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Organizational Commitment, Psychological Contract Fulfillment and Job Performance: A Longitudinal Quanti-qualitative Study

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Abstract

The goals of this study are to contribute to the understanding of the development of organizational commitment and to explore the relations among psychological contract fulfillment, organizational commitment, and job performance. This paper reports the findings of a longitudinal quanti-qualitative study conducted with newcomers over three years. We identified four trajectories of commitment development: Learning to Love, High Match, Honeymoon Hangover and Learning to Hate. The last one is originally proposed in this study, and it is represented by individuals who began work highly committed to the organization, but then their commitment levels decreased dramatically over time. We discuss some characteristics associated with these trajectories. Our results corroborate the assumption that psychological contract fulfillment is positively related to commitment. Nevertheless, our findings about the relationship between commitment and job performance were different according to the trajectories. The trajectories Learning to Love and Learning to Hate support the assumption that higher commitment levels would lead to better performance, and vice versa; however, the trajectories High Match and Honeymoon Hangover contradict it. We offer and discuss some possible explanations for these findings.

Key words: organizational commitment; job performance; psychological contract; public sector management; human resources management.

Introduction

Organizational commitment and psychological contracts are constructs that develop over time (Bastos, Maia, Rodrigues, Macambira, & Borges-Andrade, 2014; Conway & Briner, 2005; Costa & Bastos, 2013; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). The development may result in trajectories of weakening, strengthening, or stabilizing for these employee-organization linkages. On the one hand, the assumption is that the fulfillment of a psychological contract by the employer and also the high levels of organizational commitment among employees have desirable consequences, such as better job performance (Correia & Mainardes, 2010; Riketta, 2008). On the other hand, there is a complementary assumption that breaches and violations in psychological contracts are associated with lower organizational commitment and job performance (Chen, Tsui, & Zhong, 2008). Nevertheless, studies investigating the consequences of fulfilling, breaking and violating psychological contracts are still needed (Gondim & Rios, 2010; Menegon & Casado, 2012).

Although these three constructs (*i.e.*, psychological contracts, organizational commitment and job performance) each have a long tradition of research separately, they are relatively isolated with little communication between them when taken together. This paper reports the findings of a qualitative study that followed the development of psychological contracts, organizational commitments and job performances of newcomers during the first three years of their employment in a Brazilian public sector agency. It is complemented by a longitudinal quantitative survey with the same subjects conducted in parallel. The results of the quantitative research are partly used and are examined in conjunction with the qualitative data. The main goal of this study is to contribute to the understanding of the development of organizational commitment, by illustrating the different patterns each with special qualities, in addition to meeting the goal of exploring the relations among psychological contract fulfillment, organizational commitment, and job performance.

The next section of this paper presents a literature review on organizational commitment, psychological contract and job performance, which provides the basis for our analysis. Then, the Method section presents our research design, showing how we developed this quantitative and qualitative longitudinal study, and how we conducted data analysis. The fourth section presents the identification of patterns, the selection of representative cases for each of these patterns, and the quantitative and qualitative results. Then, we discuss and highlight the findings, present some limitations of this study and also suggestions for future research. Finally, in the last section, we conclude and point out this paper's main contributions.

Theoretical Framework

Organizational commitment is often defined as a linkage, bond, or attachment of an individual to an organization (Klein, Molloy, & Cooper, 2009). However, this general definition combines fundamentally different attitudinal phenomena. In the three-component model of organizational commitment, there are three different types of commitment; *i.e.*, affective, normative and continuance. The affective organizational commitment (AOC) highlights the emotional nature that characterizes a linkage between a person and an organization. The normative organizational commitment refers to a kind of link that is maintained due to a feeling of obligation. The bond that exists only because individuals have no other choice is known as continuance commitment. Perhaps the three components have different consequences because they originate from different causes (Bastos *et al.*, 2014).

The three-component model of organizational commitment has been conceptually criticized in that the three bases are possibly three distinct constructs (Rodrigues & Bastos, 2010). We are especially interested in AOC because this type of bond has the strongest correlations with desirable behaviors at work (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). The normative and continuance

commitments usually present a negative correlation for the same behaviors (Bastos *et al.*, 2014; Maia & Bastos, 2011).

More specifically, our special interest in AOC is in contributing to the discussion on how it develops over time. Thus, we emphasize the importance of considering the AOC as a dynamic phenomenon that may change over time, rather than as a static concept (Bastos *et al.*, 2014; Costa & Bastos, 2013). In this sense, it is important to point out that predictors related to AOC are not necessarily predictors of AOC trajectories. A contextual variable which is associated with low levels of AOC, for example, is not necessarily associated with decreasing trajectories of AOC over time. In other words, what keeps the AOC at a specific level may be different than what makes it increase or decrease over time.

Furthermore, we expect to address a broader perspective than the research on increasing or how to increase AOC. We expect to collaborate in the research on low AOC and how the decrease of AOC happens. Obviously, it is not because there is interest in reducing levels of organizational commitment, but rather because there is interest in preventing them from falling. As highlighted by Morrow (2011), there is an organizational reticence to address cases of low organizational commitment.

In a study with newcomers over 25 consecutive weeks, Solinger, Olffen, Roe and Hofmans (2013) proposed a taxonomy of three scenarios, identifying trajectories of weakening, strengthening, and stabilizing organizational commitment. The stable trajectory includes the scenarios that maintain the bond over time; *e.g.*, if the commitment was initially strong, it is sustained this way over time. In other words, it is a **High Match**. The **Learning to Love** scenario represents the trajectory of strengthening in the cases where the newcomer has initial relatively low commitment that then steadily increases. The **Honeymoon Hangover** scenario represents a weakening after entry of the bond that was initially strong. This has been discussed in previous studies (Cropanzano, James, & Konovsky, 1993).

The concept of psychological contract is linked to organizational commitment, since beliefs about the job agreement bind the involved parties to some set of obligations to each other. The psychological contract is the set of beliefs about the reciprocal obligations between an individual and an organization (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Even before joining an organization, a psychological contract begins to form, through pre-existing expectations about the organization. Gradually, these pre-entry expectations will take the form of perceived obligations that compose the psychological contract.

The breach of the psychological contract occurs when an individual perceives that the obligations that he or she believes to exist between the parties have not been fulfilled (Robinson & Morrison, 2000). The violation of a psychological contract is an emotional experience of disappointment, frustration, anger and resentment that might emanate from the way the employee interprets and feels about the psychological contract breaches and their circumstances (Morrison & Robinson, 1997).

Generally, the studies relate a negative relationship between breaches in psychological contract and organizational commitment (*e.g.* Cassar & Briner, 2011; Lapointe, Vandenberghe, & Boudrias, 2013). The effects of psychological contract violation on organizational commitment have been investigated in the public sector context of different countries (*e.g.* Shahnawaz & Goswami, 2011; Simosi, 2013). The general conclusion of these studies is that, as with the breaches, violations in psychological contract are negatively related to organizational commitment. The fulfillment of a psychological contract, on the other hand, was found to have a positive impact on AOC of public sector employees (Parzefall, 2008). In a study of civil servants in France, Castaing (2006) found a significant association between psychological contract variables and AOC.

AOC has also been related to organization-relevant outcomes as organizational citizenship behaviour and job performance in previous studies (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). On the other hand, job performance is endowed with a wide heterogeneity of predictors (Coelho & Borges-Andrade, 2011). We refer to job performance as the behaviour that is relevant to the organization goals and that can be measured (Campbell, 1999). Traditionally, studies turn towards the investigation of performance management in organizational environments and their consequences, measures, nuances and biases.

Performance management is “a process consisting of managerial behaviours aimed at defining, measuring, motivating, and developing the desired performance of employees” (Kinicki, Jacobson, Peterson, & Prussia, 2013, p. 4). Findings of the meta-analysis studies suggest that commitment affects performance, albeit weakly (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Riketta, 2008). In general, findings about the commitment-performance relationship are non-conclusive (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Mowday *et al.*, 1982).

Method

We conducted the quantitative and qualitative longitudinal study simultaneously. A triangulation of methods was used to maximize the quality and validity of the theoretical contributions made (Flick, 2009). By utilizing a qualitative approach, this study offers an empirical illustration about how the relationship between the constructs develops over time and how it might be interpreted. The qualitative study examines and provides background for the discussion of assumptions on which most of the earlier quantitative studies have been based.

It is worth noting that one of the aims of this study is to explore how fulfillment of the psychological contract could affect AOC and job performance; however, we do not aim to study the relationship between these variables, since it would not be consistent with the qualitative method, which is our main approach in this study. We aim to go beyond the **how much** question, to question **what the essential qualities are** (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The **how much** question usually employs traditional quantitative and aggregate-level analysis, thus we cannot draw inferences regarding the qualities of intra-individual changes from most such studies. The mean, for example, does not refer to details; instead, it refers to the general feature of the group. Most important, traditional quantitative aggregate-level analysis is usually unable to address the differences in a small portion of the sample. For example, in a quantitative study, if there is a small amount of individuals in the whole sample that significantly decrease their commitment levels over time, it is very likely that this group of individuals would be treated as outliers or that their results would be dissolved through the mean of a larger sample group.

Research context

This research was conducted in an autonomous federal government agency that has approximately 4,000 employees. In the job market, the agency offers comparatively high salaries, and the performance-pay link is limited. The organizational context is of low attrition and high job security, as long-term employment is guaranteed by the agency. In Brazil, stability is afforded to public employees to ensure that they remain in public service. It is achieved only after fulfilling certain requirements, such as passing job performance appraisals and remaining for a probationary period of three years actively working on the job.

Quantitative assessment: the sample, procedures and measures

We conducted the first survey during the orientation training before entry. In the invitation e-mail, a text presented the study along with an external link to the questionnaire. The newcomers received the invitation to answer the survey by e-mail during the orientation training (t1= Time 1), then approximately one year after entry (t2), and again approximately three years after entry (t3). The survey length was chosen to cover the probationary period of three years necessary to achieve stability.

Organizational affective commitment was calibrated with an instrument composed of 4 items from the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ), developed by Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979), translated and adapted for Brazil by Borges-Andrade, Afanasieff and Silva (1989); and of 3 items from the Affective Commitment Scale (ACS), developed by Allen and Meyer (1990), translated and adapted for Brazil by Medeiros and Enders (1998). Illustrative items are **I talk about this organization to my friends as a great organization to work for** and **This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me**. We assessed the AOC at Times 1, 2, and 3, on a Likert Scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree.

We calibrated the fulfillment of a psychological contract with an instrument composed of 20 items developed by Maia and Bastos (2014). Illustrative items of employer and employee obligations are **provide autonomy to do my job**, and **bring own ideas and creativity into this firm**. We assessed the fulfillment of the psychological contract at Times 2 and 3, by asking respondents to indicate on a 5-point scale, ranging from **not at all** to **overcame**. We assessed job performance by supervisor ratings in performance appraisals undertaken by the organization in periods near to Times 2 and 3. They use a 4-point Scale, however. To protect the identity of the participants we did not report the exact values.

Qualitative assessment: interviewee selection and procedure

At the end of the first questionnaire, the respondents were asked to state whether they would agree to be interviewed. One hundred and forty-two people volunteered to be interviewed. The selection of these respondents resulted from an exploratory analysis of the first collection results, which identified extreme cases of individuals with the highest and lowest levels of AOC. We interviewed 18 individuals on the first and second days at work (t1= Time 1). We closed the sampling process and decided to stop the interviews after the 18th interview, for theoretical saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). From the 16th interview on, we began to note the absence of new evidences to support theory. We interviewed 2 more subjects in order to confirm the theoretical saturation. One year later, we interviewed those 18 individuals again (t2). Finally, a few months before they completed three years of employment, and just after the last job performance evaluation that concluded the probationary period, we interviewed 13 individuals (t3). In total, we conducted 49 interviews over three years.

We interviewed each individual for approximately one and a half hours each time. We conducted the semi-structured interviews in a meeting room. The interviewer reinforced that the survey was in no way connected to the organization's human resources department and was conducted under academic supervision. Confidentiality was formally guaranteed, and participation in the study was voluntary. The structure of the interviews was designed to guide the assessment, and all the interviewees were asked the same questions. However, the respondents were free to report their work experiences in the organization in their own way. To improve the conformability of the generated knowledge, the interviewer presented to the interviewee at the end of each interview an interpretative review of each answer given to the interviewer and confirmed if the interpretation was accurate (Flick, 2009).

The interviewees in the first round were representative of different levels of the propensity to commitment and with different personal characteristics. Throughout this study, we sought to maintain this representative picture of diversity. However, during the course of the study, a few participants withdrew from the study for various reasons. Our concern was that willingness to avoid being interviewed was mainly maintained by those who wanted to complain about the organization. Given this, we conducted some analyses to investigate the possibility of bias produced by attrition. We observe that despite the loss, the different trajectories continued to be representative. We analyzed the quantitative results of the participants who were interviewed at the three times and answered all of the data collections. At this point, it is important to highlight that we did not start from quantitative data analysis to the qualitative data. Instead, we started from the qualitative analysis, by which we identified different patterns suggested in previous studies (Cropanzano *et al.*, 1993; Solinger, Olfen, Roe, & Hofmans, 2013) and only then went to the quantitative results, in order to verify the frequency of those

patterns identified in the total sample. The quantitative results contributed to the interpretation of qualitative results in an iterative process.

Analytic strategy

The interviews were taped and transcribed in full. To ensure the confidentiality of the information and anonymity of participants, we omitted information related to such areas as age, gender, marital status, department in the organization where they work or have worked and specific experiences. Fictitious names that emulated those of great painters were chosen. The interviews were carried out in Portuguese, and the transcribed segments here were freely translated. We did not use any special software for qualitative data analysis. Three categories were created based on the theoretical framework, in an inductive process supported by theory (Bardin, 1977): organizational commitment, psychological contract development and job performance. We analyzed the data that resulted from the qualitative assessment using content analysis to identify the themes related to each category. Data were analyzed as a form of expression of different theorized patterns of the development of organizational commitment (Bailer-Jones, 2009). The findings about how the fulfillment of the psychological contract could affect AOC and job performance were built abductively with a consequent theorization on the investigated phenomena (Gondim & Bendassolli, 2014).

As part of our analytic strategy, we selected the most characteristic and extreme cases, with greater potential contribution to the interpretation of the phenomena under study. Here, it is worth remembering that qualitative research is not strengthened by the numbers; instead, it is by the wealth of information and the diversity of illustrations; these are the strongest features of qualitative research. Reporting the detailed results of 49 interviews with about 80 hours of transcribed dialogues here would not make the contribution of this study more relevant. Nevertheless, somehow, even indirectly, we are reporting the results of 49 interviews, as they were all analyzed in full and by this analysis we selected the most representative cases that would be worth reporting (Guest *et al.*, 2006). Inferring the characteristics of the population from the cases was not an objective of the present study.

Results

Results are presented in three parts. First, we relate the patterns identified and the selection of representative cases for each of these patterns. Second, we relate the quantitative results of AOC, psychological contract fulfillment, and job performance of the respondents grouped by trajectories. Lastly, we relate the qualitative data, grouped by patterns, in order to illustrate the results about AOC, psychological contract development and job performance.

The first pattern identified is represented by 2 individuals who had increased levels of AOC at all times. AOC levels of these individuals increased gradually and consistently over the years. This steadily increasing pattern of commitment was named **Learning to Love** by Solinger *et al.* (2013). The second pattern identified is represented by 3 individuals who had a stable trajectory, maintaining the bond over time. The commitment level was initially high, and it was sustained this way over time. This trajectory was named **High Match** (Solinger *et al.*, 2013). The third pattern identified is represented by 3 individuals with steadily decreasing commitment, and was named **Honeymoon Hangover** (Solinger *et al.*, 2013). The fourth group is represented by 2 individuals who began working with high AOC levels, but then their AOC levels decreased significant and dramatically over time. We named this trajectory as **Learning to Hate**.

In the end, 10 individuals were interviewed at the three times. As reported, the trajectory Learning to Love had 2 representative cases, the High Match and Honeymoon Hangover trajectories had 3 cases each, and the trajectory Learning to Hate had 2 cases. Nevertheless, the information considering the 10 individuals showed a high degree of redundancy, so, we chose to report the representative cases of 6

individuals. The cases are discussed, compared and interpreted. Ultimately, we report the analysis of 18 interviews (*i.e.*, 6 individuals who were interviewed 3 times each) in parallel with the results of the quantitative study.

Table 1 reports the observed levels of AOC, psychological contract fulfillment, and information about the respondents' job performances as grouped by trajectories.

Of the total sample, approximately 9% showed the pattern of development of the levels of AOC in a similar way to that shown by the Learning to Love trajectory. Another 32% developed AOC levels over time in a similar way to the pattern represented by the High Match trajectory, 33% in a similar way to the Honeymoon Hangover trajectory, and 14% to the Learning to Hate trajectory. Of the entire study sample, 12% of subjects had developmental trajectories of AOC different than those represented in this study. Some of these individuals had trajectories described as Moderate or Low Match and others had a history of ups and downs.

Table 1

Affective Organizational Commitment Trajectories, Psychological Contract Fulfillment, and Job Performance

Case	Trajectory	Affective Organizational Commitment			Psychological Contract Fulfillment				Job Performance
					Employer Obligations		Employee Obligations		
		(t1)	(t2)	(t3)	(t2)	(t3)	(t2)	(t3)	
Miró	Learning to Love	3.57	3.86	4.71	2.33	3.40	2.73	3.27	Rising from medium to maximum
Michelangelo	High Match	5.00	5.00	4.71	3.53	2.73	3.67	3.67	Stabilized at maximum
Paul		4.57	4.57	4.43	3.33	2.73	3.67	3.93	Rising from minimum* to maximum
Gustav	Honeymoon	4.57	3.57	3.29	3.53	2.33	3.13	3.13	Rising from minimum* to medium
Claude	Hangover	3.57	3.29	3.00	3.20	2.87	3.80	3.67	Rising gradually around the median values
Vincent	Learning to Hate	4.43	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	3.50	3.54	Decreasing from medium* to minimum

Note. 't' before a number indicates 'Time' (e.g., t1 = Time1). Affective Organizational Commitment and Psychological Contract Fulfillment are expressed on a 5-point scale.

* Minimum acceptable for approval on probationary period.

Learning to love trajectory

The main reasons that led Miró, the representative of the Learning to Love trajectory, to choose to work for this organization were associated with salary and status. He hoped to find an infrastructure similar to what he had in his previous job, but to a lesser extent. Miró's expectations were formed from information he received from many people he knew who were already working in the organization. Miró had positive expectations about the working environment and expected to find rapport with people easily. According to the representative of the Learning to Love trajectory, his level of commitment to the organization did not change significantly over the first three years of work, and the relationship developed gradually.

"I do not tend to be the type who wears the shirt and goes out selling the organization very much, I'm not that profile, but I'm not the opposite type either, that ceases to defend when one must defend. (...) When asked, yes, I usually defend and I feel proud. (...) I accepted the position in which I find myself, and so I am working there trying to offer the best I can in the place where I find myself today."

Miró mentioned satisfaction with regard to the issues of the flexibility of working hours and the negotiation of holidays. Miró expected to find well-qualified people and said, "in fact, I checked and confirmed. I realized that there are real talents here." The manager positively surprised Miró:

"The management tried to maintain close contact; this aspect I found very positive. He created a space in his schedule to talk to the newcomers, understand the perception that we had on arrival; it was once or twice, but I thought it was very important, although they were brief moments."

With regard to his job performance, Miró said that he was trying to adapt to the job and taking what had been given to him as a challenge. According to him, from time to time, he realized that his work was valued. Miró noted that despite hearing that the supervisors had the habit of simply giving the highest score to everyone in the performance evaluation, his supervisor had not done this, which he perceived as a very positive thing. According to Miró, the supervisor gave him scores and justified them, talked to him, praised what had to be commended and explained how he could do better in certain areas. Miró assessed the relationship with his manager as very positive.

High match trajectory

As one of the representatives of the High Match trajectory, Michelangelo was led to choose the organization because of the perception he had of the organization as respected, important and valued in society. Michelangelo always admired the organization a great deal. This admiration was formed from what he had heard about it: that employees have many opportunities for professional development and that it was a pleasant working environment.

The expectations of Paul, the other representative of the High Match trajectory, were also formed from the comments filled with pride that he heard from the employees of the organization. Although he said that his expectations were good because he believed that the organization had good administrative practices, he was concerned about keeping himself free from preconceived notions so that he could "face the challenge in an unbiased way".

The representatives of the High Match trajectory perceived themselves as employees who are highly committed to the organization. For Michelangelo, his organizational commitment levels did not change over the years of the study. On the other hand, according to the perception of Paul, his organizational commitment increased as a function of the increased responsibility given to him. For Paul, his organizational commitment resulted from a process of adaptation to the organization during which he learned to like the work:

"As much as possible, I try to see if we can improve or not instead of complaining. I think it helps you to be more committed if you try not to complain, but to understand and improve, you try to commit in order to improve it."

Michelangelo did not report any disappointment or frustration. For him, everything was as he had imagined it would be. The organization exceeded the expectations that Michelangelo had on the issues of the working hours flexibility and the focus on results. For Paul, work ceased to be the end and became the means. He realized that he did not feel anguish about the need to do what he liked anymore, as he used to feel before. For him, this anguish had diminished with time. What is important for Paul is to work in a place that gives him a decent job, a good salary and quality of life to enjoy the things he likes.

The representatives of the High Match trajectory reported that they perceived themselves as having good job performance and stated that they felt that they were exercising a function valued by society.

Honeymoon hangover trajectory

One of the representatives of the Honeymoon Hangover trajectory, Claude, declared that he was really trying not to have many expectations so he would not to be disappointed. The main reasons that led Claude to choose the organization were pay, the quality of life, stability and job security. Gustav, the other representative of the trajectory, in turn, had expectations of working with friendly people and liking the work he was going to do a great deal and being part of a respected organization.

The representatives of Honeymoon Hangover trajectory said they felt committed to the organization. Claude declared that he always perceived himself as a highly committed employee who is proud and recommends and endorses the organization in front of others, if necessary. As for Gustav, as a result of some disappointments he had, he still feels committed but no longer has long-term plans with the organization:

“The first opportunity I have to leave, I’ll leave, it’s kind of, it’s like I am holding a grudge, not that I’m expressing it every day, but the first chance I have, I’ll get out, do you get it? I commit myself to my work daily, do not ask me for commitment for years because I cannot promise it, do you understand?”

Over the first three years of working in the organization, many things changed for Gustav, even in his personal life. These changes made him expect more of the organization than he expected before entering. Gustav reported some great disappointments, but he said that despite everything, he still thought that it was his dream job and a job for a lifetime. Gustav was disappointed with the resistance that older employees had shown towards him. He also had expectations that the management would be more strategic than he perceived it was.

According to Claude, he had no great disappointments because he had no great expectations. Although it is not what he expected, for him, it was all right. One of his unmet expectations was about his initial position in the organization. He was not pleased at first. However, according to him, it was a place that gave him opportunities and dynamic work, which he learned to like.

The representatives of the Honeymoon Hangover trajectory reported having an acceptable job performance. According to Claude, he is productive at work, but there was nothing new in terms of learning, and he feels stagnant.

Learning to hate trajectory

Vincent, representing the trajectory Learning to Hate, was the one with the highest expectations. Like Michelangelo, he had expectations to develop and find professional challenges. Unlike the other respondents, Vincent did not mention the pay, stability or job security among the reasons for choosing the organization.

“I’m entering with very high expectations and hope to make a very interesting career, serving the nation in the best possible way, and even though the assignments (of the organization) are complicated, very complex, I’m really willing to study, dedicate myself and be an excellent employee.”

One year later, Vincent perceived himself as uncommitted to the organization. For him, his commitment is null, and he feels no pride in working for the organization. Vincent stated that for him, the organization is “over”, “has died” and has proved unworthy of his trust.

“I have a deep hate, I have a deep loathing of working here, I hate working here. (...) I just work here because I have nowhere else to go, unfortunately. I want to leave this place as quickly as possible, this place makes me sick. (...) I’m stuck ... I’m tied to the salary. You cannot fire me, you will put up with my face and I’ll put up with your faces.”

There were many disappointments according to Vincent, but those most emphasized by him were related to the work itself, including organizational characteristics such as excess bureaucracy and issues concerning the lack of equality and justice in the treatment of employees.

“We had an agreement, and this agreement went down the drain. The changes in the game rules take place at such a great speed that what you had agreed in the past is not valid any longer in the future, in a close and short time horizon...”

For Vincent, work became an obligation that was mainly related to assiduity and discipline. Vincent said he expected nothing more from work and that he was merely following orders, no longer questioning anything.

“Bring new ideas? Am I an idiot to bring new ideas? What will I gain? Nothing! I do not want to know, no. I still do what I’m told to do because I’m not an insubordinate, I’m a professional, and I still have ethics.”

From the perception of Vincent, the organization expects him to commit eight working hours a day, regardless of what he does during this time. Vincent was disappointed with the human resource management policies in the organization in general. Vincent reported one special occurrence in which he lost trust in the organization. He reported that he felt betrayed, very upset and disturbed. Moreover, he did not notice any plausible explanation for what happened. About his job performance, Vincent said that he only does what is strictly demanded from him.

Discussion

We discuss the results in two parts. First, we discuss the four different patterns of development of organizational commitment each with special qualities. Worth noting that there are probably other patterns of development of commitment beyond these four reported in this study, since approximately 12% of the sample in the quantitative study does not fit in any of these four patterns that we identified. Then, we explore the question about how the fulfillment of the psychological contract could affect AOC and job performance.

Affective organizational commitment trajectories

The first pattern identified is the Learning to Love trajectory, represented by approximately 9% of the sample in the quantitative study and by two individuals in the qualitative study. These individuals increased their levels of AOC gradually over the years. Miró, the representative case of this trajectory, committed himself to the organization gradually over the years, and the link between employer and employee was developed in a positive and consistent way. What makes the difference for an employee becoming more committed to an organization? The findings here suggest that some of the factors that could play an important role in this process are the human resource practices, the management practices, the environment and the relationship with colleagues, providing support for the assumption of these predictors of AOC as possible predictors of the increasing trajectory of AOC (Meyer *et al.*, 2002).

The second pattern identified is the High Match trajectory, represented by approximately 32% of the sample in the quantitative study and by three individuals in the qualitative study. These individuals

began to work in the organization highly committed to it and their AOC were kept at the highest levels over the years. The two cases that we chose in order to illustrate this trajectory, Michelangelo and Paul, perceived themselves as highly committed to the organization.

What can make the difference for an individual to remain highly committed to an organization? What can we learn from the first two identified trajectories and the reported cases? The illustrative cases of Learning to Love and High Match trajectories reported a generally positive assessment in relation to human resource practices and employee-organization relations. Miró and Michelangelo also expressed satisfaction regarding the issue of the flexibility of working hours and the negotiation of holidays, as well as the evaluation of their job performance.

The third pattern identified is the Honeymoon Hangover trajectory, represented by approximately 33% of the sample in the quantitative study and by three individuals in the qualitative study. Our results add empirical grounding for the taxonomy proposed by Solinger *et al.* (2013), suggesting that at least these three trajectories really could exist, and illustrating it with cases. The individuals in the Honeymoon Hangover trajectory began to work in the organization committed to it and their AOC decreased gradually over the years. The two cases that we chose to illustrate this trajectory, Gustav and Claude, related that they felt committed to the organization. Interestingly, Gustav illustrated one case in which he had some disappointments with the organization, still feels committed to it but does not make long-term plans for it any longer.

Contributing to the debate on how to address the cases of low organizational commitment (Morrow, 2011), the results of the Honeymoon Hangover trajectory provide evidence that not all decreases in AOC levels should be considered alarming for managers. Surveys generally seek to identify ways to increase AOC levels to the highest. A slight decrease in AOC levels might not be as much of a problem as a dramatic decrease to the point at which the individual has no further commitment to the organization. Preventing organizational commitment levels from dramatically decreasing may be even more important than understanding the mechanisms for managing the growth of medium to high commitment levels, as evidenced by the characterization of following the trajectory.

The fourth pattern identified is the Learning to Hate trajectory, represented by approximately 14% of the sample in the quantitative study and by two individuals in the qualitative study. These individuals began to work in the organization highly committed to it and their AOC decreased significant and dramatically over time. The case that we chose to illustrate this trajectory, Vincent, related in the first interview that he felt extremely committed to the organization. However, in the second interview one year later, everything had changed radically, and he stated his commitment to the organization at that stage as null.

The Learning to Hate trajectory is originally proposed in this study, in an effort to contribute to the reduction of the research gap about how to deal with low organizational commitment (Morrow, 2011). We interpreted the results of the Learning to Hate trajectory as different from the Honeymoon Hangover, because the content of the interviews was different between these individuals. It was more intense and emotional. The individuals in the Honeymoon Hangover demonstrated being resigned to some extent. On the other hand, the individuals in the fourth pattern were resentful and angry, talking about hate, betrayals and revenge. Moreover, the decrease in the AOC levels of these individuals was consistent and more intense than it was for the newcomers in the Honeymoon Hangover pattern.

The representatives of the Honeymoon Hangover and Learning to Hate trajectories reported a generally negative assessment in relation to human resource practices and employee-organizational relations. Gustav and Vincent said that they were extremely disappointed with the human resource practices and employee-organization relations. Gustav's comments, referring to commitment itself as if he had a grudge and Vincent referring to the organization as a prison, contributes to the discussion that Rodrigues and Bastos (2010) proposes questioning the commitment of an individual who maintains his or her link to an organization, but only because he or she has no better options. This individual could actually be entrenched in the organization instead of committed to the organization.

Psychological contract, AOC and job performance

The analysis of the representative cases of extreme trajectories, Learning to Love and Learning to Hate, offer insights about the relationship between the three constructs, furthering the goal of exploring the question about how fulfillment of the psychological contract could affect AOC and job performance. Miró's levels of AOC, of the perceived fulfillment of the psychological contract and of job performance over the first three years of employment increased. Vincent's levels of AOC, on the other hand, of the perception of fulfillment of the obligations of the employer in the psychological contract and of job performance decreased. These findings offer support to and illustrate findings of previous studies (Cassar & Briner, 2011; Castaing, 2006; Lapointe *et al.*, 2013; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Parzefall, 2008; Shahrawaz & Goswami, 2011; Simosi, 2013).

Our results suggest that the fulfillment of employer obligations in the psychological contract has a positive impact on AOC, as illustrated by the cases of Miró, Michelangelo and Paul. The findings here also suggest that breaches and violations of the psychological contract have a negative impact on AOC, as illustrated by the cases of Gustav, Claude and Vincent. These findings also corroborate the results of previous studies (Cassar & Briner, 2011; Simosi, 2013).

Some personal attitudes seem to improve the impact of the fulfillment of psychological contract on AOC. This is the case of Miró, who perceived the breach of the psychological contract as a learning opportunity, and the case of Paul, who, despite realizing that the experience was not what he had first expected tried not to be affected. Claude also had an attitude that mitigated the impact that breach of the psychological contract could have had on him. First, he tried not to generate many expectations, with the clear intention of trying to avoid possible disappointment. After joining the organization, Claude sought to perceive the opportunities that were offered and tried to like the activities that he was being given to do on the job.

It is worth noting, however, that Vincent, the representative case of Learning to Hate trajectory, perceived that he has fulfilled his obligations in the psychological contract almost entirely over time. Moreover, we note that except for Miró, the fulfillment of employee obligations seems to be less related to the AOC levels than the fulfillment of employer obligations in the psychological contract. Both the quantitative as well as the qualitative results of this research suggest that a minimum level of fulfillment of employee obligations and job performance is maintained regardless of the levels of AOC, the fulfillment of employer obligations and the experiences after entry into the organization. These findings suggest that the fulfillment of the psychological contract by the employee does not have the same relationship with the AOC, as does the fulfillment of the psychological contract by the employer.

The feeling of holding a grudge against the organization or the fact of perceiving the organization as an prison, contributes to the discussion that Fink (1992) proposed questioning the reason why so many managers settle for compliance rather than trying to build commitment in their employees. "The problem is that when people do things because they are afraid of the consequences of not doing them, they do not really give their best" (Fink, 1992, p. 119).

With this kind of link between employee and employer settled, the organization can expect the employee to perform no more than what is strictly necessary. These findings highlight the importance of discussing what types of job performance the organization is looking for. If the organization is satisfied with employees who simply obey, do everything they are told to without question, without innovation, and without doing anything else, then nothing needs to be done beyond the granting of monies in exchange.

An analysis of the representative cases of Honeymoon Hangover trajectory might help us understand why the findings for the relationship between AOC and job performance are inconclusive (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Mowday *et al.*, 1982). On one hand, AOC levels decrease after entry into the organization. We interpret this phenomenon as a process of adjustment during which the individual begins to better understand the organization, its strengths and weaknesses, and then the

idealized image before entrance gives way to a closer picture of reality, which leads to an adjustment of AOC levels. Nevertheless, this same adjustment process appears to lead to an improvement in the levels of job performance. We interpret this improvement as a period during which the individual learns to work in the organization. Because of this learning, the levels of job performance increase. If a quantitative analysis was performed in a group in which a similar phenomenon occurred, the relationship found between the two constructs would be non-significant or negative. In this case, the researchers would have difficulty in interpreting the reasons that justify a negative relationship between the two constructs because the widespread assumption is that the relationship is positive, although the empirical support for this assumption is weak and inconclusive (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Mowday *et al.*, 1982).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

In this paper, we stated that inferring characteristics of the population from the case studies was not an objective of this research. The cases were chosen for their relevant potential to aid in the interpretation of the phenomena under investigation. Therefore, the findings reported in this study are not transferable to other individuals and contexts. In addition to the limitations imposed by the method adopted, it is necessary to note that the studied discourses were self-reported. We worked with the perception of a very limited number of individuals who could have exaggerated when reporting some facts or may have inaccurately reported some aspects.

It also remains to be investigated whether there is a limit to which AOC may have some influence on job performance, as in the case where there was no AOC, but a minimum level of job performance was maintained. Would the relationship between AOC and organization-relevant outcomes be linear, as assumed? Further research is needed to clarify the relationship between the three constructs of AOC, psychological contract and job performance.

Conclusion

One of the main goals of this study was to contribute to the understanding of the development of AOC, by illustrating the different patterns each with special qualities. The results of this research explore how phenomena are related in light of the organizational actors' own perceptions. We identified four trajectories of AOC development: Learning to Love, High Match, Honeymoon Hangover and Learning to Hate. The last one of these trajectories is originally proposed in this study, as a contribution to the debate on how to address the issue of low organizational commitment.

Exploring the question about how the psychological contract fulfillment, organizational commitment and job performance could be related, this study also provided insights for the research of each of the constructs involved, especially AOC. Our results contribute in the interpretation of how fulfillment of employer obligations in a psychological contract, and its breaches and violations, are related to the process of becoming more or less committed or even not committed at all to an organization. Nevertheless, since the relationship between commitment and job performance was different according to the trajectories, this study discusses the issue and offers insights into the interpretation of this relationship, suggesting that not all decreases in AOC levels should be alarming for managers.

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