

Positive Mood and Felt Obligation as Mediators of the Relationship between
Perceived Organisational Support and Affective Commitment

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Drawing from social exchange theory, this research investigates the relationship between perceived organisational support (POS) and affective commitment (AC). Consistent with previous research POS is shown to directly influence AC. Utilising administration staff from a large Australian university, regression analyses partially promote felt obligation and positive mood as mediators of this social exchange relationship. Results suggest POS leads an individual to feel positive about and obligated to their organisation. Subsequently they demonstrate AC. This research establishes that organisations who support and accept their employees will be better positioned to capitalise on the benefits of employee commitment. In order to increase their competitive advantage, organisations should be aware that employees who feel supported, demonstrate a felt obligation to exhibit AC and other beneficial work behaviours and attitudes.

For decades organisations have strived to gain and maintain a competitive advantage. Recently however, the focus has shifted away from technology and toward ‘people’ as the key leverage point of competitive advantage. The organisational literature suggests that the highly committed employee may give organisations the benefits they seek (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986; Eisenberger, Fasolo & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Settoon, Bennet & Linden, 1996; Wayne & Shore, 1997).

Early conceptualisations of Organisational Commitment (OC) assumed uni-dimensionality, however more recently, OC has been viewed as a multi-faceted work attitude (Allen & Meyer, 1990, 1993, 1996; Meyer, Allen & Gellatly, 1990). Allen and Meyer operationalised OC with three divergent components, affective, continuance and normative commitment, that influence an employee’s likelihood of remaining with the organisation (Allen & Meyer; LaMastro, 2000; Meyer, Allen & Smith, 1993; Meyer & Allen, 1984). Affectively committed employees ‘want’ to remain with their organisation (Allen & Meyer; Meyer & Allen, 1991). Employees experiencing continuance commitment remain employed at an organisation because they ‘have’ to (Allen & Meyer). Normatively committed individuals stay within their organisation because they feel they have a moral obligation to remain (Allen & Meyer; Meyer et al; Meyer & Allen, 1984, 1991).

Meyer and Allen (1984) explained that the affective commitment (AC) component of their theory is based on an emotional bond to the organisation (Allen & Meyer, 1993, 1996; Shore & Wayne, 1993). Of the three components of commitment, Allen and Meyer (1990, 1993) argued that AC is the most valuable in the organisational context. This contention is supported by substantial scholarly work suggesting that affectively committed employees are most likely to act in accordance with the best interests of the organisation and exhibit favoured work attitudes and behaviours (Allen & Meyer, 1990, 1993, 1996; Meyer, Allen & Topolnytsky, 1998).

Research contends that AC can be regulated in accordance with a social exchange framework. Blau’s (1967) Social Exchange Theory describes the trade of socio-emotional benefits, motivated by the expectation of future unspecified returns (Cropanzano, Byrne & Rupp, 2003). Social exchange in its simplest form refers to the concept that “an individual who supplies rewarding services to another

obligates him. To discharge this obligation, the second must furnish benefits to the first in turn” (Blau, 1967: p 89). In accordance with this conceptualisation of social exchange, if both parties involved in the trade are satisfied with what they receive from each other, they likely to continue contributing their services to the exchange relationship.

This is based on Gouldner’s norm of reciprocity which dictates that when an individual partakes in an exchange relationship, this individual is required to fulfil their obligations for exchange to those whom they have received services from in the past (Armeli, Eisenberger, Fasolo & Lynch, 1998; Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli & Lynch, 1997). The reciprocity norm is further argued to be based on an individual’s ‘felt obligation’ to behave morally (Eisenberger, Cotterell, Marvell, 1987; Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkle, Lynch & Rhoades, 2001). Eisenberger and colleagues (2001) defined felt obligation as an individual’s belief about whether or not they should care about the goals and well-being of their organisation. As such, favourable treatment by an individual creates a moral felt obligation in another individual to fulfil the requirements of social exchange by reciprocating favourable treatment (Eisenberger, et al., 1997).

Organisational support is suggested to be a key component of the social exchange processes. Organisational Support Theory contends that an employee’s commitment to their organisation forms on the basis of their beliefs about whether their organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Armeli et al., 1998; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Hutchison, 1997; Lynch, Eisenberger & Armeli, 1999; Settoon, et al., 1996). Eisenberger and colleagues (1986, 1997) refer to this global assessment as perceived organisational support (POS). This theory suggests that POS gives employees an index used to judge how committed their organisation is to them, based on displays of appreciation and care for employee’s well-being (Eisenberger et al). In accordance with both social exchange and organisational support theory, strong perceptions of support create a felt obligation for the employee to reciprocate and repay their organisation with beneficial organisational outcomes, including AC.

In support of the theoretical association between AC and POS numerous researchers have demonstrated that POS and AC are positively related (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Hutchison, 1997;

LaMastro, 2000; Meyer, et al., 2002; Shore & Wayne, 1993), yet conceptually and empirically distinct (O'Driscoll & Randall, 1999; Shore & Tetrick, 1991; Hutchison). Importantly, meta analyses clearly show that AC is the consequence most strongly associated with POS (Meyer et al., 2002; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Few studies have attempted to identify mediators in the relationship between POS and AC. Mediating variables may provide important pointers as to the psychological mechanisms through which the relationship between POS and AC holds. One study has identified felt obligation as a potential mediator of this relationship (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Empirical studies have determined that felt obligation and POS are positively related (Eisenberger et al., 1990; Wayne & Shore, 1997). High levels of POS, developing from an organisation's commitment to the employee, serve to create a felt obligation for the employee to remain strongly committed to their organisation and their goals, and to reciprocate their organisation's commitment (Shore & Wayne, 1993).

Eisenberger and colleagues also posited a second variable as a mediator in the relationship between POS and AC (Eisenberger et al., 2001). They showed that positive mood was independently related to both POS and AC, and that it mediated the relationship between POS and AC (Eisenberger et al.). This association suggests that some of the effect of POS on AC is the result of positive feelings arising from feeling supported.

Based on the preceding review of the literature, this study aimed to test the direct relationship between POS and AC and investigate potential psychological mechanisms through which this relationship holds (as illustrated in figure 1). Moreover, previous research suggests controlling for trait negative affectivity when exploring cross-sectional attitudinal associations in organisational research (Thoresen, Kaplan, Barsky, Warren & de Chermont, 2003). Based on this four hypotheses were generated:

Hypothesis One: POS will account for a significant proportion of variance in AC after controlling for the influence of demographic factors and trait negative affect.

Hypothesis Two: Felt obligation will mediate the relationship between POS and AC after controlling for the influences of demographics factors and trait negative affect.

Hypothesis Three: Positive mood will mediate the relationship between POS and AC after controlling for the influence of demographic factors and trait negative affect.

Hypothesis Four: The constructs of AC, POS, felt obligation, positive mood and trait negative affect will factor into individual constructs.

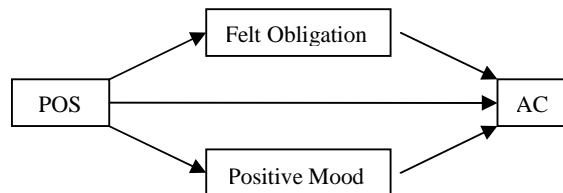


Figure 1

Hypothesised Model of Direct and Indirect Associations Between POS and Affective Commitment

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Five hundred surveys were dispatched to administration staff of a large Australian university. Participants numbered 170 representing a response rate of 34%. Respondents were 61% female ($n=104$), 34% male ($n=58$) and 5% did not disclose their gender ($n=8$). Ages ranged from 20-62 years, with an average age of 40.16 years ($SD=10.55$).

2.2 Measures

The questionnaire consisted of 74 items and measured five primary constructs measured simultaneously: AC, POS, felt obligation, positive mood and trait negative affectivity. Except where noted, responses were anchored on a seven point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree=1' to 'strongly agree=7'. To avoid response bias, items for each scale were both positively and negatively phrased. In order to be able to control for the influence of demographics in analysis, respondents were supplied general questions concerning gender, age, occupation, employee status, tenure and education level.

2.2.01 Organisational Commitment

AC was measured using the Affective Commitment Scale (ACS) (Allen & Meyer, 1990). The ACS consists of eight items measuring an employee's emotional attachment to the organisation. The ACS has been shown to have high convergent validity with the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire $r=0.83$ (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1979; Rhoades et al., 2001). The ACS has high reliability ($\alpha=0.87$) (Allen & Meyer).

2.2.02 Perceived Organisational Support

The eight item version of the Survey of Perceived Organisational Support (SPOS) was utilised to measure POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986). The SPOS has high reliability $\alpha=0.92$ (Hutchison, 1997). Validity of the SPOS is supported by positive correlations between POS and organisational commitment and employee performance ratings (Eisenberger et al., 1990; Moorman, Blakely & Niehoff, 1998).

2.02.03 Felt Obligation

An employee's sense of obligation to assist an organisation in reaching its goals was measured with the felt obligation scale (Eisenberger et al., 2001). While discriminant validity of this measure compared to similar constructs has been ascertained (Eisenberger et al., 1986), no reliability statistics have been reported.

2.02.04 Positive Mood

Ten items from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) measured positive mood (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1998). Warr, Cook and Wall's (1979) five item measure of job related well-being and Eisenberger et al.,'s (2001) two item measure were added to this scale. The PANAS utilises a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'very slightly=1' to 'extremely=5'. Respondents were requested to respond based on their feelings over the last two weeks. Test re-test reliability over an eight week period for the PANAS positive mood scale was high $\alpha =0.60$ (Watson et al., 1988). Convergent validity of the positive mood scale with other positive mood scales was high $r=0.76$ to 0.92 (Watson et al., 1988).

2.02.04 *Negative Affect*

The PANAS was also used to measure negative trait affect. Responding on a five point likert scale, respondents described how they felt in general. Test re-test reliability for the PANAS trait negative affect scale was high $\alpha = .71$ (Watson et al., 1988). Internal consistency reliability for negative affect was $\alpha = .87$ (Watson et al., 1988).

2.03 *Procedure*

Individuals were directed to read the explanatory statement which explained that responses were voluntary and confidential. Participants completed the questionnaires in their own time. Questionnaires were returned in supplied self addressed envelopes through university internal mail.

3. Results

3.1 *Descriptive Analysis*

Factor structures for the ACS and the SPOS scales were consistent with the construct validity reported by the scale developers (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Eisenberger et al., 1990; Rhoades et al., 2001). Both the negative affect and positive mood scales factored onto multiple dimensions. The positive mood construct was refined using factor analysis. The seven items with the highest loadings (above .8) on the primary factor, were selected as the items defining the construct of positive mood.

Descriptive and reliability statistics consistent with previous studies were generated for each scale (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Eisenberger et al., 1990; Watson et al., 1988). As evident in Table 1, reliabilities for each scale were acceptable ranging from $\alpha = 0.81$ to $\alpha = 0.94$. As expected, each of the major variables correlates with AC.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for POS, Felt obligation, Positive Mood, Negative Affect, AC, Gender and Age.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. SPOS	4.55	1.33	0.9	1					
2. Felt Obligation	5.76	1.06	0.81	.35**	1				
3. Positive Mood	3.08	1.07	0.94	.51**	.51**	1			
4. Negative Affect	4.41	0.74	0.88	.32**	0.05	.17*	1		
5. ACS	4.19	0.49	0.85	.66**	.48**	.66**	.21*	1	
6. Age	40.16	10.55		-0.1	0.14	0.05	0.06	.06	
7. Gender				.05	.06	.15	-.06	0.10	-.18*

N=170 Note: * p <.05; ** p <0.001.

3.2 Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regressions were calculated in order to ascertain whether felt obligation and positive mood mediated the relationship between POS and AC. Table 2 summarises the output assessing both the independent variables and the mediators as predictors of the dependant variable (The first and second mediation requirements).

Table 2

Multiple Regression Analysis Showing the Influence (Standardised Beta Weights) of Gender, Age, Trait Negative Affect, POS, Felt Obligation and Positive mood on AC.

Variables	Step 1 β	Step 2 <i>B</i>	Step 3 β	Step 4 β
Gender	.08	.09	.06	.00
Age	.10	.09	.15**	.07
Negative Affect		.25**	.01	.00
POS			.65***	.44***
Felt Obligation				.20**
Positive Mood				.30***
Multiple R	.11	.27	.66	.75
Adj. R ²	-.00	.05	.42	.55
Δ R ²	.01	.07	.44	.57
F	.87	3.73**	27.67***	30.54***

N=170 Note: *= significant at p <0.05; **= significant at p <.01; ***= significant at p <.001.

Table 2 shows that after controlling for gender, age and trait negative affect, POS, felt obligation and positive mood all significantly predicted AC, $F(6, 141)= 30.54, p<.000$. Table 3 shows POS and the control variables as predictors of felt obligation and positive mood.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis Showing the Influence (Standardised Beta Weights) of Gender, Age, Trait Negative Affect and POS on Felt Obligation and Positive Mood..

Variables	Felt Obligation			Positive Mood		
	Step 1 <i>B</i>	Step 2 β	Step 3 β	Step 1 <i>B</i>	Step 2 <i>B</i>	Step 3 β
Gender	.11	.11	.09	.15	.16	.14
Age	.18	.17	.21	.09	.09	.14
Negative Affect		.10	-.03		.22	.04
POS			.34***			.50***
Multiple R	.19	.21	.38	.16	.28	.54
Adj. R ²	.02	.05	.15	.01	.06	.27
ΔR^2	.04	.03	.12	.03	.08	.29
F	2.69	2.26	6.11***	2.04	3.93**	14.58***

N=170 Note: *= significant at $p<0.05$; **= significant at $p<.01$; ***= significant at $p<.001$.

Table 3 shows that POS predicted significant amounts of variance in felt obligation and positive mood $F(4, 144)= 6.11, p<.000$. and $F(4, 143)=14.58, p<.000$. The final step of mediation regression requires that when all variables are entered in the regression equation simultaneously, the beta weights associated with the IV should be zero or significantly diminished (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Judd & Kenny, 1981). Table 2 shows that when POS, felt obligation and positive mood were simultaneously entered into the regression equation, all remained significant predictors of AC. Therefore full mediation by felt obligation and by positive mood can not be supported. However, the beta weight associated with POS when simultaneously entered with felt obligation and positive mood ($\beta=.44, p<.000$) was lower than the original beta value for POS ($\beta=.65, p<.000$) entered by itself. This suggests that felt obligation and positive mood may partially mediate the relationship between AC and POS.

Sobel tests were subsequently conducted to ascertain the extent to which the influence of the IV on the DV was carried by the mediators (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Sobel, 1982). Felt obligation was shown to partially mediate the relationship between POS and AC ($z=3.43, p<.001$). Similarly, positive mood was also found to partially mediate the relationship between POS and AC ($z=5.23, p<.001$).

4. Discussion

The results of this study provided support for the social exchange approach by identifying POS as a strong predictor of AC. Evidence in support of the mediating effects of felt obligation and positive mood provided additional support for the social exchange theory. The following discussion outlines the findings of this research, as well as implications, limitations and directions for future research.

Consistent with previous studies, the ACS, SPOS and felt obligation scales factored onto individual dimensions. Trait negative affectivity however, factored into two factors, suggesting this may measure various facets of negative affect. The seven items measuring positive mood, factored into one primary dimension, suggesting this scale adequately measured an employee's level of positive mood. This research extends Eisenberger et al's (2001) study by including more items in the measure of positive mood and establishing acceptable psychometric properties.

Consistent with previous research (LaMastro, 2000; Wayne & Shore, 1997), POS accounted for a significant amount of the variance in AC. This finding supports social exchange in that employee's perceptions of support from the organisation enhance employee's AC. The social exchange view suggests that POS influences AC by eliciting a felt obligation from employees to reciprocate their organisation's commitment.

Under social exchange theory, felt obligation represents one psychological mechanism through which the relationship between POS and AC can be understood. Felt obligation was shown to partially mediate the relationship between POS and AC. This result reinforces Eisenberger et al's (2001) findings that the relationship between POS and AC is mediated by felt obligation. These findings further support

the social exchange account of felt obligation based on the norm of reciprocity. This suggests POS leads to a felt obligation to care about and contribute to the organisation and subsequently to exhibit AC.

Positive mood was also examined as a potential mediator in the relationship between POS and AC. Positive mood partially mediated the relationship between POS and AC. This implicates positive mood as a psychological mechanism through which the link between POS and AC could be explained. This suggests that some of the effect of organisational support on AC results from positive employee feelings arising from POS. Thereby, given POS, employees may link positive mood with the organisation and subsequently exhibit greater AC to the organisation.

One limitation present in this research is that it does not attempt to establish causality. Future research should attempt to clarify the cause and effects of the relationships presented here. Furthermore, as all information was collected in self-response surveys, common method variance may influence the results. Future research should utilise techniques that control for common method variance. Further research needs to consider other mediators that could potentially influence the relationship between POS and AC.

This research has multiple practical implications for organisations. The study establishes that organisations aiming to capitalise on employee AC need to support their employees. This display of organisational commitment to the employee may enhance POS and in turn, lead to increased AC (Rhoades et al., 2001). Organisations should further recognise that efforts to maximise POS result in behaviours and attitudes, such as positive mood, which may benefit the organisation by increasing AC. Organisations striving to increase their competitive advantage should acknowledge that displays of commitment to the employee would enhance employee's felt obligation to display AC.

In summary, the results of this research support a social exchange view of the relationship between POS and AC. The results further partially promote felt obligation and positive mood as contributors to this social exchange relationship. Given that there has been limited research attempting to empirically identify mediating links between POS and AC, the social exchange perspective would benefit from future research seeking to identify psychological constructs which influence this relationship.

Therefore, while it is evident that the social exchange perspective and its counterpart POS influence AC, further investigation into the measurement and explanation of this relationship and other impacting variables is still warranted.

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