

Psychological career resources and organisational commitment: exploring sociodemographic differences

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to explore the way in which people from various gender, age, ethnic, marital and job level groups differ in terms of their psychological career resources (as measured by the Psychological Career Resources Inventory) and organisational commitment (as measured by the Organisational Commitment Scale). Participants comprising a convenience sample of 358 employed adults at both managerial and staff levels in the field of economic and management services participated in the study. The results of non-parametric tests indicated that there were significant differences between the various sociodemographic groups in terms of the measured variables. The results contribute new knowledge that can be used to inform career development practices directed to retaining valuable staff (especially those from historically disadvantaged groups) in the South African work context.

1 Introduction

In today's world of globalisation and demographic change, the workforce is becoming increasingly diverse, which has resulted in a greater variety of knowledge, skills, experiences and attitudes, all of which contribute to the organisation's performance in what has become a highly competitive global business market (Arnold & Randall 2010). Organisations are increasingly recognising the value of attracting and retaining staff from all demographic groups in order to improve workforce performance and thereby improve their competitive position (Torrington, Hall, Taylor & Atkinson 2009). Welbourne, Cycyota and Ferrante (2007) found that gender diversity in top management teams was directly associated with companies' financial performance. Diverse workforces are also associated with higher levels of retention of employees from historically disadvantaged groups (Zatzick, Elvira & Cohen 2003). Avery, McKay, Wilson and Tonidandel (2007) found, for example, that employees from ethnic minority or historically disadvantaged groups who perceived their employer as failing to value diversity adequately had significantly higher absentee rates than those from the white or previously advantaged groups.

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The retention of talented staff from all demographic groups and their organisational commitment therefore appear to be of strategic importance to employers owing to the potential financial returns from these employees in the long term (Döckel, Basson & Coetzee 2006; Swart 2009). Loyal, engaged employees tend to generate high-performance business outcomes when measured in terms of increased sales, improved productivity and profitability (Rogers 2001; Tsui, Pearce, Porter & Hite 1995). Commitment strategies shape desired employee behaviours and attitudes by forging psychological links between the organisation and employee goals. The focus is thus on developing committed employees who can be trusted to use their discretion to carry out job tasks in ways that are consistent with organisational goals (Storm & Roodt 2002).

Shifting trends in the contemporary world of work have also led to a renewed interest in the psychological factors that influence people's commitment to an organisation. Organisations that want to retain valuable employees need to try to establish favourable organisational conditions and career development practices that will address the differing career needs of a diverse workforce (Coetzee & Schreuder 2008; Kniveton 2004; McNeese-Smith & Van Servellen 2000). A commitment to an organisation seems to be directly associated with whether people feel that their psychological needs are being met, and whether people believe they are respected and recognised by the organisations they work for (Hughes & Half 2009).

Economic events such as mergers, acquisitions or layoffs have led to a loss in job security, a need to develop highly divergent and diverse career paths, shifts in organisational loyalties and an emphasis on career agency (Baruch 2004; Bentein, Vandenberghe, Vandenberg & Stinglhamber 2005; Marshall & Bonner 2003; Sinclair 2009). Research has shown that, from the perspective of the individual, the turbulent careers context has led to a growing concern for developing a range of psychological career resources or career meta-competencies that enable people to take ownership of their careers and be proactive agents in managing their careers and improving their employability (Baruch 2004; Coetzee 2008; Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth 2004; Sinclair 2009). Moreover, Ferreira (2009) found that people's psychological career resources were significantly related to their organisational commitment. Research undertaken by Coetzee and Bergh (2009) has shown that individuals' psychological career resources predict their life satisfaction, job and career satisfaction, sense of happiness and the meaning they attach to the importance of work in their lives. Job satisfaction has also been found to be significantly related to individuals' commitment to an organisation (Lumley 2010).

2 Aims of the study

The aim of the present study was to explore the way in which people from various gender, age, ethnic, marital and job level groups differ in terms of their psychological career resources and organisational commitment. Although the theme of organisational commitment has been well researched, the construct of "psychological career resources" has only recently been introduced (Coetzee 2008). There also seems to be a paucity of research about how people from diverse demographic backgrounds (i.e. gender, ethnicity, age, marital status and job levels) in the South African workplace differ in terms of their psychological career resources and organisational commitment.

In the context of the present study, the constructs "psychological career resources" and "organisational commitment" refer to some of the deep-level diversity characteristics that people commonly share and that are recognised as important factors in shaping people's individual mindsets about their organisational lives.

Whereas demographics tend to reflect a surface-level diversity that points to differences in easily perceived characteristics (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, age or disability), deep-level diversity characteristics reflect what people individually think and feel about their organisations, jobs and careers. Deep-level diversity characteristics become progressively more important in determining similarity within groups as people get to know one another better (Robbins & Judge 2009).

Given the context of employment equity and affirmative action, and the fact that more Africans and women are entering the South African workplace, this study is expected to contribute important knowledge that will inform career development practices directed to attracting and retaining valuable staff (especially the historically disadvantaged groups).

3 Psychological career resources

This study uses the psychological career resources model developed by Coetzee (2007; 2008) as its theoretical framework. The profile of an individual's psychological career resources reflects his/her career consciousness. Based on Adler's (1956) view of the concept of consciousness, Coetzee (2007) describes career consciousness as people's conscious, career-related cognitions (i.e. perceptions, awareness and self-evaluations) of their career preferences, values, skills, attitudes and behaviours that are understood and regarded as helping them to realise their goals and achieve career success. Coetzee (2008) labels the various components that constitute an individual's repertoire of psychological resources as career preferences, career values, career drivers, career enablers and career harmonisers. A well-developed range of psychological career resources is an indication of conscious, self-directed career behaviour that is internally guided and proactively driven by the individual himself (or herself).

People's *career preferences and values* guide their career decisions and represent their own unique views about the paths their careers should follow. While an individual's career preferences guide his or her career moves, career values provide the motivation for particular career preferences (Brousseau 1990). *Career drivers* represent people's sense of career purpose, directedness and orientation towards career venturing. These career-oriented attitudes energise people and motivate them towards experimenting with career and employment possibilities - based on their perceptions of who they could become and their possible future work roles (Coetzee 2008). Career directedness is described as individuals' sense of clarity on future career directions and goals and on where and how to find support to enable them to achieve their career goals or find new job opportunities. The term "career venturing" relates to individuals' willingness to take risks in finding and experimenting with new career opportunities (Coetzee 2008).

Career enablers are people's transferable skills (e.g. their practical or creative skills and self-management and relationship skills) that help them to succeed in their careers. *Career harmonisers* are the psychological attributes that act not only as promoters of flexibility and resilience but also as controls (because they keep career drivers in balance so that people do not burn themselves out in the process of pursuing and reinventing their careers). Coetzee (2008) labels these attributes as self-esteem, behavioural adaptability, emotional literacy and social connectivity (the ability to connect with others, and establish and maintain mutually satisfying and supportive relationships). Self-esteem, behavioural adaptability, emotional literacy and social

connectivity have also been related to experiences of subjective career success and well-being (Sinclair 2009). An individual who has a profile of well-established psychological career resources profile will be able to engage proactively in career self-management activities that improve his or her job performance and experiences of subjective career success within a particular sociocultural context (Coetzee 2008; Ebberwein, Krieskok, Ulven & Prosser 2004; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden 2006).

4 Organisational commitment

The concept of organisational commitment has attracted considerable interest from researchers who are attempting to understand and clarify the intensity and stability of an employee's dedication to an organisation (Mester, Visser, Roodt & Kellerman 2003). In the context of the present study, organisational commitment is regarded as an attitude that relates to individuals' mindsets about the organisation (Allen & Meyer 1990). According to Gbadamosi (2003), a favourable attitude toward an organisation leads to a greater acceptance of the organisation's goals, as well as an increased willingness to make greater efforts on behalf of that organisation.

Meyer and Allen's (1991) three-component model of organisational commitments is relevant to this research. Allen and Meyer (1990) describe commitment as a psychological state that binds the individual to the organisation. Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) suggest that the binding force of commitment is experienced as a mindset (i.e. a frame of mind or psychological state that compels an individual toward a course of action). The mindset of commitment reflects three distinguishable themes which Meyer and Allen (1991) label as "affective commitment", "continuance commitment", and "normative commitment". These three distinguishable components of organisational commitment reflect the difference between a preference to stay with the present organisation based on a sense of emotional attachment (affective commitment) and a commitment rooted in a sense of economic necessity or the perceived cost of leaving (continuance commitment) or a commitment based on moral obligation (normative commitment).

Organisational commitment develops while the individual is employed by the organisation. Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) developed certain propositions that describe the development of the different mindsets of commitment: The mindset of desire (affective commitment) develops when an individual becomes involved in, recognises the value-relevance of, and/or derives his or her identity from association with an entity in the pursuit of a course of action. Individuals who are dedicated at an emotional level usually remain with the organisation; this is because they see their individual employment relationship as being in harmony with the goals and values of the organisation for which they are currently working. The development of affective commitment involves recognising the organisation's worth and internalising its principles and standards (Beck & Wilson 2000).

The mindset of perceived cost (continuance commitment) develops when an individual recognises that he or she stands to lose investments, and/or perceives that there are no alternatives other than to pursue a course of action relevant to a particular target. Because of the individual's awareness or consideration of expenses and threats linked to leaving the organisation, this form of commitment is considered to be calculative (Meyer & Allen 1997). Meyer and Allen (1991) also indicate that individuals whose most important connection with the organisation is based on continuance commitment stay with the organisation simply because they have no choice. These individuals remain with a specific organisation because of the money they earn as a

result of the time spent in the organisation. This differs from affective commitment, where individuals remain with an organisation because they want to and because they are familiar with it and its principles.

The mindset of obligation (normative commitment) develops as a result of the internalisation of norms through socialisation, and the receipt of benefits (which encourages a feeling that one should reciprocate), and/or acceptance of the terms of a psychological contract. The internalised normative idea of responsibility and commitment allows employees to feel that their continued membership in a specific organisation is appreciated (Allen & Meyer 1990). The normative element is seen as individuals' perception of their moral obligation to remain with a specific organisation, irrespective of how much status improvement or fulfilment the organisation gives the individual over the years (March & Mannari 1977).

5 Research design

5.1 Participants

Participants consisted of a convenience sample of 358 employed adults at managerial and staff levels in the field of economic and management services. These employees were enrolled on a human resource management programme at a higher distance education institution and had attended a three-day study school. The sample was predominantly made up of African (84%) and female (76%) participants. Whites constituted 8%, coloureds 6%, Indians 2% and males 24%. The sample consisted of single (51%) and married (44%) participants, mostly in the early adulthood life stage (26–40 years) (58%). Participants were employed in a full-time capacity and occupied relatively high-level positions at senior and middle management level (47%) and staff level (44%) in economic and management services. The following economic sectors were represented: 40% human resource management; 7% education; 3% administration; 1% accounting and finance; and 6% nursing, public administration and social work.

5.2 Measuring instruments

Participants completed the Psychological Career Resources Inventory (PCRI) (Coetzee 2007) and the Organisational Commitment Scale (OCS) (Meyer, Allen & Smith 1993). The PCRI (Coetzee 2007) is a self-rated, multi-factorial measure which contains 64 items and five subscales: career preferences (17 items), career values (8 items), career enablers (8 items), career drivers (10 items) and career harmonisers (21 items). The PCRI measures 15 constructs in total: stability/expertise; managerial; variety/creativity and freedom/autonomy (career preferences); growth/development and authority/influence (career values); practical/creative skills and self/other skills (career enablers); career purpose; career directedness and career venturing (career drivers) and self-esteem; behavioural adaptability; emotional literacy and social connectivity (career harmonisers). A six-point Likert-type scale was used to analyse subject responses to each of the PCRI items. An exploratory factor analysis (Coetzee 2007) and confirmatory factor analysis (Coetzee 2010) provided evidence of construct validity as indicated by the fifteen-factor model, which supports the underlying dimensions of the psychological career resources construct described by Coetzee (2008). Inter-construct correlations range from 0.14 to 0.58. In terms of reliability (internal consistency), Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each subscale range from 0.71 to 0.88

(high). Studies conducted by Coetzee (2008) and Coetzee and Esterhuizen (2010) confirmed the reliability and validity of the PCRI in the South African context.

The OCS (Meyer et al 1993) is a self-rated, multi-factorial measure which contains 18 items and three subscales: affective, continuance and normative commitment. Meyer et al (1993) reported internal consistency reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alphas) for affective commitment (0.82), continuance commitment (0.74) and normative commitment (0.83). Responses were made on a seven-point Likert-type scale. Studies by Coetzee, Schreuder and Tladinyane (2007), Ferreira (2009), Swart (2009) and Lumley (2010) confirmed the reliability and validity of the OCS in the South African context.

In line with directives provided by Nunnally (1978) for measuring broad-based trends, the psychometric properties of the instruments were deemed acceptable for the purposes of this research.

5.3 Research procedure

Ethical clearance and permission to conduct the survey were obtained from the management of the higher education institution that participated in the survey. The participants attended a session organised for the purpose of completing the questionnaires under the supervision of a professionally trained and registered psychometrist. As far as ethics are concerned, the purpose of the survey was explained and participants were requested to sign a letter of consent stating that by completing the questionnaires and returning them to the psychometrist, they were giving permission for the results to be used, but only for research purposes. Anonymity and confidentiality were also guaranteed.

5.4 Statistical analysis

The data analysis procedures chosen for this research were based on their relevance to the exploratory nature of the research design. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. Since the tests for normality revealed that the variables could not be assumed to be normally distributed, nonparametric tests were performed to test for significant differences between the sociodemographic variables regarding the psychological career resources and the organisational commitment variables. A cut-off point of $p \leq 0.05$ was set to interpret the significance of the findings.

6 Results

6.1 Descriptive statistics

The means, standard deviations and internal-consistency reliability coefficients for the variables of interest are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics: PCRI and OCS (N=358)

Measuring instrument subscales	Means	Standard deviations	Cronbach's alpha coefficients Total sample
PCRI			
Career Preference			
Stability / Expertise	5.29	0.58	0.69
Managerial	4.55	0.99	0.69
Variety / Creativity	4.92	0.84	0.76
Freedom / Autonomy	4.25	0.95	0.76
Career Values			
Growth / Development	5.46	0.57	0.76
Authority / Influence	4.27	1.01	0.61
Career Enablers			
Practical / Creative Skills	4.48	0.92	0.82
Self / Other Skills	5.04	0.78	0.70
Career Driver			
Career Purpose	5.45	0.56	0.80
Career Directedness	4.40	1.00	0.74
Career Venturing	4.38	1.22	0.87
Career Harmonisers			
Self-esteem	5.32	0.70	0.84
Behavioural adaptability	4.67	0.81	0.77
Emotional literacy	4.46	0.96	0.79
Social connectivity	5.09	0.81	0.79
OCS			
Affective Commitment	4.00	0.99	0.71
Continuance Commitment	4.14	1.02	0.68
Normative Commitment	3.77	1.35	0.70

In terms of the PCRI, Table 1 indicates stability/expertise (mean = 5.29; SD = 0.58) and variety/creativity (mean = 4.92; SD = 0.84), as well as freedom/autonomy (mean = 4.25; SD = 0.95) as the dominant career preferences for the total sample. Freedom/autonomy (mean = 4.25; SD = 0.95) was indicated as the least preferred career preference. Growth/development (mean = 5.46; SD = 0.57) was indicated as the participants' dominant career value. On the career enabler subscale, the participants obtained the highest score on the self/other skills (mean = 5.04; SD = 0.78) variable; on the career driver subscale, participants scored the highest on the career purpose variable (mean = 5.45; SD = 0.56). On the career harmonisers subscale, participants scored the highest on the variables of self-esteem (mean = 5.32; SD = 0.70) and social connectivity (mean = 5.09; SD = 0.81).

In terms of the OCS, Table 1 shows that the total sample scored the highest on the continuance commitment (mean = 4.14; SD = 1.02) and affective commitment (mean = 4.00; SD = 0.99) subscales and relatively lower on the normative commitment scale (mean = 3.77; SD = 1.35). The mean scores for the three subscales imply a relatively high level of organisational commitment.

The reliability coefficients for the PCRI range from 0.61 (moderate) to 0.87 (high); those of the OCS range from 0.68 (moderate) to 0.71 (high).

6.2 Tests for significant mean differences: Gender

The Mann-Whitney U results and mean scores presented in Table 2 indicate that the female participants obtained a significantly higher mean score than their male counterparts on the PCRI career driver variable of career venturing (mean = 4.50; SD = 1.17). The female participants also obtained significantly higher mean scores on the career harmoniser variables of self-esteem (mean = 5.36; SD = 0.71), emotional literacy (mean = 4.55; SD = 0.96) and social connectivity (mean = 5.17; SD = 0.79). No significant differences were observed between the various gender groups regarding their level of organisational commitment.

Table 2
Mann Whitney U test for gender (PCRI) (N=358)

Mean scores for males and females							
	Females		Males		Mann Whitney U	z	Sig
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
PCRI Scale							
Career Driver							
Career Venturing	4.50	1.17	4.05	1.33	9569.5	-2.67	0.01**
Career Harmonisers							
Self-esteem	5.36	0.71	5.20	0.66	9544.5	-2.69	0.01**
Emotional literacy	4.55	0.96	4.18	0.90	8927.0	-3.42	0.001***
Social connectivity	5.17	0.79	4.83	0.81	8738.5	-3.68	0.00***

***p≤0.001 **p≤0.01 *p≤0.05

6.3 Tests for significant mean differences: Age

Table 3 indicates that, in terms of the PCRI, the participants in the latter part of the early adulthood life stage or establishment phase (26–40 years) obtained significantly higher mean scores on the variety/creativity career preference (mean = 5.01; SD = 0.82).

Participants in the maintenance life stage (41–55 years) obtained significantly lower mean scores (mean = 4.08; SD = 1.28) than participants in the late life stage (56 years and older) (mean = 5.33, SD = 1.16) on the career driver variable of career venturing.

The results indicate that the age groups appear to differ significantly with respect to two (self-esteem and social connectivity) of the four career harmoniser variables. Participants who are in the early stages of their career (25 years and younger) obtained significantly higher mean scores on the career harmoniser variables of self-esteem (mean = 5.46; SD = 0.56) and social connectivity (mean = 5.19; SD = 0.80). The participants in the late life stage (56 and older) obtained significantly higher mean scores on the career driver variable of career venturing (mean = 5.33; SD = 1.16). In terms of the OCS, participants in the midlife stage (41 – 55 years) obtained significantly higher mean scores on the normative commitment variable (mean = 4.12; SD = 1.30).

Table 3
Kruskal-Wallis -Significant mean differences: Age groups (PCRI & OCS) (N=358)

	Age group	Mean	SD	Chi-square	df	sig
PCRI Total						
Career Preference						
Variety/Creativity	25 years and younger	4.73	0.76	7.786	3	0.05*
	26 – 40 years	5.01	0.82			
	41 – 55 years	4.82	0.91			
	56 years and older	4.75	0.87			
Career Drivers						
Career venturing	25 years and younger	4.44	1.23	8.187	3	0.04*
	26 – 40 years	4.48	1.18			
	41 – 55 years	4.08	1.28			
	56 years and older	5.33	1.16			
Career Harmonisers						
Self-esteem	25 years and younger	5.46	0.56	9.706	3	0.02*
	26 – 40 years	5.36	0.71			
	41 – 55 years	5.17	0.71			
	56 years and older	4.95	0.95			
Social connectivity	25 years and younger	5.19	0.80	9.545	3	0.02*
	26 – 40 years	5.14	0.80			
	41 – 55 years	4.93	0.81			
	56 years and older	4.22	0.51			
OCS Total						
Normative commitment	25 years and younger	3.94	1.37	11.261	3	0.01**
	26 – 40 years	3.57	1.32			
	41 – 55 years	4.12	1.30			
	56 years and older	3.72	2.31			

***p≤0.001

**p≤0.01 *p≤0.05

6.4 Tests for significant mean differences: Ethnicity

Table 4 shows that in terms of the PCRI, the African participants scored significantly higher than the other ethnic groups on the managerial (mean = 4.66; SD = 0.91), variety/creativity (mean = 5.00; SD = 0.77) and the freedom/autonomy (mean = 4.31; SD = 0.96) career preferences; they also scored significantly higher on the growth/development career value (mean = 5.50; SD = 0.52), the career driver variable of career venturing (mean = 4.50; SD = 1.19), and the career harmoniser variable of self-esteem (mean = 5.43; SD = 0.62). The white participants scored significantly higher than the other ethnic groups on the career driver variable of career purpose (mean = 5.25; SD = 0.67). No significant differences were observed between the various ethnic groups regarding their level of organisational commitment.

Table 4
Kruskal-Wallis-Significant mean differences: Ethnic groups (PCRI) (N=358)

	Group	Means	SD	Chi-square	df	Sig.
PCRI Scale						
Career Preference						
Managerial	African	4.66	0.91	19.062	3	0.00**
	Coloured	3.84	1.32			
	Indian	4.25	0.83			
	White	3.98	1.15			
Variety/Creativity	African	5.00	0.77	14.416	3	0.00**
	Coloured	4.56	1.04			
	Indian	4.19	0.89			
	White	4.50	1.06			
Freedom/Autonomy	African	4.31	0.96	13.895	3	0.00**
	Coloured	4.12	0.96			
	Indian	3.75	0.66			
	White	3.78	0.71			
Career Values						
Growth/Development	African	5.50	0.52	9.101	3	0.03*
	Coloured	5.23	0.75			
	Indian	5.16	0.68			
	White	5.22	0.70			
Career Drivers						
Career Purpose	African	4.49	0.54	8.596	3	0.04*
	Coloured	5.21	0.69			
	Indian	5.27	0.50			
	White	5.25	0.67			
Career Venturing	African	4.50	1.19	19.502	3	0.00**
	Coloured	3.90	1.35			
	Indian	3.13	1.28			
	White	3.84	1.07			
Career Harmonisers						
Self-esteem	African	5.43	0.62	38.393	3	0.00**
	Coloured	4.90	0.81			
	Indian	4.73	0.83			
	White	4.68	0.79			
	Coloured	3.75	1.16			
	Indian	4.54	1.16			
	White	3.94	1.34			

***p≤0.001 **p≤0.01 *p≤0.05

6.5 Tests for significant mean differences: Marital status

Table 5 indicates that the separated/widowed participants obtained significantly higher mean scores than the single, married and widowed participants on the managerial career preference (mean = 4.85; SD = 0.74). No significant differences were observed between the various marital status groups regarding their level of organisational commitment.

Table 5
Significant mean differences: Marital status (PCRI) (N=358)

	Group	Means	SD	Chi-square	df	Sig.
PCRI Scale						
Career Preference						
Managerial	Single	4.62	0.92	8.490	3	0.04*
	Married	4.45	1.05			
	Widowed	4.44	1.53			
	Separated/Divorced	4.85	0.74			
	Married	3.81	1.34			
	Widowed	4.47	1.18			
	Separated/Divorced	3.41	1.05			

***p≤0.001 **p≤0.01 *p≤0.05

6.6 Tests for significant mean differences: Job level

Table 6 indicates that the participants who occupy executive/senior management level positions obtained significantly higher mean scores on the PCRI stability/expertise career preference, the career driver variable of career purpose and the OCS normative commitment variable than participants at the other job levels.

Table 6
Significant mean differences: Job levels (PCRI & OCS) (N=358)

	Group	Means	SD	Chi-square	df	Sig.
PCRI Scale						
Career Preference						
Stability/Expertise	Executive/Senior management	5.62	0.51	11.650	5	0.04*
	Middle management	5.21	0.61			
	First-level management	5.33	0.56			
	Staff	5.32	0.55			
	Independent contractor	5.16	0.39			
Career Drivers						
Career Purpose	Executive/Senior management	5.80	0.27	13.827	5	0.01**
	Middle management	5.38	0.60			
	First-level management	5.53	0.47			
	Staff	5.45	0.58			
	Independent contractor	5.30	0.59			
OCS Scale						
Normative Commitment	Executive/Senior management	4.40	1.49	11.923	5	0.04*
	Middle management	4.15	1.18			
	First-level management	3.57	1.40			
	Staff	3.62	1.36			
	Independent contractor	3.87	1.66			

***p≤0.001 **p≤0.01 *p≤0.05

7 Discussion

Overall, the results indicated a number of significant differences between the various sociodemographic groups regarding the psychological career resources variables. In

terms of the organisational commitment variables, the results indicated that significant differences only existed between the various age groups and job levels in terms of the normative commitment variable.

7.1 Gender

Although the results overall suggest that the participants seem to feel attracted to jobs that offer them stability and the opportunity to develop and grow in their expertise, it appears that the female participants had a significantly stronger need than their male counterparts to venture out and experiment with new career opportunities. These findings are contrary to studies conducted by Kniveton (2004) and Coetzee and Schreuder (2009), both of which reported that women placed higher value on steady and stable work opportunities. The female participants' significantly higher levels of self-esteem, emotional literacy and social connectivity (suggesting confidence in their ability to form meaningful social connections) could offer an explanation for their apparent confidence in considering venturing out in search of new career opportunities. Brown, George-Curran and Smith (2003) found high levels of emotional literacy to be significantly related to people's confidence in their ability to successfully complete career-related tasks. The findings are also in agreement with other studies that report women to be more emotionally self-aware than men (Brown et al 2003) and to have a greater tendency to seek advice and social support (Chan & Hui 1995). The results are also in contradiction to the findings of Coetzee (2008), which indicate that males report significantly higher levels of self-esteem than their female counterparts.

7.2 Age

The results indicated that the participants in the age group 25 years and younger seem to have greater confidence in their ability to achieve their career goals and form meaningful social connections than the participants in the age group 56 years and older (late life stage). According to Feldman (2002), young adults in the early phase of their career development have a strong need to establish both their career identity and socially supportive networks. The participants in the establishment phase of their careers (26 – 40 years) seem to have a significantly stronger preference for jobs that expose them to a variety of opportunities for expressing their talents and abilities creatively. Coetzee and Schreuder (2008) report similar findings, which show this life/career stage to be characterised by a need for further growth and learning opportunities. Similar to findings reported by Coetzee (2008), the results also indicate that the participants in the late life or retirement stage (56 years and older) of their careers seem to have a significantly higher need to venture out in search of new career opportunities.

Participants between the ages of 41 and 55 years (maintenance stage) seem to feel more obliged to continue their employment with their respective organisations, probably as a result of an internalised normative idea of responsibility and commitment that has developed over time (Allen & Meyer 1990). Although meta-analytic evidence suggests that age and organisational commitment are significantly, albeit weakly, related (Mathieu & Zajac 1990), Meyer and Allen (1984) have suggested that older workers become more attitudinally committed to an organisation for a variety of reasons, including greater satisfaction with their jobs, being in better positions, and having "cognitively justified" their continuance in an organisation. Being in the maintenance stage of their lives, these participants may have come to appreciate their continued membership of their respective organisations.

7.3 Ethnicity

Similar to findings reported by Coetzee (2008), the results suggest that the African participants seem to have a significantly stronger need for managerial positions that expose them to a variety of growth and development opportunities and jobs in which they can express their talents and abilities creatively. Contrary to the findings reported by Coetzee and Bergh (2009), the African participants also indicated a significantly higher need to venture out in search of new career opportunities. This implies that it is possible that they would move on to greener pastures if a new career opportunity presented itself. This may be the result of their significantly higher level of confidence in their ability to achieve their career goals. These findings appear to corroborate those of a previous study (Coetzee 2008), which reported whites to have significantly lower levels of self-esteem than their African counterparts.

The findings are also in line with the conclusion drawn by Motileng, Wagner, and Cassimjee (2006), namely that employment equity and affirmative action strategies appear to have enhanced the self-esteem of black or African individuals. This is because these policies have given them the opportunity to articulate their competencies, potential and abilities. Positive self-esteem has been found to enable people to become proactive agents and to increase their openness to, and need for, new learning (Coetzee & Bergh 2009). Similar to findings reported by Coetzee et al (2007) and Lumley (2010), no significant differences were observed between the organisational commitment levels of the various ethnic groups.

7.4 Marital status

The results suggest that the separated/divorced participants appear to have a significantly greater need for managerial-type jobs in which they can exercise control and authority over others. Given that the sample consisted largely of female participants, the results seem to be in agreement with findings reported by Eddlestone, Baldridge and Veiga (2004) and Whitehead and Kotze (2003). These findings suggested that women managers are less likely to be married or to have children owing to the role overload often caused by the need to balance multiple life roles.

7.5 Job level

The results suggest that the participants in managerial positions appear to have a significantly higher level of normative commitment than the participants employed at the staff level or as independent contractors. As Meyer and Allen (1997) observed, having the authority to influence the organisation's goals seems to have increased participants' sense of obligation to continue their employment with the organisation. It appears that the feelings of responsibility created by having authority and influence over others tend to increase people's sense of accountability and their need to stay in the same occupation and organisation. The participants in the executive/senior management level positions also seem to have a significantly stronger sense of career purpose and a preference for steady and secure employment that allows them to develop their expertise. These participants have probably acquired various skills during their careers and therefore possibly prefer positions where they can use their expertise.

8 Conclusions, implications and recommendations

8.1 Conclusions and implications

Given that employment equity and affirmative action have contributed to a more demographically diversified workforce in South African workplaces, it may be concluded that the findings of the present study add valuable new knowledge that could be used to inform organisational career development support and retention practices. The findings could be used in the design of organisational career development support and retention policies, programmes and interventions that take into consideration how employees' particular gender, life stage (age), ethnicity, marital status and job level relate to their psychological career resources; this, in turn, is likely to result in greater commitment and motivation levels.

In terms of normative commitment, the significant differences observed between participants who are at executive, senior and middle-manager level and are in their midlife, and those at lower job levels, and those in the early life stages, suggest that employers need to take cognisance of these groups of employees' perceptions of entitlements or expectations (i.e. what employees think the company owes them) and obligations (i.e. what employees think they owe to the employer) in the design of career development and retention strategies. These aspects all relate to the psychological contract between an employee and the organisation and are generally influenced by the individuals' experiences both prior to and following entry into the organisation (Allen & Meyer 1990).

8.2 Recommendations

The aim of the present study was to help human resources managers and professionals, as well as researchers, to gain a better understanding of how people from various gender, age, ethnic, marital and job level groups differ in terms of their psychological career resources and organisational commitment. In future investigations, however, some of the limitations of this study would have to be taken into consideration. Firstly, because the present study was limited to participants predominantly in the economic and management sciences, the findings cannot be generalised to other economic sectors and occupational contexts. Secondly, given that the sample was predominantly made up of Africans and females, a more balanced sample would have contributed more meaningful insights regarding the sociodemographic differences between ethnic and gender groups. It is recommended that participants from various organisations and occupational contexts, and a more demographically diverse group, be used in future studies to obtain a more representative sample.

Thirdly, longitudinal studies are needed in order to validate the differences observed in this study between the various sociodemographic groups. Since individuals are increasingly unable to depend on a single organisation for their entire career owing to mergers, downsizing and layoffs, a longitudinal study could, for example, investigate the employee's emigration from organisational commitment to career commitment. In the context of employment equity and affirmative action, researchers are encouraged to examine, both theoretically and empirically, the constructs of relevance to the present study and other psychological constructs to allow them to reach more broadly-based conclusions regarding the deep-level diversity characteristics that may influence the retention of staff from diverse sociodemographic backgrounds.

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