

Differential relations between regulatory foci and components of organizational commitment

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Abstract

In recent conceptual work it has been argued that organizational commitment and its components might be systematically related to employees' regulatory focus. Building on this work, we use regulatory focus theory to derive specific predictions regarding the differential relationships between regulatory focus and commitment. We estimated a structural equation model using a sample of 520 private and public sector employees and found in line with our hypotheses that (a) promotion focus was more strongly related to affective commitment than was prevention focus, (b) prevention focus was more strongly related to continuance commitment than was promotion focus, (c) promotion and prevention focus had equally strong effects on normative commitment. Implications of these findings for the three-component model of commitment, especially the 'dual nature' of normative commitment, as well as implications for human resources management and leadership are discussed.

**Key words:** Regulatory focus, organizational commitment, Greece

## Differential relations between regulatory foci and components of organizational commitment

Several decades of research demonstrate that organizational commitment can have positive consequences for the organization and the individual employee (e.g., see the meta-analyses of Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Riketta & van Dick, 2005). Organizational commitment is defined as “a force that binds an individual to [an organization] and to a course of action of relevance to [that organization]” (Meyer, Becker, van Dick, 2006, p. 666). Relatively little, however, is known about the sources of this force, especially if one subscribes to the common view that commitment is comprised of three distinct components, i.e. affective, normative, and continuance commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Meyer et al.’s (2002) meta-analyses provide strong evidence that higher affective commitment is associated with the presence of organizational support and fairness and the absence of work-stressors such as role ambiguity or conflict. As for the antecedents to normative or continuance commitment, however, little or no empirical data are available.

It is timely, therefore, that research has begun to integrate the commitment construct with the broader domain of motivation (Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004), which is the domain traditionally concerned with the forces that make people act in the way they do. In order for a motivational theory to account for the three different components of commitment, it needs to assume at least two distinct motivational processes. As discussed by Van-Dijk and Kluger (2004), this is true of a host of motivational theories (e.g., Herzberg’s, 1968, and Atkinson’s, 1964, classic theories of work motivation). However, as suggested by several authors, regulatory focus might best account for the strength of different commitment components (Johnson & Chang, 2008; Kark & Van-Dijk, 2007; Meyer et al., 2004; Van-Dijk

& Kluger, 2004). In the present paper, we build and elaborate on these suggestions and report the first empirical test of the relationships between regulatory focus and commitment. First, we briefly review the theory of regulatory focus. Then, we discuss how the two regulatory foci theoretically map onto and may feed into the different components of commitment.

### *Regulatory Focus Theory*

Regulatory focus theory (RFT, e.g., Higgins, 1997) is a theory about how people pursue goals. Although all (or at least most) people seek to approach pleasure and avoid pain, RFT assumes that these goals can be represented very differently, depending on which self-regulatory system is activated. RFT posits that there exist two fundamental self-regulatory systems: *promotion focus* and *prevention focus*. In a promotion focus, people represent goals as hopes and aspirations, whereas in a prevention focus, people represent their goals as duties and obligations. These representations are assumed to lead people in a promotion or prevention focus to use eagerness or vigilance means, respectively, to pursue their goals. Eagerness means are concerned with ensuring positive outcomes (looking for means of advancement) and ensuring against the absence of positive outcomes (not closing off possibilities), whereas vigilance means are concerned with ensuring the absence of negative outcomes (being careful) and ensuring against negative outcomes (avoiding mistakes; e.g., Higgins, Friedman, Harlow, Idson, Ayduk, & Taylor, 2001).

Clearly, as both regulatory systems are important for survival, they can in some sense be considered human constants. Indeed, a promotion or prevention focus can be situationally induced by priming or problem framing (e.g., see Higgins, 1998). There are nonetheless reliable individual differences in the preferred regulatory focus that are assumed to reflect subjective histories of previous promotion or prevention success in goal attainment in childhood and beyond (Higgins et al., 2001).

*Regulatory Focus and Commitment*

Organizational commitment is a multi-component construct which describes individuals' feelings of attachment to their organization. Here we use Allen and Meyer's (1990) three component model of affective, continuance and normative commitment; employees remain in an organization because they feel they *want* to, *need* to or *ought* to remain, respectively. Affective commitment is viewed and felt individually by the employees based on their emotional attachment to the organization. Continuance commitment is more of a calculative form derived from the individual's ongoing investment in the organization and the lack of alternative employment options of similar value (Dunham, Grube, & Castañeda, 1994). Normative commitment in contrast is a cognitive form of commitment, where the employee views commitment as either a moral imperative or indebted obligation based on their evaluation of relative individual versus organizational investments (Meyer, 2005).

Previous theorizing has linked commitment and regulatory focus, but these references are indirect and scattered (Johnson & Chang, 2008; Kark & Van-Dijk, 2007; Meyer et al., 2004; Van-Dijk & Kluger, 2004). Meyer et al. (2004) presented a broad theoretical framework of work motivation and noted in passing that individuals who are affectively organizationally committed (i.e., individuals being emotionally attached to, identified with and involved in the organization) may be expected to have a stronger promotion focus, whereas those individuals having a strong feeling of normative commitment (i.e., employees feeling obligated to remain with an organization) or continuance commitment (i.e., employees assessing the costs associated with leaving an organization) may have a stronger prevention focus. Van-Dijk and Kluger (2004), in their conceptual paper similarly argue that continuance commitment corresponds to a prevention focus and affective commitment should

correspond to a promotion focus, however, the authors did not examine these relationships empirically.

Finally, Kark and Van-Dijk (2007) recently presented a theory of how the chronic regulatory focus of leaders might affect their leadership style and the behavior of followers. Regarding the regulatory foci of the followers, they argued that the “promotion-focused individuals are intrinsically motivated and are mostly guided by their inner ideals and not by external forces. Thus, they are likely to be committed to the organization in an autonomous form (affective commitment). In contrast, prevention-focused individuals are more influenced by external or social pressure and attempt to fulfill obligations and avoid losses. Thus, they are more likely to be committed to the organization out of a sense of obligation or necessity (normative or continuance commitment)” (Kark & Van-Dijk, 2007: 517).

In summary, previous theorizing suggests that promotion focus should map onto affective commitment, whereas prevention focus should map onto normative and continuance commitment. More recently, however, Gellatly, Meyer, and Luchak (2006) have speculated on the possible ‘dual nature’ of normative commitment. More specifically, they considered “the possibility that the nature of employees’ NC changes as a function of the strength of the other two components. When employees feel a strong sense of AC, obligations might be experienced as a *moral imperative* (i.e., ‘this is the right thing to do and I want to do it’). In this case, employees may be inclined to do whatever it takes to achieve organizational objectives even if it is not required by the terms of the commitment. In contrast, when AC is low and CC is high, NC might be experienced as an *indebted obligation* (i.e., something one has to do to meet obligations and/or save face).” (p. 342)

Thus, it seems plausible that promotion focus might relate to the moral imperative part of NC and that prevention focus might relate to the indebted obligation part of NC. In contrast, the affective and continuance components appear to be more dominantly related to a

promotion and a prevention focus, respectively. In a promotion focus, employees tend to try to bring themselves in alignment with their ideal selves, which maps nicely onto the affective or “want to” part of commitment. In a prevention focus, employees tend to try to bring themselves in alignment with their ought selves, which maps nicely onto the cost-conscious or “have to” part of commitment. Considered together with the literature reviewed above, the following testable hypotheses can be derived:

*Hypothesis 1:* Promotion focus is more strongly related to affective commitment than is prevention focus.

*Hypothesis 2:* Promotion focus and prevention focus are equally related to normative commitment.

*Hypothesis 3:* Prevention focus is more strongly related to continuance commitment than is promotion focus.

The primary goal of the present research was to provide a first empirical test of these hypotheses by surveying a large number of employees. Empirical support for these hypotheses would be a significant first step in expanding our knowledge about the potential sources of commitment. As discussed above, however, regulatory focus can reflect stable dispositions as well as situational cues. For instance, Kark and Van-Dijk (2007) suggested that organizational leaders might prime a promotion or prevention focus among followers at the group level. In their model, followers’ chronic regulatory focus is assumed to moderate the effects of the situationally primed regulatory focus, such that stronger effects (e.g. on performance) will be observed if the chronic focus matches the situationally primed focus. Although not discussed by Kark and Van-Dijk (2007), followers’ chronic regulatory focus is likely to also have direct effects on organizational variables such as commitment.

Thus, the practical usefulness of our results would be enhanced if we could obtain evidence as to the dispositional vs. situational nature of promotion and prevention focus. If

leadership behavior or the type of work in any given organization has effects on employees' situational regulatory focus, we should observe high agreement regarding the strength of promotion and prevention foci among employees from the same organization. Of course, such agreement could also result from the well-known attraction – selection – attrition cycle (Schneider, 1987) in that people with similar chronic regulatory foci end up in the same organization (or work-team). Low agreement, however, would render situational influences less plausible. Therefore, a secondary goal of our research was to sample multiple employees from the same organizations and to use within-group agreement indices so as to better understand the nature of promotion and prevention foci as antecedents to commitment.

## Method

### *National and Organizational Context*

The sample consists of 520 employees from the Northern Central part of Greece, drawn from both private and public sector employment. Greece is one of the older members of the European Union; its employment relations and organizational context, especially in the private sector, present few significant differences from other European countries. Markovits et al. (2007) present a descriptive picture of the Greek employment context by arguing that public sector employment is viewed somewhat differently from elsewhere in Europe mainly due to the comparatively elevated salaries on offer. However, in relation to the key differences of interest here (e.g. security and predictability versus challenge and instability), Greek private and public sector employment is sufficiently representative and generalizable to other national contexts.

### *Sample and Procedures*

The sample was evenly split between private and public sector organizations and between male and female respondents. The private sector participants were drawn from 33



organizations, ranging from family owned small businesses to medium-sized industrial or commercial enterprises. The public sector respondents worked in governmental authorities and tax and customs agencies in secure and primarily white-collar employment. The mean age of the sample was 31 years ( $SD = 4$  years) with a mean organizational tenure of 7 years ( $SD = 6$  years). About 84% of the sample was non-supervisory employees with approximately 16% heading functional departments of their organizations. Educational level varied; 33.3% having completed secondary education, 24.1% having attended a technical college, 30.2% being university graduates, and 12.4% having a postgraduate diploma. The sample was approached either in their place of work (the private sector employees) by the first author, or, in the case of public sector employees partly at their workplace and partly when they participated at vocational training programmes. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The overall response rate was 67%.

### *Measures*

The scales employed in this study were translated into Greek and then back translated and checked by a bilingual teacher of Greek and English. All scales have all been used in earlier research in Greece and present good psychometric properties (Markovits et al., 2007). Affective commitment, normative commitment and continuance commitment were measured using Meyer et al.'s (1993) scales with six items for each component of commitment, scored on a 7-point scale (endpoints 1 = complete disagreement to 7 = complete agreement). Promotion and prevention focus were measured using the promotion and prevention focus questionnaire (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002). The original scale comprised fourteen items, seven per regulatory focus, but two items from each focus were omitted as they were formulated with respect to academic goals and performance. As with the other measures, the items were scored on a 7-point scale (endpoints 1 = complete disagreement to 7 = complete agreement).

## Results

### *Preliminary Analyses*

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics, Cronbach alpha coefficients, indices of within-group homogeneity, and inter-correlations for the components of commitment and the two regulatory focus states. Because we sampled multiple employees from the same organizations, we first examined to what extent regulatory focus and commitment reflected shared perceptions among employees from the same organization.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

We used multiple criteria to assess within-group agreement (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). As can be seen in Table 1, the  $\bar{r}_{wg,j}$  index (James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984) and the  $\bar{r}_{wg,j}^*$  index (Lindell, Brandt, & Whitney, 1999) with a uniform distribution were below the conventional cutoff value of .70 except for promotion focus. Likewise, the ICC(1) index suggested that only 5% of the variance in regulatory focus and commitment was explained by group membership, and ICC(2) revealed low reliability of the group means.

Concentrating on regulatory focus, our initial question was if our measures would reflect only individual differences or shared situational influences resulting in organizational level promotion or prevention foci as well. In general, the values of the  $\bar{r}_{wg,j}$  indices were low to moderate, suggesting that there was some similarity within organizations regarding promotion and prevention focus. This could mean that common experiences (e.g. leadership processes) within organizations have shaped regulatory focus or that individuals with similar dispositions tend to work in the same organizations. As discussed above, a situation of no

within-group agreement would have provided a clearer interpretation of our measures. The most plausible interpretation, then, is that our measures of promotion and prevention focus reflect a mixture of disposition and situational influences, with the evidence for shared prevention focus being weaker than for promotion focus.

### *Analytic Strategy*

Our analytic strategy was implied by our theoretical goals and the nature of our data. In order to ascertain the differential relationships between regulatory foci and components of commitment, we needed to ensure that these relationships would not differ due to differential reliability of the independent variables. Indeed, preliminary analyses indicated that our measure of prevention focus was less reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .60$ ) than our measure of promotion focus ( $\alpha = .75$ ). Therefore, we decided to treat promotion and prevention focus as latent variables in a structural equation model so as to estimate their relationships at the construct level. Because we sampled multiple employees from the same organizations, our statistical analyses had to take this non-independence into account. We accomplished this by using the TYPE=COMPLEX method in the Mplus Software (Muthén & Muthén, 2007), which corrects the standard errors for the bias due to clustering. This method limits the number of parameters that can be estimated to the number of clusters in the sample (i.e., 36). Therefore, we could not specify full measurement models for the regulatory foci using all available items. The compromise that we chose was to use two item parcels and one single item as indicators for each latent regulatory focus.

### *Hypothesis Tests*

The complete structural equation model underlying our hypothesis tests is shown in Figure 1. As was expected based on the poor reliability estimates for prevention focus, the fit of the model was suboptimal, but acceptable,  $\chi^2(20) = 63.30, p < .001, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .07$ . Although future work would be advised to use an optimized measure of prevention

focus, for current purposes we are content to correct for *differential* measurement error in the regulatory foci by estimating them as latent variables. All paths extending from the regulatory foci to the components of commitment were positive and significant ( $p < .05$ ) except for the path from prevention focus on affective commitment ( $p = .21$ ). We tested our hypotheses using the Wald chi-square test on equality constraints on the structural parameters relating the regulatory foci to a given component of commitment. As expected, promotion focus had a significantly stronger ( $p < .05$ ) effect on affective commitment ( $\beta = .32$ ) than did prevention focus ( $\beta = .09$ ), and prevention focus had a significantly stronger ( $p < .05$ ) effect on continuance commitment ( $\beta = .30$ ) than did promotion focus ( $\beta = .10$ ). As for normative commitment, the hypothesis could not be rejected as the effects of both regulatory foci ( $\beta = .31$  for promotion focus and  $\beta = .17$  for prevention focus) are equally strong ( $p = .19$ ).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

### Discussion

The contribution of the present research was to synthesize and test the scattered theoretical assumptions regarding the links between regulatory focus and organizational commitment (Johnson & Chang, 2008; Kark & Van-Dijk, 2007; Meyer et al., 2004; Van-Dijk & Kluger, 2004). Previous theorizing has proposed that a promotion focus would be related to affective commitment, whereas a prevention focus would be related to normative commitment and continuance commitment. Our findings are consistent with these propositions, in that both promotion and prevention focus were positively related to all three components of commitment. In light of a recent comprehensive model linking commitment to work motivation (Meyer et al., 2004), this may not seem very surprising because both promotion and prevention foci are associated with motivational effort toward goal attainment.

However, we have argued for a more nuanced pattern of predictions regarding the links between regulatory focus and commitment. Specifically, we predicted that a promotion focus would be more strongly related to affective commitment than a prevention focus, and that a prevention focus would be more strongly related to continuance commitment than a promotion focus. In contrast, we predicted that promotion and prevention would have equally strong effects on normative commitment. The estimated parameters of our structural equation model supported all of these predictions.

Our findings represent the first step in establishing empirical linkages between regulatory focus and organizational commitment. The findings are especially encouraging regarding normative and continuance commitment, considering that their antecedents are relatively under-researched (Meyer et al., 2004). The fact that both promotion and prevention focus had positive effects on normative commitment that were of comparable size is consistent with Gellatly et al.'s (2006) notion of the 'dual nature' of normative commitment. Gellatly and colleagues argued that the affective and continuance components of commitment provide a context for normative commitment. In their study, normative commitment had a positive effect on citizenship behaviors in the context of low continuance commitment and high affective commitment, which suggested to Gellatly and colleagues that under these circumstances normative commitment is experienced as a moral imperative. In contrast, normative commitment had a negative effect on citizenship behaviors in the context of low affective commitment and high continuance commitment, which suggested that under these circumstances normative commitment is experienced more as an indebted obligation.

Our results help to better understand this distinction between normative commitment experienced as moral imperative versus indebted obligation. Consider employees in a promotion focus. Results from our study suggest these employees are likely to develop a stronger affective commitment than continuance commitment. This makes for a context in

which normative commitment is experienced as a moral imperative, which is also reminiscent of earlier work linking commitment to endorsement of the Protestant Work Ethic (Kidron, 1978). Employees in a prevention focus, on the other hand, are likely to develop a stronger continuance commitment than affective commitment, which makes for a context in which normative commitment is experienced as an indebted obligation. Thus, the interaction effects obtained by Gellatly and colleagues might reflect unobserved heterogeneity regarding regulatory focus.

More generally, our results point to the important role that regulatory focus may play in affecting the different components of commitment. This could have practical implications for personnel selection, development, and leadership. Depending on the nature of work, organizations may be inclined to select predominantly promotion or prevention focused employees. However, they may not anticipate the potential consequences such a selection strategy may have for the resulting commitment profiles. Likewise, our results may be useful for personnel development and leadership in that different regulatory foci could be made salient with predictable consequences for organizational commitment.

#### *Limitations and directions for future research*

A weakness of the present research is the cross-sectional nature of the data, preventing us from making causal inferences and raising concerns about common-method variance. Note, however, that common-method variance cannot account for the differential effects of the regulatory foci that we predicted and found. Nevertheless, to increase the practical relevance of our findings, it is essential that the causal direction from regulatory focus to commitment be demonstrated in field experiments or longitudinal studies. Furthermore, as with any single study, future work should aim at testing the stability and generalizability of the differential relationships between regulatory foci and components of commitment that we observed.

The most exciting direction for future research on regulatory focus and commitment in work settings seems to explore the relative importance of dispositional vs. situational influences. For instance, Kark and Van-Dijk's (2007) model suggests that organizational leaders can prime followers' regulatory focus at the group level and thereby influence different organizational outcomes. It remains an open question, however, how and to what extent such regulatory foci can be made salient regardless of the nature of work and the employees' personalities. Recent research suggests that dispositional influences on work behaviors are somewhat underestimated (e.g., Judge et al., 2008; Staw & Cohen-Charash, 2005). In our study, we used within-group homogeneity indices to get a rough idea of the dispositional vs. situational nature of our measures of regulatory focus. We concluded that both factors were likely to have contributed to these measures given the relatively ambiguous range of within-group homogeneity. Thus, it seems fruitful to explore more systematically in future studies the distinction between chronic and situational regulatory focus. This could be done by developing work-specific measures of promotion and prevention focus and contrasting them with the general measures typically used in the literature. Moreover, longitudinal studies of organizational newcomers could explore the trajectories of change in regulatory focus.

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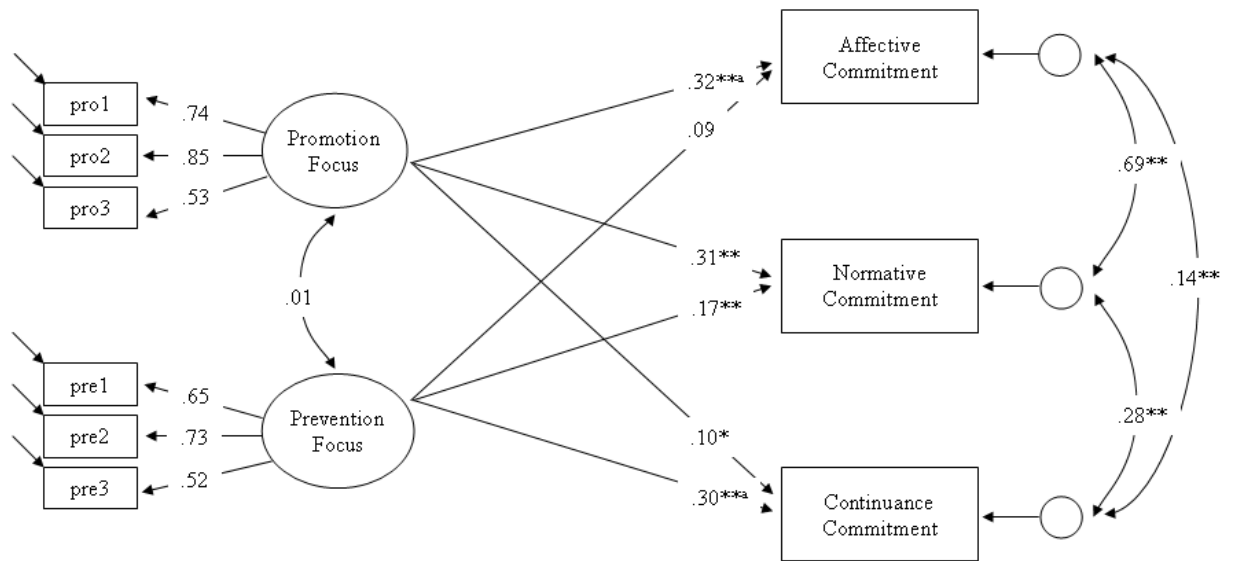


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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Relationships between regulatory focus and commitment



$N = 520$ ,  $\chi^2 = 63.30$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CFI = .95$ ,  $RMSEA = .07$

Note: Values represent standardized parameter estimates, \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , a = significantly stronger effect of one regulatory focus compared with the other.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and within-group homogeneity indices), Pearson correlations**

| <i>Variables</i>          | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>α</i> | $\bar{r}_{wg,j}$ | $\bar{r}_{wg,j}^*$ | <i>ICC(1)</i> | <i>ICC(2)</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>3</i> | <i>4</i> |
|---------------------------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 1. Affective commitment   | 4.56        | 1.28      | .84      | .61              | .27                | .02           | .23           |          |          |          |          |
| 2. Continuance commitment | 4.56        | 1.08      | .68      | .57              | .23                | .03           | .31           | .20**    |          |          |          |
| 3. Normative commitment   | 4.29        | 1.28      | .83      | .56              | .23                | .05*          | .39           | .73**    | .34**    |          |          |
| 4. Promotion focus        | 5.44        | .80       | .75      | .92              | .71                | .03           | .26           | .29**    | .09*     | .27**    |          |
| 5. Prevention focus       | 4.41        | .98       | .60      | .67              | .37                | .02           | .17           | .07      | .24**    | .14**    | -.04     |

*Note.*  $N = 520$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed), \*  $p < .05$  (two-tailed)