COMMITMENT BALANCE: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

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Abstract

This paper proposes a new concept of 'commitment balance' as worthy of study within organisations' relational exchanges. The purpose of the paper is to share thinking and empirical data from a research study within the context of higher education, with the aim of seeking opportunities for future cross-cultural research to further examine commitment balance within education and other sectors. The study shares outcomes from quantitative analysis of undergraduate students' reports of commitment balance within the context of their experiences of study within U.K. Universities. The study provides an empirically-informed definition of commitment balance and identifies the importance of a focus for commitment balance. The research shows that the focus of institution rather than academic staff seems to resonate more strongly within undergraduate students' reports of commitment balance. Thus the construct 'commitment balance between students and institution' is considered to be worthy of future research. It is hoped that this paper will precipitate Asian/Australian/ U.K. future research collaborations both within the context of higher education and other consumer-focused contexts.

Keywords: commitment balance, cross cultural, UK

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Background

Commitment is identified by a variety of scholars (e.g. Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Fullerton, 2011) as a central concept within organisations' interactions across their relational networks. Earlier work (e.g. Morgan and Hunt, 1994) identified commitment as a single latent variable, but recent years have seen increasing complexity within commitment's conceptualization. Allen and Meyer's (1990) work within the context of organizational commitment, provides the seminal underpinning for the multi-dimensional approach, pursued by a variety of authors including Fullerton (2005, 2011), Gustafsson (2005) and Tsai and Huang (2008).

Commitment within the context of marketing relationships is seen as a concept experienced towards a relational partner but Gundlach et al.'s (1995) work highlights the importance of mutuality. This study develops these ideas further, contributing an original concept, 'commitment balance' to scholarship, arguing that unbalanced commitment produces tension and insecurity whichever the direction of that imbalance. Initial evidence is presented regarding the nature and evidence of commitment balance within the context of U.K. higher education. The future aim is to develop these ideas further within a cross-cultural context.

Conceptual Underpinning

Many authors, from the seminal work of Morgan and Hunt (1994) to more recent studies such as that by Wong and Wong (2012), based their work on the definition of commitment originally developed by Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande (1992:316), 'Commitment to the relationship is defined as an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship'. Morgan and Hunt (1994) in turn develop their own definition of commitment, drawing from Moorman et al.'s (1992) work, seeing commitment as:

An exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it: that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely. Morgan and Hunt (1994:23).

Clearly this definition has an aspirational feel to it. Indefinite relationships, if 'indefinite' is considered to be unending, are few and far between outside the context of personal relationships. This work draws from Morgan and Hunt (1994), Moorman et al. (1992) and Allen and Meyer (1990) in order to define commitment as follows:

Commitment can be seen as ongoing connection, based on a desire, need or obligation to maintain that connection and a preparedness to invest in perpetuating that connection.

At the heart of this definition is the notion of 'connection' which Morgan with Vivek and Beatty (writing some years after his seminal work with Hunt), see as part of 'engagement' (Vivek et al., 2012), but this study posits as central to commitment. The notion of enduring desire is drawn from Moorman et al. (1992); the addition of need and obligation alongside desire comes from Allen and Meyer's (1990) work and the ongoing nature of commitment and the effort (investment) required to maintain the connection is drawn from Morgan and Hunt (1994).

Commitment then, as a sense of ongoing connection, is central to relational exchanges. This work drawing from Gundlach et al.'s (1995) idea of mutuality, proposes that balance of commitment is worthy of consideration and research.

This study argues that in circumstances in which a relational partner feels that they are more or less committed towards a partner than the partner is committed towards them, the sense of unbalance, whichever its direction, produces tensions and insecurity. Therefore the critical notion of a balance of commitment between relational partners may be central to understanding the dynamics of commitment. This research argues that there is the opportunity

to study notions of what might be articulated as 'felt' and 'perceived' commitment. That is, a consideration of the balance between the commitment a relational partner feels towards the focus of their commitment and the perceptions of the commitment which is reciprocated towards them from the relational partner. For example applying this in the context of higher education, 'felt' commitment would comprise the commitment students feel towards, for example, the institution and its staff, 'perceived' commitment comprises students' perceptions of the commitment directed towards them by say the institution and its staff.

Thus a student's 'felt' commitment can be defined as, a student's feelings of ongoing connection with an institution or academics based upon a desire, need or obligation to maintain that connection and a preparedness to invest in perpetuating that connection.

A student's 'perceived commitment' is defined as, a student's perceptions of an institution or academics' desire to continue a connection with that student based upon a desire, need or obligation to do so and evidence of investment in perpetuating that connection.

These definitions draw on Allen and Meyer's (1990) seminal ideas of commitment embracing dimensions related to desire, need or obligation, further built upon within work of more recent authors applying commitment within the context of consumer marketing. Fullerton (2005 and 2011) explicitly presents commitment as a series of constructs related to desire, need or obligation. Gustafsson et al. (2005) use the desire and need dimensions of commitment within their study of the commitment within the telecoms sector.

The notion of balance between 'felt' and 'perceived' commitment is critical as demonstrated
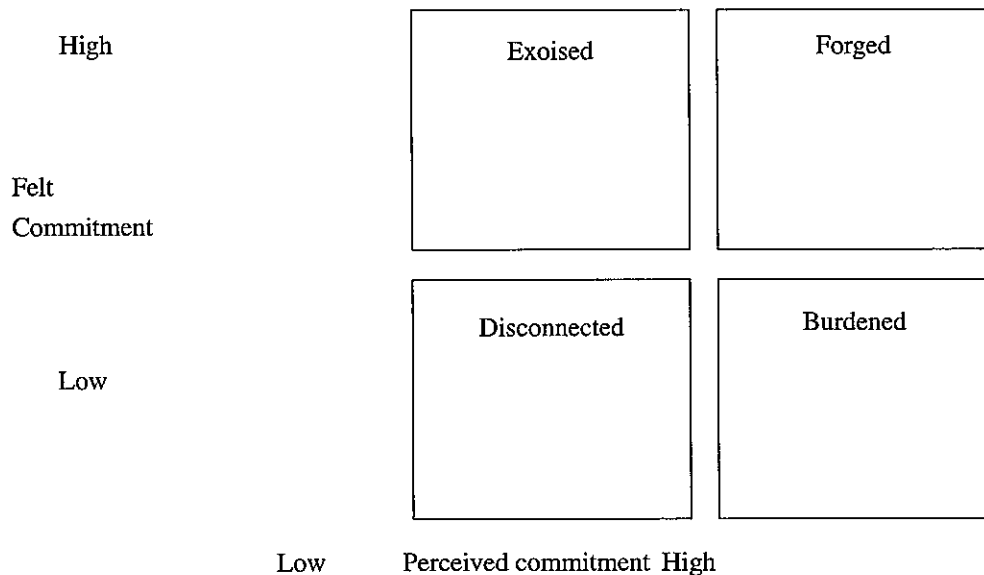
in figure 1.0. When balance of high levels of 'felt' and 'perceived' commitment is present, a state of 'forged' commitment is achieved, representing feelings of ongoing connections between relational partners. At the other extreme, a state of 'disconnected' represents low levels of both 'felt' and 'perceived' commitment, that is, a situation of balance, but absence or low levels of commitment which results in disconnection between relational partners.

The less balanced quartiles comprise 'exposed' and 'burdened' commitment. In the context of H.E. exposed commitment represents a situation of a student having high levels of 'felt' commitment towards the institution and academics but undermined by low levels of 'perceived' reciprocal commitment from these partners. Such a state, whilst representing high levels of commitment from the student, is problematic because in order to achieve a sense of balance, unless perceived commitment dramatically increases, the student's response may be to reduce their 'felt' commitment towards the University and/or staff.

Equally, 'burdened' commitment represents a state of high levels of 'perceived' commitment but low levels of 'felt' commitment. Whilst the optimistic view might be that within the context of H.E., students would seek to achieve balance by enhancing their 'felt' commitment, an alternative perspective might be that, as in personal relationships, overly high levels of 'perceived' commitment might result in student flight from the relationship.

Thus the notion of mutuality or balance of commitment is central and whilst institutions and academics seek to encourage commitment from students, they must in adopting such a strategy, be prepared to demonstrate high levels of reciprocal commitment to their students.

Figure 1: 'Felt' vs. 'perceived' commitment

High	Exoised	Forged
Felt Commitment		
Low	Disconnected	Burdened

     Low   Perceived commitment High

Methodology

A quantitative methodology using online survey method to generate data from a population of undergraduate students studying at post-1992 English universities was adopted (see also Cownie, 2014). Previous studies which have included a similar research population, that is with a focus on newer universities within the U.K., include those by Chapleo (2011), Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009), Bennett and Kane (2010), Floyd and Dimmock (2011).

The study commenced with a pilot conducted at one university. This pilot was considered to be successful, generating 300 responses and thus permitting the use of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis in order to aid construct development and definition.

Whereas normal practice would be to draw indicators from previously validated scales, commitment balance is a new concept and so validated indicators were not available to measure the construct. The pilot commenced by identifying a single construct, commitment balance between students, institution and academy, with eleven potential indicators, developed from the conceptual underpinnings of commitment balance and indicators used by a variety of scholars (Hansen et al., 2003; Allen and Meyer, 1990; Fullerton, 2005; Gruen et al., 2000; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Sharma et al., 2005). Table 1 presents the indicators which were subject to exploratory factor analysis. Each indicator was evaluated on a 1-7 scale where 1 was strongly disagree and 7 was strongly agree. Principal components analysis and direct oblimin rotation demonstrated that a single construct was not sufficient for the study of commitment balance in the context of H.E. Thus two constructs were developed, each with a different focus of the balance of commitment. Commitment balance between students and institution was represented by four indicators which comprised a reliable scale with Cronbach Alpha 0.800. Commitment balance between students and academy, also represented by four indicators generated a Cronbach Alpha of 0.798. Thus both scales were considered to be reliable on the basis of Cohen et al.'s (2011:676) advice that scales should demonstrate a Cronbach Alpha of 0.700 or over.

Table 1: Indicator development

Indicator	Adapted from.
I feel that the University is as committed to me as I am to the University.	Sharma et al., 2005; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Allen and Meyer, 1990; Fullerton, 2005.
I feel that my tutors and I are not equally committed to each other ®.	Sharma et al., 2005; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Allen and Meyer, 1990; Fullerton, 2005.
My tutors and I are equally as committed towards my achievement.	Sharma et al., 2005; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Allen and Meyer, 1990; Fullerton, 2005.
I am equally as proud to study at this University as the university is proud to have me as a student here.	Harrison-Walker, 2001.
Students and staff do not feel an equal 'sense of duty' to work hard ®.	Gruen et al., 2000; Sharma et al., 2005.
My tutors and I do not have an equal sense of moral obligation towards each other ®.	Allen and Meyer, 1990.
I have a different level of emotional attachment to my tutors than that which they have towards me ®.	Fullerton, 2005; Gruen et al. 2000.
My tutors are as proud to associate themselves with their students as we are to associate with our tutors.	Harrison-Walker, 2001.
My University and its students need each other equally.	Allen and Meyer, 1990.
This University depends upon its students as much as its students depend upon the University.	Allen and Meyer, 1990.

® Reversed indicator.

Confirmatory factor analysis on pilot data supported the development of two constructs as appropriate representations of the over-arching idea of commitment balance within higher education.

Thus the pilot provided an important analytical opportunity within the overall study. Once the two constructs were defined and confirmed, the research tool was adapted for the final data collection using the indicators highlighted in Table 2. An additional 1174 students responded to the questionnaire. A decision was made to focus analysis on the 1129 respondents who had fully completed the research tool (both at pilot and roll-out stage), using listwise deletion (Byrne, 2010; Blunch, 2011) and the assumption that the data is missing completely at random (M.C.A.R.) (Bryne, 2010:356).

Table 2: Indicators used within final study

Construct.	Indicators.	Scale Reliability.
Commitment balance between students and institution.	My University and its students need each other equally.	0.800
	I feel that the University is as committed to me as I am to the University. Students are equally as proud to study at this University as the University is as proud to have me as a student here. This University depends upon its students as much as its students depend upon the University.	
Commitment balance between students and academy	My tutors and I are equally as committed to each other. I have the same level of emotional attachment to my tutors as they have towards me. My tutors and I have an equal sense of moral obligation towards each other.	0.798
	My tutors and I are equally committed towards my achievement.	

Findings

Students' responses to questions concerning commitment balance showed a marked difference to responses to other constructs within the broader research study (but not reported on in this paper). In comparison to other constructs, in which responses were highly skewed (e.g. measuring normative commitment), responses to commitment balance demonstrated a more normal distribution. This is positive from an analytical perspective as it reduces problems of kurtosis (Byrne, 2010) should the emerging constructs be included within structural equation modeling, and in turn enhances the chances of the discovery of relationships with other constructs within a conceptual framework as the distribution of responses is not skewed.

Table 3 demonstrates that on a scale of 1-7 (where 1 is strongly disagree and 7 is strongly agree), modes demonstrated moderate agreement to the questions associated with commitment balance towards institution, but general neutrality associated with commitment balance towards academy. All four indicators associated with commitment balance between student and institution generated agreement from the majority of respondents, however only one of the indicators related to commitment balance between students and academy generated majority agreement. Indeed the average reported disagreement was only 22% across the four indicators, thus we can see that many students were neutral regarding questions which sought to measure the construct commitment balance between students and academy.

Table 3: Responses to commitment balance constructs

Commitment Balance focus	Modes (x4 indicators)*	% agreeing with statements	Mean % agree	% disagreeing with statements	Mean % disagree
Commitment balance between student and institution	5,5,4,5	75,56,55,71	64	10,24,17,10	15
Commitment balance between student and academy	4,4,4,5	40,35,44,58	44	25,22,19,23	22

*where 1 is strongly disagree and 7 is strongly agree.

Analysis

Empirical work to date corroborates thoughts that commitment balance is a useful and valid concept for research. The indicators provided reliable scales for the measurement of commitment balance (Cronbach Alpha 0.800 and 0.798), and contributed to an empirically informed definition of commitment balance (in the context of H.E.) as:

Commitment balance is the extent to which students perceive that their 'felt commitment' is equally matched by the reciprocal 'perceived commitment' emanating from the relational partner, be that institution or academy. Commitment mutuality is not directional, that is it is an assessment of the balance or imbalance of 'felt commitment' and 'perceived commitment' but low levels of commitment balance do not give an indication of the direction of any imbalance.

Initial ideas relating to the concept of commitment balance resulted as an outcome of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, in the production of two constructs each with different foci. However data suggests that within the context of H.E. only one construct resonates within students' reports of commitment within

H.E. Commitment balance between students and institution emerges as a robust construct which generates agreement from the majority of students who participated in this research and can be defined as:

The extent to which students perceive that their 'felt commitment' is equally matched by the reciprocal 'perceived commitment' emanating from the institution. Commitment balance comprises equal feelings of commitment towards and from the institution, together with a sense of equal need, pride and dependency in and between students and their institution.

Thus this descriptive analysis suggests that commitment balance is a robust idea, but that the focus of balance between specifically defined relational partners is an important part of its operationalization in research.

Opportunities For a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Moving forward, this paper seeks opportunities for the study of the concept of commitment balance within a cross-cultural context. Studies of commitment are largely U.K. or U.S. based (e.g.

Harrison-Walker, 2001; Fullerton, 2005, Fullerton, 2011, Brown et al., 2005; Lacey et al., 2007). However there are recent examples of organizational commitment being studied within an Asian context such as Farooq et al.'s (2014) study of the impact of corporate social responsibility on organizational commitment in South Asia, Sun et al.'s (2013) study of organizational commitment within the Chinese workplace and Tsai and Huang's (2008) examination of organizational commitment in Taiwan. There seem to be few examples of commitment being studied from a marketing communication perspective within Asia and no examples of scholarship examining commitment from an education or marketing communications' perspective across cultural-boundaries. It would be good to see such research endeavor and this paper seeks to establish some confidence that work within this new area of 'commitment balance' would be worthy of collaborative, cross-cultural research endeavor.

A variety of opportunities exist. First the opportunity to examine concepts of commitment balance within the context of higher education within Asian and Australian contexts, alongside further analysis within U.K. higher education. Second, the opportunity to take ideas of commitment balance out of the context of higher education and examine these within the consumer context again within U.K., Asian and Australian environments.

In particular suggestions for future work examining commitment balance within higher education would first seek to examine whether commitment balance between students and institution was indeed more strongly reported than commitment balance between students and academy within Asian and Australia contexts.

Secondly a multi-dimensional approach to commitment balance between students and institution could be examined in a quantitative manner, again using exploratory factor analysis to underpin the study. This might examine the relative evidence of affective commitment balance between students and institution, normative commitment balance between students and institution and calculative commitment balance between students and institution. The work could examine whether overall commitment balance was an aggregate of these forms and if so whether for example, high levels of imbalance in one direction, e.g. affective commitment, could be compensated for by imbalance in other dimensions.

Future research could examine the relative levels of 'felt' and 'perceived' commitment alongside commitment balance, in order to populate the matrix in figure 1. Structural equation modeling could be used to examine the relationship between exposed, forged and burdened commitment balance and outcomes of commitment such as advocacy, co-operation and loyalty highlighted within scholarship (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Rojas-Mendez et al., 2009; Gustafsson et al., 2005; Fullerton, 2005; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Hansen et al., 2003; Bendapudi and Berry, 1997).

Such ideas can also be explored within a broader consumer context again, usefully across cultural boundaries. Expressions of interest within either contexts of future study within Asia and Australia are very much welcomed and should be directed to the author on fjcownie @bournemouth.ac.uk.

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