



Forgiving is good for health and performance: How forgiveness helps individuals cope with the psychological contract breach



Sandra Pereira Costa ^{*}, Pedro Neves

Nova School of Business and Economics, Portugal

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ABSTRACT

The negative impact of the psychological contract breach on outcomes has received growing attention from researchers. However, there is a lack of studies about the potential individual resources that may help employees to cope with such breaches of the psychological contract, minimizing its negative effects. Drawing on the job demands-resources model, we examined psychological contract breach (time 1) as a job stressor and its direct impact on emotional exhaustion and carry over effects for in-role performance and organizational citizenship behaviors (time 2). Based on the conservation resources theory, we tested the moderating role of forgiveness and revenge cognitions as personal resources that allow individuals to cope with stressful situations. Using a sample of 220 employees and their supervisors, our results suggest that forgiveness cognitions moderated the relationship between the psychological contract breach and emotional exhaustion, while the effect of revenge cognition was non-significant. These findings highlight the role of breach as an important stressor and its negative effects for health and performance, as well as the buffering effect of forgiveness cognitions.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a renewed interest in psychological contracts (e.g., Conway & Coyle-Shapiro, 2012). The underlying motivation has been the organizational changes caused by market competition and the financial crisis. Hereupon, employees experience constant variations in their employment relationships and contracts, which are often perceived as breaches of their psychological contract (Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007). Curiously, these breaches are known for being the norm and not the exception (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994) and have negative consequences for employees (e.g., Turnley & Feldman, 1999), hypothetically leading to increased stress and strain, because it jeopardizes the notion of reciprocity, which is key to employees' well-being (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Furthermore, research indicates that the psychological contract breach can be particularly distressful for employees (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003; Noblet & Rodwell, 2009). Two reasons have been pointed out: the imbalance of the relationship may exceed the levels of job control and social support available to the individual (Karasek, Baker, Marxer, Ahlbom, & Theorell, 1981); and, the threat to predictability and sense of control that people believe they have over their environment (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003). In this regard, we suggest that psychological contract breach can be defined as a job stressor since it is a stimulus that requires cognitive effort and it is associated with certain psychological and physical costs (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). However, research on

^{*} Corresponding author at: Campus de Campolide, 1099-032 Lisboa, Portugal.

E-mail addresses: sandra.costa@novasbe.pt (S.P. Costa), pneves@novasbe.pt (P. Neves).

this topic is only emerging and little is known about the extent to which psychological contract breach contributes to employees' stress appraisal process.

In order to understand the role of psychological contract breach as a stressor, we draw on the job demands-resources model of burnout (JD-R; Demerouti et al., 2001) and use insights from the conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). The former model suggests that job demands (e.g., workload; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998) may lead to a depletion of energy, exhausting employees (Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, & Pinneau, 1975). The latter assumes that individuals use personal resources in order to deal with threatening or demanding conditions, preventing negative outcomes (Hobfoll, 2001). Personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy and optimism) are aspects of the self that increase an individual's ability to control and impact upon the environment in a successful fashion (Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003).

Personal resources have some similar features to job resources, such as being functional in the achievement of goals, reducing job demands and stimulating personal growth and development (Demerouti et al., 2001). These personal and job resources are theoretically analogous to coping strategies (De Jonge & Dormann, 2006) because they can be defined as an extra energy that makes individuals able to cope with stressors (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002). Thus, employees who experience psychological contract breach (cognitive stressor) are likely to experience strains (emotional exhaustion) unless they have the resources to cope with the situation (coping strategies).

This research makes three important contributions to the literature. First, we propose that personal resources (i.e., forgiveness and revenge cognitions) operate as coping strategies that allow individuals to deal with the psychological contract breach. Specifically, we suggest that forgiveness and revenge cognitions buffer the relationship between psychological contract breach and performance (i.e., in-role performance and organizational citizenship behaviors) via emotional exhaustion. In doing so, we respond to calls in the stress literature for more evidence of the buffering role of resources on the impact of job demands (i.e., breach) on stress (i.e., emotional exhaustion) (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007). Moreover, not only there is a lack of forgiveness scholarship in organizational sciences (Bright & Exline, 2011; Cox, 2011), but research about forgiveness and revenge has been focused on interpersonal relationships (Aquino, Groer, Goldman, & Folger, 2003; Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Thus, we make a second contribution by shedding light on forgiveness as a coping and conflict reduction strategy, and as a benefit in the aftermath of wrongdoing in organizations (Aquino et al., 2003); and, by extending the literature about forgiveness and revenge directed at impersonal entities (i.e., organizations) because these types of cognitions can also significantly affect the employment relationship.

We offer a third contribution to psychological contract literature by examining a complementary mechanism to social exchange – the most studied process – in the explanation of the negative impact of psychological contract breach. Specifically, we propose that employee health (i.e., emotional exhaustion) mediates the breach-outcomes relationship. The uniqueness of this contribution is based on the fact that we test this mechanism over and beyond the effect of social exchange (operationalized here as affective commitment to the organization) and it shows that psychological contract breach harms not only the quality of the employment relationship, but also impairs one's health and performance. This is also a response to a call in the employee-organization literature for clarification of negative effects of a poor employment relationship (i.e., breach) on employees' health and stress (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007).

1.1. Conceptualization of psychological contract breach as a job stressor

Psychological contracts have been defined as individual beliefs regarding the mutual obligations that exist between employee and employer (Rousseau, 1995), and are based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Contrasting with labor contracts, the terms of a psychological contract are not written, stated, negotiated, or discussed, but they can be restructured by a context that implicitly or explicitly transmits a future commitment or intent (Rousseau, 2001). When one party fails to keep up the promises or obligations, a psychological contract breach occurs (Rousseau, 1989). Hence, psychological contract breach refers to the employee's perception concerning the degree to which the organization has failed to fulfill its promises or obligations (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). When the employee perceives a breach in his/her psychological contract, he or she feels that the relationship with the employer is unbalanced (i.e., the difference in the ratio between benefits received and contributions made), and acknowledges that he or she is not receiving enough from the organization (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robbins, Ford, & Tetrick, 2012; Rousseau, 1995). This perception is likely to lead to negative responses if it induces strong feelings of unfairness (Noblet & Rodwell, 2009), which is normally the case (Robbins et al., 2012).

Perceived unfairness, in general, and psychological contract breach as a demonstration of lack of fairness (i.e., one believes that what he or she is receiving is not fair), in particular, are considered stressors at the workplace (Robbins et al., 2012), since they embody conditions or situations that can be a source of strain to an individual (Kahn & Byosiere, 1992). Additionally, this conceptualization of the psychological contract breach as a stressor is based on its potential to exert a negative influence on employees' psychological and physical health (Demerouti et al., 2001), by reducing the individual's capacity to exert control over the work environment and affecting his or her ability to function in an efficient way (Fried, Ben-David, Tieg, Avital, & Yeverchayahu, 1998). Moreover, Lapointe, Vandenberghe, and Boudrias (2013) argue that breach can be "conceived as a stressor that alters the quality of employee-organization relationship and depletes individuals' organization-related outcomes" (p.535).

1.2. Psychological contract breach and performance: the mediating role of emotional exhaustion

Psychological contract breach has been related to reductions in performance (Robinson, 1996; Turnley, Bolino, Lester, & Bloodgood, 2003; Turnley & Feldman, 1999) and organizational citizenship behaviors (Robinson, 1996; Zhao et al., 2007). Several studies have demonstrated the existence of multiple mechanisms, such as trust (Morrison & Robinson, 1997) and affective

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