

The Psychological Contract and Work-Family¹

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The notion of the "psychological contract" was first coined by Argyris (1960) to refer to employer and employee expectations of the employment relationship, i.e. mutual obligations, values, expectations and aspirations that operate over and above the formal contract of employment. Since then there have been many attempts to develop and refine this concept. Historically, the concept can be viewed as an extension of philosophical concepts of social contract theory (Schein, 1980; Roehling, 1997). The social contract, which deals with the origins of the state, supposes that individuals voluntarily consent to belonging to an organised society, with attendant constraints and rights. Argyris (1960) used the concept to describe an implicit agreement between a group of employees and their supervisor. Other influential early writers such as Levinson, Price, Munden, and Solley (1962), used the concept to describe the set of expectations and obligations that individual employees spoke of when talking about their work experience. They identified a number of different types of employee expectations, held both consciously (for example expectations about job performance, security, and financial rewards) and unconsciously (for example being looked after by the employer). Roehling (1997) credits Levinson et al (1962) with explicitly recognising the dynamic relationship of the psychological contract: contracts evolve or change over time as a result of changing needs and relationships on both the employee's and the employer's side. Schein (1965) emphasised the importance of the psychological contract concept in understanding and managing behaviour in organisations. He argued that expectations may not be written into any formal agreement but operate powerfully as determinants of behaviour. For example, an employer may expect a worker not to harm the company's public image, and an employee may expect not to be made redundant after many years' service. Like Levinson et al (1962), Schein emphasised that the psychological contract will change over time.

Recent developments in psychological contract theory are largely dominated by Rousseau (e.g. 1989; 1995; 2001). Rousseau argues the psychological contract is promise-based and, over time, takes the form of a mental model or schema which is relatively stable and durable. Rousseau (1989) explicitly distinguished between conceptualisations at the level of the individual and at the level of the relationship, focusing in her theory on individual employees' subjective beliefs about their employment relationship. Crucially, the employer and employee may not agree about

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what the contract actually involves, which can lead to feelings that promises have been broken, or, as it is generally termed, the psychological contract has been violated.

Rousseau's conceptualisation of the psychological contract focuses on the employee's side of the contract so can be termed a "one-way contract". Much recent work has focused on the employee's understanding of the explicit and implicit promises regarding the exchange of employee contributions (e.g. effort, loyalty, ability) for organisational inducements (e.g. pay, promotion, security) (Rousseau, 1995, Conway & Briner, 2002). The employer's perspective has received less attention.

Rousseau also distinguished between "relational contracts" which implicitly depend on trust, loyalty and job security, and "transactional contracts" where employees do not expect a long lasting relationship with their employer or organisation, but instead view their employment as a transaction in which, for example, long hours and extra work are provided in exchange for high pay, and training and development (Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1995). This will be considered further in section "State of the Body of Knowledge" below.

It is important to recognise that researchers have used the concept of the psychological contract in a variety of different ways (Roehling, 1997). Significant elements of all definitions of the psychological contract include:

- Incorporation of beliefs, values, expectations and aspirations of employer and employee, including beliefs about implicit promises and obligations, the extent to which these are perceived to be met or violated and the extent of trust within the relationship.
- These expectations are not necessarily made explicit. It can be regarded as the implicit deal between employers and employees. It implies fairness and good faith.
- An important aspect of the notion of a psychological contract is that it can be continually re-negotiated, changing with an individual's, and an organisation's, expectations, and in shifting economic and social contexts. It is not static, but dynamic and shifting. However, most research provides only a snapshot of one point in time thereby capturing only one stage in this social process.
- Because it is based on individual perceptions individuals in the same organisation or job may perceive different psychological contracts, which will, in turn, influence the ways in which they perceive organisational events (e.g. redundancies or developing or modifying a flexitime system).

Some, but not all, definitions of the psychological contract stress that it implies mutuality and reciprocity, based on the perceptions of both parties (employee and employer or its agent e.g. managers). The notion of mutuality, however can be problematic, especially where there is a large power differential between contractors. This allows for the emergence of multiple psychological contracts, some of which may be rather one-sided rather than mutual, with employees not able to include their expectations and hopes. For example, when employees feel constrained in what they can expect from employers, due to factors such as job insecurity, they may develop what have been termed "compliance contracts" (Lewis et al, 2002; Smithson and Lewis, 2000). This implies a mutual understanding that employees will do whatever is necessary to retain their jobs. It is a pragmatic response that does not involve loyalty on either side.

Violation of the Psychological Contract

An important element of the concept of the psychological contract in the literature is the notion of contract violation, and its consequences (Rousseau, 1995; Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Usually research focuses on employees' perceptions of the breach of expectations by the employer, for example in relation to job security, opportunities for development or ethical principles, referred to as violation of the contract. This can lead to feelings of injustice, deception or betrayal among employees (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Specific circumstances, such as organisational timing, and labour market factors (for example, whether there is a perceived market need for redundancies or cutbacks) are associated with employees feeling that their psychological contract has been violated (Turnley & Feldman, 1999a; 1999b). There is also evidence that employees with different understandings of their psychological contracts respond differently to contract violation and to planned organisational change (e.g. Herriott et al, 1997; Rousseau, 2001b). For example, employees in Singapore, with an unstructured labour market and many short term contracts, and "transactional" psychological contracts, show a lower sense of obligation to employers than US employees, and less perceived violation when changes are introduced (Ang, Tan & Ng, 2000).

Violation has implications for employee trust (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994) performance (Robinson & Wolfe-Morrison, 1996) and behaviour (Nicholson & Johns 1985). However, the psychological contract is viewed in the literature as dynamic and changing. Most research on contract violation focuses on one point in time and therefore we know less about the long-term implications of psychological contract violation for individual employees or organisations. Moreover, research has also focused on employee perceptions of contract violation. We know less about employer perspectives (Rousseau, 2001a). Thus we have evidence of contract violation from the perspective of the victim not the perpetrator. Further criticisms of focusing on contract violation are addressed in the Implications section of this entry.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

The psychological contract is a useful concept for understanding what employees and employers expect of a job and a work environment, including not only expectations of tenure or promotion but also sense of entitlement to work-life benefits and flexible working arrangements. Indeed, it has recently been argued that work-life balance or integration can be a key factor in establishing a positive psychological contract (i.e. based on mutual trust) (Coussey, 2000). However, consideration of work-life issues and policies seldom appear in psychological contract research and merit much more attention. Moreover, very little work in the work-family research area has explicitly utilised psychological contract theory.

Nevertheless, psychological contract theory is implicit in recent studies relating work-life policies or practices to measures of employee satisfaction, loyalty and commitment. For example, Roehling, Roehling and Moen (2001) studied the relationship between work-life policies, informal support and employee loyalty over the life course, concluding that flexible time policies are consistently related to employee loyalty, and most strongly for parents of young children. Perceptions of informal support were also strongly related to employee loyalty. Some

research has begun to address the relationship between the psychological contract and remote working (Harwood, 2003) and part time working (Conway and Briner, 2002). Recent UK research (Management Today, 2003) suggests that employees now have a higher sense of entitlement to flexible working arrangements than in the past (at least in Britain), and that they feel the psychological contract may be violated when flexible working or work-life benefits are not available to them. Smithson and Lewis (2001) looked at the impact of work-life issues on the psychological contract for younger employees, some of whom accepted a balanced lives contract in which employees accept lack of long term security and less than optimum conditions in exchange for flexibility and reasonable hours, in order to accommodate their family or personal lives.

The role of gender within psychological contract theory has received little attention, though it is sometimes suggested that women have a different notion of the contract than men, expecting less in terms of pay and promotion and trading these benefits for flexibility (Herriot et al, 1997). However, studies of young adults have shown little gender difference in psychological contract expectations, suggesting that as women and men's expectations of work converge, so may their experiences of the psychological contract (Smithson & Lewis, 2000).

Psychological contract theory is a potentially useful tool in work-life research as it provides a way of considering employees' and employers' expectations of work-life support, balance and valuations in the context of their other expectations of the working relationship. Given the growing evidence that work-life policies alone have a limited impact on workplace practices and cultures or on individual employee behaviour (Lewis, 1997; 2001; Rapoport et al, 2002), this approach is also useful for shifting the focus away from policies towards individual employees' expectations and understandings of such initiatives.

State of the Body of Knowledge

The emerging links between psychological contract theory and work life research reflects changes in the composition of the workforce since the 1960's, changes in the expectations of younger workers, and changes in societal expectations of work-life integration. For example, some younger workers are prepared to challenge norms of long hours of work and feel violated if expected to work what they perceive as excessive hours, particularly for an organisation which offers them little long term security (Tulgan, 2000; Brannen et al, 2002). Meanwhile, others do not incorporate direct work-family concerns in their interpretation of the psychological contract at their particular stage in the life cycle, often, trading long work weeks and low salaries for training opportunities and challenging work (Rousseau, 1995; Turner and Feldman, 1999).

Another trend which has been reflected in psychological contract theory and also has implications for work-family research relates to job insecurity and the changing nature of the employment relationship, as flexibility is thought to take over from "jobs for life" (McLean Parks & Kidder, 1994; Turnley & Feldman, 1999b). This has been reflected in changing definitions of the psychological contract, with a growing emphasis on transactions rather than relationships, as discussed below.

Relational versus Transactional Definitions: Traditionally many employers encouraged the expectation of long-term employment relationships by, for example, adding various benefits, such as low mortgages. In return for this security of employment, an organisation expected loyalty and commitment. It has been argued that workers today experience a "new psychological contract" (Herriot, 1992), reflecting their own experiences and expectations, societal attitudes and changing work situations.

For example Hudson et al (1998) describe a current version of the psychological contract in terms of employees expecting to be 'looked after' through the course of their employment in return for their loyalty, hard work and commitment, without expecting long term security. However this implies a uniformity of expectations and overlooks diversity. MacNeil (1985) introduced the idea of conceptualising contracts along a relational-transactional continuum. Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni (1995) suggest that the more traditional "relational contracts", implicitly depending on trust, loyalty and a degree of job security, are being replaced by "transactional contracts" in some contexts, where employees provide for example, long hours and extra work in exchange for high pay, and training and development. Transactional definitions recognise that an organisation may not be able to provide job security but can still provide employability, or may be perceived as offering high levels of personal support (Sparrow, 2000). Other types of contract identified by Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni include "balanced" contracts, where both worker and firm contribute to each other's advantage, and "transitional" contracts, reflecting a temporary state during organisational change (Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni 1995).

There are important implications of the rise in "transactional contracts" for work-family studies, particularly concerning perceived and actual entitlement to work-life policies and practices. Employees who expect less security and fewer benefits from an organisation may feel less entitled to request or take up "family friendly" working practices (Lewis & Smithson, 2001). Short term transactional contracts often explicitly exclude workers from statutory rights such as maternity and paternity benefits, (where these are available) which those in more traditional "relational contracts" take as an automatic right (Lewis & Smithson, 2001). While transactional contracts can be used to advantage by some highly skilled and employable individuals for managing work and family in ways of their choice, for example by insisting on certain working patterns before accepting a job, this is impossible for lower skilled workers.

Factors Associated with Psychological Contract Development: Both individual and organisational factors appear to be associated with the development of the psychological contract. Individual determinants include experiences and expectations which may have been formed about the employment relationships, prior to employment, during recruitment, during early organisational socialisation or from experiences in the course of employment (Rousseau, 2001a). These experiences and expectations may vary according to individual difference factors such as age, gender, level of education, union membership, non work commitments etc (Guest & Conway, 1998). Organisational factors influencing the development of the psychological contract include human resource policies and practices which may indicate certain promises or obligations on the part of the employer and expectations of employees (Guest & Conway, 1998). Noer (2000) argues that many organisations are operating a cultural lag from the old psychological contract. They want the flexibility of "new" contracts but retain the artefacts of a

traditional contract e.g. career paths, benefits etc. This indicates a need for employers to be clearer, more explicit on mutual obligations and to communicate them unambiguously.

Generational and Life Cycle Change in the Psychological Contract: With the ageing of the workforce recent research has also focused on generational differences in the psychological contracts. There is evidence that older members of the workforce feel that the psychological contract, as they understand it, has been violated, and have lost trust in their organisations (Herriot et al, 1997), while younger workers may have different expectations (Turnley & Feldman, 1999b; Smithson & Lewis, 2001). The assumptions feeding into the psychological contracts perceived by these young adults thus appear to reflect the changing realities of the labour market and the employment relationship (Brannen, Lewis, Nilsen & Smithson, 2002). Supporting this view, there is some evidence that perceptions of contract violations have decreased, as people have more "realistic" expectations, and more is communicated (Harwood, 2003). Alternatively, it could be argued that sense of violation is related to different expectations or perceived promises. There may, for example, be less sense of violation if people lose their jobs or job descriptions change, and a higher sense of violation for omission of quick advancement or challenging work (Turnley and Feldman, 1999b) or for lack of support for work-life needs (Brannen et al, 2002).

Debates about the usefulness of the concept: Finally there is some debate about the usefulness of the concept. For example, Sparrow and Marchington (1998) argue that the psychological contract concept has been useful in capturing the complex changes at work in times of uncertainty. It acts as an organisation wide framework of analysis and captures concerns over new employment practices. However, Guest (1998) argues that it is operationalised to include so many different psychological variables, with very little known about the relationships between them, that the psychological contract becomes an analytic nightmare. Guest and Conway (1998) suggest that it is best viewed as a useful metaphor for helping make sense of the state of the employment relationship and plotting significant changes in this relationship. They use the notion as a tool for change for practitioners by referring to the goal of healthy psychological contracts- reflecting a range of management practices which they argue will lead to improved employee motivation and commitment.

Debates about the usefulness of the concept also focus on measurement issues. As research has tended to focus on the use of the concept of the psychological contract for explaining research findings, or for informing management practice less attention has been paid, to date, to explicitly considering how the concept is to be measured, (Roehling, 1997). Often the psychological contract is measured indirectly, for example via commitment and loyalty, which is contentious, or in terms of contract breach (eg Kickul, 2001; Kickul, Neuman, Parker & Finkl, 2001). Some recent research has devised measures in which, the content of the psychological contract is typically broken down into various objective and subjective components which are then measured on survey questionnaires. For example, Westwood, Sparrow and Leung (2001) measured the promises and commitments perceived to have been made by organisations and the obligations which employees perceive they have made. Other research, especially on work-family issues, takes a more qualitative approach to this subjective concept. However, there remains a lack of agreement about how the psychological contract should be measured.

In conclusion on the state of the body of knowledge, the concept of the psychological contract has attracted considerable academic and management interest and is currently utilised in a variety of ways in a wide range of situations. Recent debates about the salience of relational versus transactional contracts, and about the existence of other forms of contracts, need to be resolved by further empirical work. Where almost all recent work on the concept is in agreement is that understandings of the content and violation or breach of the psychological contract is changing as the nature of work changes, and also due to changes across employees' life cycle and employment situations. It is possible that, in the light of social and employment trends work-life issues will become increasingly significant in contemporary understandings of psychological contracts.

Implications for Policy and Practice

While the violation of the psychological contract has received much attention, research into fulfilment of the contract has been neglected. Specifically, it will be important for future research to identify and understand those factors which give rise to 'mutuality', the agreement of commitments between employer and employee (Rousseau, 2001b), recognising that there is already a fair amount of mutuality in the workplace. A related research field considers the concept of "fit". Larwood, Wright, Desrochers and Dahir (1998) asked employees questions about their perceptions of fit with regard to the psychological contract, and found that greater fit was associated with higher job satisfaction and a reduced intention to quit. Future research may shed light on the factors that account for or increase mutuality or fit and examine in more details the role of work-life aspirations and needs in this process.

Key issues for future research include:

- More attention is needed to understanding the development of psychological contracts over the life course (rather than at one point in time), to the gender element, and to employers' perspectives on psychological contracts and especially their violation.
- Psychological contract theory, like much work-life research, tends to be individualistic. Future research should focus more on the role of collective understandings of employment relations and the role of work-life issues.
- More needs to be known about the role of work-life policies and practices in psychological contracts. To what extent and in what ways do policies and practices, or perceptions of organisational supportiveness for work and family, impact on psychological contracts, and with what consequences for individuals and organisations?

Key issues for employers to consider include:

- There is a need to take account of employees' perspectives and perceptions of the employer-employee relationship in designing work-life policies and practices.
- Permanent staff as much as non-permanent can become demotivated when colleagues are enjoying better pay and conditions for comparable work. Fairness all around, rather than uniformity in types of formal employment contracts, must be the goal. Thus any development which addresses work-personal life issues need to be introduced in a way which includes all employees.

- Employers need to be clear and explicit on mutual obligations and expectations and communicate them unambiguously. For example, they need to be explicit about measures of productivity - are people valued by time put in or by outputs achieved, or by other measures? Is flexible working a problem if you want promotion, or not?
- Organisational change initiatives need to consider how to change psychological contracts to avoid perceptions of contract violations.

Researchers and employers need to work together to consider how mutuality in psychological contracts can be formalised and clarified in ways which lead to a "dual agenda" of work-personal life integration and organisational effectiveness (Rapoport et al, 2002).

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