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The Effect of Labor Contracts on the Psychological Contract Dynamics among Chinese Migrant Construction Workers

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KEYWORDS China. Job Performance. Labor Contract. Migrant Workers. Psychological Contract

ABSTRACT Well-developed employment relations should be clearly defined in psychological, economic and legal dimensions. The purpose of the present paper is to examine the effect of psychological contract fulfillment on the migrant workers' job involvement and job performance, and how the interaction between psychological contracts and labor contracts dynamically influences migrant workers' job involvement and job performance. Using a sample of 305 supervisor-subordinate dyads in 33 construction sites, the results showed that job involvement fully mediated the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and job performance. Further, the labor contract status moderated the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and job involvement, such that the positive relationship was stronger for migrant workers who did not sign a labor contract, compared with those who did. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Well-developed employment relations should be clearly defined in psychological, economic and legal dimensions (Marsden 2004). Although researchers have accumulated a large body of literature regarding the impact of psychological contracts in the workplace (Zagenczyk et al. 2014), empirical research exploring the joint effects of a labor contract and psychological contracts in shaping migrant workers' work outcomes is lacking. From the psychological contract perspective, De Cuyper and De Witte (2006) or Guest et al. (2010) interpreted the significant difference of work outcomes among different contract type workers. However, far less is known about how the interaction between psychological contract and labor contract dynamically influences work outcomes, such as job involvement and job performance. Moreover, previous research has investigated how affective reaction mediates the effect of psychological contracts on job performance based on the affective events theory (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996; Wei and Si 2013). Then, from this perspective, is job involvement

a mediator on the effect of psychological contracts on job performance?

This paper explored the above issues with migrant workers in the context of the People's Republic of China. This is important given that informal employment became widespread among Chinese migrant workers (according to National Bureau of Statistics of China 2012, the rate of labor contract coverage was only 24.9 percent in the construction industry) and they had to rely on psychological contracts between two parties in the employment settings (Lee and Meng 2010; Kuruvilla et al. 2011). For example, most Chinese migrant workers find a job through *Guanxi* to lower environment uncertainty and they trust the contractors in their constructing team (Liu 2014; Wang et al. 2014), which indicates high quality social exchange, and in turn leads to perceptions of a psychological contract fulfillment (Swider 2015). From another perspective, although labor contracts can describe basic rights and obligations of both parties to provide a safeguard for harmonious employment relations (Li and Freeman 2014), it is less flexible and idiosyncratic compared with psychological contracts (Guest 2004). Flexibility and idiosyncrasy are very important in the construction industry because migrant workers' pay is based on their unique experiences, and it is the experiences that largely determine the effectiveness of the construction process and the quality of the products (Lu and Fox 2001).

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