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Re-Conceptualising 'Union Commitment'

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Biography

Brian Peat is a full-time PhD student funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). His current research involves in-depth case studies of contemporary employee perception and uses of trade unions in the gas industry. Prior to joining the Business School, Brian was an as active unionist when employed by the British Gas Corporation.

Abstract

This paper questions the validity of the definition of union commitment derived from the literature on organisational commitment. As a corollary, the adopted one-sided perspective of human behaviour (where behaviour is seen as the result of the rational pursuit of self-interest by atomised individuals) and therefore the existing conceptualisation of union commitment fails to take adequate account both of the interpersonal social context within which individual activity is embedded and the impact of common elements in the social relations of waged employment. The definition of 'union commitment' developed in this paper attempts to anticipate this by adopting Granovetter's concept of embeddedness and Marx's concept of class consciousness. The resulting concept, although arguably more valid, is more complex and dynamic than the one found in the existing literature and therefore more difficult to operationalise. Nonetheless, the paper suggests how researchers might develop operational measures of the proposed conceptualisation of union commitment.

Introduction

The published literature on 'commitment' reveals it to be a theory-laden expression with numerous conceptualisations and definitions so much so that the usefulness of the term has been called into question (Hall 1977 in Angle and Perry 1981). Thus any discussion on investigation of commitment needs to make explicit exactly what it is that is being discussed. That is, what is meant by commitment? However, more than two decades after Hall highlighted the problem, difficulties still remain. As Guest (1991) concluded, "commitment is a difficult and rather elusive concept" (p.117), and in a recent review of the literature Aghila (2000) concludes that there is a lack of consistency leading to confusion. This confusion has been reflected in the different instruments developed by researchers, creating a situation whereby "It is apparent that there are no universal predictors of commitment" (Lydka, 1991:42). Aghila (2000) concludes that the situation is one where it is difficult or even impossible to compare studies. These discrepancies and inadequacies in the construct open up a space for the advocacy of alternative approaches to both the conceptualization and investigation of commitment.

Allen and Meyer (1997) in particular have made valiant attempts to resolve the difficulties referred to above by constructing research instruments that attempt to incorporate the various conceptualisations. However, they and others (see Angle and Perry 1981, O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986, and Guest, 1991), uncritically accept the presupposition that commitment is a property of atomised individuals independent of social activity. Using Granovetter's (1985) notion of oversocialised atomization this paper highlights the taken for granted the view –implicit in the conceptualisations of Organisational Commitment- that society is little more than a collection of atomized self-seeking individuals and argues that this failure to incorporate ongoing social activity is particularly detrimental to the concept of Union Commitment. By uncritically treating trade unions as 'just another organization' researchers have not only neglected to take into account the concrete personal relations within which behavioral and psychological traits are embedded but also and more importantly the concrete social structural relations of waged employment within which Union Commitment is embedded.

The paper starts by tracing the links between organizational commitment and union commitment. It then highlights the conceptual inadequacies of the generally accepted concept of union commitment consequent upon these links before outlining an alternative conceptualization intended to provide a more accurate abstraction.

Union Commitment (UC)

Workers can be considered to be 'committed' to various entities both inside and outside of the workplace (e.g. profession/occupation, employing organisation, trade union, family, workgroup, football club). However, research into UC has borrowed almost exclusively from the research agenda developed by researchers interested in worker 'commitment' to the employing organisation (Snape *et al.,* 2000), usually referred to as Organisational Commitment (OC) [1] (Meyer and Allen, 1997). Within the field of OC how organisations are perceived has also influenced research. Fincham and Rhodes (1992) describe two predominant schools of thought, one concerned with the sociology of organisations, the other concerned with the internal efficiency of organisations. It is this second school with its managerialist perspectives (ibid.) that appears to have had most influence on research into OC. The study of organisational commitment developed out of research into job satisfaction[2] by industrial psychologists (Lydka, 1991) and, as highlighted by Gordon *et al*., (1980), managerial perspectives have a long history of association with (the application of) industrial psychology. The influence of industrial psychologists has meant that research into OC has concentrated on the individual and has generally been pursued using positivist methodologies and methods[3]. This has resulted in the development of research instruments that "assume causation" whilst establishing

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[1] Although it may be regarded as a mute point the notion of an organisation being committed to its workers receives no credence in the literature Whilst researchers into organisational commitment appear to have difficulty in defining in a consistent manner exactly what it is they are dealing with they have no difficulty in agreeing that it refers to employee 'commitment' to the 'organisation' and not visa versa. As noted in Allen and Meyer (1997:3) the position is such that " if gaining the loyalty of employees requires that employers reciprocate in kind, the cost might simply be too great …." Thus commitment is viewed as a desirable, and if possible manipuable attribute of employees not employers.

[2] Job satisfaction and organisational commitment although related have been shown to be separate constructs (Lydka 1991).

[3] The preoccupation with independent and dependent 'variables' in psychology is an expression of the hold positivism has on psychology (Banister et al 1994).

correlations between [an individuals] attitudinal variables (Snape *et al.* 2000:221). At the same time managerialist perspectives have been reflected in the search for links between OC and the motivation of *individuals* to perform in line with stated organisational goals. As Guest (1991) makes clear, managerial interest in 'Commitment' (albeit expressed via the introduction of employee involvement initiatives) is essentially unitarist and despite attendant conceptual problems[4], such interest is attracted to the definition developed by Mowday *et al.* (1979) They define OC as: -

> "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organisation." (Mowday *et al*., 1979: 226)

They further operationalise this definition as being characterised by three related factors:

1) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organisation's goals and values;

2) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organisation;

3) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organisation. (Ibid.)[5]

Although researchers have attempted to determine the presence or otherwise of common and or divergent antecedents (Barling *et al*., 1990, Snape *et al.*, 2000), there is an acceptance that the underlying models predicting OC and UC are similar (Thacker *et al*., 1990 in Guest 1991). Implicit in this acceptance is the assumption that no significant conceptual differences delineate OC from UC. This assumption is made explicit in the work of Gordon *et al*., (1980) who pioneered recent research into UC and they state clearly their underlying assumptions: -

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4 Although Mowday et al acknowledge that their definition includes some aspects of commitment-related behaviours they make it clear that they are concerned with attitudinal commitment and simply assert that "the organizationally [sic] committed individual will tend to exhibit the three types of behavior [sic] identified in the above definition." (1979:226) This has drawn criticism from some quarters on the grounds that it conflates process and outcome and as such creates difficulties for researchers (see Guest 1991).

5 Mowday et al also developed a research instrument the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) that has been extensively used by practitioners and researchers alike. Cook and Wall (1980) have developed a research instrument based on Mowday et al's OCQ for use in the British context, Mowday et al's being developed for American workers.

"Because scientific investigation of a concept demands measurement of all variables, development of a criterion is an obvious starting point for a study of union commitment. Such a criterion should be similar to an accepted definition of the more general construct of organisational commitment. An empirically derived commitment to the union measure should posses a factor structure that reflects the components identified in a priori definitions of organisational commitment" (p481)

Not surprisingly given this approach, UC has been defined as the extent to which an *individual*: -

a) Has a strong desire to remain a member of the union.

b) Is willing to exert high levels of effort on behalf of the union.

c) Has a definite belief in and acceptance of the values and goals of the union. (Gordon *et al*., 1980, in Kuruvilla and Iverson (1993).

As might be expected given the above, research into UC has followed the pattern of research set out by those investigating OC and is characterised by a positivist preoccupation with attempts to discover the laws that govern the relationships between 'causes' and 'effects' (Banister *et al.,* 1994), the managerialist fantasy of prediction and control (Thompson and McHugh 1995), and psychology's focus on the individual (Jackson and Carter 2000). These factors have combined to produce a research agenda that holds out the promise of a deterministic world where workers become receptacles, devoid of the powers of collective interaction and subservient to the needs of *the* organisation. This is clearly evident in the following quotations.

"it should be possible for organisations to use the results of research examining antecedents [of OC]…….. to better manage the experiences of their employees so as to foster the development of the desired profile."
(Allen and Meyer, 1990:15)

"As we gain better insight into the mechanisms involved in the formation of commitment, we will be in a better position to design HRM systems that can be applied to develop desired levels of commitment efficiently and efficiently without producing undesirable side effects."
(Allen and Meyer, 1997:114)

"An understanding of commitment is important – not only for psychological research on unions, but also for labor [sic] leaders who

wish to address the deteriorating levels of union participation and
increase democratic involvement of rank and file members."
(Fullagar and Barling, 1987).

These accounts are redolent of Granovetter's (1985) description of oversocialised
atomised actors whose behaviour patterns have been internalised such that ongoing
social relations have only minor effects on behaviour. That the process of
internalisation may be recognised as having social origins does not detract from the
conclusion that the conceptualisations of OC -and by direct association UC-
generally found in the literature separates workers from their social context and each
other.

Returning to the OC literature, Mowday *et al*. (1982) identify two broad definitional
trends one that aligns 'commitment' with behaviour. That is, an individual becomes
"bound by his [sic] actions" (p225) e.g. 'the binding of an individual to behavioural
acts' (Kiesler, 1971, in Angle and Perry, 1981). Whilst the other aligns
'commitment' with attitude / psychological state where an individual is compelled by
their values and goals (Mowday *et al*, 1982) that is 'an affective attachment to an
organisation apart from the purely instrumental worth of the relationship' (Buchanan,
1974, in Angle and Perry, 1981). However, what is important from a theoretical
perspective is that what unites these categorisations is not the differences between
them. Both categorisations presuppose that once behavioural and or psychological
patterns become internalised continuing social relations become peripheral. The
references to individuals being 'bound' and / or 'compelled' makes explicit the
premise that once it is known exactly how an individual has been affected,
continuing social relations and structures are neither here nor there. The situation
becomes one where:

> "Social influences are all contained inside an individual's head, so,
> in actual decision situations, he or she can be atomised."
> (Granovetter, 1985:486).

The marginalisation of ongoing social relations inherent in the conceptualisation of
UC presents researchers with a somewhat idealised world. Allen and Meyer's (1997)
declaration that it may be necessary to consider methods of analysis that do not
concentrate on the individual in order to develop a more complete understanding
acknowledges need for a more sophisticated approach. A finding that is reiterated in

Snape *et al*., (2000) call for longitudinal studies that treat commitment as an ongoing process. The rest of this paper outlines an alternative approach to both the conceptualisation and analysis of UC that avoids the atomisation of workers built into the existing concepts. The basic premise being that workers cannot be isolated from their social context and that their actions and decisions are embedded in concrete ongoing social relations, relations that fashion workers and are at the same time fashioned by them.

Re-Conceptualising Union Commitment

Undertaking an investigation of the UC of workers embedded in the contemporary workplace requires that we not only define the embeddedness of UC in terms of workers interpersonal social relations (designated here as social networks) but also in terms of the social relationships that give rise to trade union organisation in particular (designated as social structures). In this way the whole of the notion of Union Commitment is given a context; that is, trade union organisation is not assumed to exist as an external entity unconnected to workplace social structures and individual workers are not assumed to be atomised individuals.

Adopting Marx's perspectives on the nature of capitalist society as the social structural context within which trade union organisation is embedded, workers are abstracted as both the embodiment of a social-economic function [wage-labour] and as a group of people (workers) who perform this function. Matching these two abstractions is a dual conception of workers interests, i) 'Objective Interests' that are attached to the functional abstraction and ii) 'Subjective Interests' that are attached to the social group. Included in workers objective interests are the social structural changes that are needed for the mass of workers to realise their subjective interests (Ollman 1993). In Marxist terms the mass of workers will only fully realise their subjective interests when the existing Capitalist social structural relations are replaced by Socialist social structural relations a process that both determines and is determined by the mass of workers becoming 'class conscious'. At which time workers objective interests are included within workers subjective interests (see Fig.1). However, (in the mean time or in place of, depending upon political perspective) partial realisation of workers -viewed as a group- subjective interests may be achievable via partial social structural change. For the purposes of this paper

such partial social structural changes include the integration of trade union organisation into workplace social structures (others could be legal or political changes) (see Fig.1).

Fig.1: Pathways for The Realisation Of Worker's Interests
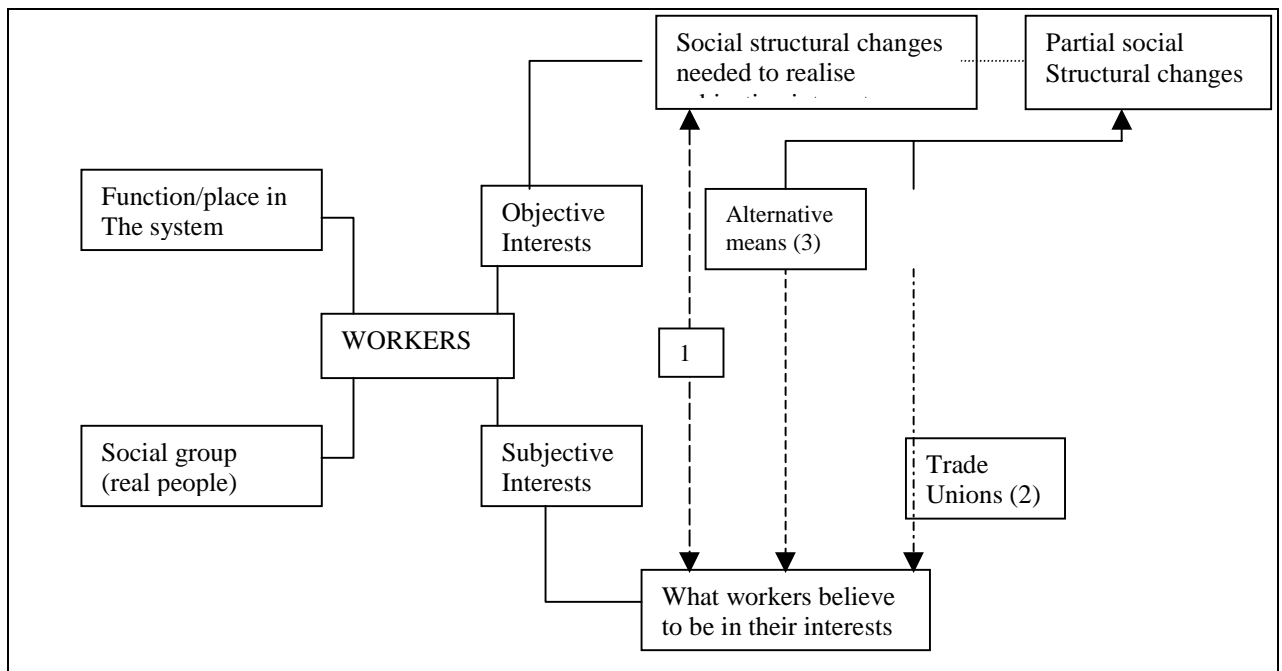
1. Class consciousness
2. Trade Unions
3. Political / legal

Thus workers who belong to or support trade unions need not be class conscious, however, when conceptualising UC the important factor taken from the above is the perspective from which the objective and subjective interests of workers is established. The main reference point, the perspective from which the objective and subjective interests of workers is established is the situation of the group and not the interests of individuals, that is, the collective. The centrality of the collective as a characteristic of trade union organisation is well established in the literature on trade union membership (see Waddington and Whitston 1997; Deery and Walsh 1999; Terry 2000).

"collectivistic modes of thought………are more evident in trade unions than any other institutions."
(Beynon, 1984:200)

Contemplating UC from the perspective of the collective moves the unit of analysis from the individual to the group and as the embodiment of the objective and subjective interests of the group the union as a collective becomes the subject. As such UC (the object of study) is different from individual commitment by having its main point of reference in the situation of the group and not in the interests of individuals. By abstracting workers as a group or collective rather than a class a shift to a narrower level of analysis from that borrowed from Marx above is also effected. This is not to say that trade unions are not in themselves class organisations but that they are not understood as organisations for the working class. Rather they are understood as organisations for the collective, that is, from the perspective of a collective UC describes a necessary relationship between the collective and trade union organisation. This relational aspect of UC underpins the sectionalism characteristic of UK trade unions where "the existence of sectional organisations is a consequence rather than a cause of sectionalism within the working class" (Hyman, 1975:60).

Also from the perspective of the collective UC is not simply a matter of individuals being committed to having a particular understanding of their relationship with the union, neither is it just a numerically larger version of individual commitment.

> It is a collective interactive approach to understanding and acting upon the particular world union members have in common. It is a set of judgments and behaviors reserved for these common situations where an individual's fate is inextricably linked to the fate of the group. It is a way of thinking done in common, usually in a common place, using common language, advanced and retarded by common pressures and constraints. This also means that it is elastic and changing, encompassing all the stages in its development (and collapse) together with the time it takes to occur. That is, *the process* of becoming committed is not external to what it is but rather at its centre [6].

This is not intended to imply that individuals cannot become committed but that

Union Commitment is more than simply the addition of individual calculations. It is something that grows out of the common circumstances, experiences, issues, problems and interests that gives life to the collective organisation underpinning workplace union activity. What is important is what an individual comprehends and does as a member of the group not his or her personal thoughts and actions.

> "The workers spontaneous source of identity is collective solidarity with each other : each responds almost automatically to what he[sic] perceives as being the group's goals, even if he[sic] believes them to be irrational."
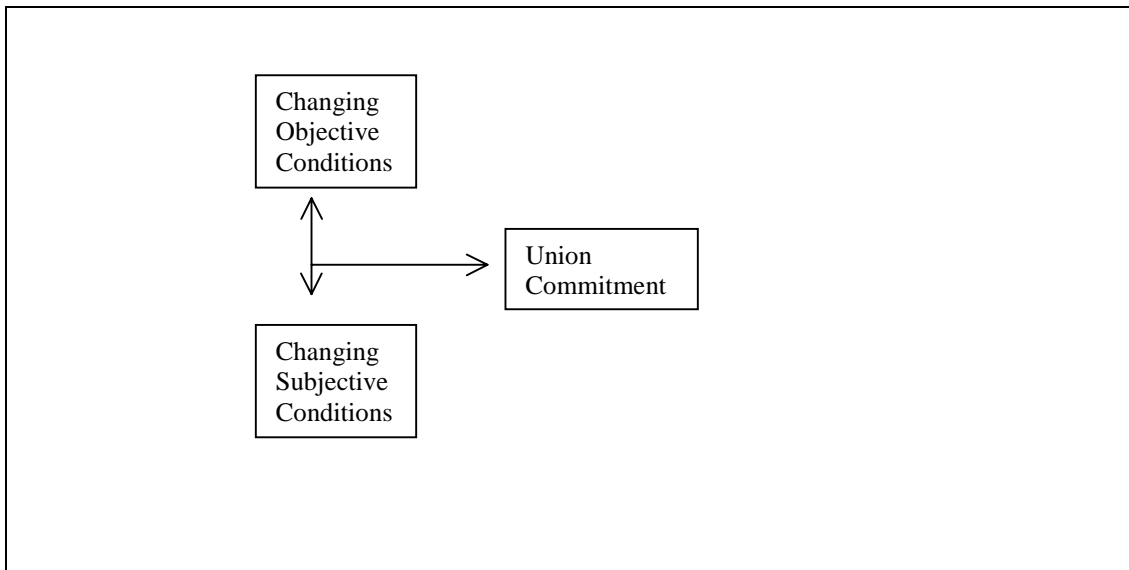> (Mann, 1973:50).

Union Commitment is therefore considered to be both a process and a relation and differs from the concept of individual commitment in three ways:

1) It is a collective commitment, a way of thinking that develops through the individuals in the group interacting with each other and opposing groups in situations that are peculiar to workers as employees.

2) It is a commitment that has its main point of reference in the situation and objective interests of workers as a group in capitalist society and not the stated subjective interests of individual workers.

3) It is fundamentally a process, a movement from wherever a group commitment is, to the level of commitment appropriate to its situation.

When considering the forces that sustain the process and give rise to the different aspects of the relation the objective conditions within which workers adopt trade union organisation and methods is given the same attention as workers understandings and perceptions of their conditions and actions. (see Fig.2).

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[6] This definition of UC has been derived from Ollman's (1993) discourse on Marx's concept of class consciousness.

Fig.2 Determinants of Union Commitment

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│        ┌──────────────┐                                               │
│        │ Changing     │                                               │
│        │ Objective    │                                               │
│        │ Conditions   │                                               │
│        └──────────────┘                                               │
│               ↑          ┌──────────────┐                             │
│               │    ────→ │ Union        │                             │
│               │          │ Commitment   │                             │
│               ↓          └──────────────┘                             │
│        ┌──────────────┐                                               │
│        │ Changing     │                                               │
│        │ Subjective   │                                               │
│        │ Conditions   │                                               │
│        └──────────────┘                                               │
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└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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Although this approach runs the risk of elevating atomisation to the level of the collective, the danger is reduced by insisting that whilst collectivist modes of thought and action are considered to be necessary features of UC they are not sufficient to ensure its development. The growth of alternative means of realising subjective interests may present themselves, for example legal and / or political structures. Also individuals may possess qualities that may make it difficult (or easy) for them to participate as members of a union, and as highlighted by Grannovetter (1985), individual qualities are embedded in social networks, for example, racial, national, religious, sexual and / or political. Investigating UC thus involves the study of both its objective and subjective aspects with the latter encompassing collective and individual orientations (Fig.3).

Fig.3 Determinants of Union Commitment
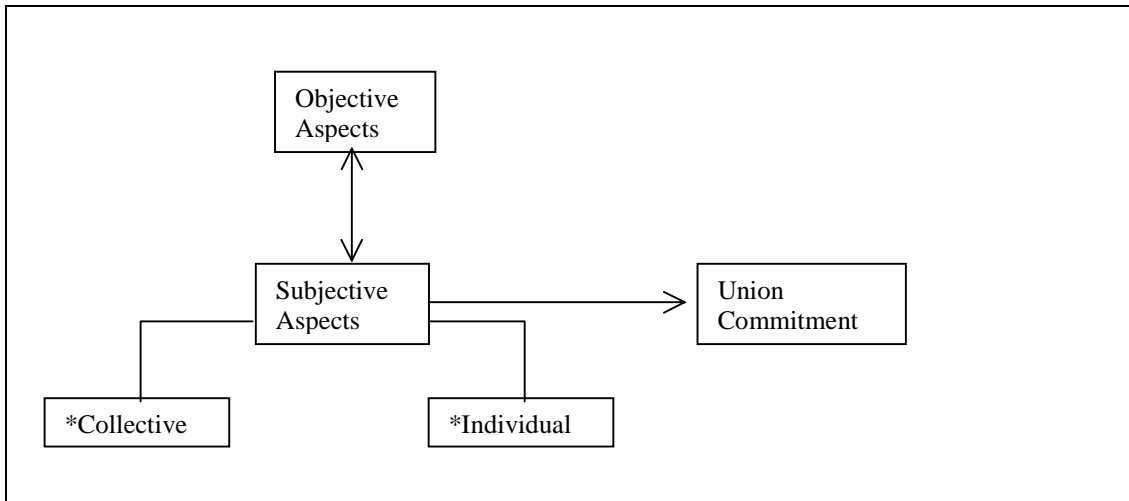
* Where the collective aspects are embedded in the social structural relations of capitalist production and the individual aspects are embedded in social networks.

Future Research

The adoption of the conceptualisation advocated here would redirect research away from that aimed at discerning whether workers are committed, what their level of commitment is and how it can be externally manipulated; towards research directed at understanding why workers don't become committed, when workers are likely to become committed, and why and how they stop being committed.

Conceived, as something workers either have or do not have UC becomes an object of research devoid of context, a thing in itself that can be acquired or lost through personal experiences such as socialisation, indoctrination or education. However, it has been argued in this paper that UC is not independent of social structures or networks but a product of them. Having critiqued the existing concept of UC as an inadequate representation of reality the value of a new conceptualisation will reside in its ability to more adequately represent reality.

Whatever methodology is adopted researching UC will be structured around the identification and understanding of the conditions (objective and subjective) under which and the extent to which the presuppositions implicit in the concept of UC occur and develop in reality. The four primary suppositions supporting the concept as

described are: one, a collective identity founded on the presence and understanding of group and opposing group interests, (that is, workers and managers). Two, the perception that trade union organisation and methods offer the most viable route to the realisation of group interests (workers' objective interest in developing trade union organisation is here given a definite role in their thinking). Three, some level of activity directed towards the production and reproduction of trade union organisation and methods must take place. Four, although the identification of individual qualities can help explain why the subjective aspects of UC might not develop in individuals they will not help in identifying the direction of movement of UC amongst a group of workers.

How the above elements interact and give expression to or inhibit the UC process will form the central problem of any ongoing research agenda.

Summary

As a consequence of its direct association with the concept of OC continuing social relations are abstracted out of the accepted conceptualisation of UC. The resulting atomisation of workers means that research into UC to a large extent ignores the ongoing social relations within which UC is embedded and takes no account of the collective aspects of trade union organisation. This paper has made a start with addressing these omissions by developing an alternative conceptualisation, one that perceives UC to be embedded in both the social structural relations of waged employment and networks of interpersonal social relations. As a consequence of contemplating UC as a complex and dynamic social relation UC is perceived as a process not an object, creating difficulties for the traditional research agenda and making the development of appropriate research instruments a pressing issue for future research. A research strategy designed to investigate UC as conceptualised here would probably necessitate the use of qualitative methods in preference to, if not in place of, quantitative methods in order to gain access to the contextual information needed to understand and delineate the process. However, although the designing of an appropriate research instrument is an important element, the primary step is the acknowledgement of the collective nature of trade unions and that that nature necessitates a different approach to the definition (and study) of UC to the one adopted to date.

The preceding ideas are only embryonic and represent initial reactions to the traditional approaches to UC. Studying Union Commitment from the perspective of the collective seems to suggest that a group of workers construct the union it needs, that it is ready for and that is appropriate to what the group commitment is and is becoming. Thus whilst trade unionist's claims that the members are the union and the union is the members are easily dismissed as rhetoric the reality may be somewhat different.

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