in relation to relevant theory and research together with practical implications for human resource practitioners.

**Keywords:** identity orientation, grounded theory, organizational commitment

## **INTRODUCTION**

Organizational commitment (OC) constitutes a phenomenon of longstanding interest to both organizational scholars and practitioners. Such an interest is attributed to commitment's well-established relationship with desirable focal and discretionary behavioural patterns. OC has generally been studied as a force binding an individual to a target (i.e. employing organization) and a course of action relevant to that target (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). It has been formulated in a variety of ways, commonly conceptualized as a construct with multiple components.

Research examining commitment development in the sense of how intra-individual commitment changes with time has been scarce, as compared to voluminous research on OC (Beck & Wilson, 2001. Bergman, 2006). Similarly, there is limited empirical research for the study of the interactions between the developmental trends for each commitment component while most empirical research has been conducted in North American work contexts. The present study aims to address this gap in the following ways. First, it sets out to identify the developmental processes related to OC by exploring how employee commitment toward his/her work organization develops. Moreover, it explores possible relationships among OC components. Moreover, the present study has been conducted in a Greek organization which is particularly interesting since Greece constitutes an under-researched cultural context in relation to OC (e.g. Markovits, Davis & Van Dick, 2007). The importance of the study is two-fold. First, from an academic viewpoint, it aims to enable the generation of a theoretical model which would explain employees' attitudes and behaviours. From a practical viewpoint, through the identification of factors and/ or processes fostering

employees' commitment to their work organization, it aims to offer advice to practitioners.

The following sections review extant theoretical and empirical research on the developmental aspects of OC with the view to formulate research aims and questions to be explored in the present study.

### **THE STUDY OF COMMITMENT DEVELOPMENT**

Among the various multidimensional frameworks, Meyer and Allen's model (1991) constitutes the widely used conceptualization of commitment which has also received considerable empirical support (e.g. Wasti, 2005. Gellatly, Meyer & Luchak, 2006). According to this framework, employees are theorized to experience this binding force in the form of three mindsets. The affective component of commitment (AC) entails acceptance and internalization of the organization's goals and values as well as willingness to exert effort on the organization's behalf (Allen & Meyer, 1990. Mowday, Steers & Porter, 1979). Normative commitment (NC) refers to feelings of obligation to remain with the organization, while Continuance commitment (CC) denotes the perceived costs associated with leaving the organization as well as the perceived availability of job alternatives. In general, the notions of AC and NC have converged in a numerous studies, finding which has been attributed to the fact that the content of the scales has been imposed by researchers rather than communicated by the employees themselves (e.g. Bergman, 2006).

According to Reichers (1985), research pertaining to commitment antecedents resembles a 'laundry list', with each of the three commitment components to be

proposed to develop as a function of different antecedents. In general, positive experiences have been found to result in higher levels of commitment over time within individuals (Beck & Wilson, 2000). Development of each commitment component is theorized to begin at different times; in specific, CC is considered to develop after employment in the organization, AC after the occurrence of certain work experiences, while NC has recently been theorized to develop through norms of reciprocation or psychological contracts (Meyer & Allen, 1997. Meyer, Allen & Topolnytsky, 1998).

In general, OC has been theorized to develop via a process of social exchange during which positive work experiences initiate employees' positive work attitudes and behaviours (e.g. Meyer & Allen, 1991). However, the nature of the theorized developmental trend has generally been understudied while OC has been approached as a static variable. Commitment changes have generally been studied using two different approaches. The first approach consists of cross-sectional designs focusing on the comparison of members of different age groups at a single point in time while it could not be informative of the way in which each commitment component develops or how each component influences the other in the developmental process. The second research stream consists of longitudinal studies which examined changes in each employee over a period of time. Some of these studies focused on the investigation of the way in which the relationship of commitment with particular hypothesized antecedents varied over time, while some other studies interpreted change in OC through a comparison of group means over time by means of variance analyses and regression procedures (e.g. Meyer & Allen, 1988. Meyer, Bobocel, & Allen, 1991). However, due to problems inherent in longitudinal studies, intra-

individual commitment changes with tenure have not been examined for periods longer than few years. Moreover, a gap in extant research has been observed regarding the examination of intra-individual changes in organizational commitment past the first couple of years of employment, while no research has examined such changes in experienced employees (Beck & Wilson, 2000).

In regard to the examination of the relationships among the commitment components, there have been few studies which have often demonstrated significant two-way interactions between commitment components (e.g. Cheng & Stockdale, 2003. Bentein, Vadenberghe, Vandenberg & Stinglhamber, 2005). Recent theoretical developments (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002. Wasti, 2005. Gellatly et al., 2006) have examined overall commitment *profiles* which permitted the examination of non-linear relationships among commitment components. Overall, review of the extant empirical research has indicated that only few studies have investigated the development of employees' OC over time.

## **AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The aim of the current study was to explore the developmental processes of each commitment component, which is particularly critical, given the scarcity of empirical research that examines commitment trajectories. This was done through the examination the developmental trajectories of groups of employees with different tenure; this decision was made in accordance to relevant literature which has approached tenure as an index of commitment development (e.g. Lee, Ashford, Walsh & Mowday, 1992. Vandenberg & Self, 1993. Beck & Wilson, 2001). The study also explored the notion of OC itself and what it meant for employees; this was considered

to be particularly interesting since no previous study has explored the OC construct in a Greek organizational context. In specific, the research questions were:

- 1) What is the essence of OC?
- 2) Are there changes in nature of employee's organizational commitment over time?
- 3) Are there interactions between the developmental trends for each commitment component?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Research design process*

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, an emergent qualitative design drawing on the epistemology of constructionism was adopted. The study has followed a discursive approach, in the sense that it advocates social world phenomena are constructed through language, namely through socially and historically specific discourses which phenomena in a consistent and meaningful way (Parker, 2002). In specific, a grounded theory approach has been used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967. Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which is a data-oriented, interpretative methodology that provides opportunities for generating new theory and for model development.

The interviews were of a narrative nature, were conducted at the workplace and lasted between one and one and half hour. Interviewees were assured anonymity for their voluntary participation. The presence of the researcher on site for a period of over a month prior to interviews aimed to develop trust and rapport with study participants. In specific, interviews focused on the following research themes:

- a) what does the notion of commitment mean to them
- b) accounts of particular turning points in their experience of OC

### *Participants and research context*

Following the social psychological perspective which advocates that commitment and organizational context in which the latter is embedded are interdependent, the present study has adopted a case study design. All interviewees worked in the HR department of a Greek service organization. The organization had approximately 5.500 employees and belonged to the public sector with exceptionally low withdrawal rates. The organization was characterized by increased bureaucracy and routinization of tasks.

Out of the eighty employees working in the particular department, twenty-five were interviewed; all interviews were conducted within a period of two months. Eighteen interviewees were women and seven were men; these numbers are reflective of the gender representation of workers in the department selected, where the majority of employees were women. In total, eight employees had up to three years experience in the organization, eight employees had tenure between six and nine years, and nine employees had tenure between fifteen and nineteen years. The age of the study participants ranged from around twenty-eight to fifty years. A snowball sampling technique was used as a means of recruiting the study participants.

Three tenure groups were chosen, on the basis on two sets of information. First, employees' psychological adjustment to their employing organization has been theorized to be completed around two years after entry into the organization (e.g. Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982). Second, up-to-date, experienced employees have never been the focus of commitment studies (Beck & Wilson, 2000). As a consequence, it was decided that the first group studied would consist of employees between two and three years tenure (i.e. recent-tenured employees). The second group

consisted of employees between six to eight years of tenure (i.e. medium-term tenured employees). Last, employees with tenure extending from fifteen to eighteen years were studied; in regard to the last group, care was taken that these participants were not close to retirement, since this was thought to be likely to have an effect employees' experiences/ accounts of OC. Care was taken so that there was no difference in each group in regard to the levels of OC as experienced by employees; in specific, each group consisted of employees who reported experiencing various levels of OC, ranging from high to low. Information regarding each tenure group is presented in Table 1.

----- TABLE 1 AROUND HERE -----

#### *Data analysis processes*

Having being tape-recorded, interviews were transcribed; in cases where audio-taping the interview was not welcomed, extensive field notes were used. Written transcriptions/notes were analyzed following an iterative process, which constitutes the essence of grounded theory research. Transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis, with the term 'theme' alluding to patterns of responses which emerged in employees' accounts regarding their commitment to their work organization. The initial steps of coding were of a descriptive character, keeping as close to the data as possible, while at later stages of the coding process, codes were revised and became more focused (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1990). In all analysis stages, there was a constant comparison across participants, codes and themes. The findings were examined in relation to extant theoretical and empirical research, which informed the generation of a conceptual scheme about the development of employees' OC; this

scheme was subject to constant refinement throughout the analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In an attempt to be self-reflective as well as maximizing research rigor, the following steps were taken. First, before the conclusion of each interview, the researcher reflected her initial interpretations of the interviewees' accounts back to each participant as a means of examining the validity of such interpretations. Plausibility of the researcher's interpretations was also enhanced through a) researcher's participation in informal discussions with the department's employees and study participants on a number of occasions and b) discussion of the results with ten study participants (from all three tenure groups) who assessed the model as being representative of their experience of commitment to the organization.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The findings are presented in terms of higher level categories (i.e. themes) identified by the analysis and which emerged irrespective of tenure length. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model which was grounded on the data. Identity orientation<sup>1</sup> emerged as the core, explanatory theme when employees attempted to construct meaning regarding the phenomenon examined. While all the themes were inter-related, the model was conceptualized with a view to reflect the evolving experience of employees' commitment to their organization. Identity orientation was found to influence and be influenced by the other four themes found which were:

- a) psychological contract
- b) nature of motivation

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'identity orientation' has been chosen over 'self-definition' since it better captures the idea of self-concept-as-process.

- c) relevance to other commitment foci
- d) inter-relations among commitment components

-----FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE-----

### ***Identity Orientation***

Employees' narratives on OC were closely entangled with ways of self-definition and self-representation in the sense of their connectedness with the organization. However, interviewees belonging to the same tenure group tended to define themselves in similar ways.

Regarding the first group (recent-tenured employees), their commitment narratives included an abundance of references to personal goals and aspects of self which were 'personal' and would clearly differentiate their 'self' from other co-workers; the way they would talk about their own achievements and unique characteristics was indicative that the latter served as a basis for establishing a sense of self and self-worth:

“In my work environment, procedures and performance are mediocre. Due to my personal competencies.. and, actually, the way I really am.. I'm doing things a bit better. As a result, everybody here sees me like an expert. It's not that big deal. However, among my co-workers who have the same seniority with me – and who are like 'corks' (i.e. not very good employees) - I come out to be a champagne cork” (Woman, 3 years of tenure)

When talking about their OC, the second group of employees (i.e. medium-term tenured), they made extensive references to their interpersonal relations with other members of their work group as well as their leader. For them, experience of OC appeared to be associated with specific role relationships with others while their self-

representation was on numerous occasions interwoven with the appropriateness of their role behaviour:

“This assignment was divided to my supervisor and his subordinates. I was assigned a more ‘procedural’ part of work. I worked really hard on it [...] taking initiative, to the extent that this was possible. [...] Thankfully, and upon completion of my task, my effort was appreciated by my senior colleagues as well as my supervisor. I really felt proud of myself; for a relatively new employee, like myself, such events make you take pride in your work.. wanting to put more effort on your everyday work” (Woman, 7 years of tenure)

The increasing role of interpersonal relationships in the second groups’ narratives in reference to their own self-definition is apparent in the following extract, which is also indicative of the difference between the discourse of the first and the second group of participants:

«Despite occasional problems of co-ordination, some of us really working hard, some others not so hard, we managed to finish the work on time [...]There is a need for team and collective work.. This organization does not need single, talented employees..who are productive» (Man, 8 years of tenure)

The narratives of the third group (long-term tenured employees) were characterized by references to their adoption of the goals and values of their work organization. All nine employees belonging to this group referred to their value congruence with the organization while, making references to the collective welfare. Feelings of value congruence with the organization were connected with comments on their willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization (AC):

“In the course of one’s career in a work organization, one becomes congruent with the beliefs of the organization. At this stage, I can say that the organization’s values are also my values. I’m very happy that I’m working in an organization with a human face towards both employees and clients.. this makes me feel proud of working here.. we’re all doing our best towards this end.” (Woman, 17 years of tenure)

Even in the case of two employees who reported experiencing low levels of OC and their commitment narratives included references to their own ‘achievements’, these references, were constructed exclusively as contributions to the effective organizational functioning. as opposed to those made by recent-tenured employees:

“The organization is counting on the contributions of the conscientious and hard-working employees.. like myself.. these people.. we.. are really doing our best. We are taking pride in our work.. we are making this organization a better place.. for both employees and clients.”(Man, 18 years of tenure)

### ***Psychological Contract***

The notion of employees’ psychological contracts emerged in the discourse of all three tenure groups, even though in a different way. The theoretical mechanism by which psychological contract is related to the notion of OC has been explained by social exchange theories (e.g. Blau, 1964. Rousseau, 1998), according to which the psychological contract reflects an employee’s belief that there is a reciprocal exchange agreement between him/her and the work organization and, as a consequence, a mutual obligation between these two parties.

The recent-tenured group’s narratives were characterized by frequent references to monetizable exchange of obligations and tangible outcomes, most common being pay, benefits and overtime work. Their narratives consisted exclusively of references to performance-reward contingencies and were always linked with the notion of CC. In general, the analysis of recent-tenured employees’ narratives illustrated the adoption of narrow psychological contracts which were also characterized by low involvement. The transactional nature of psychological contracts in the case of recent-tenured employees was also in accordance to long-term tenured employees’ narrations who, reminiscent of their first years in the organization, would occasionally refer to the

original formation of psychological contract with the particular organization, describing such contract as transactional. This finding is consistent with existing empirical research in the area of employees' psychological contract and has been described as 'transactional' contract (e.g. McInnis, Meyer & Feldman, 2009).

“Commitment means ...respecting the written and unwritten rules in the organization.. abiding to guidelines.. but mainly, performing up to a required level.. no more no less.. doing what upper levels of hierarchy ask you to do.. that's why you get paid for after all.. and what is more is all those healthcare benefits, getting back home early in the afternoon.. it's really difficult to find such a deal elsewhere..” (Woman, 2 years of tenure)

The narratives of the medium-term tenured group would generally include features pertaining both 'transactional' and 'socio-emotional' contracts; that is, while making references to concrete benefits, they would also incorporate more 'relational' issues such as colleague support and experiences of mutual trust. Entangled to this narration were strong references to felt obligation to the organization, as exemplified by NC:

“Organizational commitment belongs to the sphere of psychological contract.. it's all about the involvement that you take [...] It depends on what the organization is offering you.. financial rewards, recognition for your work.. security.. I know that I owe much to this organization.. if it weren't for it [i.e. the organization], I wouldn't be in this position.. both financially and personally..” (Man, 8 years of tenure)

The analysis of the narration of experienced employees (3<sup>rd</sup> group) illustrated that the content that this group attributed to this mutual exchange agreement had an open-ended nature; these employees would describe themselves as being in a social exchange relationship, involving intangibles, socio-emotional terms, like support, while no reference was made to transactional content:

“Hadn't it been for this organization, I wouldn't have enjoyed such a quality of life all these years.. good social status.. even on the emotional part... I've always had supportive relationships with colleagues.. I've made good friends here [...] We've been lucky

working in this organization... it has a very 'humane' side.. for instance, being supportive to family difficulties [...] It has been as a 'mother' to me." (Man, 18 years of tenure)

The complex interrelations between OC and psychological contract constructs are illustrated in the following example, which, in addition, portrays the developmental nature of both constructs in the course of an employee's tenure:

"I can feel that my commitment to the organization is slowly growing.. my relationship (with the organization) becomes more mature [...] Both of us need to work on that.. It's like a marriage: you are not committed to your husband because you are afraid that if you get a divorce, you'll end up with no money.. You cannot stay long in an organization just because you get your salary, special arrangements related to maternity, job security etc. You need to get your relationship alive and working.." (Woman, 6 years of tenure)

### ***Nature of Motivation***

When employees were primed to refer to incidents that they experienced a change (either positive or negative) in their commitment toward the organization, they alluded to issues that acted as a source of motivation for the development of organizational commitment. Overall, recent-tenured employees made extensive references to issues related to HR practices such as clear role specifications, performance expectations, information on career advancement and so on:

".. the induction program was really helpful.. you get to know quite a lot about the organization.. some information about the way your career can develop within the organization.. However, when you come to work here [...] you really get to understand that you are left by yourself.. no real guidance.. [...] after all this time here, I still find myself wondering what are my responsibilities here and what I can be held accountable for.. And what is worse is that.. I don't know what is next.. I often feel emotionally tired.. it's like circling around without knowing the purpose.." (Woman, 3 years of tenure)

This group also made frequent references to the mentoring relationship of the newcomer with his/her immediate supervisor and had to do with feedback,

recognition and subsequent praise; this finding is indicative of the important role of the supervisor/ mentor in the early stages of employment in the organization. Overall, recent-tenured employees' accounts abounded in references of instrumental and extrinsic motivations when referring to perceived changes in their OC.

The second group (medium-term tenured employees) focused predominantly on social organizational issues, such as relationships with colleagues and work environment when describing what made them more motivated (or de-motivated) to commit to their organization:

“When I first came to this work unit, my co-workers ‘embraced’ me with warmth.. they are all people with whom I share the same values more or less.. have similar interests..”  
(Man, 8 years of tenure)

On the contrary, more experienced employees mainly alluded to ‘intrinsic’ features which were connected to the job itself (e.g. interesting job, vision, participation in decision making, applicability of the work done) which acted as sources of motivation:

“It happened a couple of years ago.. I was working on a project.. I was part of an inter-departmental team. We were all experts in our field [...] We were asked to make proposals to the upper management for improvements in different functional areas [...] I’ve never been more motivated in my working life.. I was even taking work at home, even though nobody was asking me to” (Man, 18 years of tenure)

### ***Relevance to other Commitment Foci***

Even though not primed, employees' narratives regarding their OC abounded in references which highlighted the relationship between OC and various forms of work-related commitment. Work-related foci were individuals and groups to whom an

employee is attached such as supervisors, colleagues, subordinates or groups which collectively comprise the organization.

Recent-tenured employees were found to become tied to the organization through their everyday interaction with their supervisor. This group was also found not to be in a position to differentiate between commitment to supervisor and to organization; for example, after being primed to talk about his attachment to the organization, the following employee argued:

“To a great extent.. it has to do with my relationship with my supervisor.. He knows his job well.. I respect him, he has ‘protected’ me from making ‘mistakes’.. not only in terms of work done but also in terms of possible behavioural ‘misconduct’.. as every supervisor should do with a new employee.. So, I don’t have any reason to dislike the organization or not to be committed to it [..] However, I do understand.. organizational commitment should be something different.. [to supervisor commitment]” (Man, 2 years of tenure)

In the case of medium-term tenured employees, references to OC were distinguishable from other commitment foci but nevertheless often intermingled (in seven out of eight occasions) with work group commitment and/ or affiliations to other groups:

“It took me a few years to feel I belong in this organization.. I couldn’t understand what the organization wanted from me. After a point, I decided to get involved to the Literature group.. I found people there with similar values to mine.. the more I was becoming involved in the activities of the group, the more I felt that I was slowly becoming a member of this organization.” (Man, 8 years of tenure)

While the analysis illustrated that commitment to various foci (e.g. group, supervisor, union membership) was important for recent and medium-term tenured employees’ trajectories of OC, long-tenured employees’ narratives suggested that OC was an entity distinct to other commitment foci, while it often had an effect on these foci. Thus, even though spillover between different foci was possible (e.g. commitment to

a supervisor may affect OC), these commitments were not highly related, with the organization being the predominant commitment focus more likely to affect the rest:

“I don’t agree with the task-related decisions my supervisor takes.. nor with his leadership practices.. However, I have to try [to be in good terms with him]. It’s part of my commitment to this organization.. to be committed to my supervisor and do my best to ensure cooperation with all levels of hierarchy.” (Woman, 15 years of tenure)

“Being committed to the supervisor may only enhance organizational commitment, the opposite doesn’t apply.” (Man, 15 years of tenure)

### *Inter-relations among Commitment Components*

The analysis of employees’ narratives indicated that references to the three commitment components were enmeshed in the same narration; as it was often the case, interviewees would start referring to a particular component of OC but soon would continue with another component. While this finding was common to all three groups, there were differences in the nature of inter-relationships among the three components, as described by each tenure group.

In general, recent-tenured group’s narration was characterized by an abundance of CC references; all interviewees referred explicitly and extensively to side-bets as well the notion of job security offered by the organization; the side-bets presented were mainly tangible and to a lesser extent, social cost-based. CC references were mostly related to NC references. This finding suggests that these employees felt that have already been recipients of certain benefits from the organization, and as a consequence, they would experience a sense of obligation to reciprocate through the expression of loyalty to the organization and their willingness to exert more effort in performing their job. As the following extract suggests, experience of CC, together with social influences from

senior organizational members which have usually remained implicit, seemed to act as a precursor to the development of NC in new employees:

“The organization offers me a lot.. it offers me security.. I can take my leave of absence when it’s convenient to me... eight hours of work and then I can devote myself to my family.. On the contrary, I haven’t offered the organization, so far, that much.. since I feel that I don’t make full use of my capabilities within these eight hours.. I sometimes experience remorse about it.. I don’t want the others to feel that I’m not grateful to what I’ve been offered.” (Man, 3 years of tenure)

Medium-term tenured employees’ narratives contained less CC references - as compared to the previous group - which focused equally on socio-emotional costs (i.e. good working relationships in the work group) as well as on ‘concrete’ benefits. However, the most important finding of the analysis for this group has been that there were many explicit references to the initiation of AC as a result of employees’ feeling moral obligation (NC) to the organization for the benefits (tangible and intangible) that it has been offering them; in this sense, and unlike previous theoretical propositions (e.g. Bergman, 2006), emotional attachment to the particular organization, both in the form of loyalty as well as development of a care towards the organization’s welfare, appeared to develop as a response to employees’ moral obligation to reciprocate:

“It depends on what commitment we are talking about.. There is a part of commitment that is ‘objective’: you have to be committed to the organization you are working for.. And, there is another part which really depends on you.. Since I have chosen to remain in this organization.. [...] there was a need to come to terms with the organization’s beliefs and wants.. to start fitting with them.. This organization has been acting like a mother to me; it still takes good care of me. The least I could do in return is to care about its development.. to see that it gets good reputation to the market. It comes naturally to one’s mind as the right thing to do.” (Woman, 8 years of tenure)

While in medium-term tenured employees' narratives, the experienced sense of obligation to the organization could be easily differentiated from the notion of desire in doing so, analysis of the narratives of long-term tenured employees illustrated that their perceptions of obligations were closely related to perceptions of wants. In other words, this group experienced their attachment to the organization, care and exertion of more effort for the organization's welfare as obligatory and personally desirable at the same time; as an employee explained. The extract illustrated below indicates that employee' sense that obligation toward the organization has been experienced as a moral imperative which has taken the form of an internalized value; as such, the employee perceived the value as personally-relevant and thereby experienced a desire to enact it through his behaviour which has become a psychologically fulfilling experience:

“Regarding my being committed to the supervisor, it's part of my obligation to the organization [...] It's not that anybody 'obliges' me to act in this way.. it's just the way I see it.. I am really keen in helping out my supervisor and my colleagues.. I don't want to create any unnecessary problems.. all this is part of my devotion to the organization.. since, had I not been felt as a member of a family of the organization, I wouldn't have wanted to behave in similar ways.. The organization has been offering me a lot all these years.. the least I can do in return is to be co-operative with everybody.” (Man, 15 years of tenure)

## **DISCUSSION**

Up to date, the bulk of existing empirical research has concentrated on the relationship between OC and a wide range of organizational variables at one point in time. The present study found evidence supporting the conceptualization of OC as an evolving social process by illustrating the existence of differences in the way in which employees with different tenure experienced organizational commitment. Drawing on

the empirical data, the study proposes a conceptual model of employees' commitment trajectories towards their work organization. Identity orientation emerged as the overarching theme in the construction and evolution of employees' organizational commitment, the evolution of which was inter-dependent to that of the other themes emerged from the analysis. In specific, the development of employees' OC during their tenure in a work organization was characterized by analogous shifts in their self-definition, psychological contract with the particular organization, prominence of motivators and of other commitment foci.

As the grounded model illustrates, employees at early stages of employment in an organization (i.e. recent-tenured) appear to adopt an individualized identity orientation while forming transactional psychological contracts with their work organization. At this period, instrumental and extrinsic motivation, as exemplified through the role of mentor/ supervisor as well as HR practices appear to have a crucial role. Initiation and further evolution of experiences of OC seem to emanate largely from perceptions of commitment to the supervisor. Having evaluated the benefits offered to them by the organization (mainly tangible benefits), new employees start developing a sense of obligation to their work organization (NC). At a later stage of tenure (medium-term tenured), employees' identity orientation becomes more relational, putting emphasis on interpersonal relationships mainly formed in the context of their work group while adopting a more long-term and enduring psychological contract. For this group, social organizational features such as interpersonal relationships in the work group (and subsequent experiences of commitment to it) appear to be the predominant motivators for OC development; accordingly, experiences of OC development are closely related to work group

commitment. Feelings of obligation to reciprocate to the organization (NC) are coupled with experiences of being emotionally attached to it and exerting more effort towards attainment of organizational goals (AC). Finally, experienced employees tend to hold a more collective self-definition according to which their notion of self-worth is closely interwoven with experiences of value congruence and reference to collective welfare. Their psychological contract has been revised and most often turned into what has been referred to as 'transformational' contract (e.g. Rousseau, 2000). For them, intrinsic motivation (features connected to the nature of their job) and issues of the treatment and support they have received from the organization (i.e. procedural fairness) are the most salient motivation factors. OC appears to evolve independently to other commitment foci. To them, perceptions of obligations are related to perceptions of wants, thereby perceiving their commitment to the organization as both more obligatory and more personally desirable.

In general, the present findings corroborate commitment, self-concept/definition and psychological contract literature. Regarding OC research, this study provides support to Meyer and Allen's (1991) conceptual framework of OC in a Greek sample of employees. An individualized self-concept - CC link and collective self-concept - AC link has been empirically demonstrated (e.g. Meyer, Becker & Vandenberghe, 2004. Johnson & Chang, 2006). Moreover, the analysis suggests that NC is defined differently by recent versus more experienced employees (as a moral obligation closely related to the need of reciprocation of benefits acquired as well as meeting others' expectations for relative recent and medium-term employees; as a moral imperative which has taken the form of an internalized value for experienced employees). While recent conceptualizations of NC (e.g. Gellatly et al., 2006) have been oriented towards a two-fold nature of NC, such dual meaning of NC has not so

far been examined in association with changes in the conceptualization of OC associated with the length of employee's tenure. Finally, the finding suggesting that employees' notion of obligation to the organization (NC) precedes AC is at odds with certain theoretical propositions (e.g. Bergman, 2006) suggesting that NC develops as a result of AC. However, taking into account the proposition that organizational culture is an important factor for the development of AC - NC relationship (Bergman, 2006), this finding may be related to the particular organizational culture and its emphasis on obedience to norms.

In regard to research on self representation, the findings support Brickson's framework (2000) and Triandis' (1989) conceptualization of self, both of which advocates for the existence of three distinct loci of self-definition (individualistic, relational and collective, Brickson, 2000) (private, public and collective, Triandis, 1989) which engender distinct patterns of employee's relations with the employing organization. The present analysis suggested that these three perspectives informed employees' sense-making regarding their commitment experiences while self-definition tended to evolve from personal to relational and collective as a function of accumulation of work-related experiences (i.e. length of tenure). However, since the shift from individualized – relational – collective self-definition found in the present study is not consistent with Lord, Brown and Freiberg's (1999) findings that the relational self-definition precedes the shift towards either individualized or collective self-representation, there is a call for further research on this issue.

The study also corroborates theoretical and empirical research connecting transactional psychological contract with CC and relational contract with AC (e.g.

Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1995. Sturges, Conway & Guest, 2005). This study suggests that the initiation of NC takes place at the early stages of an employee's tenure in an organization; in this regard, the study advocated towards a NC - psychological contract formation. Since there is a lack of empirical research examining the psychological contract – NC relationship, this relationship needs to be further examined.

### **STUDY LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

As compared to the quantitatively dominated extant literature, this research adds to existing knowledge of employees' OC, by constituting one of very few studies which attempted to map the organizational commitment development over time. However, this study has certain limitations in regard to its sample and design.

First, generalization to other groups of employees or work settings needs to be used with caution, since this study is based on a small sample of employees working on a particular department of an organization. In order to enhance credibility and transferability of the findings, the level of similarity between research setting and other settings needs to be assessed (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998). In addition, it may be the case that groups of employees at different career stages may construct their OC experience in diverse ways or experience different OC trajectories. Finally, as the narratives studied are self-reported, it may be the case that some developmental indicators in commitment trajectories might be inaccurately recalled.

Despite these limitations, the present findings offer a number of implications for both commitment theory and its applications. While prior research has already indicated

the role of extrinsic, social and intrinsic rewards for OC (e.g. Mathieu & Zajac, 1990. Meyer et al., 1991), the present study illustrated the distinctive role of each type of reward for the development of OC for employees with different tenure length. Similarly, while the importance of HRM practices for the development of OC has been empirically demonstrated (e.g. Paul & Anantharaman, 2004), the present study suggested the greater importance of such practices for recent-tenured employees who are trying to gain information pertinent to their role. Moreover, the study poses new questions concerning the relationship between NC and psychological contract construct which needs to be empirically tested. In addition, another future direction which has arisen as a result of these exploratory findings is the exploration of the development of NC prior to experiences of AC. Finally, this study provides an analysis of the meaning of OC in a Greek public organization, which is closely associated with the notion of self (e.g. self-concept) as well as interwoven to the notion of employee's psychological contract; these findings need to be seen as a call for more research to culture-specific examination of OC construct.

Apart from its theoretical implications, the grounded model proposed in this study depicting OC trajectories which has emerged from employees' discourse strengthens the basis on which advice about optimization of employees' OC can be offered to managers and HR practitioners. Understanding various ways in which employees' commitment (in particular recent-tenured employees') develops will enable human resource practitioners to anticipate the impact of particular policies or HRM systems to be implemented on employees' OC. Moreover, and since the results suggest that workgroup relationships and participation in informal network resources increases the probability - for medium and long-tenured employees respectively - to stay with the

organization, organizational designs and HR systems promoting the development of relationship ties between organizational members could foster employees' OC.

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**Table 1. Study participants**

<b>GROUPS</b>	<i>Recent-tenured</i> <b>2-3</b> years tenure	<i>Medium-term tenured</i> <b>6-8</b> years tenure	<i>Long-term tenured</i> <b>15-18</b> years tenure
<i>Women</i>	3 (2 years) 3 (3 years)	1 (6 years) 3 (7 years) 2 (8 years)	2 (15 years) 1 (17 years) 3 (18 years)
<i>Men</i>	2 (3 years)	2 (8 years)	1 (15 years) 2 (18 years)

**Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Organizational Commitment Trajectories**

