

## Summer School "Sciences and Academic Careers"

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The Role of Professional Commitment in Academics'  
Career Decisions – A Qualitative Study

## Introduction 1/2

- Academics typically have a **strong commitment to their profession** (e.g., Teichler, 2013).
- Commitment is „a **force** that binds an individual to a **course of action** of relevance to one or more **targets** (e.g., organization, profession)“ (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001, 301).
- Focus on **affective** commitment towards the profession, i.e., strong **desire** to **exert efforts** to pursue the goals and values of the **academic profession** (e.g., searching for truth, intellectual honesty).
  - critical for academics performance, job satisfaction and intention to stay in academia (e.g., Jauch, Glueck and Osborn, 1978; Lee, Allen and Smith, 2000).
  - protective resource against negative work-related influences (Kobasa, 1982; Romzek, 1989)

## Introduction 2/2

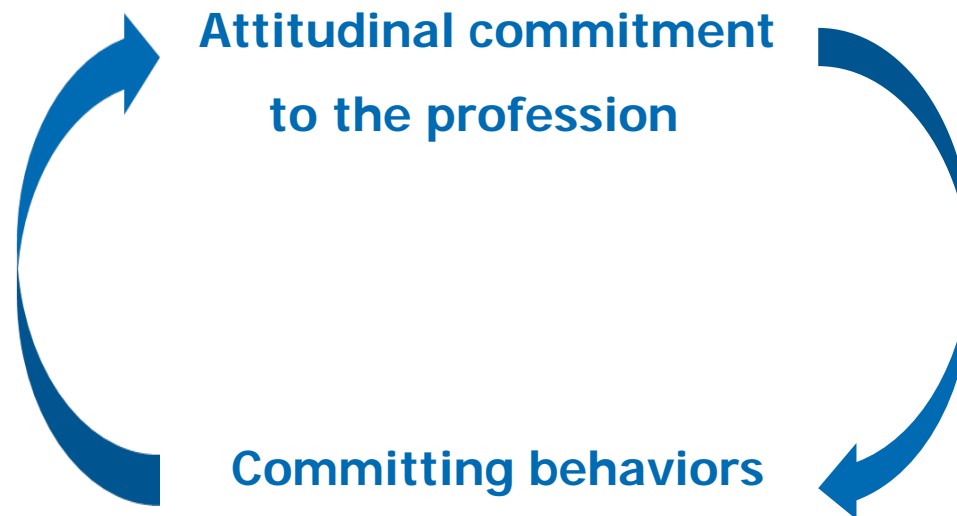
- Career stage theory suggests that affective professional commitment can change over time (e.g., Super, 1957; Mowday, Porter and Steers, 1982; Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001).
- Empirical research shows that it is very stable (among those who do not leave) and does not change over time.
  - Mentoring has no influence on doctoral commitment (Green and Bauer, 1995; Paglis, Green, and Bauer, 2006).
  - No influence of contract type, salary, autonomy and group support on postdocs' commitment (Kidd and Green, 2006).
- Differences between those who stay in and those who left the academic profession? Independence of any work experience?

## Aim of the study

understanding the development of academics' affective commitment towards academia

## Conceptual background

- Commitment to the profession develops over time through the interplay of attitudes and behaviors.



(see Mowday, Porter and Steers, 1982, 48)

## Empirical Study

- qualitative analysis
- 44 semi-structured interviews (February – May 2016)
- description of the sample:
  - 28 academics who are active in academia (D.1-5; PD.1-13; P.1-10)
  - 16 academics who left academia (D-D.1-8; PD-D.1-8)
  - 52% females, 48% males
  - Ø 37 years
- Ø interview length: 32 minutes
- Transcripts were evaluated using content structuring analysis according to Mayring (2014).

## Results (1/7)

### Initial commitment propensity

- very strong
  - *"I am a nerd. Already since I have been a little child, I knew that I want to work in research and development." (P.1)*
  
- strong
  - *"At the beginning of the PhD I had hoped to pursue an research career, but I could not be sure." (PD.1)*
  
- low
  - *"I did not know if I wanted to go into business or remain in academia after obtaining the PhD. Both options were possible." (D-D.1)*
  
- very low
  - *"At the beginning, I could not imagine to remain in academia." (PD-D.2)*

## Results (2/7)

### Promotive Factors

- rewarding work environment
  - *"I was **not alone**. If I had a problem, I could **go to my colleagues** and speak with them. I have enjoyed a **cooperative** working atmosphere." (P. 7)*
- mentor support
  - *"At quite an early stage my PhD supervisor said to me: **You can do it**. That was quite important for me. Otherwise, I would not have followed this career path." (PD.11)*

## Results (3/7)

### Adverse Factors

- lack of mentoring
  - *“At my first job as a research assistant I was on my own. That was sobering.” (P.3)*
  - *“I had **no support**. There was **no postdoc** who gave me advice. I did not know what to do.” (D-D.7)*
- career insecurity
  - *“At the age of **35 years** it was the first time that I had a full-time position. Now, I **am 40 years** old and I have a four-year contract. That is **depressing**.” (PD.10)*



## Results (4/7)

### Behaviors: networking

- target-oriented (networking with the community)
  - *"Its important to be part of certain research networks. You have to be proactive."* (P.10)
- non target-oriented (isolating or non-relevant networking)
  - *"I had found some **master students** to work with me. But they were not really interested in research and could not give me any feedback."* (D-D.2)

## Results (5/7)

### Behaviors: career planning

- target-oriented (long-term career planning)
  - *"It was a **conscious decision** to apply for a junior research group position. I can say, that I have personnel and project responsibility which makes me still attractive for private business."* (PD.11)
- non target-oriented (career ignorance)
  - *"I have **not planned long beforehand**. At the beginning of the postdoctoral time I wanted to see how it goes."* (PD-D.7)

## Results (6/7)

### Commitment-reinforcing development mechanisms

- involvement
  - *“Publishing has become a **drug**. After a few publications I am **addicted**.” (PD.1)*
- identification
  - *“One **becomes an integral part** of all of this. At the beginning you are **outside** of the circle, then you **move closer and merge** some time with this circle, if you know more and more people, cite a lot of works and get cited, so you have an intense interaction with others. This is what you not have in the beginning. I just started doing all this.” (PD.1)*

## Results (7/7)

### Commitment-reducing development mechanisms

- value incongruence
  - *“One is only occupied with writing some proposals. This is only opportunistic... You write that you need to research for data that you already have [...]. In the end, this did not appeal to me.” (PD-D.2)*
- alienation
  - *“...my advisor was an arrogant idiot [...], I could not trust my colleague and had no one to talk with [...]. I no longer knew how to help me. [...] I sent an application to another university, but I was too afraid to find the same “witch house”. [...] Thus, I sent applications to become an actuary.” (D-D.7)*

## Conclusions (1/2)

- Influencing factors and behaviors can lead to **reinforcing and dissolving mechanisms**. -> Affective commitment develops.
  - The analysis reveals two groups of individuals:
    1. The **very high and very low** committed individuals.
      - All **extremely high** committed individuals either became professors or are postdocs. No one left academia.
      - All **extremely low** committed persons left academia (most of them already during PhD studies).
    2. The intermediate group of **high and low** committed individuals.
      - **considerable development** of commitment over time and individuals' **behaviors** are critical for the development of affective commitment
      - Individuals who **left** academia showed **non target-oriented** behaviors in response to adverse factors.
      - Individuals who **stayed** successfully in academia showed **target-oriented** behaviors in response to adverse factors.
- > depending on the individual's behavior either **dissolving or reinforcing** development processes were realized over time



## Conclusions (2/2)

- Results **complement** the relevant literature by taking account of individuals who left academia in the past.
  - It is this group that most clearly shows that affective commitment can deteriorate over time.
  - questions affective commitment as a stable mind-set which is independent of work-related experiences
  - Behaviors in response to adverse influences are important for the development of affective commitment.
- **Policy implications** start by enabling the individual to take target-relevant actions or strategies, in particular in response to adverse influences (e.g., problem-solving skills, research strategies).

## Limitations

- Qualitative study can not fully assess research object.
- Results are based on self reports.
- Recall bias

## Further research

- a longitudinal quantitative study of academics to test the proposed interdependency of influencing factors and behaviors and the mechanisms involved

**Thank you for your attention.**

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