Rethinking organisational commitment: A meso-level concept and framework for analysis.

Robert Denny
Regent's University London, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London, NW1 4NS, UK.
dennyr@regents.ac.uk

Abstract: Approaches to the evaluation of organisational commitment tend to concentrate on an amalgamation of individual employee behaviours and attitudes. However, the extension of individual level theory toward analyses of collective behaviour raises some issues. This working paper is an attempt to develop a framework for evaluating organisational commitment by setting the organisation as an agent in itself. As such, the paper is still very much in its early stages and requires further development for a future journal paper. Any advice and comments from colleagues is warmly welcomed.

Word count: 2,925.

1. Introduction

Existing approaches to the analysis of organisational commitment focus on attitudes or behaviours of individual employees towards the organisation within which they work. Individual's work related commitments have long been shown to correspond positively with a range of behaviours and outcomes thought to be of value to organisations, for example, increased performance, reduced voluntary turnover, as well as organisational citizenship behaviour (Meyer et al, 1989; Tett and Meyer, 1993; Williams and Anderson, 1991). Efforts have also been made to explore the positive implications of 'collective' or 'aggregated' organisational commitments. Typically, this type of research aggregates individual expressions of commitment to the 'unit' level by establishing a mean commitment score for a given group, team or department. Differences in these scores have been correlated with variations in unit level outcomes, such as unit performance speed, or aggregate voluntary turnover in firms (Conway and Briner, 2012; Gardner et al, 2011). However, the transposition of individual level theory to the analysis of collective behaviour is theoretically problematic as significant level of analysis issues exist when assuming that the mechanism that explains association between individual level factors continue to hold at the collective level (Ostroff, 1992). Understanding organisations as the aggregated actions of individuals therefore has its flaws.

This paper therefore sets out a framework for the conceptualisation of commitments operating at the level of analysis of the organisation understood as an agent in itself.

Despite the maturity of the organisational commitment research field, serious conceptual differences about the nature and the dimensions of the concept of commitment persist. Long standing difficulties about core issues of concept formation point to considerable methodological obstacles to progress in this filed of study. For example, Klein et al (2009) identifies eight distinct approaches to the conceptualisation of commitment in the literature, many of which mistakenly confound the concept of commitment with its determinates or with its outcomes. Elsewhere, the lack of conceptual precision in this field has been blamed for the 'stretching' of the concept to the point at which it has lost much of its discriminatory power (Chimezie and Osigweh, 1989). Stretched concepts risk misformation in one's conceptual framework and empirical imprecision in data collection (Sartori, 1970). These methodological flaws ultimately undermined researchers ability to draw warranted inferences from their data to conclusions (Bellamy, 2012).

Given the conceptual difficulties with organisational commitment, and the issues associated with the shift in level of analysis, this paper utilises research from across the social sciences to develop a new concept of organisational commitment. A comprehensive review of the commitment literature across the social sciences was conducted to identify similarities and differences in usage of the term. Despite some overlap, no signal approach to commitment offers a precise definition of the concept for operationalization in the context of organisational behaviour, with different existing studies pointing to subtly different attributes of the concept. However, it is possible to infer eight distinct strands of use, which interlink in a precise way to form an initial definition of organisational commitment. This can be further differentiated by grouping these strands in terms of (a) commitment in principle; (b) committed behaviours; (c) strategies for commitment; and (d) indicators of commitment. The foundations of these groupings, as well as the eight different strands of this concept and its structure are discussed.

Organisations acting with commitment are those which (i) intend a particular objective, and who have (ii) capacity to commit, are willing to (iii) put its assets at hazard, (iv) over time, and in the face of (v) escalating costs, so that it can be achieved. A number of strategies are available through which the target of commitment can be pursued. These include the (vi) self-binding of the organisation to the objective to prevent future deviations in behaviour, so that interests are aligned with seeing the objective being realised. Similarly, organisations might seek to convince others of its intentions towards the objective by staking its (vii) reputation, to encourage cooperative behaviour. Finally, a firm indicator of commitment is a tendency to treat sunk costs as not being sunk, thereby allowing this particular (viii) thought-style to influence future behaviour. Although relatively complex, the definition is also quite specific. Each of the eight strands of the definition and the structure of the concept are analysed in full.

2. Conceptual framework

A comprehensive review of the commitment literature across the social sciences was conducted to identify similarities and differences in usage of the term. Despite some overlap, no signal approach to commitment offers a precise definition of the concept for operationalization in the context of understanding the commitments of organisations, understood as actors in themselves. However, it is possible to infer eight distinct strands of use, which interlink in a precise way to form an initial definition of meso-level organisational commitment. This can be further differentiated by grouping these strands in terms of (i) commitment in principle; (ii) committed behaviours; (iii) strategies for commitment; (iv) indicators of commitment. The foundations of the eight strands of this concept and its structure are discussed below.

2.1 Commitment in Principle

2.2.1 Intentions and the object of commitment

Scholars working in the field of organisational studies have long recognised the importance of behavioural and attitudinal intention for the understanding of commitment. Research in this area typically seeks to demonstrate how individuals' workplace commitments correspond with positive organisational outcomes such as productivity or reduced employee turnover. Commitment is often operationalised as an intention to remain in membership of an organisation or an intention to work towards team goals because of an emotional attachment. However, recent scholarship has criticised much of the work in this tradition by drawing attention to definitional inconsistencies, and a tendency to conflate the object, or 'target', of commitment with the construct of commitment itself (Klein et al, 2009). Instead, Klein et al (2012) posits a 'target free' conceptualisation of commitment, understood as a 'volitional bond' between an actor and a workplace target (p 131). This separation of an actor's commitment from the target to which she is committed allows for a more precise delineation of the nature of the bond itself, and a more nuanced understanding of its relationship with characteristics of the commitment target.

Whilst issues about the level of analysis clearly exist when attempting to use psychological concepts for understanding the collective actions of governments, the work in organisational studies does show how commitment must be in part composed of an intension towards an object, and that this object might be multifaceted.

2.2.2 Capacity to commit

'Capacity' is offered as the second limb of political commitment, and captures an actor's ability to commit to a course of action. This is of particular interest in the field of development studies where judgements about governments' ability to commitments to reform are often viewed as a central to the success of development programmes. For example, McCourt (2003) understands political and administrative capacity as antecedent conditions to 'commitment proper'. Similarly, Morrissey (1995) focuses on the interplay between commitment and capacity in the policy process, arguing that both are necessary conditions for successful policy reform. It is capacity to commitment which enables actors in pursue of outcomes to realise their commitments.

Whilst the literature on British politics does not deal with commitment directly, it does discuss governments' capacity to influence outcomes, and so is relevant for this discussion by implication. Hood (1983) and Hood and Margetts (2007) draw attention to the role of resources for pursuing outcomes. In their 'tool-kit' approach they show how it is through the mobilisation of four basic types of resources that government has the capacity to monitor society and affect change. Resources are sometimes understood to be intangible, such as "nodality", understood as the quality of being embedded within an informational network, or 'authority', the possession of legal or official (legitimate) power. By contrast, resources are sometime tangible, for example 'treasure' such as money or property. Other times, the resources in Hood's toolkit seem both tangible and intangible such as with 'organisation', as a stock of people or skills, equipment etc. Hood (1983) also discussed the nature of these resources in use. Some resource (treasure, organisation) are or 'immanent' because unless they are replenished, they will run out. By contrast, others (authority, nodality) are

'contingent' because the level of their depletion is dependent on circumstances. Under certain situations, rather than being depleted, contingent resources might be 'self-renewing' or perhaps even 'self-augmenting' (Hood, 1983, p. 144).

The mobilisation of resources offers political actors the capacity to influence outcomes. By implication, resources are also necessary for political actors to have the capacity to commit to achieving those outcomes. In this context, capacity can therefore be understood as a vector of resources for committing.

Writing from a different perspective, Rhodes (1997) also considers the significance of resource in politics. However, his account of the policy process emphasises the 'exchange' of resources between political actors as the principle mode of their utilisation. This process of exchange occurs through institutionalised networks of interaction which congregate around particular policy issues. These 'policy networks' are characterised by a state of mutual 'power dependency', whereby no one actor is able to influence outcomes unilaterally. As a consequence, actors must engage in 'positive-sum' games of resource exchange to exercise power (Rhodes 1997). It is as an outcome of the bargaining and exchange of resources through networks that policy emerges (Rhodes, 1997). Because resources are not spent, but rather exchanged, this account of the policy process underscores how even in the absence of resources, actors are able to influence outcomes by engaging in appropriate relationships of exchange. By extension, the ability to engage in such relationships is therefore a resource itself. The implication of this discussion is that for capacity to commitment, possession of resources is less important than control over their use. Similarly, it also implies that resources can be used to build both the capacity to make an initial commitment, as well as capacity to sustain that commitment over time. This second dimension of capacity will be discussed in the following section.

Following Hood (1983), Hood and Margettes (2007) ad Rhodes (1997) understanding of the role of resources, a distinction is made between 'hard' and 'soft' resources to capture the full range of qualities that resources for committing might possess. These are summarised in the table below.

Table 1		
Hard resources - tangible and external to an actor	Funds	Adequacy of size of budget for a task, etc.
	Tangible systems	Adequacy of technical infrastructure e.g. IT systems, security of buildings
	Human Resources	Adequacy to task in hand of numbers of personal.
Soft resources – intangible, internal or exist in relationships	Skills and abilities	E.g. oratory, technical expertise, skills in coordination
	Degree of influence	Social relations between people which support their power to persuade
	Organisational arrangements	

Table 1: Typical ESG issues

2.2.3 Assets at hazard

A third aspect of commitment highlighted in the literature is the recognition of the preparedness for risk on behalf of a committed actor, or a willingness to 'put assets at hazard'. For example, Tilly (1999) in his discussion of social movements defines commitment as '…persistence in costly or risky activity, declarations of readiness to persevere, resistance to attack' (p. 261). Similarly, Hirshleifer (2001) and McCourt (2003) suggest that plans or ambitions only become commitments when it is likely that they will require some form of sacrifice or challenge. On this view, a readiness to incur

risk is what separate commitment from other types of preference that an actor might hold. It is also consistent with Klein et al (2012) who argue that commitments are not 'instrumental' bonds that persist because of fear about risks of costs or loses if the bond were severed. However, Klein et al (2012) do not go far enough in their analysis of the role of risk in commitment. Commitment necessitates a preparedness to risk costs precisely because of the nature of the bond an actor has towards an object.

In a political context, resources utilised to achieve control or influence over outcomes can be understood as assets. When utilised in the pursuit of an object of commitment, hard and soft resources e.g. time, energy, funds, can be wasted if utilised unsuccessfully or unstrategically. It is these forms of interaction i.e. the putting at hazard of assets in the process of being committed, which run the risk of incurring a loss, and which are captured by this limb of the definition. Resources are scarce in that they may not be available, or of use, when called on in the process of committing in the future. Because of the scarcity of resources, their utilisation for the act of commitment therefore requires weighing of preferences, and consideration of opportunity costs. Similarly, commitment implies the risk of wastage of certain kinds of hard and soft resources. Assets put at hazard may be lost, even if the object of commitment is achieved.

The three conditions of 'intention', 'capacity' and 'assets at hazard' capture a political actors' stance towards a policy. An actor who meets these three conditions would be said to be 'committed in principle'. However, commitment itself implies action to pursue the object of commitment and, for this, additional evidence of behaviour is required before commitment can be established with any confidence.

2.2 Committed behaviours

2.2.1 Perseverance over time

For a number of scholars, the notion of commitment is intrinsically bound up with the necessity of perseverance over time. Nesse (2001) argues that committed individuals '… keep trying to reach self-imposed goals or expectations, even if that becomes difficult to sustain' (p. 245). Similarly, Tilly (1999, 2005) discussion of social movements suggests that it is crucial for committed actors to show their commitment through perseverance against resistance. In this context, it is the demonstration of commitment by persevering that is important because of its communicative value as a signifies to other of the character of the social movement. Commitment also has a symbolic value to groups associated with social movements, as it helps to cement the formation and sustainment of their identity. However, Tilly (2005) does not treat perseverance seriously enough and mistakenly takes demonstrations of commitment to be a defining feature. Perseverance must mean more than a means to communicate intentions, as it requires that actors actually do behave in a certain way over time, despite the risks of incurring loss. The significance of an actor's resolve to persist with a course of action where resistance is experienced must therefore be a central element of what it means to be committed.

2.2.2 Against escalating cost

Committed actors are likely to engage in the 'escalation' of their commitment to an object, even in the face of receiving negative feedback on their initial decision to allocate resources in its pursuit (Staw, 1981; Staw and Ross, 1978). This is based on an understanding of commitments as being informed by both expected outcomes and the desire to justify past decisions. Staw (1981) argues that actors persevere in the face of escalating costs in the hope of avoiding loss, measured from the reference point of the initial decision to allocate resources to a goal. The act of escalating their commitment by investing additional resources takes place in an effort to make good on the initial investment. In doing so, the actor refuses to treat 'sunk costs' as sunk (i.e. refuses to discount cost already incurred from future decisions about behaviour), and instead become 'locked-in' to a pattern of repeated investment.

Actors may also selectively filter information they receive in an attempt to maintain their commitment. The costs associated with perseverance, although escalating in an objective sense, are filtered so that they do not enter calculations about preferred behaviour in an explicit way. Work by Sellsemen et al (2012) finds support for six different varieties of theoretical explanation for the escalation phenomena in their meta-analysis of the literature. All of these are grounded in a subjective weighing of alternatives, rather than a judgement about objective conditions. These suggest that actors' who escalate their commitment either disproportionately weigh continuation over deviation from the current course of action, or else they are unable to conceive of an alterative.

Element (iv) 'perseverance over time' and element (v) 'escalation of costs' are clearly closely related in that they both pertain to the utilisation of resource over time in pursuit of the object of commitment. In order to clarify the distinction between these two strands of the concept, Figure 1 sets out their relationship with one another by showing the *types* of cost associated with being committed.
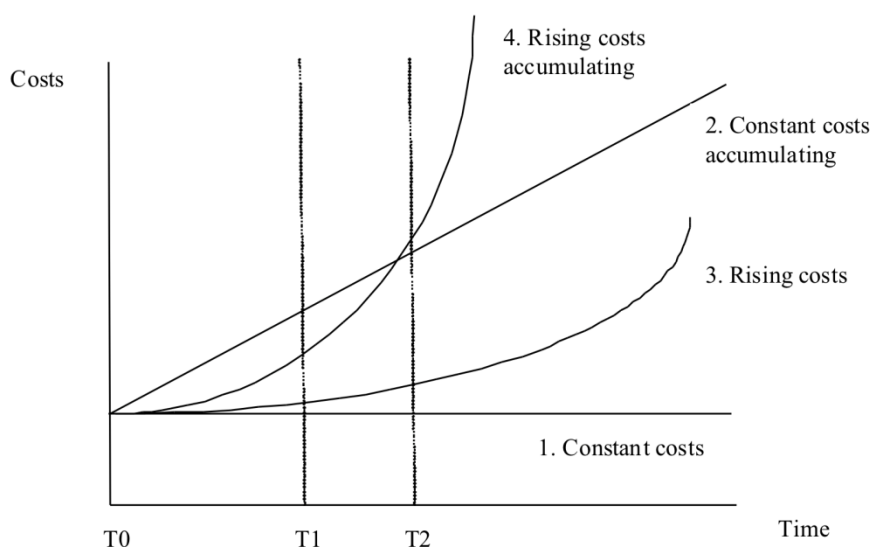

Figure 1: Commitment to the PRI Code

3. Further research and conclusions

The next phase of the research is to explore commitment in various arena, such as at parliamentary and executive levels, and to draw some relevant conclusions. Comments on this initial phase are welcome.

References

Full details available from the author:
- Bellamy (2012)
- Chimezie and Osigweh (1989)
- Conway and Briner (2012)
- Gardner et al (2011)
- Hirshleifer (2001)
- Hood (1983)
- Hood and Margetts (2007)
- Klein et al (2009)
- Klein et al (2012)
- McCourt (2003)

- Meyer et al (1989)
- Morrissey (1995)
- Nesse (2001)
- Ostroff (1992)
- Rhodes (1997)
- Sartori (1970)
- Sellsemen et al (2012)
- Staw (1981)
- Staw and Ross (1978)
- Tett and Meyer (1993)
- Tilly (1999 & 2005)
- Williams and Anderson (1991)