

Psychological Contract: Theoretical Dimensions, Literature Review and Research Agenda

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'psychological contract' was first used in the early 1960s, but became more popular only in early 1990's. In modern life, we are surrounded by lot of contractual obligations. Although the concept of psychology is not new, the complexity of the matter has grown enormously. We come across contracts with lot of people and companies in our day to day life. The contracts most of the time are formal and specific. The terms of the contract differ in terms of formality and specificity and it also involves exchange. In ancient times, there was a very specific and clear contract between the slave and the master or the employer and the employee. Both had obligations and rights in relation to each other. Contract need not be in exchange of physical goods that are tangible in nature, it is important to know how people feel and behave about the contract.

A psychological contract generally arises in an employment relationship. The employment relationship describes the interconnections that exist between employer and employee in the workplace. The agreements may be formal or informal. Formal agreements include the contracts of employment, procedural agreements...etc and the informal agreements may be in the form of psychological contracts, which express certain assumptions and expectations about what managers and the employers have to offer and are willing to deliver. The dimension of psychological contract can be individual or collective.

THE CONCEPT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

It is defined as the way in which two parties to contract i.e. the employee and the employer perceive their mutual obligations, duties, responsibilities and expectations towards each other. In case of organisations, these parties include an employee, client, manager or organisation as a whole. The obligations many a times will be imprecise and informal and they may be seen as promises and expectations, which may be assumed from actions or from the past experience.

Psychological contracts refer to beliefs that individuals hold regarding promises made, accepted and relied upon between themselves and another (Rousseau and Wade – Benzoni, 1994). The ideal contracts in employment would detail expectations of both employer and the employee. Contracts become incomplete due to bounded rationality and the notion of bounded rationality expresses the belief that the emotional reactions and situations they are in play a major role while the employees try to act rationally. The psychological contract is a way of interpreting the state of employment relationship and helping to plot the significant changes.

SIGNIFICANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

The emotions and attitudes created by Psychological contract form and control behaviour (Spindler 1994). A balanced psychological contract is necessary for continuing harmonious relationship between the employee and the organisation (Sims, 1994). If there is any kind of violation, then it can indicate that the parties no longer share a common set of goals or objectives.

The contract will include lot of expectations and assumptions by the employer and the employee and this will surely lead to dissatisfaction and disappointment on both the parties to contract. These disappointments can be alleviated if the management or the employer appreciate that one of their key roles is to manage expectations, which means clarifying what they believe employees should achieve, the competencies they should possess and the values they should hold. It should be noted that in a psychological contract, the parties involved will not express their expectations and many a times will be quite incapable of doing so.

The importance of psychological contract was emphasised by Schein (1965) and he suggested that the extent to which people work effectively and with full commitment towards the organisation depends on:

- The degree to which their own expectations of what the organisation will provide to them and what they owe to the organisation in return match the organisation's expectations of what it will give and get in return.
- The nature of what is actually to be exchanged –
- Money in exchange for time at work.

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- Social need, satisfaction and security in exchange for hard work and loyalty.
- Opportunities for self actualisation and challenging work in exchange for high productivity, high quality work and creative effort in the service of organisational goals.

THEORETICAL DIMENSIONS

Literature on the psychological contract has blossomed progressively over the last ten years to the extent that it is now firmly located within the lexicon of the Human Resource Management (HRM) discipline. (Cullinane, N and Dundon, T., 2006 p.113). Though the concept of the psychological contract originated from outside the Human Resource Management (HRM) field, today it has become a major area of study in the field of HRM. The notion that employees and employers form assumptions about their mutual obligations is well known in the organisational behaviour and human resources literature. Indeed, central to a modern understanding of the workplace is the idea that some form of exchange occurs between parties in an employment relationship and that the nature of the exchange process can have a strong influence on organisational outcomes. In recent years, increased attention has turned to the psychological aspects of this relationship (Grimmer and Oddy, 2007, p.153).

A psychological contract is basically a series of mutual expectations of the employer and the employee which govern their relationship in an employment contract. These series of mutual expectations between the employer and individual employee cover not only how much work is to be performed for a given pay, but also include the entire set of obligations, privileges and rights. The issues like labour unrest, employee dissatisfaction and worker alienation result from violations of the psychological contract. The interest in research in psychological contract stems from the changing nature of the employment contracts and the perceptions of people towards the employment contract. David Guest (2004) observes that workplaces have become increasingly fragmented because of more flexible forms of employment and the managers have become increasingly intolerant of time-consuming and sluggish processes of negotiation under the system of traditional employment relations. As a result, promises and deals that are made in good faith one day are often broken owing to a range of market compulsions. Due to the decline in collective bargaining and the emergence of individualist values among the workforce, informal arrangements are becoming more significant in the workplace. As a result, the 'traditional' employment relations literature is argued to be out of touch with the changing context of the world of work. Given the increasingly diverse nature of employment, a framework like the psychological contract provides an alternative paradigm for studying the behaviour of people at work.

As noted earlier, a psychological contract emphasises informal aspects of an employment contract. Since the emphasis of psychological contract is upon the informal and the perceptual aspects of contract of employment, the theory of the psychological contract seeks to go beyond the limitations of the legal contract of employment which focuses exclusively upon the formalized aspects of work. A psychological contract also helps in acknowledging the fact that the economic and formal aspects of employment are inevitably influenced by informal social interactions of the parties to the contract of employment. It recognizes that employment contract includes implicit and unspecified expectations and managing people at work is considered as containing a strong social dynamic, rather than merely a static financial transaction.

It should be noted here that there is no universally accepted definition of a psychological contract. Some authors emphasize the significance of *implicit obligations* of one or both parties; others stress a need to understand peoples' *expectations* from employment; while another school of thought suggests that *reciprocal mutuality* is a core determinant of the psychological contract (Atkinson *et al.* 2003; Tekleab and Taylor 2003).

Two types of psychological contracts can be identified in HRM literature: relational and transactional. Relational contracts involve beliefs about obligations based on exchanges of socio-emotional factors like loyalty and support rather than purely monetary factors. In fact, a relational psychological contract can create feelings of affective involvement or attachment on the part of the employee, and can urge the organisation (i.e., the employer) to providing more than purely remunerative support to the individual with investments like training, personal and career development, and provision of job security. Transactional contracts, on the other hand, focus on short-term monetary agreements with very little involvement of the parties. Employees are more concerned with personal monetary benefit rather than the well being and growth of the organisation. Employees do not have any interest to grow with the organisation. Whereas relational contracts tend to describe perceived obligations that are emotional and intrinsic in nature, transactional contracts describe obligations that are economic and extrinsic. Relational contracts are basically open ended having indefinite duration while the transactional contracts are having a short duration. Therefore, transactional contracts are also said to be static while the relational contracts are dynamic and evolving and hence the scope of relational contracts is more general. Therefore relational contracts are more subjective and less tangible as compared to transactional contracts.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT EVALUATION

Psychological contract deals with mutual obligations and fulfilling of these obligations by the parties to the contract.

Therefore, one has to examine the employee beliefs about employer obligations. The negative impact of psychological contract will result in outcomes such as reductions in trust, satisfaction and intentions to remain, and greater turnover (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994, Kickul, 2001, Simons and Roberson, 2003). In a psychological contract, employees evaluate what was previously promised to them relative to what actually resulted. If there is any discrepancy, the result is cognitive dissonance and negative outcome. As the psychological contract exists between the individual (employee) and the organization, something must prompt the individual to compare perceived promises to perceived fulfillment in order to evaluate the PC. Therefore, when faced with uncertainty, individuals seek comparative information (Goodman, 1977) and begin to scan the environment for clues as to what is happening (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978).

VIOLATION OF A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

It is generally agreed that the psychological contract plays an important, if not crucial role in shaping employee behaviour at the workplace (Anderson & Schalk, 1998). Let us take that a psychological contract emphasises on mutual obligations and mutual expectations of the parties to the contract of employment. However, emphasising on mutuality of obligations and expectations presents its own difficulties and problems, especially in those cases where there is a large difference in power between employer and employees. This may result in multiple psychological contracts, some of which may be imposed rather than mutual, with employees unable to incorporate their own expectations and hopes which may lead to frustration and dissatisfaction among employees which may ultimately result in the violation of the psychological contract. In other words, psychological contract violation may occur when people think they are not getting what they expect from a contractual agreement (Niehoff and Paul 2001, Pate and Malone 2000).

Psychological contract violations take two forms: reneging or incongruence. Reneging results when the organization knowingly breaks a promise to the employee, either on purpose or because of unforeseen circumstances. In contrast, incongruence is marked by the difference in perceptions of the individual and the organization, for example, the organization might believe that it has lived up to its commitments, but the individual perceives that the organization has failed to meet their expectations (Rousseau, 1995). The results of psychological contract violation range from outcomes such as negative impact on employees' work behaviours and attitudes to voluntary turnover. Conversely, the intact psychological contract has predicted many potential benefits. Researchers have shown that individuals with intact contracts have high levels of organizational commitment, extra-role behaviour that promotes effective functioning of the organization, productivity, and job satisfaction (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). Several studies have reported violation of psychological contract. (Morrison and Robinson 1997, Lemire and Rouillard 2005, Sturges and Guest 2004, Sturges *et al.* 2005, Lester *et al.* 2002).

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT AND HRM LITERATURE

Several studies in HRM have focused on psychological contract in the West. A brief review of the recent literature is provided to highlight the relevance of psychological contract in HRM.

O'Neill, B. S. and Adya, M (2007) examined how managers and organisations can be vehicles for managing psychological contract perceptions favouring knowledge sharing among current employees, newcomers, and applicants. The authors propose an integrative model to discuss psychological contract issues within each stage of employment and HRM initiatives that can encourage knowledge-sharing behaviours. It is observed that implicit psychological contracts often influence knowledge worker attitudes for sharing knowledge are challenging to manage. Managers must properly assess the nature of psychological contracts maintained by such workers so that knowledge-sharing messages address employees' key motivators. The authors sought to better understand the different psychological contract perceptions of knowledge workers at various stages of employment, which has not been done to date.

Atkinson, C. (2007) studied the relationship between trust and the psychological contract and found that trust is present in all psychological contracts and its different bases- cognitive and affective underpin transactional and relational obligations respectively.

DelCampo, R. (2007) observed that a wealth of today's research is becoming increasingly interested in the area of psychological contracts. The psychological contract is defined as the unwritten agreement that exists between the employee and employer that contains a set of mutual expectations. This paper is an attempt to elucidate the impact of individual difference variables (more specifically personality) on psychological contract violation. The paper sets forth a theoretical argument with practical implications for developing the field and the management of psychological contracts in the workplace. Lester, S. W., Kickul, J. R and Bergmann, T J., (2007) tested the relationships pertaining to employee perceptions of psychological contract type over time. It was observed that perception of contract type will influence employee perceptions. Saunders, Mark N.K. and Thornhill, A., (2006) explored the implications for all employees' psychological contracts of a forced change from permanent to temporary employment status for some employees within an organisation. They observed that nature of psychological contracts and organisational attachments for both permanent employees and forced temporary workers is complex. Permanent employees generally continue to exhibit relational forms of attachment to the organisation.

These, they believe, are reciprocated by the organisation. Reactions from forced temporary workers are more varied. After a period of denial, some develop a more calculative approach to their interactions. Others maintain aspects of their previously developed relational attachments. Only some temporary workers appear to recognise that their future direction is no longer a concern of the organisation. Management actions need to be recognised as important in re-defining the nature of psychological contracts. The transitional nature of this process may be prolonged where management imposes transactional contracts and where communication and negotiation create clear expectations is lacking.

De Cuyper, N. and De Witte, H. (2006) studied the impact of job insecurity for temporary employees by considering the role of job insecurity on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, life satisfaction, and self-rated performance among permanent employees as compared with temporary ones. Psychological contract theory assumes that job insecurity effects are due to a violation of the relational psychological contract, and that permanents as compared with temporaries engage more in relational psychological contracting. As a result, job insecurity is expected to be problematic in terms of outcomes for permanents, but not for temporaries. Results validate the assumptions made in psychological contract theory. Furthermore, job insecurity proved problematic for permanents but not for temporaries when job satisfaction and organizational commitment are concerned.

Cullinane, N. and Dundon, T., (2006) address some of the central problems presently confronting the theoretical side of the psychological contract literature. In seeking to advance knowledge and understanding, this review calls for an alternative approach to studying the psychological contract on the basis of a more critical and discursive literature analysis.

Deery, S.J., et al (2006) observed that experiences of psychological contract breach have been associated with a range of negative behaviour. However, much of the research has focused on MBA alumni and managers and made use of self-reported outcomes. Studying a sample of customer service employees, the research found that psychological contract breach was related to lower organizational trust, which, in turn was associated with perceptions of less cooperative employment relations and higher levels of absenteeism. The study indicated that psychological contract breach can arise when employees perceive discrepancies between an organization's espoused behavioural standards and its actual behavioural standards, and this can affect discretionary absence.

Pate, J., (2006) proposes a processual framework of psychological contract breach, which maps holistically the interactions among concepts drawn from the trust and justice literature. The research findings indicate that breach may occur as a result of direct or indirect organisational actions. Further the degree of reaction may differ according to the type of trigger and also the extent to which the organisation is held responsible. The key contribution of this paper is that it presents a new model of psychological contract and elucidates a key aspect of the holistic model using empirical data.

D'Annunzio-Green, N., and Francis, H., (2005) present findings of an exploratory study of managers' experiences of an emotion management leadership programme in a large retail company. Drawing on the concept of the psychological contract, the authors explored the signalling by the programme of a shift from a transactional to relational contract and how this influenced managers' perceptions about what the organization expected of them and what they could expect in return. The paper illustrates the dynamics of a 'wait and see' period and concludes by raising questions about the potential of HRD interventions to raise 'unrealistic' expectations, leading to possible breach of the psychological contract.

Montes, S. D. and Irving, P. G. (2005) report that existing research demonstrates negative relationships between psychological contract breach and employee attitudes and behaviours. This may be interpreted to mean that organizations promise little to newcomers from the beginning of their employment relationship. The findings of this study suggest that breach perceptions are not composed of a mere discrepancy between promised and delivered inducements, and that the relations among these component variables and satisfaction, feelings of violation, and employment intentions are more complex than is suggested by most past research.

Dabos, G. E. and Rousseau, D. M (2004) address the network processes through which social interaction patterns shape employee psychological contracts. Psychological contract theory postulates the existence of multiple contract makers within an organization from whom workers come to understand their exchange relationship with the employer. These include co-workers, managers, mentors, recruiters, and other organizational actors, along with administrative and structural signals such as human resource practices. The people with whom an individual interacts on the job can directly or indirectly affect his or her attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. In the social network literature, two primary mechanisms account for the influence observed among socially-proximate pairs of individuals: cohesion and structural equivalence.

Raja, U. et al (2004) examined the relationship between employee personality and psychological contract type, perceptions of contract breach, and feelings of contract violation. In general, personality characteristics (extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, self-esteem, equity sensitivity, and locus of control) were related to reported contract type. They also tended to predict perceptions of contract breach and to moderate the relationship between those perceptions and feelings of contract

violation. Both contract type and feelings of violation were associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intentions to quit.

Sels L. et al (2004) developed a feature-oriented assessment of psychological contracts, an underdeveloped approach to psychological contracts. Relying on theoretical frameworks in psychological contract research, industrial relations studies, and a cross-national study on psychological contracts, six dimensions that capture the nature of psychological contracts: tangibility, scope, stability, time frame, exchange symmetry, were identified. The results of their study indicate the significance of formal contract characteristics and HR practices as two antecedents shaping the nature of psychological contracts.

Rousseau, D. M. (2004) discusses the effect of psychological contracts on the survival of a firm or organization. In essence, psychological contracts motivate workers to fulfill commitments made to employers when workers are confident that employers will reciprocate and fulfill their end of the bargain. An employee who agrees to work for a firm for at least a year is likely to be internally conflicted if offered a job elsewhere a few months after being hired. How workers interpret their psychological contracts with employers is shaped by many sources of information. Lastly, human resource practices such as training and performance appraisal processes can signal promised benefits and required contributions. If workers or employers rely on psychological contracts to guide their actions, then the failure of the other party to fulfill anticipated commitments results in losses. Managers, both immediate supervisors and higher-ups, play the central role in shaping a worker's psychological contract.

Gakovic, A., and Tetrick, L. E., (2003) investigated the role of psychological contract breach in employees' experience of emotional exhaustion and job dissatisfaction. The results of their empirical study suggest that psychological contract breach contributes to employee experience of job strain.

Pate, J. et al (2003) focus on the impact of psychological contract violation on employee attitudes and behaviour. They observed that the current turbulent business environment, arguably the traditional psychological contract, long-term job security in return for hard work and loyalty, has come under pressure. The psychological contract has been used to analyse the changing employment relationship and has been defined as "an individual's beliefs regarding terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement. Key issues include the belief that a promise has been made and a consideration offered in exchange for it. Psychological contract violation has gained the attention of both practitioners and academics in recent years. Critical commentaries have questioned whether breaching such a contract has implications for employee attitude and behaviour and ultimately organisational performance.

CONCLUSION

Promises are the key elements constituting the psychological contract, and it is to be expected that individuals' fulfillment evaluations of promises and the effects of social influence on such evaluations will be affected by characteristics of promises. Employees' psychological contracts with the organisation consist of their perceptions of what the organization has promised them. As noted earlier, several empirical studies are conducted on psychological contract in the West. However research on psychological contract is at the elementary stages in India. Psychological contract is a promising area for research for the researchers in the field of HRM in India.

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