



Outcomes associated with breach and fulfillment of the psychological contract of safety

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The study investigated the outcomes associated with breach and fulfillment of the psychological contract of safety. **Method:** The psychological contract of safety is defined as the beliefs of individuals about reciprocal employer and employee safety obligations inferred from implicit or explicit promises. When employees perceive that safety obligations promised by the employer have not been met, a breach of the psychological contract occurs, termed employer breach of obligations. The extent to which employees fulfill their safety obligations to the employer is termed employee fulfillment of obligations. Structural equation modeling was used to test a model of safety that investigated the positive and negative outcomes associated with breach and fulfillment of the psychological contract of safety. Participants were 424 health care workers recruited from two hospitals in the State of Victoria, Australia. **Results:** Following slight modification of the hypothesized model, a good fitting model resulted. Being injured in the workplace was found to lower perceptions of trust in the employer and increase perceptions of employer breach of safety obligations. Trust in the employer significantly influenced perceived employer breach of safety obligations such that lowered trust resulted in higher perceptions of breach. Perceptions of employer breach significantly impacted employee fulfillment of safety obligations with high perceptions of breach resulting in low employee fulfillment of obligations. Trust and perceptions of breach significantly influenced safety attitudes, but not safety behavior. Fulfillment of employee safety obligations significantly impacted safety behavior, but not safety attitudes. Implications of these findings for safety and psychological contract research are explored. A positive emphasis on social exchange relationships in organizations will have positive outcomes for safety climate and safety behavior.

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1. Introduction

Investigation of the influence of social exchange constructs on safety attitudes and behavior is a recent extension of occupational safety research. Hofmann and Morgeson (1999) and Hofmann, Morgeson, and Gerras (2003) found that two types of organizational social exchanges (leader–member exchange and perceived organizational support) positively influenced safety attitudes and behaviors. Similarly, Simard and Marchand (1997) found positive employee–supervisor relationships to be the most important predictor of safety compliance behaviors. Perceived organizational support, in the form of management commitment to safety, has also been shown to significantly predict non-safety related attitudes and behaviors, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and work performance (Michael, Evans, Jansen, & Haight, 2005). These studies suggest that social exchange theory may be a useful tool to facilitate the understanding of both organizational attitudes and behaviors and safety attitudes and behaviors.

The psychological contract is another form of social exchange in organizations based on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Occupational safety is based on

reciprocity involving a duty of care on the part of the employer and a reciprocal obligation to uphold safety standards on the part of the employee (Sully, 2001). The psychological contract of safety is defined as the beliefs of individuals about the reciprocal safety obligations between the employer and the employee inferred from implicit or explicit promises (Walker & Hutton, 2006). Employees form expectations about workplace safety that lead them to believe that certain actions will be reciprocated. These expectations constitute a psychological contract when employees believe that perceived employer safety obligations and perceived employee safety obligations are contingent on each other.

When the employee perceives that the employer has failed to meet their obligations, psychological contract breach is said to have occurred (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). The negative effects of psychological contract breach on employee attitudes and behavior are well documented in the organizational literature and include reduced organizational trust (Robinson, 1996), lowered work performance (Turnley & Feldman, 1999), greater intention to leave the organization (Raja, Johns & Ntalianis, 2004), reduced commitment and loyalty (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Turnley & Feldman, 1999), and lowered engagement in citizenship-type behavior (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002a). Psychological contract breach has also been found to have a stronger impact on attitudinal outcomes than on behavioral outcomes (Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007).

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A neglected area of psychological contract research is how perceived breach of employer obligations influences employee fulfillment of obligations and the subsequent impact on employee attitudes and behavior. Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2002b) found that employer fulfillment of obligations resulted in a similar reciprocal fulfillment of obligations by the employee. Hence it is plausible that high perceptions of employer breach of obligations might negatively influence employee fulfillment of obligations.

The impact of breach and fulfillment of the psychological contract of safety on employee safety attitudes and behavior has not been specifically researched. Nevertheless, it is expected that this relationship will be similar to the relationship between the psychological contract and employee attitudes and behavior established in the organizational literature. Four variables pertinent to psychological contracts and occupational safety research were selected to investigate the positive and negative outcomes associated with breach and fulfillment of the psychological contract of safety: trust, safety climate, safety behavior, and injury.

The trust between employers and employees is commonly referred to as organizational trust. Gilbert and Tang (1998) operationalize organizational trust as the feeling of confidence and support an employee has in their employer believing that the employer will fulfill commitments or obligations made to the employee. The more an employee believes that their employer will fulfill commitments and obligations, the more likely the employee is to trust their organization (Lee, 2004).

Organizational trust is believed to be a central component of the development, maintenance, and outcomes of the psychological contract (Braun, 1997). In particular, higher perceptions of psychological contract breach have been found to result in lower perceptions of organizational trust and vice versa (e.g., Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2006; Lo & Aryee, 2003; Robinson, 1995; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Organizational trust has also been shown to mediate and moderate the relationship between psychological contract breach and organizational outcome variables (e.g., Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Lo & Aryee, 2003; Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Morrison, 1995).

Few have investigated the nature of trust as an antecedent to contract breach, the exception being Robinson (1996). Robinson found that initial trust in an employer measured at Time 1 was negatively related to employee perceptions of psychological contract breach measured at Time 2. Robinson maintained that lower perceptions of organizational trust are likely to influence both recognition and interpretation of perceived contract breach.

It seems that trust is also a basis for an effective safety climate. For example, a low trust work environment, perpetuated by a blame culture, has been found to negatively impact employee reporting-type behaviors in relation to incidents, accidents, and near misses (Cox, Jones, & Collinson, 2006). Trust in management has been found to

positively influence perceptions of safety climate (Barling & Hutchinson, 2000) and negatively impact safety performance (Zacharatos, Barling, & Iverson, 2005). Perceptions of trust and distrust have also been shown to differently impact safety performance, with distrust being found to be a stronger predictor of safety performance than trust (Conchie & Donald, 2006).

The relationship between safety climate and safety performance is well established, with a meta-analysis by Clarke (2006) confirming a strong positive relationship between safety climate and safety behavior. Clarke also found positive relationships between safety climate and accident and injury rates, and between safety behavior and accident and injury rates. However, in both instances the effect sizes were small.

Much of the research has examined how perceptions of safety climate influence accidents and injury rates, resulting in interventions to improve climate and subsequently improve performance. Of the few studies investigating injury as an antecedent to safety attitudes, Gillen, Baltz, Gassel, Kirsch, and Vaccaro (2002) found that injury severity negatively influenced safety attitudes, while Barling, Kelloway, and Iverson (2003) found that being injured at work resulted in distrust of management, job dissatisfaction, and turnover intentions.

The present study aims to test a model of safety investigating the positive and negative outcomes associated with employer breach and employee fulfillment of safety obligations, illustrated in Fig. 1. Specifically, based on previous research within the psychological contracts and safety climate literatures it is predicted that:

H1. Injury will negatively influence organizational trust and positively influence employer breach of safety obligations.

H2. Organizational trust will positively influence safety climate and negatively influence employer breach of safety obligations.

H3. Employer breach of safety obligations will negatively influence safety climate and will negatively influence employee fulfillment of safety obligations.

H4. Employee fulfillment of safety obligations will positively influence safety behavior.

H5. Safety climate will positively influence safety behavior.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Four hundred and twenty four health sector employees recruited from two hospitals in the State of Victoria, Australia participated in this study. Most of the participants were nurses (81%) and were female

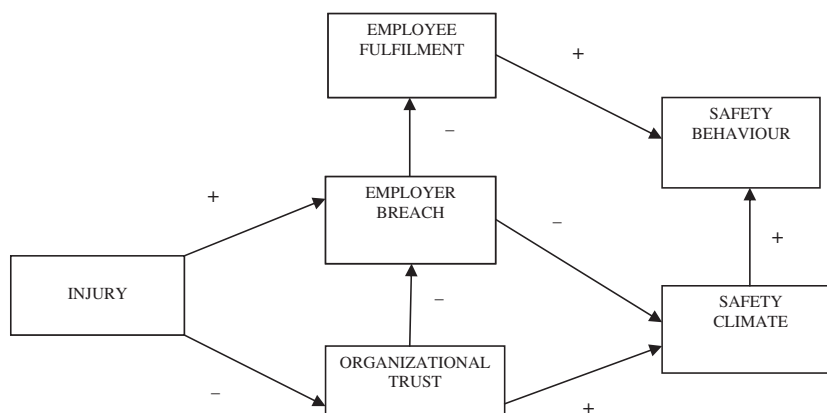


Fig. 1. Theoretical model showing hypothesized relationships among the constructs.

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