



The seasons of the psychological contract: Overcoming the silent transformations of the employer–employee relationship



Sybille Persson^a, David Wasieleski^{b,c,1}

^a ICN Business School, Nancy-Metz and CEREFIGE, University of Lorraine, 13 rue Michel Ney, 54000 Nancy, France

^b Duquesne University, 600 Forbes Avenue, 918 Rockwell Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15282, United States

^c ICN Business School, Nancy-Metz, France

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ABSTRACT

In this piece, we advocate a broader conceptualization of the psychological contract to incorporate a more comprehensive understanding of its characteristics and evolution over time. We provide an alternative conceptualization in order to sustain the PC by management practices from an accompaniment stance. Typically, the psychological contract is assessed by examining idiosyncratic information that carries particular meaning for either party, as well as standard information that is generalizable to a larger population. Traditional Western ideologies and methods of thought regarding the workplace relationship often focus on outcomes, or are caught up in defining the specific duties that each party has to the other. Here, we argue that this assessment must acknowledge that the information is not always defined by a specific event or action. The dialogue needs to change to establishing a more holistic understanding of individuals' interactions in organizations, informed by the Chinese philosophical tradition. With this understanding, comes an ability to positively affect how the employer and employee relate. We propose an alternate ideology characterized by the establishment of “letting happen” and a broader shared meaning between parties in the relationship.

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1. Introduction

“We are surrounded by the marvellous, which sustains us like air itself, but which we do not perceive.”

[–Charles Baudelaire]

How employer–employee relationships change over time takes prominent importance in the management literatures. The changing nature of organizations in response to turbulent, fast-moving business environments has created new workplace situations (Chaudhry, Wayne, & Schalk, 2009; Van der Smissen, Schalk, & Freese, 2013), which as a consequence, revise employment relationships (Guest, 2004). One core aspect of the employer–employee relationship involves the psychological contract which has become an established field of research (Rousseau, de Rosario, Jardat, & Pesqueux, 2014). This refers to the “individual beliefs shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organizations” (Rousseau, 1995, p.10). To understand employment relationships in this transitional business environment, research has focused on psychological contracts (Conway & Briner, 2005; Shore, Porter, & Zahra, 2004). Since “understanding and effectively managing these psychological contracts can help organizations thrive” (Rousseau, 2004, p.120), it is important for researchers to comprehend the evolving nature of psychological contracts in the workplace.

¹ Tel.: +1 412 396 1092.

At the same time, it is widely believed among management scholars that organizational change has an effect on psychological contract formation and maintenance (Rousseau, 2003; Shore et al., 2004; Freese, 2007). However, research on change and psychological contracts remains underdeveloped (Van der Smissen et al., 2013). Our present paper aims to address the transformations of the employment relationship with regard to the psychological contract. Our motivation in this paper is to generate a more thorough understanding of the psychological contract. More theoretical clarity is needed in order to promote more sustainable employment relationships (D'Art & Turner, 2006).

While it is accepted that psychological contracts change in form and quality over the entire course of employment (Lester et al., n.d), the revisions to the relationship are thought of in terms of discernable changes to the relationship. The psychological contract is useful for explaining how cognitive, emotional, and relational processes affect employee engagement within an organization. Most research on the psychological contract focuses on particular phases of the interaction, and on identifying the components of psychological contracts themselves (Uen, Chien, & Yen, 2009). While both parties to the psychological contract acknowledge that the employment relationship is changing (DeMeuse, Bergmann, & Lester, 2001), there remains a lack of clarity about the evolving nature of the psychological contract and how misunderstandings between parties occur, leading to further breach. We agree with the sentiment that an appreciation of how these employment “agreements or disagreements are reached and their impact on the parties' behavior is essential” for a more comprehensive understanding of workplace relationships (Chen & Miller, 2011, p. 33).

Our purpose in this paper is to expand the human resource management field's understanding of psychological contracts (PCs) so as to better incorporate *change* within the context of an employment relationship. In order to be able to effectively recommend useful strategies to human resource managers for sustaining workplace relationships, scholars must gain a fuller view of how employer–employee connections develop, evolve, and adapt over time (Chan & Schmitt, 2000). This involves thinking about the psychological contract in a different way. Currently, psychological contract research focuses much on how to control aspects of the employment relationship in order to generate a more sustainable PC—the laudable goal of theoretical efforts. However, “it may not be possible for an employer to control all, or even most, of the many factors that influence perceptions of the employment relationship” (Paul, Niehoff, & Turnley, 2000, p. 479).

To understand psychological contract transformations, we posit that the theoretical focus needs to shift away from an emphasis on trigger events and specific actions as being the impetuses for psychological contract breach. The field's current understanding of psychological contracts is centered on the antecedents to breach and subsequent violation (Ng, Feldman, & Butts, 2014). Thus, scholars tend to objectify the causes of breach by identifying the triggers for the relationship change. Arguably, there is a negative connotation associated with the PC change and much work in the field assumes the relationship will actually deteriorate over time (Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994; Sparrow, 1998). Given this premise, it is understandable that much effort in the literature has been spent on identifying trigger events or actions that help cause the change in the relationship. While we recognize this is indeed helpful for increasing our comprehension of employer–employee exchanges, it does not, in our view, account for the entire variance of change.

One of the potential triggers is simply an expectation gap between the contracting parties related to a perceived deviation from the core values shared between the employee and the company (Turnley & Feldman, 1999a; Uen et al., 2009), ultimately leading to a negatively altered workplace dynamic. For instance, theories of expectancy demonstrate that different perceptions of what is contributed and what is owed in a social relationship often lead to a breakdown of the relationship itself (Burgoon, 1993; Hayibor, 2012). Part of the problem is that the nature of these expectations is not fully understood. Our position in this paper is that PCs need a new conceptual starting point through which to view the expectations and obligations of the employment relationship.

To ultimately improve the workplace relationship it becomes necessary to provide managers with the “knowledge and resources they need to understand how they are part and parcel of their relationship with each employee they manage” (Uen et al., 2009, p. 35). D'Art and Turner (2006) state that employment relationships, despite the transitions they go through, have core features that are enduring and constant. By rite of being an employment relationship, there exist some permanent and consistent aspects. We build on this notion in our paper by arguing that fluid, silent transformations are an enduring (and, unavoidable) part of the employer–employee interaction. While D'Art and Turnley's argument centers on the Western assumptions associated with the market, we take an Eastern view that the relationship is living and goes through constant, invisible transformations.

We posit that the *psychological contract has no form*; that the relationship between employer and employee needs to be re-conceived as something less documentable, and more holistic and fluid. This theoretical paper re-examines the current comprehension of the employer–employee relationship from an Eastern philosophical perspective in an effort to improve workplace relations. “Understanding is more often used to try to alter an outcome than to repeat or perpetuate it” (Diamond, 1999, p. 17).

We propose leaving this ethnocentric way of thinking opening the door to indigenous Chinese philosophies and their associated psychology (Hwang, 2012). The Eastern philosophies—especially Chinese philosophy—are very comfortable with change. Chinese thought is positioned to integrate change in its way of thinking (Chia, 2014) and even to take advantage of it. Specifically, we address the tacit, intangible aspects of employment arrangements, characterized by the psychological contract. Since they are cognitive in nature, the perception of the actions of each party which is affected by many factors is in a constant state of change (Makin, Cooper, & Cox, 1996). We propose another kind of reading (and associated knowledge) with the concept of “silent transformations” (Chia, 2014; Jullien, 2011a) applied to PC. It should be noted that researchers in the field offer that it is “plausible that far more types or dimensions of the psychological contract exist” (Scheel & Mohr, 2013, p. 391). We believe this provides us an opening for establishing new ways of thinking about the life of the contract and evolving nature of the relationship. We add a “silent” transformation element to the understanding of the psychological contract.

In this present piece, we advocate a broader conceptualization of the psychological contract to incorporate a more comprehensive understanding of its characteristics and evolution over time (Suazo, Martinez, & Sandoval, 2011). We provide an alternative view in

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