

**COMMITMENT IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE:  
EXPERIENCES OF A GROUP OF FEDERAL PUBLIC SERVANTS**

**Doctor of Philosophy in Management**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A great deal has been learnt about organizational commitment since research began over 50 years ago. In recent years the focus has been on the relationship between commitment and human resource management (HRM) practices; (Kinnie, Hutchinson, Purcell, Rayton and Swart, 2005) commitment as an element of motivation; (Meyer, Becker and Vandenberghe, 2004) and the ongoing paradoxical nature of commitment and its relationship to performance (Wright and Bonnett, 2002; Chen and Francesco, 2001; Siders, George and Dharwadkar, 2001; Kibeom, Carswell and Allen, 2000; Becker, Billings, Eveleth and Gilbert, 1996; Allen and Meyer, 1996; Meyer and Bobocel, 1991; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer, Paunonen, Gellatly, Goffin and Jackson, 1989; Allen and Smith, 1987). It seems that the more researchers delve into this multidimensional construct, the more complex it becomes.

This thesis steps back from this level of complexity and revisits the construct of commitment as it is experienced by a group of Australian federal public service employees. Little is known about the form that commitment takes in the public sector in general and in this context in particular; consequently this study sought to address this.

Allen and Meyer's three component model of organizational commitment (1990) being affective, normative and continuance commitment, was adopted for the purposes of this research. Firstly, it was of interest to determine if these particular employees experienced a dominance of continuance commitment as has been presented in the literature as common to public sector employees (Goulet and Frank, 2002; Abbott, White and Charles, 2005; Lyons, Duxbury and Higgins, 2006). Secondly, this thesis explores the form that continuance commitment takes for these Australian federal public service employees, and if it is experienced in a manner that is similar to Allen and Meyer's definition of continuance commitment, or if it is varied in its form, as the literature suggests is possible (Allen and Meyer, 1990). Finally, this thesis considers the implications these findings may have on the way that human resource management (HRM) practices and policies are implemented in this context, in line with the literature that shows clear linkages between organizational commitment and HRM functions (Ouchi, 1981; Peters and

Waterman, 1982; Meyer and Smith, 2000; Guest, 2002; Steijn and Leisink, 2006; Grant, Dutton and Russo, 2008; Conway and Monks, 2009; Gong, Law, Change and Xin, 2009)

**Three research questions were posited:**

- 1) What levels of continuance commitment are experienced by a group of Australian federal public servants?
- 2) In what way, if any, does continuance commitment differ for this group of public service employees?
- 3) What implications are evident for HRM practices in the Australian public sector context?

An initial quantitative study sought to measure the dominance or otherwise of continuance commitment, relative to normative and affective commitment, for these employees in a public sector organization. Following this a qualitative approach explored the form that continuance commitment took for these employees and in doing so also explored the form that affective and normative commitment took, however, to a lesser degree. The focus of this thesis is on the dominance or otherwise of continuance commitment and the form it takes, for these particular Australian federal public servants, and the implications of this on current HRM practices, set within the public sector context. The process of measurement and exploration of continuance commitment, relative to affective and normative commitment states resulted in data being gathered and analyzed on all three forms of commitment, with a clear focus on continuance commitment, in line with the intention of this study.

The greater interest in continuance commitment and what it looks like in this public sector setting rests on two key issues. The first issue reflects the literature that suggests this component of commitment is dominant in public sector organizations (Goulet and Frank, 2002; Abbott, White and Charles, 2005; Lyons, Duxbury and Higgins, 2006). The second issue reflects the literature that shows a relationship between commitment and performance that includes a negative correlation between continuance commitment and performance (Meyer and Bobocel, 1991; Allen and Meyer 1996; Allen and Smith 1987; Chen and Francesco 2001; Mathieu and

Zajac 1990; Meyer, Paunonen, Gellatly, Goffin and Jackson 1989; Becker, Billings, Eveleth and Gilbert 1996; Kibeom, Carswell and Allen, 2000; Siders, George and Dharwadkar, 2001; Wright and Bonnett, 2002). At a time when the Australian Public Service (APS) is implementing reforms that aim to place the APS in the top performing public services in the world (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010, p. v).seeking a better understanding of the formation of commitment and its influence on HRM and invariable, on performance, is well timed.

The findings of this research were less supportive of the literature than expected. It was expected that continuance commitment would be dominant for these employees and this was supported through qualitative data. It was also expected that continuance commitment would present in a manner typical of Allen and Meyer's (1990) definition, however, this was not found to be true for these public sector respondents. Rather, it appeared through the qualitative data that continuance commitment took a varied form for these employees. It was expected that the quantitative stage of this research would accurately measure the level of continuance commitment experienced by these respondents, relative to affective and normative commitment and yet the quantitative data failed to present an accurate measurement of the experience of commitment for these employees. This was despite the fact that the questionnaire used in this study was widely accepted as reliable and despite two pre-tests that confirmed its applicability. It was concluded that the reduced applicability of the questionnaire in this study may have been a consequence of the influence of this particular context on this tool. If this were the case, it may throw into question previous research into how organizational commitment is measured and experienced in public sector organizations and may identify a problem in this field.

It was expected that a dominance of continuance commitment would present as problematic, as it has done so in the past (Allen and Smith 1987; Goffin and Jackson 1989; Iles, Mabey and Roberston, 1990; Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Meyer and Bobocel, 1991; Allen and Meyer 1996; Meyer, Paunonen, Gellatly, Becker, Billings, Eveleth and Gilbert 1996; Kibeom, Carswell and Allen, 2000; Chen and Francesco 2001; Siders, George and Dharwadkar, 2001; Wright and Bonnett, 2002). However, consideration of a commitment profile resulted in the conclusion that this dominance was less problematic than expected. It was also unexpected that both affective and normative commitment appeared to vary in their form, as well as continuance commitment.

It became apparent that the variation on all three forms of commitment not only formed a rather unique commitment profile for these individuals, but was likely to be reflective of the employment context in which they worked, which supports the literature on this relationship (Pierce and Dunham, 1987; Lee et al., 1992; Wilson, 1995; Nyhan, 1999; Clugston et al., 2000; Chen and Francesco, 2001; Perry, 2004; Swailes, 2004; Abbott et al., 2005).

Finally, the implications of these findings resulted in theoretical discussions on a number of issues:

- 1) the applicability of research methodology and the possibility that a dominance of quantitative research in this field is resulting in a lack of exploration and consideration of variances in all three components of commitment;
- 2) the possibility that there is a problem with the way commitment has been measured in public sector organizations if it presents in an atypical manner;
- 3) the value of exploring commitment profiles and the link between this and performance as opposed to considering only separate components of commitment and how they relate to performance;
- 4) the role that commitment plays as a mediator between HRM practice and organizational performance and the possibility that the psychological state of commitment sits in the 'black box' of HRM (Edwards and Wright, 2001; Conway and Monks, 2009);
- 5) the possibility that continuance commitment as it is experienced by these particular employees, is perpetuated by a process of bulk recruitment, supporting the literature that suggests that continuance commitment can be developed through actual HRM practices (Gong, Law, Chang and Xin, 2009); and
- 6) the possibility that there is a lack of understanding of the commitment construct by employees themselves which may impact on individual's performance management, professional development and career planning.

This study was not intended to build theory from data collated and analyzed from multiple case studies or larger sized groups. Rather, this study sought to contribute to research into organizational commitment as it is experienced within a public sector context as there is less known about commitment in public sector organizations than there is about commitment in private sector organizations. It was not intended that the findings of this study be extrapolated beyond the experiences of the individuals who took part in this study. A single, illustrative case study was undertaken to determine if commitment, in particular continuance commitment, looked the same for these public service employees as had been reported for public sector employees elsewhere. This study showed that all three components of commitment presented in Allen and Meyer's three component model, being affective, normative and continuance commitment, were atypical for these employees. Although it was considered possible that continuance commitment may be varied in its form for these employees, as Allen and Meyer have suggested in their work (1990) it was not expected that affective and normative commitment would also be varied in their forms. Consequently a key finding of this study is that commitment for these public sector employees differs more than expected and, if this were found to be true of other public sector employees, there may be a problem in the way commitment in public sector organizations has been measured in the past. It may be that a dominance of quantitative research, well tested in the private sector and applied in the public sector may not have measured commitment as well as was expected. The research into commitment in public sector organizations may, therefore, be incomplete. Further qualitative research into commitment as it is experienced by public sector employees may shed light on this issue and would confirm the degree to which this is true for other public sector organizations. Thus, the literature that suggests that commitment is low or non-existent in public sector organizations (Goulet and Frank, 2002; Abbott et al., 2005; Lyons et al., 2006) and which adopts Allen and Meyer's three component model and measures through quantitative methodologies, may not be as accurate as thought. If commitment is varied in its form, then commitment as defined through Allen and Meyer's model may be low or non-existent, but commitment in its varied form, reflective of the public sector context, may not be.

The key contributions that this thesis makes to the literature on organizational behaviour and organizational commitment are, therefore:

- As expected, continuance commitment was the dominant form of commitment experienced by these public sector employees, however, in a varied form;
- variances were found in the forms that all three components of commitment took for these Australian public sector employees which may suggest that there is a problem with the way commitment has been measured in public sector organizations in the past;
- a unique commitment profile formed reflecting these variances that appeared to be reflective of the culture and congruent with the context;
- variations in the forms of all three commitment components resulted in the quantitative research process failing to accurately measure commitment as it was experienced by these respondents;
- the unique commitment profile and its congruence to the culture and context suggests that the dominance of continuance commitment was less problematic than expected;
- the dominance of continuance commitment may be, theoretically, a direct consequence of a specific HRM practice known as bulk recruitment; and
- theoretically, commitment may sit in the 'black box' of HRM and mediate the relationship between HRM practice and organizational performance.

This thesis presents a mixed methodology study; with findings from each of the quantitative and qualitative stages of this study presented and discussed. It also presents several theoretical considerations and suggestions for further research into the field of organizational commitment in public sector environments, and in general.

## **Certificate of Authorship of Thesis**

Except where clearly acknowledged in footnotes, quotations and the bibliography, I certify that I am the sole author of the thesis submitted today entitled –

*Commitment in the Australian Public Service: A New Perspective*

I further certify that to the best of my knowledge the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

The material in the thesis has not been the basis of an award of any other degree or diploma except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

The thesis complies with University requirements for a thesis as set out in *Gold Book Part 7: Examination of Higher Degree by Research Theses Policy, Schedule Two (S2)*. Refer to <http://www.canberra.edu.au/research-students/goldbook>

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**Signature of Candidate**

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**Signature of chair of the supervisory panel**

**Date:** .....

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