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Is Organisational Commitment Culturally Bound?

Dr Helen Chen & John Murray

Abstract

The paper investigates whether organisational commitment is culturally bound. Literature was reviewed on the impact of Hofstede's four dimensions of culture on organisational commitment. Three hypotheses were put forward in relation to the cultural impact on the three components of organisational commitment: affective, normative and continuance commitment. Data was collected from two branches of an American multinational corporation with operations in China and Ireland. The two cultures were chosen as they demonstrate differences as well as similarities on Hofstede's dimensions, which provided an opportunity to explore the cultural impact. The results supported two of the hypotheses that Chinese employees have higher levels of affective and normative commitment than their Irish counterparts. Such findings reaffirm some extant literature and justified the conclusion that affective and normative commitments are culturally bound. If organisational commitment is culturally bound then it is sufficient to use Hofstede's cultural scores to compare organisational commitment across cultures. In addition, income was found to be significant in predicting continuance and normative commitment; tenure was a significant factor in understanding affective and normative commitment.

Keywords: *Organisational Commitment, Cross-Cultural Comparison*

Introduction

The theory of organisation commitment has largely originated in the United States of America. It is one of the most popularly researched subjects as it has significant effects on job performance and turnover (Chen and Francesco, 2003; Suliman and Iles, 2000), and on organisational performance (Benkhoff, 1997). Much research over the past few decades stresses the nature of organisational commitment (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Porter, Steers and Boulian, 1974); its measure, validity and reliability (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnystsky, 2002; Meyer and Allen, 1991; Sekimoto and Hanada, 1987); and its antecedents and consequences (Buchanan, 1974; Hrebiniak and Alutto, 1972; Takao, 1998).

However, Boyacigiller and Adler (1991) assert that most American theories reflect an individualistic perspective and fail to include a full range of explanations for organisational commitment. Since then, more research on organisational commitment has been extended into other cultural contexts to include countries such as Jordan (Suliman and Iles, 1999), China (Ling, Zhang and Fang, 2001; Wang, 2004) and Malaysia (Rashid, Sambasivan and Johari, 2003). More recently, comparative work has started to emerge, such as Cheng and Stockdale (2003) on organisational commitment differences between Chinese, Korean and Canadian employees, Meyer, Srinivas, Lal, and Topolnysky (2007) on employment commitment and

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support for organisational change in Canada and India; and Hattrup, Mueller and Aguirre (2008) on whether organisational commitment can be generalised across countries.

Inspired by the cross-cultural comparative studies, the present research, by using an American MNC which has branches in China and Ireland, sets out to compare the organisational commitment of its Irish and Chinese employees in order to investigate to what extent the American studies are generalizable in other cultures. In the following sections, we provide a review of the existing literature on organisational commitment with an emphasis on the theoretical developments of organisational commitment; the research of organisational commitment in Chinese and Irish contexts; and some cross-cultural studies including meta-analysis on organisational commitment. The main objective of the literature review is to understand given the cultural characteristics of Ireland and China in light of Hofstede¹ (1980), what are the organisational commitment levels of the two nationals as prescribed in the literature. The hypotheses are put forward. The methodology and data analysis is then presented with an accompanying examination into what extent organisational commitment is culturally bound. In other words, if the American-based literature is generalizable in other cultures, then when organisational commitment across cultures is studied, only Hofstede's culture scores are sufficient.

Organisational Commitment

Organisational commitment is a somewhat complicated concept. However, it is primarily regarded as an attitudinal construct dealing with the perceived utility of continued participation in an organisation (Hrebiniak and Alutto, 1972). In a similar vein, it has also been described, according to Buchanan (1974), as a partisan, affective attachment to the goals and values of an organisation, to one's role in relation to goals and values of an organisation, and to the organisation for its own sake. Such an argument has received popularity. Porter *et al.* (1974) postulate that employees with high organisational commitment tend to demonstrate a strong belief in and acceptance of the organisation's goals and values, and are willing to exert considerable effort into the organisation, and have a definite desire to maintain the employment relationship. Meyer and Allen (1997) state that a committed employee tends to stay with the organisation through ups and downs, attends work regularly, puts in a full day, protects company's assets and therefore shares the goals and values of the company. As such, organisational commitment has been found to affect job performance and turnover

¹ Hofstede (1980) proposed that cultures be compared on four dimensions based on his research of employees working in IBM between 1967 and 1973, covering 70 national cultures. These dimensions are power distance (PD), individualism/collectivism (IDV), femininity/masculinity (MAS) and certainty avoidance (UA). A fifth dimension was added into the model in 1991, long-term orientation (LTO) based research of Michael Bond. In the present paper, only the original four dimensions will be discussed.

(Gregson, 1992; O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986). It has also been found to have effects on societies as a whole as it affects job movement, community stability and national productivity (Porter *et al.*, 1974).

One of the key areas in which there is little agreement is how organisational commitment should be measured. Porter *et al.* (1974) defined organisational commitment as the strength that an individual identifies with and involves in an organisation. In such a light, organisational commitment is measured as employees' motivation and identification with the values of the organisation and their intention to remain as an employee (Porter *et al.*, 1974). O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) however, approached organisational commitment from the perspective of psychological attachment and believed that it reflects the degree to which the individual associated themselves with the characteristics or perspectives of the organisation. Therefore, they proposed that the bond between an employee and an organisation could take three forms: compliance, identification and internalisation.

According to O'Reilly and Chatman (1986), compliance attachment reflects instrumental behaviour designed to gain rewards; identification attachment occurs when employees behave in a way they want to maintain a relationship with an organisation due to its attractive values or goals, and internalisation attachment occurs when employees' behaviour is driven by their values that are consistent with those of the organisation. Meyer and Allen (1991) argued that the identification and internalisation dimensions discussed in O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) have been difficult to distinguish from each other. As a result, Meyer and Allen (1991) produced the most commonly accepted (Wasti 2005) three-dimensional organisational commitment model, comprising of affective, continuance and normative commitment. It should be noted that Meyer and Allen (1991) viewed these three forms as components rather than types of commitment. They are not mutually exclusive. Instead, it can be assumed that an employee might experience all forms of commitment to varying degrees. One employee might, for example, feel both a strong need (continuance commitment) and a strong desire to remain (affective commitment), but little obligation to the organisation (normative commitment), while another employee might feel little desire, moderate need and a strong obligation (Meyer and Allen, 1991). In other words, employees who have strong affective commitment stay in an organisation because they want to; those who have strong continuance commitment remain as they need to and those who have strong normative commitment stay in an organisation because they feel obliged to. This finding provides a subtle theoretical foundation to approach the three components separately, which are within the scope of the present research.

Organisational Commitment in China and Ireland

The rationale for the selection of units of one organisation in two cultures such as Ireland and China lies in the following. First, the study of organisational commitment especially in the case of China is developed (Cheng and Stockdale, 2003; Chen and Francesco, 2003). Few studies however propose approaches to robustly test the affective, continuance and normative commitment variables in Eastern and Western countries. Secondly, the Irish and Chinese cultures are different yet they share similar scores on the dimension of masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. It is anticipated that the direct contrastive effects from two potentially dissimilar units yet with similarities in one organisation will add to the literature on organisational commitment.

China has received attention in the study of organisational commitment not only because China has a population of 1.3 billion and its economy has been growing strongly for more than 2 decades; but also because it has a culture in which power distance (Cheng and Stockdale, 2003) and collectivism scores are high (Chen and Francesco, 2003). The score of the Chinese culture on power distance is 80 and its score on individualism is 10 according to Hofstede (1980). Under the influence of Confucius, Chinese culture emphasises loyalty to the emperor (zhong), obedience to parents (xiao), loyalty to the spouse (jie), helpfulness to friends (yi) and conformity with social codes (hemu). As a result of these values, Yang (1993) observed that the Chinese people do not truly express themselves as individuals preferring to stay within the formalised system of roles. Tan and Akhtar (1998) argued that 'coupled with a strong emphasis placed on the network of relationship (guanxi) and reciprocal expectations of the proper behaviour (li), the Chinese are subjective to specific forms of behaviour consistent with his or her job role within the organisation' (p.313). Accordingly, the normative commitment of the Chinese employees is high (Tan and Akhtar, 1998).

This pattern of behaviour has spurred a number of researchers to conduct research on organisational commitment within a Chinese context (Chen and Francesco, 2003; Cheng and Stockdale, 2003; Tan and Akhtar, 1998). With the economic reform of China, significant changes have also occurred within society with people no longer 'having an iron rice bowl' (having a secured job in a state-owned enterprise) but ready for 'frying squids' (being made redundant); previously individuals welfare was looked after by state enterprises, however individuals must now pay for education and healthcare themselves.

The economic landscape of Ireland has experienced radical change in the last forty years. Up until the early 1990s, huge numbers of the population emigrated to seek employment overseas. During this time, often it was the most educated, creative and innovative individuals that emigrated, which subsequently led to the term 'brain drain' being coined in Fanning (2001). Owing largely to the economic success in recent years, organisational commitment in the Irish context has attracted the attention of a small number of studies. They focused on the

Irish employees working on farms (Randall and O'Driscoll, 1997; O'Driscoll and Randall, 1999). Nevertheless, the findings from these studies have shown that affective commitment and job involvement of the Irish employees are positively associated with one another, whereas emotional attachment to the organisation is distinct from continuance commitment (O'Driscoll and Randall, 1999).

Cross-cultural Studies of Organisational Commitment

Boyacigiller and Adler (1991) stated that commitment researchers are entering into an international phase as some of the American theories are lacking of other cultural perspectives. Randall (1993) conducted a meta-analysis of 27 papers and associated Hofstede's framework of four dimension of culture with organisational commitment; power distance; acceptance of inequality in societies and organisations; individualism/collectivism; preference for working in groups and influence of reference groups; and uncertainty avoidance.

Randall (1993) concluded that

- 1) affective commitment to organisations is greater in cultures that tend to have lower levels of conformity (i.e. individualistic, tolerant of ambiguity, and less authoritarian);
- 2) normative commitment is greater in more collectivist countries;
- 3) continuance commitment is greater in feminine cultures.

In a similar light, Clugston *et al.* (2000) tested the influence of culture on the three components of organisational commitment and three foci (organisation, supervisor and workgroup). Their findings confirmed that power distance is related to normative commitment across all foci; uncertainty avoidance is associated with continuance commitment across all foci and collectivism is related to three components of organisational commitment across workgroups only. Table 1 summarises some of the extant literature on the cultural effect on organisational commitment.

Hofstede (1980) provides a perspective to study culture. In his model, China has an individualism score of 20 while Ireland 70 and therefore, according to Table 1, the Chinese employees have a higher affective commitment (Randall 1993; Clugston *et al.* 2000); higher continuance commitment (Clugston *et al.* 2000); higher normative commitment (Randall 1993; Clugston *et al.* 2000; Boyacigiller and Adler 1991) than their Irish counterparts. China has a power distance score of 80 while Ireland 28 and therefore the Chinese employees have a lower affective commitment (Randall 1993); higher continuance commitment (Clugston *et al.* 2000) and higher normative commitment (Stanley *et al.* 2007; Clugston *et al.* 2000) than their Irish colleagues. China has a masculinity score of 66 while Ireland 68 and therefore the Chinese have higher affective commitment (Randall 1993); lower continuance commitment (Randall 1993; Clugston *et al.* 2000) and lower normative commitment (Cheng and Stockdale 2003). China has an uncertainty avoidance score of 30 and Ireland 36 and therefore the

		Affective Commitment		Continuance Commitment		Normative Commitment
Individualism	-	Randall 1993; Clugston <i>et al.</i> 2000	-	Randall 1993; Clugston <i>et al.</i> 2000	-	Randall 1993; Clugston <i>et al.</i> 2000
Power distance	-	Randall 1993	-	Randall 1993	-	Randall 1993
Masculinity	-	Randall 1993	-	Randall 1993	-	Randall 1993
Uncertainty avoidance	+	Randall 1993	+	Randall 1993	+	Randall 1993

Table 1: The cultural impact on the three components of organisational commitment

Chinese have a higher affective commitment (Randall 1993) and a lower continuance commitment (Clugston *et al.* 2000). Therefore, the following hypotheses were compiled:

- H1:** The Chinese employees have a higher level of affective commitment than their Irish counterparts.
- H2:** The Chinese employees have a higher level of commitment than their Irish counterparts.
- H3:** The Chinese employees have a high level of normative commitment than their Irish counterparts.

Data and Sample

Data was collected in two branches of one American MNC in Ireland and China by two researchers on the same day. The MNC was chosen as it has the same human resource policies in the two subsidiaries. The same questionnaire was administered. The questionnaire was originally designed in English and then was translated into Chinese by one bilingual researcher. A back translation was performed from Chinese into English to ensure the two versions were consistent as this can be an issue in cross-cultural studies (Brislin, 1970). The respondents in Shanghai were all Chinese and they received the Chinese version of the questionnaire and the Irish employees in Dublin got the English version. Participation was agreed between the researchers and the managing directors and those employees in office at that day participated in the survey. The questionnaire was filled in, in the presence of the researchers providing a response rate of 100%. Eighty-two questionnaires were returned from the Irish branch and 118 from the Chinese one. There were 51.2% female respondents in the Irish sample compared to 44.9% female respondents in the Chinese sample. There were 60.9% respondents in the Irish sample who were aged below 34 compared to 68.1% in the Chinese sample. About 65.9% respondents in

the Irish sample had worked in the organisation for less than 18 months compared to 85.3% in the Chinese sample. About 26.8% Irish respondents had a salary level lower than €30,000 compared to 77.9% in the Chinese sample.

Variables

The dependent variables are three components of organisational commitment. Organisational commitment was measured by using the revised 18-item three-component scale of affective, continuance and normative commitment (Herscovitch and Meyer, 2002), which has been adopted in a myriad of studies, such as Jacobsen (2000), Rashid *et al.* (2003), Cheng and Stockdale (2003). Sample questions for the three components of organisational commitment are 'I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career working with this organisation', 'It would be very hard for me to leave my organisation right now, even if I wanted to', and 'I do not feel any obligation to remain with my current employer'. Tenure was measured by the duration an employee has worked in the MNC.

ANCOVA and Covariate

In a cross-cultural study, it is recommended to control economic factors to test for the effect of other factors (Dawar and Parker, 1994). In the study, the focus is to investigate the differences of the organisational commitment of Irish and Chinese employees working in the MNC. Data were compared using ANCOVA with income level being chosen as the covariate. As previous studies have shown that tenure is a significant variable on organisational commitment, it was treated as the second covariate in the analysis.

Data Analysis and Findings

In the first step, the two sets of data were merged into one for comparative analyses with a new variable created, Country, for which Ireland was coded as 0 and China was coded as 1. Factor analysis was performed and oblique rotation was adopted. To have three factors generated, 3 items were dropped as their factor loadings were less than .40. The reliability of the 3 factors was examined using Cronbach's alpha. Results are presented in Table 2. The standardised factor scores were used in the subsequent ANCOVA analysis.

Items	Affective commitment	Continuance commitment	Normative commitment
1	.60		
2	.54		
3	.70		
4	.56		
5	.67		
7		.59	
8		.64	
10		.60	
11		.72	
12		.56	
13			.62
14			.73
16			.79
17			.68
18			.72
Cronbach a	.75	.76	.83

Table 2: Factor analysis of the organisational commitment

In order to proceed with ANCOVA, z scores, the linearity for each group and homogeneity of regression slopes were checked. There were no outliers or abnormalities detected. ANCOVA was performed to analyse data with income and tenure being set as the covariates. The two covariates were compared using a t-test by using country as the grouping variables.

t-test for Equality of Means		
	t	Sig.
Income	-10.234	.000
Tenure	-.962	.337

Table 3: t-test of the Income levels and Tenure of the Irish and Chinese employees

Table 3 showed an obvious difference between the two groups in their income levels. The Irish employees enjoy much higher income than their Chinese counterparts, t being -10.234 at the significance level of .000. But there is no significant difference in tenure between the Irish and Chinese employees in the MNC.

Results for ANCOVA analysis of affective commitment are shown in Table 4; results for continuance commitment are shown in Table 5; and results of normative commitment are shown in Table 6.

	Mean square	F	Sig.
Tenure	14.87	19.16	.00
Income	.79	1.02	.32
Country	20.53	26.44	.00
Gender	.24	.31	.58

Table 4: ANCOVA analysis of affective commitment for the Chinese and Irish employee

Table 4 showed that there is a significant country difference between the Chinese and Irish employees working in the same MNC. The mean square is 20.53 at a significance of .00. It indicated that the Chinese employees have a higher level of affective commitment than their Irish counterparts, which supports H1. Table 4 also showed the significant effect of one of the covariates, tenure on affective commitment. The mean square is 14.87 at the significance level of .00. It indicated that those employees who have worked longer in the MNC are more affectively committed to the organisation. Table 2 confirmed the fact that there is no significant difference of tenure between the Chinese and Irish employees. Therefore, the country difference of affective commitment is not as a result of tenure.

	Mean square	F	Sig.
Tenure	.16	.18	.67
Income	11.20	12.32	.00
Country	.00	.00	.26
Gender	1.14	1.25	.96

Table 5: ANCOVA analysis of continuance commitment of the Chinese and Irish employees

Table 5 showed that there is no country difference of continuance commitment of the Irish and Chinese employees working in the MNC. H2 is not supported. This is very interesting as continuance commitment is about whether an employee feels he or she needs to stay as a result of analysing the alternatives (Meyer and Allen, 1991). Therefore, the cultural effect of continuance commitment seems to be weak. It is worth noting that income has a significant effect on continuance commitment at the significance level of .00. It implies that the higher the income an employee is earning, the higher continuance commitment she/he has and therefore the higher risk they perceive in leaving the MNC.

	Mean square	F	Sig.
Tenure	3.07	4.94	.03
Income	12.64	20.30	.00
Country	55.64	89.37	.00
Gender	.06	.09	.77

Table 6: ANCOVA analysis of normative commitment of the Chinese and Irish employees

Table 6 showed there is a significant country difference detected among the Irish and Chinese employees' normative commitment. The F value is 89.37 at the significance level of .00, indicating that the Chinese employees in the MNC demonstrate a higher level of normative commitment than the Irish employees. H3 is thus supported. Both covariates, Income and Tenure, have significant positive impacts on normative commitment. This is certainly supporting those studies that include salary or pay as the antecedents to organisational commitment (Buchanan, 1974; Hrebiniak and Alutto, 1972; Stevens *et al.*, 1978).

Discussion

The present research set out to investigate whether organisational commitment is culturally bound as prescribed by some American-based studies such as Randall (1993), Clugston *et al.* (2000) given the fact that the USA is highly individualist. The main argument in the present paper is that if organisational commitment is culturally bound, then the Hofstede's culture scores on the four dimensions are sufficient to compare organisational commitment of different cultures. Ireland and China were chosen as Ireland is highly individualist while China is highly collectivist compared to the highly individualist USA. It compared a three-dimensional model of organisational commitment across the Irish and Chinese employees working in the same MNC by using Herschcovit and Meyer's (2002) 18-item scale of organisational commitment. ANCOVA was performed to analyse the data with the results providing a number of insights.

Affective Commitment

It is found that in the MNC, the Chinese employees' affective commitment is higher than that of the Irish employees. Such a finding supports Randall (1993)'s meta-analysis findings: people coming from more individualistic cultures tend to be more idiocentric (Earley, 1989) and more calculative on self achievement (Randall, 1993). Having a higher individualism score, the Irish employees working in the same MNC have a lower level of affection attachment to the organisation than their Chinese counterparts. This is also in support of Boyacigiller and Adler (1991) in which they postulate people from collectivist cultures (in this case, China) are more committed as they form closely-knit ties with their co-workers, managers or owners.

According to Porter *et al.* (1974) and Meyer and Allen (1991), affective commitment is associated with the emotional attachment of employees to their employer and the goals and values of the employer. It can be inferred that the MNC's goals and values are better shared by the Chinese employees as they are more emotionally attached to their employer than the Irish employees based in Dublin. Therefore, the Chinese employees are more willing compared to their Irish counterparts to put effort into the MNC.

Continuance Commitment

There is no country difference identified in the present study between the Irish and Chinese employees on continuance commitment. There are two possible reasons to explain our results: 1) both the Chinese and the Irish employees might find it easy to find alternative jobs at the time of the survey; or 2) as Clugston *et al.* (2000) indicated that uncertainty avoidance is to do with continuance commitment, we think that both the Chinese and Irish people are both risk-taking people, compared to cultures such as the French, their uncertainty avoidance scores are 36, 30 and 80 respectively (Hofstede, 1980). Therefore both nationalities share a commonality of association of changing jobs as low risk and low cost. Additionally, in the present study it is found that continuance commitment is highly correlated with income. We concluded that the employees with higher income associate leaving the MNC as risky and costly (O'Driscoll and Randall, 1999). Our finding confirmed the significance of linking internal marketing with organisational commitment, particularly continuance commitment.

Normative Commitment

It is found in the present study that the Chinese employees have higher levels of normative commitment compared to their Irish counterparts in the MNC. This supports Randall (1993), Clugston *et al.* (2000) and Boyacigiller and Adler (1991) on the argument that people from more collectivist cultures have higher normative commitment. It also supports Stanley *et al.* (2007) and Stanley *et al.* (2007) on the argument that people from cultures with high power distance tend to demonstrate higher normative commitment. It also supports Randall (1993) on people from a feminine culture demonstrating higher level of normative commitment. As normative commitment deals with one's feeling of commitment towards an organisation as an obligation, duty or loyalty (Meyer and Allen 1991), it is inferred that the Chinese employees see being loyal to their employer as more of an obligation than their Irish counterparts in the MNC.

Conclusion

Boyacigiller and Adler (1991) posit 'it is therefore not surprising, and yet highly unfortunate, that American theoretical structures fail to include a full range of explanations for organisational commitment and the lack thereof.' (p.274-275). An American MNC was used to examine how much the American-generated theories could be applied on two cultures other than American. If the generalizability is high, then Hofstede's cultural scores are sufficient to understand organisational commitment. The findings are reasonably satisfactory. The literature proposed that employees from a culture with higher power distance scores are more affectively and normatively committed to their organisations. The present research also finds out that the Chinese culture having higher power distance and collectivism scores than the Irish, has more affectively and normatively committed employees than the Irish counterpart. The literature proposed that employees from a culture with higher individualism scores are less affectively and normatively committed. The present research also finds out that the Irish culture having higher individualism scores, has less affectively and normatively committed employees than the Chinese. Therefore, it is concluded that affective and normative commitment are culturally bound. Since there was no evidence found in the present research about the cultural link with continuance commitment, it is concluded that continuance commitment is not culturally bound. It is believed that continuance commitment be highly related to the income and benefit of the employees as indicated in some studies. Nevertheless, we have to point out that in the present study, Ireland and China were included but their scores on Hofstede's cultural model are very close to each other on the dimension of masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. As uncertainty avoidance is linked with continuance commitment, we would recommend future studies to include cultures with significant differences on the latter two dimensions to further investigate the generalisation of the American theories on organisational commitment in other cultures.

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