



The application of the psychological contract to workplace safety

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Abstract

Introduction: Psychological contracts of safety are conceptualized as the beliefs of individuals about reciprocal safety obligations inferred from implicit or explicit promises. Although the literature on psychological contracts is growing, the existence of psychological contracts in relation to safety has not been established. The research sought to identify psychological contracts in the conversations of employees about safety, by demonstrating reciprocity in relation to employer and employee safety obligations. The identified safety obligations were used to develop a measure of psychological contracts of safety. **Method:** The participants were 131 employees attending safety training sessions in retail and manufacturing organizations. Non-participant observation was used to collect the data during safety training sessions. Content analysis was used to analyze the data. Categories for coding were established through identification of language markers that demonstrated contingencies or other implied obligations. **Results:** Direct evidence of reciprocity between employer safety obligations and employee safety obligations was found in statements from the participants demonstrating psychological contracts. A comprehensive list of perceived employer and employee safety obligations was compiled and developed into a measure of psychological contracts of safety. A small sample of 33 safety personnel was used to validate the safety obligations. **Conclusions and impact on industry:** Implications of these findings for safety and psychological contract research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Psychological contracts have only recently been applied to the understanding of employment relationships and are believed to be important determinants of employee attitudes and behavior (Anderson & Schalk, 1998; McLean Parks, Kidder, & Gallagher, 1998; Rousseau, 1989, 1990; Schein, 1965). Psychological contracts can be thought of as the perceived mutual obligations between employees and employers, viewed from the employee's perspective (Rousseau, 1990). Employees form expectations about the employment relationship that lead them to believe that certain actions will be reciprocated, this comprises their psychological contract.

Applied research on the role of psychological contracts in organizations has established that they can be associated

with trust, commitment, citizenship behavior, and intention to leave (Bunderson, 2001; Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Psychological contracts have mainly been researched in an employment context but there is evidence that they exist in other settings (e.g., Wade-Benzoni & Rousseau, 1998). There is the belief that individuals in organizations can simultaneously develop multiple psychological contracts (Shore et al., 2004). The role of psychological contracts in occupational safety has received little attention. The present research examines the proposition that employees hold psychological contracts of safety.

Much of the occupational safety research focuses on safety culture and safety climate, depicted as attitudinal and behavioral phenomena. The safety literature suggests a relationship between safety attitudes and safety behavior and also that safety attitudes and behavior are related to

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safety performance (Garavan & O'Brien, 2001; Hofmann & Stetzer, 1996; Varonen & Mattila, 2000; Zohar, 2000). The influences on the formation of safety attitudes and behavior have yet to be established. Psychological contracts of safety could provide the cognitive basis to the development of safety attitudes and behavior.

Psychological contract theory is based on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). A psychological contract is essentially a perceived exchange relationship between the two parties in an employment relationship, namely the employee and the employer. Organizational social exchanges depend on trust that the goodwill actions of one party will be reciprocated by the other party at some time in the future (Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996). The concept of the psychological contract, adopted in this research, is that first put forward by Rousseau (1989, 1990) and further developed by others (e.g. McLean Parks et al., 1998; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Shore et al., 2002). This conceptualization of the psychological contract is from the individual's perspective, rather than the relational or group perspective evident in earlier definitions of the construct (Roehling, 1997; Shore et al., 2002). Psychological contract theory proposes that implied promises and reciprocal obligations are fundamental components of the psychological contract, although it is also argued that expectations play a role in forming the psychological contract (Shore et al., 2002). A psychological contract develops when an individual believes that promises made by an employer are contingent upon reciprocal actions of the employee (Rousseau, 1990). The psychological contract is uni-lateral in that it is held by a single individual but it contains both employer and employee obligations (Hutton, 2000).

The reciprocal nature of psychological contracts has been somewhat controversial in the past (e.g. Guest, 1998a,b; Rousseau, 1998) such that reciprocity needs to be demonstrated if claims are to be substantiated that employees hold psychological contracts. The body of direct evidence for the existence of reciprocity is limited (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002; Dabos & Rousseau, 2004; DeVos, Buyens, & Schalk, 2003) and has been difficult to obtain. Also, the issue of reciprocity has led to debate over which perspectives should be represented in psychological contract research, that is, the employee perspective, the employer perspective, or both perspectives (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Shore et al., 2004). Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2002) argue that the empirical research has largely neglected the employer perspective and focused exclusively on the employee perspective, by investigating how employees reciprocate perceived employer fulfillment or breach of the psychological contract. Studies examining the employer perspective or both perspectives are becoming more common (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002; Guest & Conway, 2002; Lester, Tumley, Bloodgood, & Bolino, 2002; Porter, Pearce, Tripoli, & Lewis, 1998).

Psychological contracts of safety have not been specifically researched. Nevertheless Sully (2001) argued that to

better understand the relationship between safety culture, safety behavior, and the individual employee, it was important to understand the dynamics underlying the relationship between employees and their organization. Sully proposed the psychological contract as means of exploring this relationship, arguing that safety was already 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.

Recently, the occupational safety literature has been extended to examine the role of other organizational social exchange constructs on safety attitudes and behavior. Two types of organizational social exchanges, leader-member exchange and perceived organizational support, have been found to positively influence safety attitudes and behaviors (Hofmann & Morgeson, 1999; Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras, 2003). Also, perceived organizational support, in the form of management commitment to safety, has 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, on which the psychological contract is based, may play an important role in understanding both organizational and safety attitudes and behaviors.

The present study expands previous research on social exchange constructs in a safety context to include psychological contracts and extends the understanding of safety attitudes and behaviors. A psychological contract of safety perspective also provides a more balanced view of safety as a contractual exchange relationship between two parties. This is in contrast to the traditional, one-sided view of safety as one party (the employer) versus the other (the employee). Most often the safety literature focuses on the responsibilities and commitment of management in relation to safety, especially on how safety managers or leaders can improve safety culture and climate (e.g. Booth, 1996; DeJoy, 1994; Friend & Pagliari, 2000; Skinner, 2001). This management emphasis is endorsed in the extensive reviews of safety climate measures by Flin, Mearns, O'Connor, and Bryden (2000) and Guldenmund (2000). Both reviews found that, of the three most frequently measured safety climate dimensions, two dimensions related to safety management themes in terms of management commitment and safety systems. The other dimension, risk, was related to employee risk taking behavior and perceptions of hazards and risks. Similarly, safety legislation and safety advertising campaigns in Australia tend to emphasize the responsibilities of employers in relation to safety. When the focus is on employees, it is usually in relation to safety attitudes and behavior, rather than employee safety responsibilities and obligations. With a psychological contract of safety, the perceived social exchange between employers and employees is included in the safety framework. The focus is on the reciprocal safety obligations.

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