



Psychological contract breach and employee health: The relevance of unmet obligations for mental and physical health

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of psychological contract breach (PCB) on employee mental and physical health (SF-12) using a sample of 3,870 employees derived from a German longitudinal linked employer-employee study across various industries. Results of multivariate regression models and mediation analysis suggest that PCB affects both the mental and the physical health of employees but is more threatening to employee mental health. In addition, mental health partly mediates the effects of PCB on physical health. Also, the findings of this study show that the relative importance of obligations not met by employers differs according to the specific contents of the psychological contract. In conclusion, the results of this study support the idea that PCB works as a psychosocial stressor at work that represents a crucial risk to employee health.

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La ruptura del contrato psicológico y la salud de los empleados: la importancia de las obligaciones incumplidas para la salud mental

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza los efectos de la ruptura del contrato psicológico (PCB, según sus siglas en inglés) sobre la salud mental y física (SF-12) de los empleados, utilizando una muestra de 3.870 empleados obtenida de un estudio longitudinal que vincula empleador con empleado en distintas empresas alemanas. Los resultados de los modelos de regresión múltiple y de análisis de mediación indican que la PCB afecta tanto a la salud mental como a la física del empleado, pero es más amenazante para la salud mental. Además, la salud mental modera parcialmente los efectos del PCB en la salud física. Igualmente, los resultados del estudio muestran que la importancia relativa de las obligaciones no cumplidas por parte del empleado varía en función del contenido específico del contrato psicológico. En conclusión, los resultados del estudio avalan la idea de que el PCB funciona como un agente estresante psicosocial en el trabajo, lo que representa un gran riesgo para la salud del empleado.

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The increasing complexity of employment relationships is particularly evident in a changing relationship of demands and gratifications (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). As a result, current research on employer-employee relations now

views these interactions as multidimensional social exchange relationships rather than as just a (direct) exchange of explicit demands and gratifications as captured by standard employment contracts (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Rousseau, 1989, 1995). In line with this approach, psychological contracts are considered to be a key concept for understanding modern employment relationships, as well as employment behavior in general (Conway & Briner, 2005; Guest, 2004; Shore & Tetrick, 1994; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo,

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2007). These unwritten, implicit contracts refer to employees' expectations regarding reciprocal exchange agreements with their employers that arise from the employees' interaction with the organization (Freese & Schalk, 1996; Rousseau, 1995; Rousseau & Greller, 1994), implying that employees expect organizations to meet certain obligations. However, if employees perceive that the organization has failed to fulfill one or more of its obligations, researchers recognize that this psychological contract breach (PCB) (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 1995) leads to the experience of job strain. More specifically, research has recognized PCB to predict employee health, because such an imbalance in the employment relationship acts as a psychosocial stressor in the work environment (Robbins, Ford, & Tetrick, 2012). In line with the effort-reward imbalance model (Siegrist, 1996), we argue that the perception of PCB represents an imbalance in the employment relationship that works as a psychosocial work stressor that leads to negative emotional states and perceived stress, which in turn lead to impaired employee mental and physical health. In this research, we focus on the stressor-strain link by analyzing the association of PCB with mental and physical health. Until now, research on the relationship between PCB and employee health has mainly focused on specific (mental) health symptoms (Gracia, Silla, Peiró, & Fortes-Ferreira, 2007) and the effect of PCB on employees' physical health in particular has been largely overlooked. Empirical studies have shown that PCB increases employee burnout (e.g., Chambel & Oliveira-Cruz, 2010; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Topa Cantisano, Morales Domínguez, & García, 2007) and is negatively associated with psychological well-being (e.g., Conway & Briner, 2002a). The first main aim of this study fills this research gap by investigating the effects of PCB on both the mental and the physical health of employees using a version of the 12-item Short Form Health Survey (the SF-12 questionnaire) (Andersen, Mühlbacher, Nübling, Schupp, & Wagner, 2007). The SF-12 assesses a person's health-related quality of life as a comprehensive measure of individual health and therefore enables us to broaden the scope of previous approaches from quite specific health symptoms to a more general perspective on employee health. We use stepwise multivariate regression analysis (hierarchical regression) to compare the effects of PCB on both of these health dimensions. Moreover, we add to the results of previous studies on the relationship between PCB and health outcomes by examining how employees' mental health mediates effects of PCB on employee physical health. The consideration of this mediation effect has been completely missing in other studies on this topic.

The second main aim of this study is to draw particular attention to a more detailed view of how PCB adds to the prediction of employee poor health by exploring the relative impact of breaches of specific obligations included in psychological contracts. For the most part, recent studies have used comprehensive measures of the overall or average extent of unmet obligations to assess the effects of PCB. Our study adds to this research by considering breaches of specific contents of the psychological contract (e.g., long-term job security, job autonomy, and social appreciation) as well as an overall imbalance in the psychological contract. So far, empirical research has neglected that unmet obligations about different contents of psychological contracts might differ in their relevance for explaining employee health outcomes. More precisely, how strongly PCB as a work stressor affects employee health is likely to depend on the specific content that has been breached.

Additionally, the design of this study is able to advance current knowledge as previous research mostly involved case studies of small samples of specific employee groups, such as soldiers (e.g., Chambel & Oliveira-Cruz, 2010) or managers (e.g., Guerrero & Herrbach, 2008). Furthermore, most of the empirical studies have been based on cross-sectional data and did not allow conclusions about causality (Conway & Briner, 2005, 2009). By using two waves

of a German Linked Employer-Employee (LEEP-B3) Survey, we are able to conduct a longitudinal analysis involving 3,870 panel cases from 100 large companies representing various industries. From this large sample, which included employees from various occupational and sociodemographic groups, we were able to capture complex employment relationships in which psychological contracts are in place. This enables us to overcome the limitations of studies that have used predominantly cross-sectional analysis with highly specific samples and small sample sizes.

Psychological Contracts in Organizations

Building on the assumptions put forth in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the psychological contract approach explores the processes and contents of employment relationships. In particular, the aim of this approach is to cover the unwritten and possibly implicit elements of employment relationships that are based on individual perceptions and reciprocity expectations. Psychological contracts are basically defined as "individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization" (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). These beliefs include the fact that employees expect organizations to reward their efforts because they are bound by reciprocal obligations (Rousseau, 1989). The literature on different aspects of psychological contracts is extensive (for a detailed overview, see Conway & Briner, 2009). Some research focuses on describing differences in content, such as whether the contracts are relational or transactional (Rousseau, 1990). "Content" refers to the specific reciprocal obligations that characterize an individual's psychological contract (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). Theoretically, obligations in such contracts may include all conceivable aspects of the employment relationship (Rousseau, 1990); for example, they may involve easily quantifiable aspects (pay, working hours), social aspects (a pleasant atmosphere, social activities) and a long-term perspective (job security, career opportunities) or a short-term one (an interesting new work task). Guest (1998) argues that, in their search for a general theory, researchers should go beyond merely describing the contents of psychological contracts and seek to evaluate their status, such as determining whether obligations are being met (fulfillment) or not being met (breach).

Psychological Contract Breach (PCB)

Psychological contract breach is a subjective experience in which the employee perceives that the organization has failed to adequately fulfill one or more of the obligations included in the psychological contract (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1989). According to Morrison and Robinson (1997), PCB may be perceived to have occurred without actually having taken place; in other words, if employees believe that a breach has occurred, this perception may affect their behavior or attitudes whether or not there actually was a breach of the contract (Robinson, 1996). In this study, we specifically discuss PCB as an imbalance between what the employee expects the employer to be obligated to provide and what is perceived to be actually provided by the employer, concerning either the whole psychological contract (overall imbalance) or only specific aspects.

However, the relevance of the breach goes beyond the sheer nonfulfillment of expectations. If reciprocity is a key element of social relationships (Gouldner, 1960), an unfulfilled expectation of reciprocity is likely to harm the foundation of a relationship. Thus, even though PCB is often considered to be the opposite of contract fulfillment, this dichotomy is not quite so clear-cut (Conway & Briner, 2009).

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