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THE EFFECTS OF STATUS ON THREE COMPONENTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL  
COMMITMENT AMONG ARMY AVIATION PERSONNEL

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RACHEL E. KARNES



To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Rachel E. Karnes entitled 'The Effects of Status on Three Components of Organizational Commitment Among Army Aviation Personnel.' I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Industrial/Organizational Psychology.



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COMMITMENT AMONG ARMY AVIATION PERSONNEL

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A Thesis

Presented to

The College of Graduate Studies

And Research Council of

Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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Rachel E. Karnes

May 2001

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband,

Louis J. Karnes

for his love, patience, and support

to make this all possible.

This thesis is also dedicated to my

parents who have always been

there to give me encouragement

over the years.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of soldier's rank on three different components of organizational commitment: affective commitment (AC), continuance commitment (CC), and normative commitment (NC). Literature suggests some conflicting finding with regards to the influence rank has on AC. Role conflict and role ambiguity can clarify some of these discrepancies and thus may influence the interpretation of any differences in AC due to rank or status. However, role variables are not assumed to influence the differences in rank with CC or NC. The hypotheses stated that 1a) There will be no significant differences in affective commitment between ranks when role conflict and role ambiguity are left to operate freely, 1b) There will be significant differences between the ranks such that higher ranks (pilots) will have greater levels of affective commitment than lower ranks (support) when role conflict and role ambiguity are controlled for among the ranks, 2) There will be significant differences between the ranks such that lower ranks (support) will have greater levels of continuance commitment than higher ranks (pilots), and 3) There will be significant differences between the ranks such that higher ranks (pilots) will have greater levels of normative commitment than lower ranks (support).

Hypothesis 1a and 2 were supported such that support soldiers had higher CC than pilots, but there were no significant differences in AC between the two ranks. Hypothesis 1b and 3 were not supported such that there were no significant differences in NC between the two ranks or in AC when role variables were controlled for. Additional findings are discussed, as well their implications and further research directions.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Organizational commitment (OC) still remains a valuable factor studied in the work place today. OC has traditionally been characterized with Mowday, Porter, and Steers' (1979) attitudinal definition and measured with the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) developed by Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian (1974). However, recent research has demonstrated that there seems to be more of a multidimensional nature of OC. Meyer and Allen (1990) expanded the conventional definitions of OC and identified a three-component model that consists of a desire, a need, and an obligation to remain employed with an organization. The three-dimensional construct is defined as:

*Affective commitment* refers to the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization... *Continuance commitment* refers to an awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization... *Normative commitment* reflects a feeling of obligation to continue employment. (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p.67)

This multi-dimensional model of commitment appears to provide a more comprehensive measurement than the OCQ, which has been found to measure primarily affective commitment (Dunham, Grube, & Castenada, 1994). Further, Meyer and Allen (1991) state that an employee's commitment can reflect varying degrees of all three components and the psychological states under each component may develop as a function of rather different antecedents. For example, work experiences are thought to influence affective commitment; alternatives, or lack thereof, are thought to influence continuance commitment; and organizational investments, such as training, are thought to influence normative commitment. There has also been some preliminary

evidence for the generalizability of the three-component model of commitment (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993).

Occupational status appears to be an important factor in OC relationships, nonetheless most studies have measured merely the affective dimension of OC. Cohen and Hudecek (1993) found that occupational level has a strong moderating effect in the affective commitment-turnover relationship. Specifically, the relationship is stronger for white-collar employees than blue-collar employees. Chelte and Tausky (1986) similarly found that the paths to and outcomes of OC might differ with employees rank.

There have been several findings that suggest rank or status not only moderate commitment relationships, but also directly influence affective commitment (AC). Verma (1986) found that employees with higher job status had significantly higher affective commitment than employees with lower job status. Jha and Verma (1998) also found that senior level managers had significantly higher affective commitment than junior level managers. Further, Welsh and La Van (1981) found that employees with higher GS levels also had higher levels of affective commitment than employees with lower GS levels.

Thus, it would appear that employees with higher status seem to feel more affectively attached to their organization than employees with lower status. However, other studies have yielded conflicting findings. Several studies have found that higher status employees actually have lower levels of AC than lower status employees (Balaji, 1985; Podsakoff, Williams, & Todor, 1986; Mathieu and Hamel, 1989). Still further conflicting are the findings of Howell and Dorfman (1986) in which there were no significant differences in any direction of the affective commitment between professionals and nonprofessionals.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### *The Relationship Between Role Stress, Status, and Affective Commitment*

Role variables may explain the conflicting relationships between affective commitment and status. Role ambiguity occurs when a worker perceives a lack of clarity in the information available to perform a job (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Role conflict occurs when a worker perceives conflicting demands from others or when fulfilling one role expectation makes it difficult to fulfill another (Martin & Berthiaume, 1993). Employees with high job status typically experience higher levels of role conflict and role ambiguity than employees with low status (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964).

Role conflict and role ambiguity have also been found to influence the affective component of commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). In a meta-analysis, Jackson and Schuler (1985) found that role conflict and role ambiguity have a significant negative relationship with affective commitment. Several other studies have also confirmed this direct relationship between role variables and AC (Mathieu, 1988; Michaels, Cron, Dubinsky, & Joachimsthaler, 1988; Zaccaro & Dobbins, 1989).

Thus, it appears from the literature that higher status employees would have higher role conflict and role ambiguity, which will negatively influence affective commitment. However, as mentioned previously, some studies have in fact found that higher status employees do have higher affective commitment than lower status employees. It could be that in these situations, levels of role conflict and role ambiguity are similar across the samples. For example, Jha and Verma (1998) found that senior level managers had higher levels of AC than junior level managers. Even though they were divided into low and high status, both groups were still



managers performing similar tasks with most likely similar levels of role conflict and role ambiguity. With these role variables operating at comparable levels between the two groups, the difference in AC among them was most likely reflecting status level.

Welsch and La Van (1981) also found that employees higher in status have higher levels of AC. They divided their sample by a GS hierarchy, which included several different management and medical staff. It is possible that employees at different GS levels still perform tasks with similar amounts of role conflict and role ambiguity. This again could be showing real status differences in affective commitment.

On the other hand, high status employees with lower levels of affective commitment than low status employees may also have higher levels of role conflict and ambiguity than low status employees. These role strains may actually suppress their AC to levels below those of lower status employees. Podsakoff et al. (1986) found that professional employees (higher status) had lower levels of AC than nonprofessionals (lower status). However, they also found that these professionals perceived significantly greater role ambiguity and role conflict in their jobs than nonprofessionals. Mathieu and Hamel (1989) also found that professional employees had lower levels of AC and higher levels of role strain than nonprofessional employees. It may be this variation of role conflict and role ambiguity that is interfering with any actual differences status may have on AC.

Balaji (1985) also found professionals to have lower AC than nonprofessionals. Their higher status employees were professionally qualified managers in specific areas of education as opposed to their nonprofessional sample. This could have put them in roles where conflict and ambiguity might be higher than the nonprofessionals. This may be evident in the finding that professionals in this study were significantly less satisfied with the support and cooperation they



received from superiors. This lack of support and cooperation could create a conflict with their job of managing others. Again, this possible variation of role conflict and role ambiguity between the two samples may suppress any true differences in AC from status.

Howell and Dorfman (1986) found no significant differences in the AC between professionals and nonprofessionals in their study. While, these results are a bit more puzzling, role variables still were not accounted for and may have influenced the findings. There was a fairly stringent criterion for employees to be classified as professional in this study. They had to receive a certain score on an instrument, which emphasized their professional attitude, and their job had to be labeled as professional based on an occupational standard. Based on this criterion, it seems that the sample does not represent a difference in status per se, but rather a difference in attitudes about their work. It is unclear then as to whether role variables may have been similar or different across the samples. Further, the lack of any difference in the two samples may not have even been accurately reflecting status.

It is apparent that role variables play an important factor in determining affective commitment. However, it is also apparent that they might vary across status levels more than once assumed. Therefore, employees' perceptions of role conflict and role ambiguity need to be controlled for when interpreting relationships between status and affective commitment.

### *Defining Status*

One more issue that needs mentioning is the way that status can be defined. It seems that it can be seen as simply a hierarchical rank, such as with titles or numbers, or it can be seen as more task/job related, such as with white versus blue-collar or with professional versus nonprofessional employees. While affective commitment is likely to be related to both, role variables would appear to influence only the latter definition. In the private work sector, these

two definitions often mean the same thing. However, in an institution such as the military they are in fact distinct from each other.

For example, an Army aviation unit has pilots who are commissioned officers (the highest rank) and warrant officers (second highest rank). Mechanical and administrative support consists of non-commission officers (third highest rank) and enlisted soldiers (lowest rank). While there is a definite clear ranking system, job tasks are quite different. Commissioned officers are pilots, however they also have managerial/supervisor duties, while a warrant officer's primary duty is to fly the aircraft. Similarly, noncommissioned officers provide administrative and mechanical support, however they too have heavy managerial duties, while an enlisted soldier's primary duty is to perform aircraft maintenance and administrative support.

It is apparent that the potential for varying levels of role conflict and role ambiguity presents itself, but not in a traditional linear ranking order. A high and a low rank engage in supervisory tasks likely to produce elevated levels of role conflict and role ambiguity. If left to operate freely among the ranks, it is unlikely that any true differences in affective commitment between them will be seen.

*Hypothesis 1a:* There will be no significant differences in affective commitment between ranks when role conflict and role ambiguity are left to operate freely.

On the other hand, if role conflict and role ambiguity are controlled for among the ranks, more logical results should be produced. Any differences found would not be influenced by role variables and should more accurately reflect rank.

*Hypothesis 1b:* There will be significant differences between the ranks such that higher ranks (pilots) will have greater levels of affective commitment than lower

ranks (support) when role conflict and role ambiguity are controlled for among the ranks.

### *Continuance Commitment and Status*

While few studies have actually measured continuance and normative commitment with regards to status, possible explanations for these relationships have been proposed. Continuance commitment (CC) is developed by recognition of the costs associated with leaving the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Employees with higher status are more likely to have a larger number of employment opportunities, while transferability for lower status employees is more limited (Cohen and Hudecek, 1993). Thus, lower status employees may find more costs associated with leaving the organization and develop higher levels of CC than higher status employees.

Consider again the Army aviation unit where pilots have received intensive generalizable flight training that makes them marketable and fairly competitive in the civilian world. Further, the experience of being an officer in the army may make them rather desirable in the civilian job market as well. As a result, they may not find the costs with leaving the army as great as those in lower, support ranks with more specialized training. Thus, it would be logical to assume that rank would directly influence continuance commitment.

*Hypothesis 2:* There will be significant differences between the ranks such that lower ranks (support) will have greater levels of continuance commitment than higher ranks (pilots).

### *Normative Commitment and Status*

Meyer and Allen (1991) suggest that normative commitment may develop when "an organization provides employees with 'rewards in advance' (e.g., paying college tuition), or

incurs significant costs in providing employment (e.g., costs associated with job training)” (p. 72). Recognizing investments that an organization has made on an employee’s behalf may in turn create a type of obligation for the employees to reciprocate in their feelings toward the organization.

Pilots receive extensive flight training. The army invests a lot of time, money, and trust in its pilots. This investment may create feelings of debt to the army beyond their standard duty by its pilots more than support staff that has not been given the same investment. Further, commissioned officers typically receive college tuition assistance in the form of ROTC scholarships or by attending a military academy. This may create even more feelings of responsibility for commissioned officer pilots.

*Hypothesis 3:* There will be significant differences between the ranks such that higher ranks (pilots) will have greater levels of normative commitment than lower ranks (support).



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Participants*

The sample for this study consisted of 72 soldiers from an Army aviation battalion at a southern United States Army post. Participants are divided into mechanical/aviation support and pilots. Support soldiers are further divided into the general ranks of enlisted personnel and non-commissioned officers (NCOs). Pilots are further divided into warrant officers (WOs) and commissioned officers (COs). This sample consisted of 20% enlisted soldiers, 28% NCOs, 26% WOs, and 26% COs. Participants completing the survey were 90% male and 10% female. There were 21% of the soldiers in the 18-24 age group, 49% were in the 25-30 age group, 17% were in the 31-36 age group, and 13% were in the 37-42 age group. The percentage of White participants was 84%, Black participants was 6%, Hispanic participants was 6%, Asian participants was 1%, and the remaining 3% were of another race/ethnicity. The highest attained education degree was a high school diploma/GED for 34% of participants, 23% have an Associate's degree, 36% have a Bachelor's degree, and 7% have a Master's degree.

#### *Measures*

*Organizational Commitment.* Organizational commitment was measured with the revised 19-item version of Meyer and Allen's (1990) scales of OC. These included the three dimensions of Affective Commitment Scale, Continuance Commitment Scale, and Normative Commitment Scale. The items were rated on a 7-point agree-disagree scale. The responses for items on each dimension are averaged to produce overall AC, CC, and NC scores. Scale coefficient alpha reliabilities for the AC, CC, and NC are .88, .84, and .78 respectively.

*Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity.* Role conflict and role ambiguity were assessed using the role questionnaires developed by Rizzo et al. (1970). The items were rated on a 7-point agree-disagree scale. The responses for items on the two dimension are averaged to produce overall role conflict and role ambiguity scores. Scale coefficient alpha reliabilities for role conflict and role ambiguity were .72 and .66 respectively.

*Demographics.* A demographic survey was included at the end of the packet of information given to soldiers. This requested the rank, age, gender, race, education, marital status, years in the army, years left under current commitment, re-enlistment intentions, and future aviation career for each participant.

#### *Procedure*

Permission was obtained from the Army post's Public Affairs division and JAG. Further permission was granted from the aviation battalion's commanding officer to request participation of his soldiers for this research. Participants were recruited by being sent a packet of information via the battalion internal mail system. This packet included an informed consent form asking for voluntary participation, a questionnaire of the OC scales, role scales, and a demographic survey. Information explaining participants' anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses was also included on the questionnaires. Addressed and stamped return envelopes were provided with the materials for each participant. A total of 240 questionnaires were distributed to 120 pilots (all 50 COs and all 70 WOs) and 120 support soldiers (60 random NCOs and 60 random enlisted). The individual response rate was 30%.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between affective commitment, continuance commitment, normative commitment, role conflict, role ambiguity, education, and age can be found in Table 1.

Table 1  
Mean, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Affective Commitment, Continuance Commitment, Normative Commitment, Role Conflict, Role Ambiguity, Education, and Age

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>
1. Affective Commitment	3.84	1.56	<b>0.88</b>						
2. Continuance Commitment	3.56	1.47	0.48	<b>0.84</b>					
3. Normative Commitment	3.59	1.42	0.74**	0.51**	<b>0.78</b>				
4. Role Conflict	5.02	0.93	-0.17	-0.02	-0.21	<b>0.72</b>			
5. Role Ambiguity	3.44	1.15	-0.49**	-0.29	-0.47*	0.34	<b>0.66</b>		
6. Education	2.16	0.99	-0.05	-0.35	-0.06	-0.09	0.24	----	
7. Age	2.21	0.93	0.51**	0.16	0.30	-0.10	-0.18	0.20	----

Note: Values bolded on the diagonal represent Cronbach's alpha. \* Indicates significance at  $p < .01$ . \*\* Indicates significance at  $p < .001$ . Means and Standard Deviations for Education and Age represent a 7-point scale.

The data was analyzed using a t-test to evaluate hypotheses 1a, 2, and 3. Hypothesis 1a indicated that there would be no significant differences in affective commitment between ranks

when role conflict and role ambiguity are left to operate freely. This hypothesis was supported, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2  
Rank Differences for Affective, Continuance, and Normative Commitment

Commitment Measure	<u>Higher Ranks</u>		<u>Lower Ranks</u>		<u>t</u>
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	
Affective	4.03	1.53	3.53	1.58	1.42
Continuance	3.21	1.45	3.99	1.41	-2.20*
Normative	3.63	1.42	3.53	1.45	0.29

Note: \* Indicates significance at  $p < .05$

An ANCOVA was used to test hypothesis 1b, which indicated that there would be significant differences between ranks such that higher ranks will have greater AC than lower ranks when role conflict and role ambiguity are controlled for. There was no support found for this hypothesis, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
Analysis of Covariance for Affective Commitment

Source	<u>df</u>	<u>MS</u>	<u>F</u>
Rank	1	4.45	2.33
Role Ambiguity (Covariate)	1	34.91	18.28*



ole Conflict (Covariate)

1

0.03

0.01

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Note: \* Indicates significance at  $p < .001$

Hypothesis 2 indicated that there would be a significant difference between ranks such that lower ranks will have greater CC than higher ranks. This hypothesis was supported, as shown in Table 2. Hypothesis 3 indicated that there would be a significant difference between ranks such that higher ranks will have greater NC than lower ranks. There was no support found for this hypothesis, as shown in Table 2.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether rank, or status, influenced three separate components of organizational commitment. It appears that rank does influence continuance commitment such that support soldiers with lower rank indicated significantly higher levels of CC than pilots with higher rank. This finding is consistent with the rationale that lower status employees have fewer employment opportunities and higher costs associated with leaving the organization (Cohen & Hudecek, 1993).

It was not found however, that rank influences normative commitment or affective commitment, even when role stress variables were controlled for. There were no significant differences in normative commitment between higher and lower ranks. One possible explanation for this may be that in civilian institutions, the differential opportunities and possible feelings of debt to the organization that status might lead to may appear in elevated levels of NC because of lack of other outlets to pay the organization back. They may truly feel they owe the organization, but can only give it their voluntary employment to repay them. Thus, feelings of obligation may lead to elevated normative commitment. In the military, however, regardless of rank and investments made on a soldier's behalf, a contract of time and obligation is already owed. The military is not a job that a soldier can leave when they want and it often involves a large set of sacrifices for them and their family members. Any pilots that may have felt they were in debt to the Army for their training and possible educational assistance, may have felt their contracted time was sufficient to pay them back. While there were no differences between ranks, the average normative commitment for all participants was on the lower end. It is very possible that

their contracted military obligation substituted any feeling of normative commitment to the Army.

There were also no significant differences found in affective commitment between higher and lower ranking soldiers. While this is exactly what was predicted when role variables operated freely, controlling them did not yield any significant difference between the two groups either. Apparently role conflict and role ambiguity do not suppress the affective commitment of higher ranks when not controlled for. In fact, the average level of role conflict for all participants was fairly high. Further, role ambiguity was found to have a significant, negative relationship with affective commitment for all participants, regardless of rank.

These findings indicate that role stressors seem to be prevalent throughout the ranks. This could be explained by the fact that all ranks are part of a very formalized organization. Jackson and Schuler (1985) have found that while formalization may have a negative relationship with role ambiguity by providing a structure in which to carry out work activities, it may actually increase role conflict for employees possessing professional norms. Thus, it may be these professional norms operating in a highly formalized environment that influence role stressors and any subsequent affective commitment instead of rank within the organization. For example, Michaels et al. (1988) found that formalization influences affective commitment indirectly through its effects on role ambiguity and role conflict. Future research could further explore these relationships.

Another possible reason why rank was not found to influence affective commitment is that age may be a significant predictor with a military population. Jans (1989) found that beyond all other factors in the study, older officers are more committed to the military than younger officers. The current study also found a significant positive relationship between age and

affective commitment. This may be because older soldiers may have values different from younger soldiers that allow them to become more emotionally attached to the organization. They may also have more time in towards retirement and thus convince themselves that they truly enjoy and want to remain in the army to reduce any cognitive dissonance they may be experiencing if retirement is their only driving force to still be there. Future research is needed to validate these possible theories.

The results of this study add to the contradictory findings regarding factors that influence organizational commitment. A significant contribution of these findings however is the use of the Meyer and Allen (1991) three-component measure of commitment. While most of the conflicting research deals with affective commitment, the current study may help shed some light on factors influencing normative and continuance commitment.

Several limitation of this study should be addressed. First, data were collected from only one aviation battalion, which may not be representative of other aviation and non-aviation battalions in the Army. Second, participants were asked not to complete the surveys during official duty hours. This may have contributed to the small sample size of this study. Third, the small sample size does limit interpretation of these finding. It could be that there was something about the commitment level of all of participants that returned their surveys. Finally, the findings from military participants may not necessarily be generalized to civilian employees. Future research in civilian organizations to include exploring some of the proposed theories may help to clarify these findings.

The results of this study can have some practical implications for the military. While it appears that status may impact whether a soldier believes they have other options than to be in the Army, other factors seem to influence whether they really like it and feel they are further



obligated to be there. Role ambiguity was highly negatively related to the two forms of commitment that rank did not influence: affective and normative. It is possible that if the roles soldiers possessed were more clearly defined, these levels of AC and NC may increase.

While there appears to be little research available assessing the three components of commitment in the military, further research is needed to identify the relationships between AC, CC, NC and other organizational variables. Once factors can be identified, methods for increasing different commitments in the military can be addressed.

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## VITA

Rachel Elizabeth Karnes was born in Dunkirk, NY on May 1, 1975. In New York, she attended Dunkirk High School and then went on to receive her Bachelor of Science Degree with major in Psychology and a minor in Sociology in May, 1997 from the State University of New York, College at Cortland. She married Louis J. Karnes in September of 1998 and moved overseas to South Korea. In June of 1999, she returned to the states and entered the Graduate School at Austin Peay State University in pursuit of a Master of Arts Degree with a concentration in Industrial and Organizational Psychology. After graduation, she plans to search for work as a human resource generalist or a consultant.