

The influence of commitment on employees' sense of belongingness and the consequences on employees' turnover intentions in high-commitment organizations: A study at the Royal Netherlands Navy

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted in order to further understand the experience of belongingness of employees and to identify how organizations can reduce the turnover intentions of their employees by using the experience of belongingness, complemented by the effect of commitment (formal and informal). Two kinds of belongingness were developed: (1) personal belongingness and (2) organizational belongingness. The results of this study indicate that a positive experience of organizational belongingness reduces the turnover intentions of the employees. Complementing this with formal and informal commitment could increase the positive experience. Personal belongingness could either reduce or increase the intention to leave. Here, the intention to leave could be reduced by using informal commitment.

Keywords

Personal belongingness, organizational belongingness formal commitment, informal commitment, turnover intentions

INTRODUCTION

Managing the costs related to employee turnover is a key concern for organizations. Prior research has suggested that by employing management activities that signal to workers that they are supported (e.g., training, personal recognition), organizations can reduce those costs and increase team effectiveness (Colbert, Mount, Harter, Witt, & Barrick, 2004). Further research on this topic suggests that in order to feel supported, employees should be (socially) included in the organization (Scott, Sagenczyk, Schippers, Purvis, & Cruz, 2014). In other words: employees need to feel that they belong to the organization (Scott et al., 2014).

This 'need to belong' was first coined by Baumeister and Leary (1995) as part of their belongingness theory. Here, belongingness refers to the need to develop and maintain strong and stable relationships in which there is a need for frequent, non-aversive interactions within an ongoing relational attachment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

In this study, this 'need to belong' is analyzed by conducting a single-case study at a high-commitment organization: The Royal Netherlands Navy.

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For this study, a high-commitment organization is characterized by both appropriating a high amount of personal time of the employees, as well as expecting the connection of the identities of the employees to the organization (Casey, 1995). In line with the above-mentioned, the main research question is: *How does organizational commitment influence employees' sense of organizational- and personal belongingness in the context of high-commitment organizations, and which consequences does it have for the turnover intentions of the employees?*

The result of this study is the extension of the (empirical) understanding of the experience of belongingness and its effects on the turnover intentions of employees by describing the influence of commitment, making use of the context of the high-commitment organization.

THEORY

Belongingness relates to the formation of social relationships (Baumeister & Leary 1995). This can be translated into two levels: (1) the level of belongingness that is derived from the relationships between persons and the interdependence between them, which will be further referred to as '*personal belongingness*', and (2) the level of belongingness that is derived from being embedded in a larger, more impersonal group (e.g., an organization) or in social categories, for example age-groups (how much an individual feels he belongs to this larger group) and will be further referred to as '*organizational belongingness*' (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

Personal and organizational belongingness differ in the kind of social connections used (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). In personal belongingness, the social connections are personalized bonds (e.g., two persons in a relationship). In organizational belongingness, the connections are more impersonal and are established by identification with this group (e.g., feeling part of the organization). They do not require personal relationships between the members of the group (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Prentice, Miller & Lightdale, 1994).

Belongingness can be directly linked to commitment, which is described as: "a force that binds an individual to a target (social or non-social) and to a course of action of relevance to that target" (Meyer, Becker, & Van Dick, 2006, p. 666). For this study, this binding force is split into two segments: formal and informal. *Formal commitment* is related to action commitment and organizational commitment (Vandenberghe, Bentein, & Stinglhamber, 2004). *Informal commitment* is related to interpersonal commitment (Becker, 2009).

Linked to both belongingness and commitment are the turnover intentions of employees. In their initial theory, March and Simon (1958) suggest two factors that could determine whether an employee will leave his or her job: (1) the perceived desirability of leaving the organization and (2) the perceived ease of leaving the organization. Later extensions of this theory start to look at the behavior of the employees and the way in which coworkers can influence each other. The main reason for turnover contagion is stated to be the fact that people tend to compare themselves to others (Felps et al., 2009).

In the remainder of this report, a model is formed in order to identify how an organization can reduce the turnover intentions by using the experience of both personal and organizational belongingness, formal and informal commitment, and social comparison.

METHODS

A qualitative (single instrumental case) study is conducted at the Royal Netherlands Navy; a high-commitment context allowing the possibility to identify the effect of organizational commitment. Using judgement sampling, the helicopter pilots of the Navy were selected which resulted in a total of thirteen interviewees, differing in age, time served at the Navy, and the type of contract.

After the collection of the interviews, all interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the inductive coding technique, travelling back and forth between the data and the emerging structure of theoretical arguments. Axial coding resulted in 20 different codes.

KEY FINDINGS

The key findings of this research can be separated into four key concepts: (1) organizational belongingness, (2) personal belongingness, (3) commitment, and (4) turnover intentions. In this section they will be separately discussed. The interplay between those key concepts is made visible in Figure 1.

Organizational belongingness

Organizational belongingness refers to codes such as 'organizational design', 'the amount of change', 'the direction of change' and 'the importance towards the organization'. The following quotation exemplifies why the 'importance' explains (part of) the experience of organizational belongingness: *"And, yes, it's a little giving and a little taking. I do get a lot from the organization and I would like to return that favor."* Organizational belongingness is thus linked to job performance and loyalty towards the organization.

Personal belongingness

Personal belongingness is related to codes such as 'colleagues', 'social activities', and 'inner-group relationships'. The evidence of this study shows that personal belongingness not only positively influences the atmosphere, the employees also depend on personal belongingness in their chances of growth within the organization. An example of this is given by one of the interviewees: *"I do not only look at the way someone performs as a pilot, when I've got one next to me as co-pilot, but also at how this person acts as a 'person' and how I would like this person to function at the squadron. Yeah, then I'll prefer the ones with the same kind of values and who do not only act and think in their own best interest."* Personal belongingness is therefore not only important for the

atmosphere within the organization and the relationships between the employees, but also for the career opportunities of the employees.

Commitment

The findings related to the elements of belongingness are supplemented by those related to commitment, where commitment could be split into 'formal' and 'informal'.

When discussing formal commitment, both 'organizational commitment' and 'action commitment' were frequently mentioned. Organizational commitment relates to the (different types of) contracts: *"Well, on the one hand it provides some security and on the other hand it provides some chances of which I have to decide for myself what to do with them"*, and: *"We had those contracts of course. They knew very well that we had them, and that we could not escape them."* Action commitment was referred to when explaining the meaning of the tasks: *"I would like to be part of that, that you know you can make a difference."*

The informal commitment results from the fact that various interviewees not only mention that they can make a difference, but that they can make a difference *together*. They are part of the team that is conducting an important job and therefore they feel committed to that team, as the following example shows: *"And I think you do perform an important job, you know, in the end. And you do it all together."*

Turnover intentions

The evidence shows that when an employee experiences the feeling of belongingness, it affects the turnover intentions of that employee. However, personal and organizational belongingness have a different impact on these turnover intentions.

According to the evidence of this study, turnover intentions related to organizational belongingness depend on three elements: (1) the other options available and the characteristics of those organizations, (2) the characteristics of their own organization, including the security, clarity of communications, and trust, and (3) the importance to the organization as experienced by the employee. Experiencing organizational belongingness (only) results in a decrease of the turnover intentions.

Personal belongingness could result in both a decrease as well as an increase of the turnover intentions. Several employees mention the fact that they have a nice group of colleagues and that that would be an argument to *stay*. However, this high affiliation with certain colleagues could also imply a reason to *leave*. The effect of personal belongingness on the turnover intentions of employees therefore depends on the strength of the relationship with either the leaving or the remaining colleagues: *"Well, that [leaving] is for one thing because of the departure of colleagues. I now have a group with whom I enjoy working. If more people leave with whom I had a good connection, then that would be a reason. The working experience is different then."*

DISCUSSION

The main findings of this research show a clear connection between the experience of belongingness, the effect of commitment, and the turnover intentions of employees, made visible in Figure 1. A hierarchy can be identified in which organizational belongingness is viewed as more important than personal belongingness. Evidence shows that personal belongingness is also deemed important, but that

this came second as compared to organizational belongingness; personal belongingness is even stated to be *affected* by organizational belongingness.

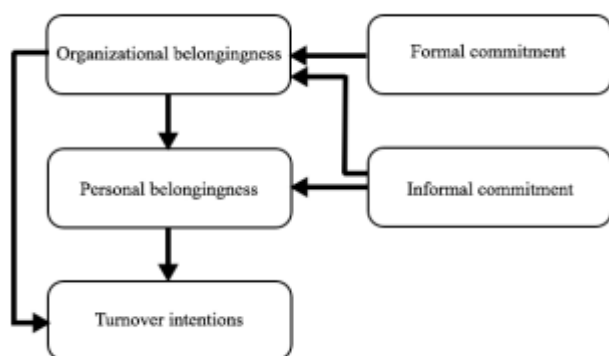
Furthermore, the findings of this study show the effects of formal and informal commitment on both personal and organizational belongingness, in which formal commitment only affects organizational belongingness while informal commitment affects both the experience of personal (e.g., commitment to the team) as well as organizational belongingness (e.g., commitment to the atmosphere within the organization).

The findings therefore underline the (higher) importance of a positive experience of organizational belongingness in relation to the turnover intentions of employees: when employees have a positive experience of organizational belongingness, they are less likely to leave the organization, thereby reducing turnover costs for the organization, but also increasing the effectiveness of the team (especially important when lives are at stake). Using formal commitment could increase this positive experience of organizational belongingness. Next to that, the use of informal commitment could also have a positive effect on the experience of organizational belongingness when relating it to the responsibility to the atmosphere of the organization.

When taking into consideration the experience of personal belongingness, this could both increase and decrease the intention to leave, depending on the strength of the employees' connection with either the leaving or the remaining colleagues. Informal commitment could be used to increase the personal belongingness and reduce the intention to leave, by making the employee focus on the commitment to the team and not on the commitment to the colleagues leaving the organization. This again relates to increasing the effectiveness of the team, which in this context could be a life-savior.

FIGURE 1

The interplay between the key concepts



Limitations

This research was conducted using a small target group, resulting in some evidence not being strong enough for a thorough conclusion in certain parts of the study. Further research could be conducted on this subject whereby more interviews could be performed at different departments, (hopefully) increasing the evidence and thereby further confirming some of the findings.

Next to that, for this study only a single-case study was conducted. Further research could explore different organizational atmospheres, further developing the boundaries between organizational and personal belongingness. Adding to this is the fact that this research

was conducted using a high-commitment context in order to obtain an understanding of the effect of commitment. Further research could change this context, thereby increasing the understanding of the experience of belongingness and the effects of commitment.

A final element is the fact that only the effect of formal and informal commitment on the relationship between personal and organizational belongingness and employee turnover intentions was studied. Further research could expand this by using, for example, the effect of the organizational structure, the communication between the employees and the management, or the use of IT on personal and organizational belongingness and employee turnover intentions.

CONCLUSION

This research was conducted in order to further understand the experience of belongingness and to identify how organizations can reduce the turnover intentions of their employees by using this experience of belongingness, complemented by the effect of commitment. The evidence shows convincingly that when employees experience organizational belongingness, it decreases the turnover intentions of employees, which could be further extended by using formal and informal commitment. Future research could further explore the fields of personal belongingness and its effects on the turnover intentions, also taking into account the effects of informal commitment.

The results of this study show that if managers want to retain their employees they should focus on improving the experience of organizational belongingness of their employees. This could be done by increasing the employees' identification with the organization, their feeling of importance to the organization, and the opportunities available to the employees. This way, the organization provides security, clarity, and trust to the employees, and the employees respond to this with loyalty towards the organization.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Lauren Waardenburg was an undergraduate student working under the supervision of Dr. B.R. Spisak when the research in this report was performed. The topic was proposed by the student herself and she arranged the access to the Royal Netherlands Navy. The design of the interview guide, the processing and writing down of the results, as well as the formulation of the discussion, implications, and conclusions and the writing were also done by the student.

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