

*Original Paper*

## Rural-urban Differences in the Commitment-Turnover Relationship

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### **Abstract**

This study employed a convenience sample of 363 employees spread across 14 home supply stores. LISREL-based estimates of parameters linking affective commitment and high personal sacrifice commitment components (Meyer & Allen, 1991) to turnover-related withdrawal cognitions showed that affective commitment was a stronger predictor of withdrawal cognitions in urban areas, while the continuance subdimension, high personal sacrifice, was a much stronger predictor of withdrawal cognitions for those employed in rural areas. This was consistent with the idea that the main driver of turnover in urban areas--where the impediments to job mobility found in rural areas are lacking--is the general emotional orientation (Jaros, 1997) of employees to their employment/employer.

### **Introduction**

For several decades now there has been a substantial consensus that organizational commitment is a multi-dimensional variable that explains a number of salient organizational outcomes – chief among them turnover. By far the most well-known version of multi-dimensional commitment is that developed by Meyer and Allen (Culpepper, 2011; Jaros & Culpepper, 2025; Meyer & Allen, 1991). A plethora of studies have supported the viability of the construct, and many of these have been incorporated in meta-analyses to demonstrate the most robust antecedents and outcomes of the construct (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002).

According to Meyer and Allen (1991), affective commitment is the degree to which individuals identify with, are involved in, and enjoy membership in the organization. Consistent with its name, this construct has been characterized as a primarily emotional form of commitment (Jaros, 1997).

By contrast, continuance commitment is said to stem from a relatively rational, dispassionate assessment of the personal costs of leaving the organization. This recognition of costs is relatively devoid of emotional content. Examples of such perceived costs include the forfeiture of higher income, pension plan funds, better insurance benefits, and losing the advantage of job and organization-specific knowledge and experience. According to the Meyer and Allen (Meyer & Allen, 1984) formulation, continuance commitment also involves perceptions of the relative availability of attractive alternative employment.

Meyer and Allen (1991) explicitly contrast theoretical descriptions of affective commitment and continuance commitment. They summarize the difference in theoretical descriptions in the following way: "Although both views reflect a link [to the organization]. . . the nature of the link is quite different...Employees with strong affective commitment remain with an organization because they *want* to, whereas those with strong continuance commitment stay because they *need* to" (Meyer, Allen & Gellatly, 1990, p. 710).

Among the many aspects involved in multi-dimensional commitment attitudes, and the role they play in organizations, there is one that seems worthy of investigation, but that has received scant attention. Namely, the question of how commitment attitudes differ across rural and urban locations has been largely ignored within the Three Component Commitment (TCM) literature.

Some previous work suggests that affective commitment derives at least in part from perceived organizational support, personal relationships and identification with the organization (Eisenberger et

al., 1986; Riketta, 2005). Thus, we might expect that affective commitment would be stronger in rural areas than in urban.

There is also some indirect evidence from fields adjacent to Organizational Behavior that can provide some guidance. For example, sociological research has shown that those living in rural locales may experience higher levels of place attachment, more robust relationships in general, and the kind of social ties that comprise community cohesiveness (Lewicka, 2011, Lichter & Brown (2011). In rural areas, people tend to know each other and to be connected in multiple ways via occupying multiple roles in work organizations, civic groups, and friendships that arise spontaneously--for example, from kids being involved in sports.

Thus, in rural areas people are more likely to know each other via more than one social sphere and the memberships within these spheres overlap to a much greater degree than would be the case in more urban areas. In urban areas, people's social ties are less likely to overlap, and they thus may be expected to experience a higher degree of anonymity—and when not, perhaps knowing each other based on typically one social sphere, perhaps two at most. In rural areas this kind of overlapping of social ties can increase one's feeling of connectedness to the community and this might presumably extend to higher levels of affective attachment to the organization, with the obverse being the case in urban areas.

While such reasoning seems to make sense, there is not much in the way of evidence to support such claims, and such expectations should be regarded as highly tenuous in nature. While work addressing this subject is scarce, two recent studies of teachers employed in urban and rural schools found affective commitment to be somewhat higher in rural settings (Patterson, 2024; Shah et al., 2022).

Moving on to the role of the urban/rural dimension in continuance commitment, there seems to be a stronger case to be made. There is a great deal of evidence, both anecdotal and statistical, that job opportunities are more plentiful in urban areas than rural. Thus, we can expect that perceived availability of alternatives, one of Meyer and Allen's two continuance subdimensions (Meyer & Allen, 1991), should be weaker in rural areas where jobs are more scarce (Goetz et al., 2018).

With regard to the other continuance subdimension, high personal sacrifice, those employed in rural areas may also view costs of leaving, i.e., personal sacrifice, as high. The likelihood in rural areas that leaving one's employment will yield the same level of benefits and compensation, or better, would appear to be lacking. Overall, we can say that the degree of lateral employment mobility in general appears to be somewhat lacking in rural areas, thus boosting continuance commitment.

In summary, theoretical descriptions of affective and continuance commitment suggest that these two forms of commitment may well vary across geographic areas. Organizational members in rural areas are likely to perceive fewer employment alternatives than urban counterparts and may also view costs of leaving, i.e., personal sacrifice, as high. Those in urban areas are more likely to have plentiful alternatives to current employment and options that afford the same level of benefits and compensation or better, and have greater general lateral mobility. In addition, due to differences in the social context in rural settings compared to urban—such as higher levels of place attachment, overlapping social ties, and community cohesiveness, discussed above--we may also expect affective commitment to be higher in rural areas than urban.

Laying aside the question of whether commitment components are stronger/weaker in rural/urban areas, undoubtedly the key question in this literature stream, is what are the implications of work location on organizational turnover. Affective commitment receives the strongest overall support vis. turnover in meta-analyses (Meyer et al., 2002). Continuance commitment predicts turnover--and its commonly used proxy, withdrawal cognitions--moderately well, when observed using the high personal sacrifice commitment (Meyer et al., 2002; Tett & Meyer, 1993). Previous work shows that combining high sacrifice commitment with the low alternatives subdimension predicts turnover much more weakly (Jaros 2006; Meyer et al., 2002).

The role of work location in the commitment-turnover relationship is an interesting question. Allen et al. (2003) discussed the possibility that local labor market constraints and mobility opportunities might affect the turnover process. They noted that scarce alternatives could strengthen the impact of

continuance commitment, especially high personal sacrifice, on employee retention. They also noted that in urban areas, affective commitment might be the dominant predictor.

Griffeth et al. (2000) observed that continuance commitment might be more predictive of turnover in locations where leaving is more costly or alternatives are scarce. They also speculated (cf. Allen et al., 2003) that affective commitment might be stronger in urban areas where there is more mobility. Meyer & Parfyonova (Meyer & Parfyonova, 2010) also noted that rural environments may amplify continuance commitment effects (due to fewer employment options or stronger community ties) compared with urban settings.

Current expectations in this study were consistent with the above. Affective commitment was expected to be a stronger predictor of withdrawal cognitions in urban areas and high personal sacrifice commitment was expected to be a stronger predictor in rural locations.

The current convenience sample used in this study, discussed in the next section, is somewhat unusual in allowing comparisons of commitment scores from relatively urban locations with those from rural locations. This sample also allowed continuance commitment to be tested as potential moderating factor in the commitment-turnover relationship, something that has not yet been done yet directly within the Meyer and Allen (1991) theoretical framework.

## Method

**Sample and Procedure** - This convenience sample included 366 survey respondents, all employees of a home improvement retailer situated at 14 store locations in the Southeastern U.S. Surveys were administered to employees at respective store locations during regular work hours. Three hundred and sixty-three useable questionnaires were obtained across 14 participating stores. Job types included 14 store managers, bookkeeping personnel, clerks, and stockers; "temps" were not included.

Conversations with top managers revealed that turnover was high at all store locations. Attitudes did not vary meaningfully by store, according to a MANOVA investigating store differences. Forty-five percent of respondents had a high school education or less, and 84 percent had three years of college or less. A number of employees speculated that compensation was a factor in the high turnover. Indeed, mean side bet commitment was relatively low ( $\bar{x} = 2.96$ , five-point scale;  $s.d. = .98$ ) compared to affective ( $\bar{x} = 3.40$ ,  $s.d. = .87$ ). With an average organizational tenure of 2.6 years, these service sector employees, on the whole, appeared to more mobile than other sectors within the job market.

**Measures** – Commitment components were measured using modified versions of the Meyer and Allen (1991) scales. Previous work has demonstrated a reverse-coding methods artifact (Magazine et al., 1996) in Allen and Meyer's (1991) original scales, confirmed with current data in this study. In addition, most of the reverse coded items have been identified as problematic or weak items in other work (e.g., Culpepper, 2000; Dunham et al., 1994). To avoid spurious findings, affective and continuance commitment facets were measured using revised scales by deleting all reverse-coded items a priori. This left four items measuring affective commitment and three items for side bet (high sacrifice) commitment. Withdrawal cognitions were measured using the Mobley et al. (1978) scale.

To focus this study on the side bet element of continuance commitment and avoid theoretical and methodological ambiguities associated with the low alternatives subdimension, only the three positively scored commitment items corresponding to Meyer and Allen's "high sacrifice" subdimension (e.g., Dunham et al., McGee & Ford, 1987) were employed. The low alternatives element is quite different nomologically from high sacrifice commitment (Dunham et al., 1994; Meyer et al., 2002). Given that relationships with turnover serve as a sort of *sine qua non* for the TCM, the low alternatives subdimension fails this test, even when using turnover proxies such as withdrawal orientation and intention to leave as the criterion (e.g., Dunham et al., 1994). Accordingly, the low alternatives subdimension was not included in causal tests, although the subdimension items were included in the survey, and mean scores were observed and treated as informational, in much the same way as demographic variables were observed.

Current reliability coefficients for affective and high sacrifice commitment were .77 and .74, respectively. These were in line with those obtained by Hackett et al. (1993) employing a large sample

( $N = 2301$ ; reliabilities of .86 and .70, respectively) and the Dunham et al. (1994) analyses employing six samples ( $N = 2731$ ; reliabilities of .74-.87 and .54-.75, respectively) using the original Meyer and Allen (1991) scales. All items employed a five-point, Likert-type variable response format with five anchors.

**Analysis** – The first step in assessing rural-urban effects was to determine whether urban and rural sub-samples differed meaningfully in terms of demographics and work-related aspects. These variables were age, job tenure, organizational tenure, education, affective commitment, high sacrifice commitment, low alternatives commitment, and withdrawal orientation. Mean scores for each of these variables were compared across urban and rural samples to check for meaningful differences. MANOVA was used first to see if the overall group of employee variables, on the whole, were statistically different across the rural and urban sub-samples. This avoids the possibility of a confound arising from Type I error, or false positives, as it were. When employing a long sequence of difference tests between two samples, longer strings of variables raise the likelihood that at least one variable will register a statistical difference, not out of differences in true scores, but rather from sampling error.

MANOVA did not yield an overall statistical difference between the two samples, thus allaying this concern. Subsequent tests performed for each individual variable yielded differences for two variables--high sacrifice commitment (urban  $\bar{x} = 2.84$  and rural  $\bar{x} = 3.09$ ,  $p = .05$ ; see Table 1) and low alternatives commitment (urban  $\bar{x} = 2.68$  and rural  $\bar{x} = 3.02$ ,  $p = .01$ ; ). These results were completely consistent with expectations for continuance commitment being stronger in rural areas.

**Causal tests** - Paths of the causal model were tested using LISREL-based estimates of each parameter. The first model tested constrained all gamma parameters (links between each commitment component and withdrawal cognitions) to equivalence across the two subsample groups, i.e., rural and urban groups. This model assumed there were no differences in the effects of commitment components on withdrawal across the rural and urban samples. This model test obtained a baseline fit index using the chi square to degrees of freedom ratio. The links for each commitment component were freed one at a time, to see if allowing the link between a commitment component and withdrawal cognitions to vary across subsamples improved fit in a statistically significant way, using the improvement in chi square to degrees of freedom ratio test as the criterion. In addition, if freeing the parameter for a given commitment-withdrawal link caused the parameter to vary substantially across the two subsamples, this also was consistent with moderation.

Freeing of the parameter for the affective commitment-withdrawal cognitions link substantially improved model fit. This confirmed that location moderated the strength of affective commitment's effect on withdrawal cognitions. The same held true for high personal sacrifice commitment. Freeing this parameter yielded a relatively strong improvement in the model, confirming a robust effect of location on the high sacrifice-withdrawal cognitions link. Overall model fit for the final model was good, between .90 and .95 according to NFI (normed fit index; Bentler & Bonett, 1980) and CFI (comparative fit index; Bentler, 1990) fit indices.

## Results and Discussion

This study helps fill a long-standing gap in our knowledge about how the turnover decision process differs across employees in dissimilar settings. The current convenience sample was fortuitous in providing an overall similar work context for subjects--the same organization, identical company policies, and highly similar employee demographics--while the physical location was spread across a variety of rural and urban areas over multiple states in the US. These results contribute to our very limited knowledge of how turnover varies geographically and adds to the slowly accruing knowledge relating to moderators of the commitment-turnover relationship.

First of all, results showed that affective commitment was highly similar across the two locations, and this was contradicted the two samples involving teachers, discussed above, showing that affective commitment was higher in rural areas. This result also was inconsistent with speculations about the social cohesiveness in rural areas leading to higher levels of affective commitment. More work needs to be done in order to sort out what we can expect in this regard and find out what factors may be in play.

Prior to the analysis, the case for continuance commitment being higher in rural areas appeared to be

more straight forward. Indeed, high sacrifice commitment was indeed significantly higher in the rural areas ( $\bar{x} = 3.09$  rural;  $\bar{x} = 2.84$  urban,  $p < .05$ ), as was low alternative commitment  $\bar{x} = 3.02$  rural;  $\bar{x} = 2.68$  urban,  $p < .01$ ). Indeed, these two variables were the only two of the nine variables measured where differences arose.

The primary focus in this study were the causal tests. Continuance commitment had a particularly robust effect on turnover-related cognitions in rural areas. Where high personal sacrifice was high, withdrawal cognitions were correspondingly much lower (rural  $\beta = -.51$ ,  $p < .05$ ; urban  $\beta = -.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These results suggest that employees living under a more limited economic context may be less transient out of sheer economic necessity. This is important information for practitioners, but also for researchers. This finding suggests that studies employing the affective and continuance commitment constructs across more than one geographic location should take rural/urban context into account--both in terms of research design and in the interpretation of results.

Location also moderated the role of affective commitment in turnover-related cognitions quite strongly. Specifically, in urban areas high levels of affective commitment impacted withdrawal orientation robustly – if employees had positive feelings about their employer overall, this had a much stronger role in dissuading them from leaving than was the case in rural areas (urban  $\beta = -.78$ , rural  $\beta = -.36$ ,  $p < .01$ ). One possible explanation for this is that there are weaker economic and practical ties keeping people committed to their employer in urban areas, and this means that affective commitment is pretty much the sole remaining driver of whether people leave or not.

Employees who are unhindered by the practical considerations represented by continuance commitment are free to choose whether they stay or go, based on emotional orientation to the organization. If they like and enjoy the people and the place, they will stay—if not, there are few impediments to leaving. To paraphrase Meyer and Allen's characterization of their commitment components mentioned above, in this company, seemingly, urban employees stay with the company because they want to, while in rural areas, they stay because they need to.

Current findings have potentially broader implications across diverse economic and cultural circumstances. For example, turnover research involving comparisons of turnover incidence across regions, countries, cultures, ethnic groups and professions could be susceptible to spurious findings should such aspects of the work context parallel the effects shown in this study. Moderator effects analogous to those shown here could potentially be in play. For example, periods of high unemployment may mimic the pattern shown in rural areas as long as such conditions are sustained. In a recession, with lower job mobility continuance commitment is the most important indicator of potential turnover. During economic expansion, affective commitment may well be the primary driver of employees leaving and finding other jobs. More work in this area both replicating the above finding, and investigating other possible moderators of the commitment-turnover relationship are needed.

Table 1. Demographic Information and Attitude Scores for Urban and Rural groups

		<u>Urban</u>	<u>Rural</u>
Age		32.7	33.2
Education		13.09	12.51
Job tenure		2.1	2.6
Organizational tenure		2.4	2.9
Affective commitment		3.45	3.40
Continuance commitment			
Low Alternatives		2.68	3.02***
High Sacrifice		2.84	3.09**

Normative commitment		3.49	3.40
Withdrawal orientation		2.66	2.72

\*\*  $p < .05$  \*\*\*  $p < .01$

Table 2. Parameter Estimates for Free Model with High Sacrifice Continuance Variable

Parameter	Model path	Urban	Rural Signif.
$\gamma^{11}$	Affect. Comt. -> Withdrawal orient.	-.78	-.36 **
$\gamma^{12}$	High Sac. Comt. -> Withdrawal orient.	-.14	-.51 **

Note: The LISREL-based parameter estimates for affective commitment-withdrawal orientation relationship differed statistically across urban and rural groups as did that for High Sacrifice Commitment and Withdrawal Orientation.

\*\*  $p < .01$

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