COMMENTARY

ON MISUNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF COMMITMENT: A THEORETICAL CLARIFICATION

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Perhaps because of its popularity in everyday discourse, the complex nature of commitment is rarely appreciated by those social scientists who use this concept in their work. Concealed in this idea are two distinct, albeit related, dimensions, which are, with very few exceptions, unintentionally fused when one or the other is treated alone. These two dimensions, although known by other names, may be called value commitment and forced or continuance commitment. 1

A recent empirical investigation by Ritzer and Trice (1969) exemplifies this confounding of the two major dimensions of commitment. The aim of this paper is to present a clear statement of the fundamental differences between value commitment and continuance commitment, while simultaneously examining the ramifications of the failure to distinguish these two ideas in Ritzer and Trice’s study. Although the investigation under attack falls under the sociological rubric of occupations, most, if not all, of the following comments can be applied with equal validity to the study of deviance, another area in which the concept of commitment has received, explicitly or implicitly, widespread use.

MISUNDERSTANDING COMMITMENT

The research carried out by Ritzer and Trice was designed to provide a test of Howard S. Becker’s (1960) side-bet theory of commitment. They randomly selected 419 male personnel managers whose occupational and organizational commitment was examined by means of a mailed questionnaire. The degree of commitment was measured by a series of questions that were constructed to determine for what reasons, if any, a person would leave his organization or his occupation. The reasons presented to the respondent for abandoning his position and the company for which he worked were various increments in the amount of pay, freedom, status, responsibility, and opportunity to get ahead offered apparently by an unspecified alternative occupation or organization. A commitment score was calculated by assigning numerical weights to the degrees of increase in pay, freedom, and so on, that the informant considered sufficient to justify switching to another position or company. The highest weights, however, were allocated to the incumbent position or organization, indicating that even in the face of a large increase in pay, freedom, status, responsibility, or opportunity (or all or a combination of these), no change of position was contemplated. The commitment score for each respondent was determined by summing these numerical weights, the higher totals representing greater commitment.

These operations clearly demonstrate that Ritzer and Trice are dealing with value commitment. This kind of commitment can be defined as a frame of mind that arises from the presence, in exceptional number, of subjectively defined rewards associated with a particular position or social identity in which

1 Value commitment, especially, has been studied under many different labels: “attachment” (Goffman, 1961:88-90), “identification with” a position (e.g., Stone, 1962:90), or the commitment investigated in experimental social psychology (e.g., Brehm and Cohen, 1962; Hovland et al., 1957). Kanter (1968:500, 504-507) introduced the term “continuance commitment.” It is used in this paper with slight modification.
the person finds himself or hopes to find himself. These subjectively defined rewards, which may also be the absence of certain costs or penalties, provide the answer to one basic question found in studies of value commitment: what attracts the person to a given position? The questions asked by Ritzer and Trice of the personnel managers manifested the investigators' concern with reward; namely, increases in pay, freedom, status, responsibility, and opportunity for advancement connected with a hypothetical alternative position or with the incumbent position.

Becker's side-bet theory, however, is not a theory of value commitment as Ritzer and Trice seem to think it is, but rather it is a theory of continuance commitment. Stebbins (1970a) has defined continuance commitment in the following manner: “the awareness of the impossibility of choosing a different social identity ... because of the imminence of penalties involved in making the switch.” Continuance commitment is a psychological state that arises not from the presence of rewards but from the presence or imminence of subjectively defined penalties associated with the attempt or desire to leave a specific position. These penalties, it should be observed, are not infrequently the absence of rewards obtainable only, or most efficiently, in the incumbent identity. The basic inquiry in the study of continuance commitment is what prevents the person in a particular social identity from renouncing this position and taking up an alternative position? The isolation of subjectively defined penalties provides the answer to this question. In short, a theory of continuance commitment is a theory of forced behavior, whereas a theory of value commitment is not concerned with forcing.

There can be no doubt that Becker (1960:35-36) was concerned with continuance commitment in his pioneering conceptualization of the matter:

This commitment has been achieved by making a side-bet. The committed person has acted in such a way as to involve other interests of his, originally extraneous to the action he is engaged in, directly in that action. By his own actions prior to the final bargaining session he has staked something of value to him, something originally unrelated to his present line of behavior. The consequences of inconsistency will be so expensive [italics mine] that inconsistency in his bargaining stance is no longer a feasible alternative.

The major elements of commitment present themselves in this example. First, the individual is in a position in which his decision with regard to some particular line of action has consequences for other interests and activities not necessarily related to it. Second, he has placed himself in that position by his own prior actions. A third element is present, though not so obvious as to be apparent: the committed person must be aware that he has made the side-bet and must recognize that his decision in this case will have ramifications beyond it.

While Becker does not directly refer to penalties in this part of his discussion, he acknowledges their importance by citing an earlier definition of commitment put forth by Abramson, Cutler, Kautz, and Mendelson (1958:16) that he (Becker) says parallels his. In the formulation by Abramson and his associates penalties play a major role in preventing the rejection of lines of behavior.

Although an innocent and facile error, Ritzer and Trice's misunderstanding of Becker's concept of continuance commitment invalidates

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2 Goffman (1961:90) has suggested that these two kinds of commitment can occur together. This appears to be true when the actor is ambivalent about his attraction to a given position. However, strong attachment to that position (value commitment) obviates the desire to leave it, while strong continuance commitment signifies a wish to renounce the position and, concomitantly, an absence of attachment. Thus, under some circumstances these two dimensions of commitment are relatively exclusive of each other.

3 It is worth noting that both Kanter (1968) and Goffman (1961:88-90), among others, have made roughly the same interpretation of Becker's conceptualization of commitment as this author has. Since it is solely the aim of this paper to identify the theoretical misconceptions and their effects found in the study by Ritzer and Trice and to proffer some clarifying distinctions, a number of important facets of commitment have been ignored. For a detailed consideration of the structural and psychological preconditions of commitment, the barriers to its development, and the limits to its duration as related to social life in general, but especially to deviance and occupations, see Stebbins (1970a:chap.2).
their entire investigation, from its results to its subsequent conclusions.4 Let us turn now to the ramifications of this misinterpretation.

RAMIFICATIONS

Ritzer and Trice hypothesized that the commitment scores were correlated with a number of variables: older age, lower education, marriage, larger number of children, mobility (rates of intercompany change, rates of job change, and rates of geographical change), higher salary, and several others. Some of these, such as age and mobility, are apparently mere correlates of commitment, while others have been labeled by Becker as “social mechanisms” in society that operate in such a manner as to commit us (operate to create penalties). These factors served as the independent variables in Ritzer and Trice’s study, while the commitment scores were the dependent variable. Although a few of the correlations turned out to be statistically significant, most of them were not; and as a result the authors concluded that Becker’s theory should be rejected.

Besides misunderstanding the general nature of continuance commitment, Ritzer and Trice overlooked several more specific aspects of it in their attempt to operationalize Becker’s theory. As stated earlier in our definition of continuance commitment, the person must be aware of certain costs arising from the act of renouncing his identity or position (also see Becker, 1960:36), and these costs must be perceived as imminent. No effort was made by the authors to identify these two preconditions of commitment.

Moreover, the strength or degree of commitment is important. How acute the feeling of commitment is depends upon the nature of the “balance of penalties” associated with the position and its alternative (Stebbins, 1970a). In other words the psychological state of commitment presupposes that the choice of alternatives (incumbent and alternative positions) is a relatively easy one for the individual concerned. There is a subjectively large preference gap, as seen in the balance of penalties, between the alternative to which he is committed (more desirable) and the one which has been rejected (less desirable).5 Often, it seems, continuance commitment has a self-degrading component about it, which serves as one important source of motivation to leave a certain identity. But even here, when continuance commitment exists, the penalties associated with renouncing the identity in question aggregate to outweigh the self-degrading aspect of continuing in that line of behavior. The principle of the balance of penalties is compared in Table 1 with what might be called “the balance of rewards,” its opposite in value commitment. Since they were not aware of the importance of penalties in continuance commitment, Ritzer and Trice did not incorporate this basic notion of the balance of penalties into their study.

**Table 1. Kinds of Commitment to the Incumbent Position**

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<th>Incumbent position</th>
<th>Alternative position</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuance commitment</td>
<td>lower penalties</td>
<td>higher penalties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value commitment</td>
<td>higher rewards</td>
<td>lower rewards</td>
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Another ramification of the failure to assimilate subjectively defined penalties into their analysis, is the resulting neglect by Ritzer and Trice of certain aspects of career as they relate to continuance commitment. In many identities, and especially occupational identities, what is perceived as penalizing about them is partly a function of the stage of his career to which the person in that identity has progressed. Ritzer and Trice endeavored to account for

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4 This misunderstanding is also expressed in another way. Becker’s conception of commitment is obviously a psychological one (commitment as a frame of mind), whereas Ritzer and Trice believe his formulation to be of a social-structural nature. The mechanisms whereby penalties are produced and defined as such are, in fact, structural, but commitment itself is not.

5 We have spoken here only of the balance of penalties in the renunciation of an identity in comparison with its alternative. We have concentrated on the question of what prevents the person from abandoning his position. In attempting to explain why a certain alternative identity was selected over other possible choices, the analysis is shifted to a consideration of value commitment and the subjectively defined rewards available.
this in an objective fashion by correlating the commitment scores with such variables as age and salary, but this is not enough. Career must be approached, in this case, from the actor's point of view. Career, as Stebbins (1970b) has pointed out, while objective, can also be a subjective matter, guiding the individual's consideration of the events at hand. What is penalizing about a particular identity at a particular moment in time (in a particular situation) depends, in part, on the perception of career events as they have unfolded to date. Lack of responsibility may be an undesirable facet of one's occupation at one point in his career, but after having achieved it in excess, responsibility may be interpreted as a burden. Continuance commitment cannot be accurately treated independently of the fact of career.

Having rejected Becker's theory, Ritzer and Trice set about presenting an alternative formulation of their own. They hypothesized that commitment (actually value commitment) to organizations arises only when the person's occupation has no really meaningful base to which one may commit himself. "The less subjectively meaningful the occupation, the more difficult it is for anyone to commit himself to it, and the more likely one is to commit himself to his organization." Low-status occupations, such as that of janitor, were believed to be lacking in meaningful content, and therefore incumbents in these positions were thought to have little commitment to them. People in high-status occupations, on the other hand, should be more highly committed. Those in personnel management, a relatively prestigious occupation, were demonstrated to be committed, in part, to both their occupation and their organization.

As a start toward a theory of value commitment, this alternate statement may have something to recommend it, but it is not a substitute for Becker's side-bet theory. Even if Becker's propositions were properly tested and found to be unverifiable, the value commitment approach would be inappropriate as an alternative explanation. The latter, as we have already seen, answers a different question than the former—it poses a different research problem.

Although possibly a minor criticism, one might question the use of the word "meaningful" in Ritzer and Trice's alternate theory. It is better to phrase the matter (as they have done elsewhere in that section of their paper) in terms of the actor's capacity to identify with or become attached to the occupation under consideration. Even a hated occupation is meaningful to those in it; it happens to be, however, that the meaning is negative. Indeed it is this kind of meaning, in one degree or another, that initially stimulates the incumbent of a position to attempt to reject it for something else. That he finds this impossible to do because of the imminence of certain penalties, is a manifestation of his state of continuance commitment at that time of his career in that identity.

REFERENCES


