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HUMANITARIAN EXPATRIATES' PERCEPTIONS OF JOB TRAINING, TRUST IN MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT: A GIFT EXCHANGE PERSPECTIVE⁶

Abstract

There is significant research demonstrating the vitality of organizational commitment for both individuals and organizations, especially as a determinant of organizational turnover. Most research on organizational commitment is in the for-profit sector and has gradually extended to the non-profit sector. Yet, most studies in this field focus on volunteers, with limited attention to paid employees. This article analyses the impact of perceived investment in training and trust in management on organizational commitment in Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). We draw on recent advancements in gift exchange and psychological contract literature and translate these to the humanitarian context. Results show that even in organizations with a disproportionately high level of organizational commitment, training that staff perceives to help increase employability on the external labor market increases commitment even more. Only for a specific group of employees – those with high trust in management who perceive to have followed only firm-specific training – organizational commitment slightly decreased.

⁶ This chapter is co-authored with Liesbet Heyse, Rafael Wittek and Melinda Mills and is currently under review at an international peer-reviewed journal. We would like to thank Marijtje van Duijn for her advice on the analytical strategy of this paper. Also sincere thanks to Mirjam Nijhuis, Marloes Schoonheim, and Elfride Aertsen of the training department at MSF-OCA for providing valuable comments and feedback on this paper.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

At both the individual employee and organization level, commitment is vital for a wide variety of organizational outcomes, such as improved performance, increased attendance, higher levels of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), creativeness, innovation, work-life balance, and stress (Cohen, 2014; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002). Organizational commitment has proven to be a crucial determinant of turnover intentions (Porter et al., 1974; Tett and Meyer, 1993). Consequently, much effort has gone into identifying potential antecedents of organizational commitment, such as tenure, job level, or perceived chances on the labor market (see overviews by Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002; Steers, 1977). Sparked by Drucker's (1990) influential contributions, the focus on commitment in for-profit organizations has gradually extended to the non-profit sector. Although considerable progress has been made in advancing understanding of non-profit organizations, most studies carried out in this field focus on volunteers, with the result that paid employees in non-profit organizations still remain an 'empirically neglected workforce group' (McDermott et al., 2013: 1490).

The present study addresses this gap in two ways. First, drawing on recent advances in the gift exchange and psychological contract literature (Akerlof, 1982; McDermott et al., 2013; Mowday et al., 1982; Rousseau, 1990), we suggest that expectations and obligations following from training opportunities constitute a discrete third component of the psychological contract, in addition to the well-studied transactional and relational components. In line with this framework, it is argued that training opportunities offered by the employer can elicit organizational commitment in non-profit organizations because they credibly signal the organization's willingness to develop and maintain a long-term relationship with the employee (Tsui et al., 1997).

Second, we apply these insights to a specific field in the non-profit sector: humanitarian aid organizations. The assumed positive relationship between training and commitment is especially interesting to organizations in the non-profit sector, which by the nature of their existence are more restricted in their choice of investments as signals to their employees (Schäfer, 2004). Monetary rewards, such as bonuses or high pay raises, are not possible due to the dependence on donations or public subsidies. Such restrictions are prominent in the humanitarian sector. Following claims of low effectiveness and efficiency in humanitarian aid (Loquercio et al., 2006), non-profit humanitarian organizations were urged to invest in the professionalization of their workforce. This led to an upsurge in the demand for learning, training and education by humanitarian aid workers (Bollettino and Bruderlein, 2008; Richardson, 2006). Consequently, investments in training to facilitate a longer-term career in the field have significantly increased. Whereas working in the humanitarian sector was considered a temporary profession, and learning was done on the job in the 1990s, nowadays many humanitarian organizations employ regularly paid, full-time staff, who follow training and career trajectories (Barnett, 2005). Yet, little is known in this sector about the consequences of training investments for organizational commitment, a prominent predictor of turnover intentions. Since turnover is considered a serious problem in the sector (Loquercio et al., 2006; Richardson, 2006; Telford and Cosgrave, 2007), this study will shed light on the effect of one of few options humanitarian

organizations have to influence their staff's commitment, and thereby indirectly their turnover intentions.

Our study had two main objectives. First, we applied a gift-exchange framework to examine the link between job training and organizational commitment in the humanitarian sector, and to what degree trust in management moderates this relation. Second, we empirically examined to what extent the type of training – as perceived by those who receive the training – matters in eliciting organizational commitment. Extending Becker's (1962) influential distinction between firm-specific investments and general investments, our study introduced the dimension of sector-specific training, i.e. training that is useful in organizations in the same sector or industry (see Neal, 1995).

This study provides several contributions to both training and organizational commitment literature and to our knowledge about humanitarian organizations. First, this is one of the first empirical studies into the relation between training and organizational commitment among humanitarian workers. Unique data was used, collected among 144 humanitarian front-line employees of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), one of the largest humanitarian agencies in the field. Despite the societal importance of humanitarian organizations, they have received limited academic attention, also because quantitative data in this field is scarce due to limited access to this hard-to-reach population (Fechter, 2012; Teegen et al., 2004). This study offers new insights into the effectiveness of job training in highly challenging working environments.

The second contribution is a precise conceptualization of job training that extends Becker's well-known dichotomy between general vs. firm-specific training with a third category, sector-specific training. We introduced a direct measure for this theoretical construct and empirically assessed its relationship to organizational commitment.

The third contribution is an improved measurement of the effect of training. Earlier research used proxies to assess the generality of training (Geel et al., 2011; Loewenstein and Spletzer, 1998; Loewenstein and Spletzer, 1999; Lynch, 1991; Lynch, 1992; Mohrenweiser et al., 2013). Yet, the same types of training can have different consequences, depending on the employee's predisposition. Direct measures were used, which elicited to what degree training measures were firm-specific, sector-specific, or general, *as perceived by employees*, reasoning that employee perceptions determine attitudes such as organizational commitment. In addition, multiple training programs in which employees participated have been taken into account in order to study how receiving different types of training might impact commitment (Campbell et al., 2012; Lazear, 2009). Finally, examining the effect of job training, something that organizations can potentially influence, the results can be of practical use to not only humanitarian organizations, but also to other non-profit organizations with transnational work contexts and demanding jobs.

4.2 THEORY

Organizational commitment is an important dimension of the employer-employee relationship, given the wide variety of positive organizational and individual outcomes it can generate (Cohen, 2014; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002).

Organizational commitment has been proven to be an important predictor of turnover intentions (Porter et al., 1974; Tett and Meyer, 1993). It has been approached in numerous ways but the central theme that continuously appears is a psychological bond or linking of the individual to the organization (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986). The present study focused on affective commitment, one of the most frequently studied commitment constructs in the literature (Meyer et al., 1993; Mowday et al., 1982). Affective commitment denotes an emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization (Meyer and Allen, 1984).

Organizational commitment can be positively and negatively influenced by an organization's employment conditions (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). The major theoretical framework that guides research on this link is social exchange theory. Though it comes in three disciplinary variants – psychological contract theory in psychology (Rousseau, 1989), gift-exchange theory in economics (Akerlof, 1982), and relational signaling theory in sociology (Lindenberg, 1988) – all three approaches suggest that a formal contract implies beliefs in mutual obligations. These obligations can be perceived as mainly transactional, implying arm's length, short-term market transactions, or relational, implying a long-term trust relation. These perceptions constitute the content of the 'psychological contract'.

Theories linking different types of psychological contracts or gift exchange to organizational commitment face two major unresolved issues. First, previous research produced inconsistent evidence of the link between transactional psychological contracts and commitment, with some studies finding a negative association (Raja et al., 2004; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994) and others reporting a positive link (Hui et al., 2004; Rousseau, 2001). One reason that has been suggested for these contradictory findings is that normative obligations and expectations related to the employment relationship are lower in transactional psychological contracts. Whereas this leads to lower commitment levels, it also prevents strong negative emotional reactions resulting from psychological contract breach (Hui et al., 2004). Restubog et al. (2008) asserts that failure to uphold relational contracts has been found to have greater impact on employee outcomes than failure to uphold transactional contracts (as cited in McDermott et al., 2013: 1492).

Second, whereas there is consistent evidence for a positive link between relational contracts and organizational commitment (Raja et al., 2004), most of this research is conducted in the for-profit sector and focuses on long-term employment or above market -level wage premiums ('efficiency wages') as major instruments to elicit commitment. Such costly signals or gifts trigger reciprocity motives in the workforce and lead to higher commitment. Empirical evidence supports the idea that employees will be more committed to an organization if the employer credibly signals the intention to invest in a long-term gift-exchange relationship rather than an exchange relationship based solely on the principles of a market transaction (Tsui et al., 1997). In the non-profit sector, and the humanitarian sector in particular, opportunities to offer secure long-term employment or efficiency wages are usually limited, if not considered inappropriate. A standard argument is that for this workforce, these instruments would be neither necessary nor effective, since individuals joining non-profit organizations are intrinsically committed to the mission and values of the organization they join (Alatrasta and Arrowsmith, 2004; Hoffmann, 2006; Nickson et al., 2008). Thus, according to this view, (humanitarian) non-profit organizations can do little to

significantly increase the commitment of their workforce by investing in relational contracts. A recent extension of the gift-exchange framework suggests an alternative to increasing commitment that is also available to (humanitarian) non-profits. It argues that the traditional distinction between transactional and relational obligations of the psychological contract should be extended by a third discrete category: obligations following from training opportunities offered by the employer (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2000; Martin et al., 1998).

In what follows, empirically testable hypotheses have been developed on the potential impact of training, using transactional and relational reasoning, on organizational commitment in the humanitarian non-profit sector.

4.2.1 Training and commitment

Traditional economic theory predominantly relies on demand-side logics for constrained mobility (Campbell et al., 2012), explicating that employees stay in their organization because there is low external demand for certain types of skills, and employees change organizations because of high external demands for other types of skills, independent of their desire to leave their current employer. However, employee-employer relations and changing conditions of employment give rise to issues not addressed in such conventional transaction-oriented models of motivation and individual responses (Rousseau, 1989).

From straightforward social exchange reasoning, any voluntary investment in training is costly to the firm, and employees of non-profit organizations are likely to value this investment in their capabilities. Consequently, the provision of training opportunities can be a credible way to signal the employer's concern for the employee – independently of the transferability of the skills provided by the training. Consequently, employer investment in training invokes higher levels of employee commitment (Farrell and Rusbult, 1981; Tannenbaum et al., 1991):

H1 (Training): Employees who received training will be more committed to the organization than employees who did not receive training.

This hypothesis does not consider variations in the types of training, and is built on the simple assumption that any costly investment by the employer has the potential to elicit reciprocity motivations in employees. However, psychological, economic, and sociological gift-exchange perspectives suggest more complex mechanisms, in which some types of 'gifts' may be ineffective or even have adverse effects. The following section elaborates on these perspectives for different types of training.

Both strategic economic and resource-based literature (e.g. Becker, 1964; Mincer, 1974) have developed a systematic explanation for types of training investments (human capital). They distinguish between different types of training, based on the transferability of the skills it offers. A key assumption is that the higher the transferability of a training program, the less likely an employer will pay for it, because it increases an employee's chances on the external labor market.

Social exchange perspectives came to a different conclusion. Highlighting the relational contracting dimensions of the offer, they stress that employers can affect the degree of 'cooperativeness' of workers by varying the generosity of the compensation

package (Fehr and Gächter, 2000). From an economic gift-exchange perspective, the argument is that the more general the training, the more generous the gift will be perceived. Hence, as bigger investments 'show a concern for the individual per se, rather than as just another employee of the organization, they could invoke in employees a particularly strong need for reciprocity and feelings of obligation to the firm' (Galunic and Anderson, 2000: 6). Below, we explicate the different types of training and draw hypotheses on the relation of the different types of training and organizational commitment based on relational signaling theory.

Firm-specific training is defined as an investment that increases productivity only in the organization that provides the training. This type of training is characterized by limited transferability since it can only be used in the current organization and loses its value on the external labour market. According to the strategic economic literature (e.g. Becker, 1964) the employer should pay for firm-specific training because it will not help the employee on the external labor market. However, from the gift-exchange perspective, translating this type of training into 'gifts' from the organization would make firm-specific training the smallest of gifts, or no gift at all, since this knowledge can hardly be used outside the current organization and does not raise an employee's external value on the labor market. Firm-specific training would thus not signal a strong concern for the broader development of the employee.

General training increases an employee's productivity at other employers to the same extent as the employer that provides the training, according to the economic perspective (Becker, 1964). General training has thus the highest level of transferability because this type of training can be widely used on the external labor market. If analyzed from a demand-side perspective only, this general training helps workers improve their employability elsewhere; therefore the current employer would not be willing to pay for this type of training. This is at odds with what can be observed in both for-profit and non-profit sector, where most general training is paid for by the employer (e.g. Acemoglu and Pischke, 1998; Loewenstein and Spletzer, 1999). General training could thus be perceived as a supply instrument by an organization (Campbell et al., 2012) because it has the attributes of a credible relational signal. It signals a strong concern for the broader development of the employee and thereby invokes high levels of commitment (Mühlau, 2000). From a relation signaling perspective, the strongest effect on commitment should be accomplished by general training, which offers employees the greatest assurance of remaining competitive in the job market (Galunic and Anderson, 2000).

Some training might not be completely firm-specific, yet might still increase chances on some part of the external labor market; *sector-specific training*. Few studies have examined the importance of skills specific to organizations in a given industry or sector of the labor market (e.g. Neal, 1995). Previous empirical work on investments in human capital (i.e. training) focused almost exclusively on skills that are either exclusively firm-specific or completely general. One of the few studies explicitly comparing differential effects of the two types of training found that investments in general training create higher levels of commitment compared to firm-specific training (Galunic and Anderson, 2000). Sector-specific programs combine general and firm-specific components (Becker, 1964). Compared to firm-specific training, sector-specific training signals a stronger employer concern for the professional development of the employee. Since knowledge acquired in sector-specific training can be transferred to

other organizations in the sector, this type of training is likely to have a stronger positive effect on commitment than firm-specific training. But since the skills cannot be used everywhere outside the firm, the effect of sector-specific training on commitment is likely to be weaker than the effect of general training. In sum: the more general the training, the larger the 'gift', and the stronger the commitment it triggers:

H2: The more general the training, the stronger the effect on commitment: the effect is weakest for firm-specific training, intermediate for sector-specific training, and strongest for general training.

4.2.2 Trust and commitment

A trust relation between employees and management is a major component of relational psychological contracts, and has consistently been found to lead to higher levels of organizational commitment (e.g. Allen and Meyer, 1990; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). Trust relations convey strong normative expectations of cooperation, mutual support, and reciprocity. Trust in management is defined as positive expectations regarding management, emphasizing faith in the good intentions of managers, confidence in the actions and competence of managers, and confidence that managers will act in a fair, reliable and ethical manner (Cook and Wall, 1980). Conversely, distrust is associated with transactional psychological contracts. Mutual expectations and obligations do not go beyond the fulfilment of the measurable elements of the formal contract.

Trust in management is crucial, especially for humanitarian expatriates who work in unpredictable and sometimes dangerous environments (see Chapter 2). In the humanitarian context, demands are usually high and there is constant pressure to finish tasks. Employees might therefore fear the consequences of failing to meet demands. Employees who have a high degree of trust in management may experience reduced pressure because they feel confident that their organization will treat them fairly, even if they do not meet all the demands (cf. Friedman et al., 1998). As a result, trust in management can lead to lower levels of fear of the consequences for failure to complete the assigned work (Harvey et al., 2003), which might lead to a greater control over one's situation (Anderson et al., 2002). Consequently, trust in management is likely to result in enduring relationships between employees and the firm (Robinson, 1996), leading to higher organizational commitment.

H3 (Trust): The higher the level of trust in management, the higher the level of organizational commitment.

4.2.3 Trust, Training, and Commitment

Psychological contract theory suggests that compared to transactional contracts, relational contracts create higher expectations and obligations. Due to this normative character, violation of relational contracts also triggers stronger negative reactions in employees than violations of transactional contracts. This implies that the same type of managerial action will elicit different types of reactions, depending on whether the employee perceives the contract to be relational or transactional.

Where a relational component defines the psychological contract and employee trust in management is high, management expects the workforce to deliver high quality

contributions even in the absence of strong control. In turn, employees expect management to signal their continued intention to maintain the mutually beneficial exchange through credible and costly gifts. Offering training opportunities can have such a signaling function, if the training program is costly and/or comes with some risk for the employer. Whereas all three types of training can involve considerable costs – e.g. in terms of paying for a training program and the opportunity costs of employees not being at work during training – the risks an employer incurs differ with the generality of the training. Offering general or sector-specific training increases human capital and hence the external labor market opportunities of the employee. Offering and paying for this opportunity is a credible signal of an employer's trust in the employee, particularly in a labor market where retention problems are endemic and still constitute one of the major HRM challenges in the sector (Loquercio et al., 2006).

Conversely, high trust employees are likely to perceive firm-specific training as an ambiguous signal: though this type of training may be costly, it does not contribute to an employee's employability on the external labor market. It may be interpreted as an indicator that management does not trust the employee to stay in the organization once he or she has received general or sector-specific training. Failure by management to deliver on its believed supportive intentions is likely to be perceived as a breach of the psychological contract, leading to a negative evaluation of management's trustworthiness (Zhao et al., 2007). Hence, organizational commitment of high trust employees can be expected to increase if they received general and/or sector-specific training, but to decrease if they receive only firm-specific training.

Where a transactional component defines the psychological contract and trust in management is low, employee expectations of gifts from employers are low. Gifts, like training opportunities, will not be perceived as an attempt to signal expectations going beyond the formal contract, but are likely to be framed as an instrumental move from the employer to increase the quality or quantity of employee performance. Consequently, the provision of any training opportunities will leave organizational commitment of low trust employees unaffected.

Hypothesis 4 summarizes the interaction effect resulting from the previous argument:

H4: Trust in management will moderate the effect of type of training on organizational commitment of expatriate humanitarian employees: (H4a) Sector-specific or general training will increase commitment of high trust employees, but not of low trust employees. (H4b) Firm-specific training will decrease commitment of high trust employees, but not of low trust employees.

4.2.4 Alternative antecedents of organizational commitment

Previous research has identified a large number of other antecedents of organizational commitment. Our study controlled for several major predictors. First, *organizational tenure*: the chances of receiving multiple types of training, but also commitment increases with organizational tenure because it increases mutual understanding and identification with the organization (see Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002). *Job level* has proven to positively influence organizational commitment. *Higher-ranking employees* show more commitment, which might be due to a stronger identification with the firm (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Steers, 1977). *Participation in a career*

trajectory, the ones involved in such a trajectory are more likely to participate in training programs and be more committed. ‘Side bet’ sources of commitment (Becker, 1960) have also been controlled for, by adding *perceived job opportunities outside the organization* to the model.

4.3 DATA AND METHOD

4.3.1 Data

Hypotheses are tested with the Humanitarian Employee Survey (HES), which was sent out in 2011 and investigated career, job characteristics, and work-life perceptions of a sample of expatriate humanitarian aid workers then working for the Operational Center in Amsterdam of one of the largest humanitarian organizations, Médecins Sans Frontières. MSF specializes in medical humanitarian emergencies, operating globally in both conflict and natural disaster areas with teams comprising both expatriate and national staff. Expatriate staff in this organization are aid workers who work in countries other than their own (i.e. an American working in Bangladesh, or a Sudanese person working in Benin).

MSF consists of 19 national offices and nine branch offices (MSF International Activity Report, 2012). In 2013, MSF had a budget of 953 million euro (MSF International Activity Report 2013). MSF-OCA is responsible for operational and human resource-related matters for the Dutch, German, and British national offices.

MSF-OCA management considers training an important instrument to strengthen skills, knowledge and behavior of their staff, and to enhance the quality of the care to their beneficiaries. The organization invests in training in a continuous learning cycle, offering tailor-made development possibilities as well as access to advanced-level training. The main objectives are to align staff with the norms and values of the organization, to increase their skills, and thereby increase retention of capable professionals (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2011: 5). In a way, the organization seems to perceive all training to be more or less firm-specific. Examples of training on offer include induction courses, (para)medical courses, non-medical courses, management courses, and other courses such as language training. The selection procedure to gain access to training differs per course: some are quite generally accessible through a general registration procedure (e.g. language training). Others require HR to select staff for a career trajectory and invite them to participate in programs with few available places. This especially holds for the higher-level management trainings.

To ensure optimal response rates among this hard-to-reach population in the most remote parts of the world, two reply options were provided, which were identical in content. The first was an online format, for employees with a reliable internet connection that would remain stable for 45-odd minutes it would take to fill out the survey. The second option was an off-line version, an attachment that could be quickly downloaded when the connection was there, filled in offline, and returned when an internet connection was available again.

The HES was sent to a total of 550 expatriate fieldworkers. Two additional reminders were sent over a period of eight weeks. Completed surveys were received from 168 expatriate field workers, reflecting a response rate of 31%. Of these 168

respondents, 54 (32%) used the offline option, indicating that the response rate would have been substantially lower if we had provided the online survey option only. This response rate was consistent with the average response rate in regular expatriate samples obtained in other studies by Shaffer et al. (2001), Birdseye and Hill (1995) Black and Stephens (1989) and Naumann (1993).

To assess the representativeness of our data, we performed non-response analyses by comparing the demographic characteristics of the sample to the characteristics of the full organizational population in terms of gender, occupational groups, and nationality. MSF's HRM department provided this information. Although the higher-level employees were slightly overrepresented, the sample was largely representative for occupational groups, gender, and nationality (see Appendix).

After removing cases with missing responses on our main variables, a final sample of 144 remained. As Table 4.1 shows, mean organizational tenure of the average respondent was 51.7 months (4.3 years). Organizational commitment was high (4.03 out of 5). Of the respondents, 28% supervised more than 20 people, and trust in management was 3.41 out of 5. Furthermore, 19% indicated being part of a career trajectory. Of the respondents, 65% have had a form of training, 21% has had firm-specific training, 44% has had sector-specific training, and 25% has had general training.

Table 4.1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations (N=144)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Organizational Commitment	4.04	.63									
2. Tenure (in months)	51.71	45.62	-.04								
3. External chances	3.73	.80	.15*	-.19**							
4. Supervision (>20)	.28		-.10	-.05	.06						
5. Career trajectory ^a	.19		-.03	.14	.05	-.11					
6. Trust in management	3.41	.61	.20**	-.02	.02	-.08	-.17**				
7. Training (1=yes) ^a	.65		.06	.32***	.03	-.19**	.35***	.09			
8. Firm-specific training	.21		-.06	.04	-.07	-.13	-.03	.05	.37***		
9. Sector-specific training	.44		.11	.36***	-.11	.07	.29***	-.01	.65***	.06	
10. General training	.25		.19**	.15*	.11	.01	.22***	.21**	.41***	-.02	.10

a. For dichotomous variables percentages are given

Notes: * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$

4.3.2 Measurements

Dependent variable. *Organizational commitment* was measured by five items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The items for the scale were constructed by combining the organizational commitment scales constructed by Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) and Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993). The scale ($\alpha = .73$) included the following items: 'I am proudly talking to others about this organization', 'I do not feel a sense of belonging to my organization', 'I often think that it was a mistake on my part to choose this organization over others I had considered', 'I do not feel emotionally attached to this organization', and 'I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization'. Items 2, 3, and 4 were coded in the reverse direction to indicate more organizational commitment when higher values were indicated.

Independent variables. Respondents were asked to list the last three training programs (or fewer) they had participated in and to indicate if they perceived this training program was (1) useful only in the current organization; (2) also useful in other organizations in the humanitarian sector; (3) also useful in organizations outside the sector. Examining perceptions of the type of training is important because we examine them in relation with a job related attitude. If individuals perceive a situation as real, in this case a type of training, its consequences will also be deemed real, and will therefore determine their attitudes (Merton, 1968). Four dummy variables were then created to measure whether respondents had followed (a certain type of) training or not. *Firm-specific training*, *sector-specific training*, *general training*, and *training*. The last variable indicates whether or not a respondent participated in any kind of training, independently of its type (1=yes, 0=no). Since respondents could have followed more than one type of training, a respondent can be part of multiple categories of training. The organization's induction course for newcomers (PPD) – obligatory to all and unique due to its socialization purpose – was excluded from our analysis. Trainings most frequently perceived as firm-specific were training programs on organizational systems and expert medical workshops, such as courses on MSF's financial system and laboratory workshops. Trainings most often perceived as sector-specific pertained to logistics courses, basic management courses and training on populations in distress, whereas the senior management course, language courses, and master programs were most frequently perceived to be general trainings. Interestingly, this grouping seems related to the selectivity of the trainings, i.e. those perceived as firm-specific are generally accessible, whereas those perceived as general or sector-specific (management courses in particular) are moderately to highly selective.

Trust in management was measured by six items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) using a pre-tested standard measure (Cook and Wall 1980). The scale ($\alpha = .72$) included the following items: 'management at my organization is sincere in its attempts to meet the employees' point of view', 'our organization has a poor future unless it can attract better managers', 'management can be trusted to make sensible decisions for the organization's future', 'management at work seems to do an efficient job', 'I feel quite confident that the organization will always try to treat me fairly', and 'our management would be quite prepared to gain advantage by deceiving the workers'. Items 2 and 6 were coded in the reverse direction to indicate more trust in management when higher values were indicated.

Control variables. *Tenure* was measured by the total number of months working in the organization without rest and retreat periods. *External chances* were measured using the following questions: 'How would you rate your chances of being able to find a job at another company in the humanitarian field?' and 'How would you rate your chances of being able to find a job at another company in the for-profit sector' (1 = no chance to 5 = very good chance). The mean of the answers to these two questions was calculated to indicate perceived chances on the external labor market. To measure *position in the organization* we used as a proxy a scale on the number of people the respondent had under supervision. Given that 98% of the respondents were supervising others, no distinction is made between supervising and non-supervising. It is assumed that the more people one had under supervision the higher one was up in the organization. The following question was used: 'How many people are under your direct supervision?' The answer categories were 1-5 (1), 6-10 (2), 10-20 (3), 21-50 (4), 50-100 (5), and more than 100 (6). Since the categories differ in size it was not used as a scale. Instead, we constructed a dummy, with 1 indicating that the respondent supervised more than 20 people. Furthermore we controlled for the possibility that respondents were following a *career trajectory*, with the following statement used as a dummy variable: 'I participate in training to follow a career trajectory to get to a higher level within this organization' (1 = yes).

4.3.3 Method of analysis

Ordinary Least-Squares Regression was used to estimate four models. All variables were centered on their grand means. Dummy variables and the dependent variable were left in their raw metric. The first model included only the controls. In the second model, the training dummy (training or not) was added, in order to test our first hypothesis. The third model included the three training-type dummy variables to assess their influence on organizational commitment. The final model contained the proposed interaction effect between training and signaling climate in the form of trust in management.

4.4 RESULTS

Table 4.2 shows the results of the regression analyses. Hypothesis 1 predicted higher levels of commitment for employees who have received training compared to those who did not. Model 2 shows no significant difference between both groups, ($B = .06$, $p = .644$), lending no support to Hypothesis 1.

Table 4.2. Regression analyses on Organizational Commitment (N=144)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SE B	p-value	Training or not			Type of training			Interaction trust in man.		
Tenure (in months)	-.00	.00	.935	.00	.00	.825	-.00	.00	.369	-.00	.00	.403
External chances	.13*	.07	.058	.12*	.07	.066	.11*	.07	.086	.12*	.07	.071
Position/supervising (>20)	-.14	.12	.243	-.13	.12	.279	-.15	.11	.184	-.19	.12	.105
Career trajectory	-.02	.14	.90	-.04	.14	.786	-.15	.14	.300	-.20	.14	.171
Trust in management	.20**	.09	.020	.20**	.09	.026	.16*	.09	.076	.25**	.12	.039
Training (1= yes)				.06	.12	.644						
Firm-specific training (ref no training)							-.12	.13	.335	-.11	.13	.399
Sector-specific training (ref no training)							.21*	.11	.068	.24**	.12	.041
General training (ref no training)							.23*	.13	.072	.20	.13	.144
Firm specific * trust in management										-.42*	.21	.054
Sector specific * trust in management										-.10	.17	.575
General * trust in management										.18	.27	.510
R2	.08			.08			.12			.16		
F	2.232			1.885			2.376			2.198		

Notes: *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01

Hypothesis 2 predicted a positive relationship between the degree of generality of training and the level of organizational commitment. Results from Model 3 lend partial support to this prediction. The effects of both sector-specific training ($B = .21, p = .068$) and general training ($B = .23, p = .072$) were remarkably stronger than the effect of firm-specific training ($B = -.12, p = .335$). However, the effects of sector-specific and general training hardly differed in strength ($B = .23$ and $B = .24$ respectively, and confidence intervals – not shown – completely overlap). Following sector-specific training increased the commitment level of employees by .21 and general training by .23 (on a scale of 1 to 5). Commitment of employees participating in both types of training increased by .43, which is almost half a point on a scale of 1 to 5.

Hypothesis 3 predicted higher levels of trust to be related to higher levels of organizational commitment. It finds support in all models (effect size for Model 4, the full model, $B = .25, p = .039$).

Hypothesis 4 predicted an interaction effect between trust and types of training: compared to low trust employees, commitment goes up for high trust employees receiving general or sector-specific training (H4), but decreases if they receive firm-specific training (H4b). The results of Model 4 show that trust in management did not moderate the effects of sector-specific and general training on commitment, lending no support for H4a. As predicted, trust in management had a significant and negative moderation effect on the link between firm-specific training and commitment ($B = -.42, p = .054$). An analysis of the simple slopes (not shown) showed a significant negative effect of firm-specific training on commitment for employees with high trust, and an insignificant effect for employees with low trust, indicating that there is no effect of firm-specific training on commitment for low trusting employees. Once the interaction terms between trust and training types were added to the model the main effect of general training dropped. Since the size and direction of the effect hardly changed, the lack of significance is highly likely to have been caused by power issues related to the sample size.

Of the control variables tenure, position in the organization, participation in a career trajectory, and positive perception of chances on the external labor market, only the last had a significant (positive) relation with organizational commitment.

4.5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Self-selection into organizations ‘with a cause’ has been identified as a major reason for the disproportionately high levels of organizational commitment (Almond and Kendall, 2000). The present study demonstrated that this also holds for paid expatriate employees of one of the biggest organizations in the humanitarian sector, *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF). Even for this select group, dedicated HRM efforts like providing training opportunities can still make a difference: organizational commitment to MSF increased among employees who perceived to have received general and sector-specific training. From this, we deduce that they appreciate these types of training as generous gifts, which increase their employability on the external labor market, irrespective of their level of trust in management. The fact that the types of training that MSF staff perceived to be sector-specific and general were to a certain extent also highly selective in terms of access – due to the strict selection procedures – could have added to the perception that these trainings are generous gifts. Only for a very specific group of employees – those who have high trust management and perceiving to have received only firm-specific training –

commitment decreased slightly. As soon as these employees perceive to have received additional general or sector specific training, this decrease is reversed. Besides this anticipated finding, our study also produced two unexpected findings.

First, sector-specific training and general training did not differ in their impact on organizational commitment. An explanation for this could be that both types of training may be perceived as equally strong signals for the employer's willingness to make the risky investment in the employee's external employability. It may also be related to the employee's predisposition of the future: if an employee wants to stay in the sector, sector-specific training might be as valuable as general training.

Second, unlike studies on the private sector, neither tenure nor position in the organization had a significant association with organizational commitment. One possible explanation may be that the commitment level of employees self-selecting themselves into MSF is already disproportionately high (Almond and Kendall, 2000). The strength of this devotion might overrule the effects of tenure and position in the organization. A similar mechanism may be responsible for the fact that MSF employees who think that they have good employment opportunities on the external labor market actually showed significantly *higher* levels of commitment than employees who perceived their chances to be low.

Before addressing the general implications and contributions of our study, some of its limitations are discussed. First, our data was collected among employees from a single organization, and thus does not allow generalization to the entire humanitarian field. Additional research is necessary to establish to what extent our findings hold for other (humanitarian) non-profit organizations that are similar to MSF in terms of their transnational work context and highly challenging work environment. Second, though consistent with our theoretical reasoning, the cross-sectional design of our study precluded causal inferences, and future research will certainly benefit from longitudinal research designs. Third, though individual commitment scores in our data range from between 2.4 and 5, the distribution was heavily right-skewed. This pattern might reflect self-selection of highly committed employees into this type of organization, but could also be due to the fact that employees who are more committed are more likely to participate in this type of study, which entails investing some 45 minutes for filling in this survey. This means that the effects would be even more pronounced in reality, stressing the importance of general types of training for organizational commitment.

Our study also has several general implications for research and HRM practices. It refines current research on organizational commitment in at least three ways. First, the findings are in line with the recent extension of psychological contract theory, according to which training can be a strong trigger of commitment. But rather than constituting an independent third pillar or 'discrete third alternative' in addition to relational and transactional psychological contracts (McDermott et al., 2013), our results suggest that the effects of training on commitment are context dependent, since high trust employees who perceive to have received firm-specific training only, may consider this as a breach of the relational contract.

Second, and in line with the previous, theories of gift exchange need to consider that some 'gifts' may carry ambiguous signals. Whereas the negative effects of only receiving firm-specific training on commitment would be difficult to explain from the perspective of economic theories of gift exchange, they do follow from psychological contract and relational signaling theory.

Third, on the empirical side, our study was among the first systematic data collections on training and commitment of salaried expatriate workers in the humanitarian sector, a hard-to-reach population. Despite their societal importance, limited attention has been given to humanitarian organizations. Quantitative data in this field is scarce, with systematic academic attention lacking (Fechter, 2012; Teegen et al., 2004). Another contribution to this literature is our refined measurement of training opportunities. The use of subjective individual-level perception measures to assess the expected labor market returns of training opportunities allows a more direct test of the training-commitment link than earlier research, which had to rely on more coarsely grained measures. The survey also asked for the last three training programs the employee participated in, taking into account a broader portfolio of training, as suggested by Campbell (2012), and Lazear (2009). Furthermore, although the present study found no significant difference in the effects of sector-specific vs. general training, this novel distinction may nevertheless be useful for future research.

Regarding practical implications, our study suggests that even for highly committed salaried employees of non-profit organizations, dedicated HRM efforts that strengthen trust in management and offering training opportunities can still make a difference. If employees perceive their training as general and sector-specific, it can foster commitment, even if staff is already highly committed. This is a relevant finding in a sector that suffers from undesirably high turnover rates, since organizational commitment has been found to be an important determinant of turnover. Although we did not directly test it, our findings suggest that training can be one (but not the sole) effective tool to reduce turnover rates through increasing organizational commitment. However, in specific circumstances both training and trust can become double-edged swords, as our findings also showed. Trust cultures foster commitment, but also create higher expectations. If these expectations are not met, perceptions of contract breach may ensue. Specifically, if high trust employees perceive to have received firm-specific training only, commitment may be tempered.

Yet this does not mean that non-profit organizations should simply consider whom to offer firm-specific training to at what point in time, since this study shows the importance of *employee' perceptions*. What one employee regards as a general training might be perceived as firm-specific training by another. On the one hand, this signals the importance for non-profit organizations to monitor how their employees perceive investment in training and compare this with their organizational training strategy and objectives. On the other hand, such perceptions could be influenced by how the organization presents training opportunities to employees, a factor within the organization's circle of influence.

