Organisation's Commitment towards its Workers (OCW): Evidence from the Netherlands

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Abstract

What does 'organisation's commitment to its workers' (OCW) mean to employees? I conducted 86 semi-structured interviews with Dutch socio-therapists, fire fighters, PhD candidates, and R & D engineers. The findings show that one indicator of the employment relationship quality can serve as a framework for understanding OCW: Perceived Organisational Support (POS). However, evidence also suggests that the current antecedent categories of POS have to be refined. These refinements should more consequently address the different needs of employees and the responsibility and responsiveness of different organisational representatives, but should also reconsider the current treatment of employee voice by making use of Industrial Relations knowledge.

Keywords: Organizational commitment, IR Knowledge, perceived organizational support

Introduction

This article contributes to knowledge on the employment relationship (ER) by choosing a research subject presently discussed in academic literature (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 1986), and expanding on it by pointing out the lack of reference to employee's voice, more specifically, to Organisation's Commitment to its Workers (OCW). As the interpretations actually made by individuals do not necessarily mirror scholars' definitions (e.g., Singh & Vinnicombe, 2000), and as OCW might influence employee attitudes and behaviour, the 'look from within' that the attention to OCW would demand seems critical (Hassard, 1991). For this reason, I conducted 86 semi-structured interviews with Dutch socio-therapists, fire fighters, PhD candidates, and R & D engineers to answer the following question: what does OCW mean?

The ER - also known as the employee-organisation relationship (e.g., Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2004a; Kuvaas, 2008) - can be defined as a relationship based on a reciprocal agreement, in which employees provide manual and/or mental labour in exchange for economic and/or social rewards supplied by employers (e.g., Gospel & Palmer, 1993; Lewis et al., 2003). Although the employee conception of the ER *quality* can take many forms (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2004b), Kuvaas (2008) convincingly argues that the following indicators should be given particular attention: "Justice, perceived organisational support (POS) and employee commitment represent conceptually different indicators of the ER that have all been portrayed as potential mediators or moderators in research on the Human Resource Management (HRM) and performance relationship" (p. 4).

According to Eisenberger et al. (1986), "POS investigates processes involved in employees' inferences concerning the organization's commitment towards them" (p. 500). However, to date, workers' voice remains unheard, causing us to question whether the absorption of OCW by POS scholars is valid. For this study, I thus listened very carefully to workers understanding of OCW, but did not ask about their perception of POS, foreclosing for now drawing conclusions about the warrant of the interchangeability of these concepts. However, I still find Eisenberger et al.'s (1986) POS analysis useful in building a theoretical framework for making sense of perceived OCW. The reason behind this decision is that specifically where and when the concepts share common ground organisations have to offer the same input if they want to be perceived by their workers as "committed" and "supportive" (see also Torka, 2011). To do so, I draw heavily from the work of POS researchers in the theory section of this paper. In the subsequent sections, I introduce the participants and method and then report on the findings. I end the paper with conclusions and a discussion relevant to research and practice.

Theoretical background and proposition development

Employees perceive organisational support when the organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Taking on a social exchange perspective (Blau, 1964) and referring to the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), we can assume that POS will elicit an employee's obligation to care about the organisation's welfare and to help the organisation reach its objectives (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 2001). Research supports this idea, as employees reward POS with commitment towards the organisation and,

through this, with desired behaviours (e.g., Meyer et al., 2002; Poursafar et al., et al., 2014; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

What should an organisation offer when aiming for POS? In their meta-analysis, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002; see also Eisenberger et al., 2005) distinguish three antecedent categories beneficial for POS: fairness, support from organisational representatives, and HRM. We can assume that if the concept POS indeed investigates OCW, then both concepts should share the same antecedent categories. We can therefore use these categories to derive propositions concerning OCW. Our derivations also rest on other relevant literature.

Organisational justice

Colquitt (2001) concludes that distributive, procedural, interpersonal and informational justice are four distinct dimensions of organisational justice. Distributive justice (Adams, 1963, 1965) refers to fair outcomes (Greenberg, 1990); procedural justice (Thibaut & Walker, 1974) to processes that lead to outcomes. Interpersonal justice reflects the degree to which people are treated with politeness, dignity and respect by authorities. Informational justice refers to the explanations given to people concerning why procedures were used in a certain way or why outcomes were distributed in a certain fashion (Colquitt et al., 2001: 427).

In their POS meta-analysis, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) only included procedural justice studies in the fairness antecedent category, distinguishing two components of procedural justice: *voice* (the structural aspect) and *interactional justice* (the social aspect). The former refers to opportunities to have one's opinion heard (p. 708); the latter to a uni-dimensional treatment of interpersonal and informational justice. The analysis shows that procedural justice has the strongest positive relationship with POS, followed by support and HRM, respectively. This outcome supports assumptions in HRM and Industrial Relations (IR) literature: Employee influence or voice - a process that allows employees to exercise influence over their work and the conditions under which they work (Strauss, 1998: 15) - is essential for employees' perception of the ER (e.g., Beer et al., 1984; Guest et al., 1993; Ramsay, 1991; Styksal, 1980). Based on these results, I formulated the first proposition as follows:

P1: Employees will associate perceived OCW foremost with structural (voice) and social aspects (interpersonal and informational justice) of procedural justice and less with support and HRM.

Although the meta-analysis suggests that structural and social aspects of procedural justice are equally important, literature 'outside of POS' shows that it is valuable to distinguish between these aspects as well as between different forms of voice. We therefore present two additional propositions. Concerning the forms of voice, even though research suggests that information disclosure is important for achieving positive employee perceptions of organisation's treatment (e.g., Guest & Conway, 2002; Peccei et al., 2005), voice seems to have a stronger influence: direct voice, which refers to having influence in decision-making without the mediation of representatives (Bryson, 2004), and the right to be heard, which

refers to representative, institutionalised forms of participation (e.g., work councils, unions or union-management cooperation) (e.g., Gollan, 2003). I have captured this finding in the second proposition:

P2: Employees associate OCW more with voice (structural aspect of procedural justice) than with informational justice (social aspect of procedural justice).

As mentioned above, a distinction can be made between direct and representative voice. Although employees are still demanding union voice mechanisms (e.g., Freeman et al., 2007; Bryson & Freeman, 2006), at least in Anglo-American countries, empirical evidence suggests that direct voice influences employee attitudes and behaviour more strongly than representative voice (e.g. Bryson, 2004). I therefore propose:

P3: Employees will associate OCW more with direct voice than with representative voice.

Finally, relatively little research has been done to date on the distributive justice and POS relationship. Rhoades and Eisenberger consequently combined studies that evaluate the fairness and favourableness of outcomes in the HRM antecedent category. However, Wayne et al. (2002) found that it is important to distinguish between both types of employee evaluation: results indicate that distributive justice has a stronger impact on POS than discretionary HR practices (see also Eisenberger et al., 2005). Thus, the fairness of HRM outcomes might have a stronger influence on POS than the favourableness of HRM. I therefore propose:

P4: Distributive justice concerning HR practices is more important for perceived OCW than favourableness of HRM, but distributive justice is less important for perceived OCW than procedural justice and support.

Support from organisational representatives

Based on Levinson's (1965) comment that employees personify the organisation, POS scholars assume that the treatment by representatives contributes to POS. The view is that employees tend to see actions by agents of the organisation as actions of the organisation itself (Eisenberger et al., 1986: 500). Eisenberger et al. (2005) suggest that the higher the status the employee believes the agent has, the more the employee should attribute the actions of that agent to the intent of the organisation (p. 210). However, as many companies delegate operational HRM to line management, it could be argued that employees not only perceive top-managers as agents, but also direct supervisors (see also Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). There are two situations in which employees will not experience direct supervisors as the organisation's representative. The first situation is one in which the supervisors influence in decision-making with respect to subordinates is restricted (e.g., Fenton-O'Creevy, 2001). The second situation is one in which the supervisor has a close working relationship with the

employee. Research has shown that only 'remote' supervisors represent the organisation and not necessarily the immediate bosses (Redman & Snape, 2005). These findings lead to the following proposition:

P5: Employees will associate top-managers with perceived OCW, and direct supervisors only when they appear as distant figures with influence in decision-making concerning their subordinates and without close working relationships with their staff.

Human Resource Management

Rhoades and Eisenberger's (2002) meta-analysis included studies that measured the following aspects of HRM: recognition, pay, promotion, job security, autonomy, role stressors, and training. As the authors expected – because many aspects of HRM may commonly be attributed to external pressures on the organisation rather than be seen as a voluntary choice (p. 701) – HRM has the weakest effect on POS of all the three antecedent categories. However, of all aspects included in this category, only pay may be influenced externally (i.e. labour law, collective agreements). When studying the HR practices included in the meta-analysis and comparing these with the original 36-item POS instrument (Eisenberger et al., 1986), as well as with the HRM practices in other empirical studies (e.g., Iverson & Buttigieg, 1999; Kinnie et al., 2005), it seems that many HR practices have not yet been integrated in POS research: for example, team work, recruitment and selection (Hutchinson et al., 2000). Moreover, although the original POS instrument contains items measuring HR practices concerning pay, development and promotion, employee influence and job characteristics, the latter is only partially included in the meta-analysis: job characteristics involve more than just autonomy (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Finally, organisations' treatment of employees with respect to general caring (e.g., "The organisation would understand a long absence due to my illness") and valuing (e.g., "The organisation fails to appreciate any extra effort from me") receive relatively little attention as antecedents of POS, as well as in HRM research in general, even though these aspects are included in the original POS instrument. In sum, the given incompleteness might explain the relatively weak influence of HRM on POS.

According to POS researchers, all employees experience an organisation's general caring and valuing as supportive treatment. However, with respect to the aforementioned HR practices, employees have different expectations or needs. Therefore, a 'one fit for all' approach is not sufficient (e.g., Guest, 1999; Purcell, 1999). Research by Kinnie et al. (2005) supports this idea. These researchers found that different HR practices contribute to organisational commitment for workers, than for professionals or for managers. Based on this finding, I formulated the final proposition:

P6: All employees will associate general care and valuing with OCW, but different occupational groups will associate different HR practices with OCW.

Research design

I conducted 86 interviews with Dutch socio-therapists, fire fighters, PhD candidates, and R & D engineers. The fire fighters had received technical vocational training. All other interviewees had a BA or MA degree. The different occupational groups were selected to determine if group differences matter for perceived OCW and to increase the transferability of the results. The choice of these groups was also pragmatic: permission had been received from their employers. Every group was related to one Dutch employer: a clinic for alcohol addicts, a fire station, a university, and a business unit from a large multinational company. I was free to choose the participants from within each organisation. I interviewed all employed (19) socio-therapists. Twenty-two of the forty fire fighters participated in the research. Some fire fighters were on vacation or on sick leave, but a few did not want to participate. We contacted the university's PhD candidate network for recruiting participants. The chair sent a mail to all members (approximately 600; 50 per cent foreigners), which resulted in twenty-nine volunteers, including 10 non-Dutch interviewees. Sixteen R & D engineers - 50 per cent of the business unit's R & D staff - were chosen at random to join the research: I selected every second employee on an alphabetized department employee list. All selected employees agreed to an interview. The PhD candidates who were interviewed had an employee status. Except for the latter group, all interviewees had a permanent employment contract. All employers had a work council: This is mandatory in the Netherlands for organisations with more than 50 employees.

The socio-therapists and engineers had experienced fundamental organisational change in the recent past. The detox clinic used to be independent, but was taken over by a large organisation. The management is now located sixty kilometres away from the unit. The engineers' employer was taken-over by an American concern. A dramatic incident had taken place for the fire fighters four years ago. Four of their colleagues had died during a disaster.

Data collection and analysis

The interview-protocol consisted of questions concerning private and work-related commitment (to what and whom are you committed?). In the Netherlands, individuals use the word 'commitment' (in Dutch: betrokkenheid) colloquially to describe one's involvement in certain ideas or entities. After participants had been asked questions concerning interviewees' commitments, the focus of commitment was reversed: *You told us about your commitment towards ... (name employer). We would like to reverse this statement: does ... (name employer) show commitment towards you and, according to you, how does ... (name employer) show (non-)commitment?* In cases where the interviewee did not elaborate on his/her commitment towards the organisation, we used the following introductory sentence: *Some people told us they are also committed towards ... (name employer).*

I taped the interviews and transcribed them word for word. Following this transcription, I carried out a content analysis using the constructs discussed in the previous section as our sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954). More specifically, based on the theoretical framework, I built the following analytical categories: (1) structural aspect of procedural justice (voice), (2) directness of voice (direct vs. representative voice), (3) interpersonal justice, (4)

informational justice, (5) distributive justice with respect to HR outcomes, (6) favourableness of HR outcomes, (7) general caring and valuing, (8) top-management support, (9) supervisor support and (10) an open category.   When interviewees' sayings appear to refer to more than one 'antecedent', they were coded under several headings.

I used the *Kernsatzmethode* (Core Sentence Method; Leithäuser & Volmerg, 1988) for text analysis, which is a method that seeks to identify the key sentences in a text. Its aim is to reduce and transform information into relevant meanings. The data were analyzed according to Kluge's (2000) four analytical steps: (1) determine the relevant comparison dimensions according to theory and data material, (2) group the cases and analyze empirical regularity, (3) analyze content meanings and type generation, and (4) characterize the generated types. Ie used two techniques to evaluate the quality of the interpretations: *multiple peer debriefing* (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) and *multiple member check* (Douglas, 1976). I arranged the findings in the order of the propositions developed.

Findings

Proposition 1 to 4: relationships between antecedent categories

All employee groups associated OCW most frequently with procedural justice and particularly with direct voice and informational justice.   They also referred to friendly and respectful treatment (interpersonal justice). Concerning the latter, interviewees mentioned not only authorities, but also indirect colleagues (see 'Proposition 5: the role of organisational representatives for OCW'). None of the interviewees remained abstract when linking procedural justice to OCW: They referred explicitly to those responsible for justice and HRM. *We can therefore confirm proposition 1 only partly*: Employees associate OCW more with procedural justice than with HRM, but agent behaviour or support is integrated into the justice as well as HRM perceptions and is therefore not less important for OCW than procedural justice. In the following, I present examples of the most frequently associated 'symptoms' of OCW, namely direct voice and informational justice.

Socio-therapists' critique about voice was most devastating: since the unit was taken over by a larger organisation, their influence in decision-making had decreased. The fire fighters described voice as improving and ascribed this to the new fire officer. They nevertheless remembered the recent past vividly. The fire brigade had introduced several project groups that had had different responsibilities such as the kitchen, the canteen, and the admittance of potential recruits. However, these projects seemed to fail on a regular basis. At first, management invited employees to raise voice, but the final decision was ultimately made 'upstairs' (the management team is located above the fire fighter's work places). In this vein, the project group 'clothing' was frequently referred to as a 'flop':

We did choose a new set of working clothes, but the management brushed our wishes aside. Later on I thought: what is your commitment towards us? We did not like the colour; they

chose khaki trousers. Come on, I'm not going on a safari.

Thus, offering opportunities to share one's opinion seems to presume influence in decision-making. Voice without influence seems to be doomed. The R&D engineers perceived voice in how to perform their tasks as an indication of OCW, as well as voice on the courses one can attend. However, according to them, opportunities for co-decision-making have decreased since the company's take-over by an American concern.

The PhD candidates associated the removal of a personal PhD budget with little OCW. Up until a few years ago, every candidate had had a 10,000 Euro budget and had been free to spend this money for the purchase of a laptop, courses, conferences, dissertation printing costs, and so on. But now, candidates' voice with respect to these benefits had decreased. The candidates also referred to 'content voice' when elaborating on OCW: their autonomy in choosing and/or approaching the research subject. The majority of interviewees valued this as 'satisfying'. The foreigners, in particular, appreciated this freedom and stated that, in their home countries, this degree of autonomy would be unusual. However, a few employees mentioned that the interference of companies that finance the research projects can influence voice negatively.

Supporting proposition 2, fewer participants referred to informational justice than they did to voice, but many of the statements concerning voice included references to fair information. Several socio-therapists demanded that management should explain why certain employees have rights to a higher salary scale than others. Furthermore, they stated that, although the management visits the unit once every few months, they doubted the honesty of the signs of interest towards them. According to the therapists, "they only want to pass on new changes". The fire fighters demanded direct and timely information. If they received information from third parties or too late (at the same time as the public), the sense of perceived OCW suffered. Many engineers mentioned a lack of information about future organisational changes when asked about OCW. Some PhD candidates complained about the large amount of non-relevant information; others criticised a lack of information about things that could affect them directly. According to the foreign candidates, much of the information was only available in Dutch and this was perceived as a lack of OCW.

Proposition 3 states that employees will associate OCW more with direct than with indirect voice. Despite the fact that all employers have a mandatory work council, only a few PhD candidates associated perceived OCW with representative voice and, more specifically, with the PhD network within the university. However, this network is an informal 'body' of indirect voice without formal rights of consent, prior consultation, the right of regular consultation meetings, or the right of appeal, nor is the network entitled to receive relevant information on university polices and practices. The very limited reference to representative voice compared to direct voice *supports proposition 3*.

Finally, I proposed that distributive justice concerning HR practices is more important for perceived OCW than favourableness of HRM, but distributive justice is less important for

perceived OCW than procedural justice and support. The interviewees did not relate distributive justice more frequently to OCW than favourableness, but voice and informational justice were mentioned more frequently than (other) fair and favourable HR practices. As for the dimensions of procedural justice, the interviewees did not remain abstract when linking HRM to OCW: They integrated agent's behaviour and/or support in elaborations on HRM. We can therefore assume that support is not more important than HRM. In sum, *proposition 4 only receives partial support*. I will present examples of fair and favourable HRM under the heading "Proposition 6: the role of HRM for OCW".

Proposition 5: the role of organisational representatives for OCW

Proposition 5 states that employees will associate top-managers with perceived OCW, but direct supervisors only when they appear as distant figures with influence in decision-making and without close working relationships with their staff. Indeed all employee groups associate top-management with perceived OCW. With the exception of the fire fighters, all other groups were dissatisfied with top-management's OCW. The socio-therapists and R&D engineers complained about the lack of information and decreasing opportunities for voice given by top management (see last section) as well as, in the case of the socio-therapists, their limited care and valuing (see next section). The engineers were extremely dissatisfied with 'the American way of top-down management' and linked this directly to decreasing OCW. The PhD candidates saw the tutor and professor as key figures for perceived OCW and all interviewees were satisfied with these agents. Only few mentioned the dean or rector. However, when asked about the universities' commitment, they expressed criticism:

No, not the university. My professor is committed, but not …(name university).

In contrast, the fire fighters judged their fire officer (top-management agent) positively:

He also competes in heptathlon, wearing short trousers and a shirt and he rolls around in the dirt, over the soap track, and he doesn't care a damn. And he drinks beer, it's just …(first name), and also here on the floor it's just …(first name), but when something is going on it's Mister … (last name).

Although the first part of proposition 5 can be supported – employees associate top-management with perceived OCW-, the second part needs further elaboration. The socio-therapists and fire fighters did not identify their direct supervisors as agents of OCW. Their supervisors are working foremen with little influence in decision-making concerning HR practices (e.g., appraisal, development and promotion) and the 'subordinates' experience them as (equal) colleagues. The R&D engineers stated that their supervisor – with

decision-making power and close relationships with his subordinates - was a role model for OCW. Thus, despite his proximity, the employees perceived him as an organisational representative and carrier of OCW. Some PhD candidates had close working relationships with their professor and tutor; others did not. However, all candidates also associated their supervisor(s) with OCW. It seems that, with the exception of pay, which is determined by the institutional framework and the university, the professor has strong influence in decision-making concerning work conditions (see next section). The findings show that supervisor's power in co-determining employees' conditions seems more important for the attribution of OCW to supervisors than having close working relationships with staff.

Although, I did not find evidence that supervisors' distance or proximity towards their subordinates affect the attribution of OCW, I did find one example that shows how individuals become to be perceived as remote from others in a particular work context. The fire fighters also associated indirect colleagues without leadership responsibilities (the officers) with OCW. They expressed so-called 'us-and-them' attitudes:

When the officers start their civil careers, they are with us for the first two weeks. They run 24 hour shifts with us, they are on the fire engine, and we share our bedrooms with them. After the initial two weeks they go upstairs. Then they change. They have to change if they want to belong. There are rumours about three transferred officers. It is said that they had to leave because they were too close to us.
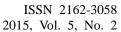
Taking all the above mentioned into account, I can *only partly confirm our fifth proposition*: employees associate top-managers with perceived OCW and direct supervisors only when they have influence in decision-making on HR practices. However, I have to add that indirect colleagues without influence in decision-making can also serve as agents of OCW: when they behave aloof.

Proposition 6: the role of HRM for OCW

When associating OCW with HR practices, the interviewees talked about the favourableness, as well as the distributive fairness, of these outcomes. I therefore present examples of both indicators of the HRM quality in this section. Before elaborating on specific HR practices, we focus our attention on the more general aspects of caring and valuing.

Although some PhD candidates associated interest in the subject 'researcher' with OCW, it was primarily the socio-therapists and fire fighters who linked signs of general care and valuing to OCW. Concerning care, the socio-therapists were seriously disappointed and blamed the director of the institution and the manager responsible for their unit:

The commitment here is bad. The responsible manager is a blockhead. A few years ago, there

was a lot of turmoil here. Organisational and personnel changes, pregnancies. A lot was going on and there was serious criticism of the management. We suffered from a lack of clarity about 'what's going on'. This man didn't show up. He should have been present at meetings, talking to the team and asking about how things are going. Somebody from the top has to be available.

One incident was mentioned frequently. A patient had died and the unit manager had blamed the therapists instead of mentally supporting them. The socio-therapists also perceived a lack of valuation. For example, in the Netherlands, several professions, such as secretaries and nurses, have so-called 'Professional Days'. The therapists' complaint was that the organisation offered the secretaries an outing, but the therapists did not receive anything on their tribute day. This example shows how injustice can influence perceived valuation. The following example, mentioned by a fire fighter, shows how organisations that care can gain in perceived OCW:

Despite the fact that I was always a troublemaker, they showed a strong commitment towards me in my personal family situation. I had to go to Costa Rica for ten weeks because of the adoption of one of our children, but legally you're only entitled for four weeks adoption leave. However, they made it possible to leave for ten weeks without sacrificing many vacation days. I did appreciate this very much.

However, several fire fighters were less enthusiastic about the care expressed by the organisation's representatives:

It could be better [author: OCW]. *My colleague and I attended a course two times. Afterwards, nobody asked about our experiences, which is bad.*

My father in law had to go to the hospital and I was very concerned about that and also shared my concerns with a manager. He never asked me about this issue again. Then I do not feel any commitment towards my person.

The fire fighters most often mentioned that they expected agents to express care concerning private life issues. How can we explain fire fighters' strong need for managers to show personal care? On duty, their life is at risk. A few years ago, four fire fighters from this department died on duty (i.e. a disaster caused by exploding firework) and the survivors still remember this loss and the dangers of their occupation vividly. This awareness may lead to these enhanced expectations for personal interest and this may also apply to other potentially life-threatening occupations, such as police officers and military personnel.

All employee groups mention pay and benefits as relevant for perceived OCW. The socio-therapists related pay and benefits most often to OCW and seemed to be most unsatisfied with these conditions: They complained about unfair salary and the Christmas bonus. Many fire fighters also associated OCW with the improved pay and benefits and attributed this progress to the new fire officer. He upgraded the functions and as a consequence the monthly salary. In the past, the fire fighters had been discontent with underpayment inequity. The R&D engineers seemed very concerned about a new salary system: According to them, this system leads to a decrease in the annual salary, as well as the annual bonus. They also complained about the overtime regulations: Many work overtime, but if they want to leave work earlier they have to sacrifice two hours of vacation time. The PhD candidates mentioned working times, contract extensions, salary and compensations and, in general, reported being satisfied with the universities 'financial' OCW. The foreign candidates in particular spoke highly of the benefits:

Because I'm a foreigner, the university must do a lot more things for me than for a person from Holland. When I came here for the interview, they just, in a very short period of time, made all the documents that were necessary for me to come to Holland. They paid for the visa and the transportation costs for the interviews.

The candidates also frequently related these HR practices explicitly to their professors. One candidate mentioned that, although the former faculty dean was against virtual work and demanded full-time on-the-job presence, the professor managed to negotiate permission to work two days a week at home. Another one related how her supervisor was able to arrange a renewal of her employment contract before her maternity leave. For one candidate, the salary funding seemed important: Receiving direct funding for his research project from the university instead of from other sources meant OCW to him. The candidates had an employee status. Some Dutch universities had already switched the status of candidates from employees to bursas. One candidate associated his employee status with OCW ("That could be a form of commitment a university can show"). One candidate said that OCW was low because, different from other candidates, she had an accumulation of several short-term contracts and not a contract for (usually) four years. As a consequence, she was not entitled to moving compensation. The candidates also frequently referred to the good child-care facilities and the moving compensations.

With the exception of the socio-therapists, other interviewees did relate working conditions to OCW. For the professionals and PhD candidates, a well-equipped workplace also stood for OCW. In general, they were satisfied with the facilities offered, although the candidates reported that some of their colleagues did not have their own PCs. None of the fire fighters referred to physical working conditions. This is not surprising, as these conditions are strongly determined by the (rescue) situation and safety precautions set by law. However, they frequently mentioned the conditions outside of the 'repressive function' (i.e., fire-fighting, rescues). They work twenty-four hour shifts and live in the fire station. Their

facilities are comparable to those at home: sleeping rooms, a kitchen, a living room and a canteen. One man said the following about his 'second home' and the facilities:

This stupid television was always broken. So, we got a new one, but this stupid TV was too small, only 71 centimetres. Sometimes fourteen people relax here, so such a TV is certainly not big enough. I don't want such a small thing at home either. At home, mine is approximately one meter. We had to complain for weeks before we got a larger TV and the same counts for our DVD-player. Such things are important. On New Year's Eve and Christmas, our children are here and they like it. This is our house. We live here.

None of the socio-therapists and only one fire fighter linked opportunities for development and promotion to OCW. This aspect of HRM seemed to matter more to the R&D professionals and PhD candidates. Candidates' perceptions about pursuing courses and attending conferences differed: some were satisfied, others not; and it seems that supervisors determine this to a large extent. Some foreigners complained about too few facilities to learn Dutch. Unlike the engineers, many candidates judged their career perspectives within the university negatively. Furthermore, they argued that support for finding employment on the external labour market was necessary if the university wanted to be perceived as having OCW:

This university is not really committed to its PhD students. You've got four years and after that it's out and over. This is a form of not being committed.

Finally, only the R & D professionals and PhD candidates related job characteristics to OCW. In particular, they mentioned hindrances in performing tasks well. The professionals referred to high work pressure due to labour shortages. A company's investment in new colleagues would be evidence of OCW, according to the R & D professionals. Several candidates reported that they lacked information about relevant research in other faculties. In addition, they also viewed administrative affairs, complicated procedures, demands for publishing articles, and lecturing responsibilities as having potential effects on perceived OCW. For many candidates, these tasks distracted them from their core business: the dissertation.

In sum, I *did not find support for the first part of proposition 6*: different employee groups seemed to attach different importance to general caring and valuing. However, different employee groups did indeed refer to different HR practices as being relevant for perceived OCW: while pay and benefits seemed to be important for all interviewees, job characteristics, working conditions, and development and promotion opportunities seemed to matter only for certain groups. Therefore, I *can only claim support for the second part of proposition 6.*

Discussion and conclusion

When do employees experience *Organisations' Commitment to its Workers* (OCW)? The findings give us the following answer: according to employees, organisational agents have to offer procedural justice - voice, information, and friendly and respectful treatment -, as well as fair and favourable HR practices, and they need to express general care and valuing. Direct voice seems more important than fair and favourable HR practices. These results support scholars who ascribe to voice a central position when elaborating on the effectiveness of HR practices for employee attitudes and behaviour (e.g., Beer et al., 1984; Ramsay, 1991): employees have different needs and should therefore be involved in decision-making on issues that matter for them. Concerning fairness and HRM, our findings show that top-managers act as organisational agents, although direct supervisors also do when they have power to decide on issues important for employees. The study also revealed a potential alternative agent group: indirect colleagues.

Eisenberger et al. (1986) claim that perceived organisational support (POS) investigates OCW. For this reason, I used their POS framework for formulating propositions on OCW. Do our results support Eisenberger et al.'s assertion that POS investigate OCW? Meta-analysis shows that procedural justice has the strongest influence on POS, followed by organisational agents support and HRM, respectively (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; see also Eisenberger et al., 2005). The findings support procedural justice's predominance. However, I doubt that support by organisational representatives should be maintained as a distinct antecedent category, as everything an organisation does to employees, it does through persons: The organisation did not remain abstract when the interviewees thought about OCW. Instead, interviewees integrated agents' responsiveness (see also Bryson, 2004; Bryson et al., 2006) and support in elaborations on, for example, fairness and HRM. Future POS research should therefore integrate the responsiveness and support of different agents in relevant work experience antecedents

Does the fact that some of our findings challenge previous views suggest that OCW is a different indicator of the employment relationship quality than POS? I do not believe so. As the answer to the research question suggests, POS research and theory offers the ingredients for understanding OCW as perceived by employees. However, POS is still a relatively new construct and research domain. Not all antecedents have received the due attention of researchers, such as the integration of agent's responsiveness and support in work-related antecedents, and the role of representatives other than top-managers and direct supervisors. This article can therefore be seen as contributing to a more definitive view of POS, as the findings point in the direction we need yet to go. What should the focus of future POS research be and what should organisations offer when aiming for the mark 'committed'? Based on the results, I am able to present refinements to the already well-known POS antecedent categories, procedural justice and HRM, and can sketch implications for research and practice.

Implications for research and practice

The interviewees associated OCW more frequently with voice than with informational justice

and friendly and respectful treatment (interpersonal justice). The results show that requests to raise voice include a performative utterance for employees: 'saying is doing' (Austin, 1955). Thus, the promise to co-decide is seen as inherently included in the request to raise voice. Concerning decent information and treatment, I assume that both are pre-conditions for successful voice. The executers of voice (top-managers and direct supervisors) cannot therefore expect positive voice judgments when information is lacking and daily leader-subordinate encounters are negative. For voice quality, as for all HR practices, the responsiveness of managers seems more important than the absence or presence of practices (Bryson, 2004; Bryson et al., 2006). Researchers should therefore focus on informational and interpersonal justice as antecedents of voice quality, and quality measures should include manager's responsiveness. Managers should not only consider the real opportunities for (co-) decision-making when employees complain about voice, but also the mentioned antecedents of voice quality. .

Many interviewees associate direct voice with OCW and few mention representative voice. This and other evidence beg for a refinement of voice in future research. Although empirical studies have suggested that direct voice has a stronger influence on employees than representative voice (e.g. Bryson, 2004), research shows a positive relationship between direct and representative voice (e.g. Kleiner & Lee, 1997; Poutsma et al., 2006), which supports Strauss's (1998) idea that indirect voice is necessary for successful direct voice. Consequently, future research should include employees' perceived direct and representative voice quality to determine how both influence each other and impact POS. Managers may want to reflect on how agents of representative voice can be helpful   - through, for example, information and support for supervisors –   in order to steer direct voice in the right direction.

When associating OCW with HR practices, the participants elaborated on the favourableness as well as fairness of these outcomes (distributive justice). For this reason, I cannot draw conclusions about what matters more for POS. Future investigations should treat these categories independently in order to gain insight into this issue, as well as consider the fact that different employee groups have different needs concerning HRM and that differences within groups do exist (e.g., Guest, 1999; Purcell, 1999). Employers should not expect to automatically receive the label 'committed' if they offer so-called best practices, as they have been described by several authors (e.g. Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1994). Such best practices include challenging tasks, opportunities for development and promotion, more than 'average' pay and benefits, voice and job security. In this study, with the exception of one fire fighter, only the 'knowledge workers' (R&D engineers and PhD candidates) related OCW to job characteristics and development and promotion opportunities. Concerning in-group differences, this study shows that organisations have to meet other expectations when it comes to their expatriate employees than when it comes to their native staff. Psychological contract (PC) research investigates the different expectations of employees, which makes research on the PC / POS relationship promising in this context (e.g., Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005). Employee expectations also seem to differ when it comes to attaching importance to organisational agents care for issues in private life, represented by work-life balance practices such as informing about sick family members,

'professional care' such as aftercare and support when critical incidents have happened, and other forms of valuation different from those related to the above-mentioned 'best practices'. Remarkably, although care and valuing are the cornerstones of POS and the original instrument covers some of these issues, HRM and POS research that includes such antecedents is still limited.

Limitations

The contributions of this research should be viewed in light of several limitations. First, the data were gathered at one point in time, making it impossible to draw inferences of causality. Future research should make use of a longitudinal research design to capture changes in perceived POS over time and assess the possible impact of these changes on consequences. Second, although I conducted interviews with four occupational groups, where every group was linked to a single employer, the number of interviewees and organisations was still too limited for generalisations. Finally, the research was done within the Netherlands. Looise and Drucker (2003) refer to the Dutch culture as a 'consultation culture', referring to the importance of voice in Dutch society. Although voice seems to be critical for POS in other countries as well, voice may be less important in those contexts that have serious shortcomings when it comes to satisfying workers' basic needs, namely, in terms of sufficient pay and benefits. Future research should therefore expand to include different societies and occupational sub-cultures within societies.

Conclusion

In general, perceived organisational support (POS) investigates organisation's commitment to its workers (OCW). However, the findings suggest that future research should refine well-known antecedents of POS. These refinements concern: 1) the role of direct and representative voice, 2) a stronger accent on 'one size of HRM does not fit all', including distinctions between favourableness and distributive fairness of HRM, and 3) a broader view of the significance of agents for OCW, as indirect colleagues can also send signals. The responsiveness and support of agents should also be integrated into relevant work experience antecedents. From an employee perspective, organisations that aim for the perception of being committed should foster the expression of the following behaviours in their organisational agents: Agents should take care of employee needs, which can differ even within occupational groups. They should treat employees fairly. They should attend to the work- and private-life concerns of employees. And, most importantly, they should listen sincerely and respond when employees raise voice.

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