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What do employees want and why? An exploration of employees' preferred psychological contract elements across career stages

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Abstract
Employees' psychological contracts comprise their beliefs about what they have to contribute to their organizations and what inducements they will receive in return. One recommended approach to attract and retain employees is to design psychological contracts that allow them to contribute in desirable ways and receive attractive inducements. However, we know little about the factors that affect psychological contract preferences. We present a qualitative study on the preferred psychological contracts of employees who are in different career stages. Our findings reveal that the roles and self-concepts that employees take on at a particular career stage may shape preferences for stage-relevant contributions and inducements. These findings advance psychological contract theory by highlighting the plausible link between employees' career stages and their psychological contract preferences.

Keywords
career stages, contributions, inducements, psychological contract

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Introduction

The psychological contract refers to 'individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization' (Rousseau, 1995: 9). Based on these beliefs, employees make inferences about what employers have promised them as organizational inducements, in return for the workplace contributions that employers expect of them (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2002). The literature recommends that organizations meet employees' psychological contract needs, in order to attract and retain them (Conway et al., 2011; Schein, 1965). Organizations that present employees with an opportunity to contribute in desirable ways (e.g. work independently), and provide attractive inducements (e.g. career progression) will do better in the retention of talent. Although psychological contract literature has given considerable attention to the consequences of psychological contract changes (see Conway and Briner, 2009, for a review), there are limited theoretical and empirical insights into how employers can create psychological contracts that match employees' preferences on contributions and inducements (collectively referred to as 'psychological contract elements' here; see Low and Bordia, 2011).

Take the case of employee psychological contract contributions. Research has examined employees' perception of the extent to which they are obligated to contribute, or have contributed, various items to their employers (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2002; Tekleab and Taylor, 2003). For instance, Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2002) asked research participants to indicate the extent to which they believed they had promised their employer, and the extent to which they had fulfilled, various contribution items, such as 'work extra hours when necessary', 'volunteer to do tasks that are not part of the job' and 'adapt to changes in the way the job is done'. However, these studies do not differentiate what employees *wanted* to contribute in their psychological contracts as opposed to what they had contributed out of obligation; in fact, there have been instances where employees contributed certain items unwillingly (e.g. salesmen who felt coerced to promote radically new products; see Kauppila et al., 2008).

Similarly, studies on employees' psychological contract inducements have examined employees' perceptions of the extent to which their employers are obligated to provide, or have provided, various inducement items (e.g. Bellou, 2007; Irving and Montes, 2009). For example, Bellou (2007) invited research participants to rate the extent to which their employer was obligated to provide them, and the extent to which their employer had actually provided them, various inducement items such as 'opportunity to promote', 'high pay' and 'continuous education'. Although the research provides insights into the inducements that are available to employees, it does not indicate whether the employees prefer them (De Vos and Meganck, 2009; Lambert et al., 2006). This has obvious implications for employee satisfaction. Indeed, Irving and Montes (2009) found that meeting employees' expectations on various inducement items was not always associated with high levels of employee satisfaction. This suggests that the inducements provided by organizations can miss their mark (Irving and Montes, 2009).

The research reported here aims to extend psychological contract theory by exploring employees' preferred psychological contract contributions and inducements, collectively referred to as preferred psychological contract elements. Note our focus is not on the

state of the current psychological contract, but on the make-up of the ideal psychological contract from the employee's point of view. Employee needs evolve with changing circumstances, and we wish to highlight the fact that the current psychological contract may differ from the preferred one. An understanding of employee needs and their preferred psychological contract elements will enhance mutuality (shared understanding between employers and employees on the psychological contract; see Rousseau, 2001). Organizations can improve attraction and retention of job incumbents by offering work conditions that meet employee preferences, and thereby form psychological contracts that strengthen employer–employee relationships.

We also wondered what shapes employee preferences for the psychological contract elements. To derive insights into the origins of employee preferences, we sought insights from the career-stage theory. Career research has shown that employees' beliefs about their choices, needs and attitudes vary with their career stages (Lam et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2011; Post et al., 2013). This suggests that employees' career stages might influence their preferences for psychological contract elements. In linking career stages with psychological contract preferences, we use the notions of role and self-concept as socio-cognitive mechanisms to explain why employees might perceive certain terms of exchange as desirable (Low and Bordia, 2011). The examination of these socio-cognitive mechanisms expands career theory as well, as it delineates how career stages may shape employees' attitudes and beliefs (Inkson and King, 2011). In the following section, we relate the idea of employees' psychological contract preferences to their career stages.

Career stages and psychological contract preferences

Career development literature has generally divided an employee's career into stages (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). Each career stage depicts a significant career segment where employees harbor specific attitudes towards the employment relationship (Carlson and Rotondo, 2001; Lam et al., 2011). Among the career-stage models developed, Dalton et al.'s (1977) and Super's (1957, 1980) models stand out, as they focus on two key characteristics of employees' career-stage-relevant attitudes: their responsibility to the organization, and their needs and aspirations, respectively.

Dalton et al.'s (1977) career-stage model portrays the tasks and responsibilities that employees would take on at different career stages. According to the model, employees may experience the apprentice, colleague, mentor and sponsor career stages (Dalton et al., 1977). Employees in the apprentice stage would carry out simpler and more routine work. Employees in the colleague stage handle substantial work independently. Employees in the mentor stage impart expertise to other employees besides performing their own tasks. Employees in the sponsor stage exert significant influence in their organizations. As employees experience different Dalton et al. (1977) career stages, they might find it beneficial to make certain contributions in those career stages.

Super's (1957, 1980) career-stage model depicts the specific developmental aspirations and personal concerns of employees in different career stages. According to Super (1957, 1980), employees may face the exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement career stages. Employees in the exploration stage are concerned with making the right vocational choice. Employees in the establishment stage are keen to pursue

a career with their organizations, and emphasize workplace success. Employees in the maintenance stage remain productive in their organizations; however, besides workplace demands, they are concerned with the non-work aspects of life. Employees in the disengagement stage will leave their organizations soon, so they spend time and effort preparing for their life after leaving their present workplaces. Given the different developmental aspirations and personal concerns felt, employees in different career stages might seek different inducements to address their needs (Super, 1957, 1980).

Low and Bordia (2011) drew insights from the social cognition literature and offered two theoretical mechanisms to explain how career stages and psychological contract preferences may be linked. The first hails from role theory (Morgan and Schwalbe, 1990). Employees' role within the organizational context refers to a set of expectations on how they should behave (Parker, 2007; Van Sell et al., 1981). The role expectations exert normative pressure on employees' attitudes and behaviors (Biddle, 1986; Callero, 1994). Employees' beliefs about their tasks, responsibilities and concerns could vary with the roles they play in different career stages (Neale and Griffin, 2006).

Second, employees' career stages and preferences for contributions and inducements can be linked using the idea of the self-concept. The self-concept reflects how individuals see themselves and serves as their schemas for making choices and initiating action (Cooper and Thatcher, 2010). Employees generally want to reinforce their self-concepts (Cooper and Thatcher, 2010). As such, their beliefs about their tasks, responsibilities, and concerns could vary with how they see themselves at different career stages. Role identities and self-concepts are related but distinct concepts. Whereas role expectations exert normative pressure externally on individuals, the self-concept acts as an internal regulator that guides individuals' beliefs (Kawakami et al., 2012).

In sum, our main research aim is to explore the nature of psychological contract preferences. Moreover, we wanted to examine whether (and how) employees' career stages shape psychological contracts preferences. Although there is some conceptual work proposing these linkages, to the best of our knowledge, ours is the first empirical examination of the ways in which role identities and self-concepts associated with career stages may shape these preferences. We therefore raised these research questions:

Research Question 1: What role do employees' career stages (Dalton et al., 1977) play in shaping their preferences for psychological contract contributions?

Research Question 2: What role do employees' career stages (Super, 1957, 1980) play in shaping their preferences for psychological contract inducements?

Given the exploratory nature of the research, we adopted a qualitative methodological approach as described next.

Method

Psychological contracts, career stages, self-concepts and role identity are complex, intrapersonal concepts that play dynamic interconnected roles in career pathways. We hoped to capture some of these nuances in our research. Hence, we adopted a qualitative method

to elicit employee psychological contract preferences and to understand how these are shaped by career stages. Qualitative research allows researchers to understand the actors' point of view on an issue in a way that the responses are unbiased by extant research (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). This unbiased and fresh perspective from the participants was important for the current research because we were hoping to amalgamate two separate strains of research to create novel understanding of employees' psychological contract preferences. More importantly, it allowed us to understand any divergence in the way these interconnected concepts were construed by the participants. We conducted semi-structured interviews with employees, exploring their preferred psychological contract preferences and the reasons for these preferences.

Participants

Thirty Singapore government employees were purposefully recruited for the interviews. They were chosen based on their organizational positions and tenures, so as to offer enough career-stage diversity. The interviewees were divided equally by gender, held various positions (i.e. nine executives, 12 junior managers, six middle-managers and three senior managers), and came from nine unrelated organizations. Their ages ranged from 25 to 65 years, and organizational tenures ranged from two days to 40 years. They were employed on a permanent basis, and were mostly university graduates. The interviewees' demographics are provided in Table 1.

Data collection and analysis

The interviews were held from September to November 2011. During the interviews, the first author presented broad questions that encouraged the participants to express their views on their preferences for what to contribute to and receive from their organizations and the context of their career stages. The questions did not inhibit them from discussing any additional issues related to the core topics. Sample questions were as follows: 'How would you describe your role in relation to the people you deal with in the organization?' (organizational role); 'What are your main concerns in terms of developing yourself at work?' (self-concept); 'If you are given a choice, what would you prefer to contribute to your organization?' (preferred psychological contract contributions); and 'What do you think are the incentives that your organization can provide to further motivate you?'(preferred psychological contract inducements).

In addition, the first author asked the participants questions aimed at clarifying their responses (e.g. getting the participants to explain their preferences). At the end of the interviews, the first author also presented a brief description of Dalton et al.'s (1977) and Super's (1957, 1980) models to the participants. Each participant was then asked to choose a career stage from each model which best described his or her present career situation. For example, Dalton et al.'s (1977) colleague career stage was described to the participants as the stage where the individual could handle substantial work and produce significant results, and Super's (1957, 1980) maintenance career stage was described to the participants as the stage where the individual wanted stability at work, so as to better fulfill work and non-work demands.

Table 1. Demographic information of interviewees.

No.	Gender	Age	Position	Organizational tenure
1	Male	31 years	Manager	8 months
2	Female	39 years	Teacher	10 years
3	Male	31 years	Senior Assistant Director	2 years 5 months
4	Female	35 years	Senior Manager	1 month
5	Female	27 years	Manager	2 weeks
6	Male	25 years	Analyst	3 months
7	Male	39 years	Senior IT Policy Officer	2 years 6 months
8	Female	35 years	Program Manager	2 days
9	Male	49 years	Head of Department	28 years
10	Female	52 years	Divisional Director	30 years
11	Female	32 years	Head of Department	1 year 8 months
12	Male	45 years	Divisional Director	20 years
13	Female	65 years	Teacher	40 years
14	Male	54 years	Uniformed Officer	28 years
15	Male	45 years	Director	25 years
16	Male	26 years	Analyst	1 year 4 months
17	Male	26 years	Economist	1 year 6 months
18	Female	60 years	Clerical Officer	27 years
19	Female	31 years	Manager	4 years 2 months
20	Female	36 years	Senior Officer	7 months
21	Male	28 years	Program Manager	10 months
22	Female	26 years	Economic Officer	3 weeks
23	Male	25 years	Information Officer	2 weeks
24	Male	26 years	Policy Officer	1 year 3 months
25	Female	25 years	Senior Officer	2 years
26	Female	33 years	Deputy Director	5 years
27	Female	48 years	Program Manager	10 years
28	Male	50 years	Department Head	12 years
29	Male	40 years	Assistant Head	9 years
30	Female	55 years	Divisional Director	5 years

The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes each, and were audio-recorded and transcribed (yielding 150 pages of transcripts). Following the tenets of constant comparative analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), the first author conducted preliminary analysis of the data gathered after each interview to make sure that major emergent themes were addressed in all interviews. Data collection ceased when no additional themes emerged from the interviews. The interview data yielded two sets of themes. One set involved the themes of Dalton et al.'s (1977) career stages, and the roles, self-concepts and preferred psychological contract contributions relevant to those stages. The other set examined the themes of Super's (1957, 1980) career stages, and the roles, self-concepts and preferred psychological contract inducements relevant to those stages.

Themes were developed from the data using a combination of inductive and literature-guided processes. We conducted the thematic analysis based on suggestions provided by King (2004). The first author generated the initial template of codes by reviewing a sub-sample of five interview transcripts, in light of relevant career stage and psychological contract literature. For instance, the codes for labeling career-stage-related roles and self-concepts, such as 'learn and get up to speed', 'I am working under closer supervision', 'keen on proving oneself', and 'I am preserving my status quo', were adopted from career-stage literature. The codes for labeling psychological contract elements, such as 'take initiative to carry out new and challenging assignments' and 'flexible work schedule', were extracted from psychological contract literature.

Additional interview transcripts were then analyzed and the template codes were revised, where required, to more aptly describe the roles, self-concepts and psychological contract element themes that emerged from the transcripts. For example, the role code of a mentor-stage employee was amended from 'mentor others' to 'guide and develop other colleagues' for greater clarity. The emergent themes were also compared to the literature iteratively, and the template was refined till it captured the data from all 30 transcripts adequately (Guest et al., 2006).

To check whether the interview data were reliably classified into the themes, an independent rater also analyzed all the interview transcripts. There was high inter-rater agreement between the independent rater and the first author, with Kappa coefficients ranging from .70 to .92 (Cohen, 1960). For transcript extracts on which the first author and the rater disagreed about the classification, they read the extracts again and discussed them until there was agreement on each classification.

Results

Each participant was classified into both Dalton et al.'s (1977) and Super's (1957, 1980) career stages based on self-rating. With respect to Dalton et al.'s (1977) career stages, seven participants identified with the apprentice stage, nine with the colleague stage, nine with the mentor stage, and five with the sponsor stage. Based on Super's (1957, 1980) career stages, eight participants chose the exploration stage, seven chose the establishment stage, 10 chose the maintenance stage and five chose the disengagement stage.

Career stages, roles, self-concepts and preferred contributions (Dalton et al., 1977)

Based on the participants' descriptions of their organizational roles and self-concepts in each career stage (Dalton et al., 1977), various examples for the role and self-concept themes emerged. These themes were found to be largely consistent with the literature's depiction of Dalton et al.'s (1977) career-stage model (e.g. Friday et al., 2004; Gibson, 2003). For instance, the role and self-concept of participants in the apprentice career stage bore the themes of 'learn and get up to speed' and 'I am working under closer supervision', respectively (Carlson and Rotondo, 2001). The interviews also yielded eight themes of preferred psychological contract contribution, namely, 'direct work to

achieve organizational or departmental objectives', 'exercise directed creativity and initiative', 'facilitate cooperation and unity among staff in the department', 'make suggestions to improve the organization', 'quickly integrate oneself into the organization', 'take initiative to carry out new and challenging assignments', 'take initiative to help subordinates improve knowledge and work-related skills', and 'take on voluntary, extra-role work activities'. Except for the 'quickly integrate oneself into the organization' theme, the participants' descriptions in this regard were thematically similar to various psychological contract contribution items identified in the literature (e.g. Hom et al., 2009; Rousseau, 1990; Seeck and Parzefall, 2008; Tekleab and Taylor, 2003; Tsui et al., 1997).

The various Dalton et al. (1977) career stage, role expectation, self-concept and preferred psychological contract contribution themes were organized according to each participant's response. The links between the participants' preferred contributions and their career-stage-relevant roles and self-concepts are examined next.

Apprentice stage

In regards to role, the participants who identified themselves in the apprentice career stage typically said that their organizations saw them as fresh entrants who should learn and get up to speed. For instance, an interviewee in this career stage said: 'My organization sees me as someone who is learning the ropes and needs to be nurtured' (Interviewee 16, male, 26 years old, analyst, one year and four months with organization).

In terms of self-concept, these participants felt that they should work under closer supervision. They opined that they were new to their organizations and should consult their more experienced colleagues about their work. An apprentice stage interviewee put it this way: 'I guess I'm still very new here. So I check with my buddy how I can do well in this organization. And sometimes, I also ask my boss for advice directly to get her direct feedback' (Interviewee 22, female, 26 years old, economic officer, three weeks with organization).

Owing to such a role expectation and self-concept, most of these participants felt that, even if they were to exhibit creativity and initiative at their workplaces, they would do so largely under supervisory guidance, as this interviewee said: 'It feels safer to work under guidance. This is especially so when you're still new and unsure' (Interviewee 23, male, 25 years old, information officer, two weeks with organization).

Interviewee 5 (female, 27 years old, manager, two weeks with organization) who was in the apprentice stage, added that being able to quickly integrate herself into her organization was her contribution to the employer. She believed that she should do so as she felt she was expected by her employer to learn and get up to speed. Moreover, she wanted to reciprocate to the supervision given by quickly becoming a proficient employee.

Colleague stage

The participants in the colleague career stage believed that they played the role of working independently in their organizations. For instance, a colleague-stage interviewee said: 'The job function here is more of middle manager level, so I don't think there are many colleagues at our level who will need to be supervised' (Interviewee 4, female, 35 years old, senior manager, one month with organization).

These participants held the self-concept of being proficient contributors. For example, Interviewee 17 (male, 26 years old, economist, one year and six months with organization) commented that he felt competent enough to handle work issues by himself. The colleague-stage participants highlighted that they would take on new and challenging assignments, and even extra-role work activities, in terms of preferred contributions. They believed that handling new and challenging assignments, and engaging in extra-role work activities, were effective ways to show their employers that they could fulfill the role of working independently. As an illustration, consider this remark from a colleague-stage interviewee: 'I want to move into more strategic work. That will be more challenging' (Interviewee 4, female, 35 years old, senior manager, one month with organization).

They might also have chosen to take on challenging assignments and extra-role work because they saw themselves as proficient contributors who were capable of doing so, like this interviewee: 'Of course, as I am proficient in what I'm handling in my own area of responsibilities, it would be good if I can take on more stuff in order to be stretched' (Interviewee 17, male, 26 years old, economist, one year and 6 months with organization).

Mentor stage

The participants in the mentor career stage had adopted formal or informal responsibilities of overseeing more junior colleagues, and were deemed to have adequate knowledge or expertise to share with newer organizational members. These participants noted that they had a role in guiding and developing other colleagues, in addition to their own work tasks. This was how an interviewee in the mentor stage described her role: 'Because of my background and experience, I am seen as a key person to help show junior colleagues what to do' (Interviewee 20, female, 36 years old, senior officer, seven months with organization).

Regarding self-concept, the participants saw themselves as having the capability and capacity to coach others in the organization. An interviewee in this career stage said: 'I manage a team of four senior executives at my organization. I have supervisory duties' (Interviewee 19, female, 31 years old, manager, four years and two months with organization).

These participants seemed comfortable playing the mentor role and implementing the self-concept of a coach. As such, almost all of them highlighted that they actually liked sharing their know-how with and guiding other colleagues. To illustrate, a mentor-stage participant said: 'I enjoy coaching my three colleagues. It is quite a satisfying experience to see them become more confident of their work' (Interviewee 27, female, 48 years old, program manager, 10 years with organization).

Sponsor stage

The participants who identified with the sponsor career stage said that their organizations expected them to exercise significant influence in their organizations. They also seemed to bear considerable accountability for the organizational outcomes that could result from their influence. This is a sample response of their role in the organization: 'My

bosses expect me to be more forceful as a leader, and to be closer to what a Director does. There's a certain decision power at my level' (Interviewee 11, female, 32 years old, head of department, one year and eight months with organization).

These participants also saw themselves as leaders who were charting directions for their organizations. This self-concept was evident in a sponsor-stage participant's reply: 'As the leader, I plan our strategic direction. I'm looking at how can I move my organization to the next level, give it more prominence, and work on projects that will make us the best' (Interviewee 10, female, 52 years old, divisional director, 30 years with organization).

Given this role and self-concept, most sponsor-stage participants highlighted that they enjoyed directing work to achieve organizational or departmental objectives. For instance, this participant said:

> As a manager I have a say in how resources in my team are used. I can thus shape the objectives of my team. As I can optimize the resources, I have a say in my department's direction content-wise. This in some way gives me opportunity to do what I could not do as an individual worker, and I enjoy that. (Interviewee 11, female, 32 years old, head of department, one year and eight months with organization)

Some of these interviewees also said that they liked to facilitate cooperation and unity among staff in the department and make suggestions to improve the organization. Doing so helped them to enact the role of delivering organizational outcomes and to implement the self-concept of a leader.

From the above results, we make two observations. First, the participants at different career stages seemed to prefer different psychological contract contributions. Second, the participants' role and self-concept sub-themes could plausibly explain why they had preferred making certain contributions. Table 2 shows the participants' role and self-concept themes arising from their career stages (Dalton et al., 1977), corresponding preferred psychological contract contribution themes, and the illustrative quotes supporting the themes.

Career stages, roles, self-concepts and preferred inducements (Super, 1957, 1980)

The 30 participants' transcripts also contained various examples for role and self-concept themes linked to Super's (1957, 1980) career stages. These themes were largely aligned to the employee roles and self-concepts described in the literature involving Super's (1957, 1980) career-stage model (e.g. De Vos et al., 2005; Gibson, 2004; Lam et al., 2011). For example, participants in the establishment career stage encompassed the role theme of 'keen on proving oneself' (Ornstein et al., 1989). In terms of their self-concept, the 'I am a go-getter' theme also emerged (Ornstein et al., 1989). The participants' descriptions of what their employers should have provided to motivate them were coded under the theme of preferred psychological contract inducement. A total of 11 preferred inducement themes were identified from the interview transcripts, namely, 'autonomy to do job in own way', 'career guidance', 'constant information on corporate issues', 'flexible work

Table 2. Interviewees' career stages (Dalton et al., 1977) and examples of preferred contributions via roles and self-concepts.

Career stages (frequency)	Roles (frequency)	Self-concepts (frequency)	Preferred psychological contract contributions (frequency)
Apprentice (7 responses)	Learn and get up to speed (7 responses) 'I believe my organization sees me as fresh coming into the working world and trying to figure things out.' (Interviewee 23, male, 25 years old, information officer, 2 weeks with organization)	I am working under closer supervision (7 responses) 'I stand to be guided by my supervisors. I need to learn the ropes, to understand how things work, to make sure my analysis is rigorous enough.' (Interviewee 16, male, 26 years old, analyst, 1 year and 4 months with organization)	Exercise directed creativity and initiative (5 responses) 'Policy research is something that really intrigues me and gets me excited. But it has to be done in a setting where there is guidance'. (Interviewee 16, male, 26 years old, analyst, 1 year and 4 months with organization) Quickly integrate oneself into the organization (1 response) 'If I can help it, I would shorten my learning curve … if I can speed up that process, I can contribute faster.' (Interviewee 5, female, 27 years old, manager, 2 weeks with organization)
Colleague (9 responses)	Work independently (9 responses) 'Most of the time, we have to make our own decisions and make good judgment.' (Interviewee 24, male, 26 years old, policy officer, 1 year and 3 months with organization)	I am a proficient contributor (9 responses) 'Now I am in charge of promoting a program to the public. I lead in this effort.' (Interviewee 25, female, 25 years old, senior officer, 2 years with organization)	Take initiative to carry out new and challenging assignments (5 responses) 'I can see myself even come up with a strategic paper like how we can reinvent our team.' (Interviewee 1, male, 31 years old, manager, 8 months with organization) Take on voluntary, extra-role work activities (4 responses) 'I'm even prepared to work in cross-department teams, not just in my own team.' (Interviewee 25, female, 25 years old, senior officer, 2 years with organization)
Mentor (9 responses)	Guide and develop other colleagues (9 responses)	I coach other colleagues (9 responses)	Take initiative to help subordinates improve knowledge and work-related skills (8 responses)

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Career stages (frequency)	Roles (frequency)	Self-concepts (frequency)	Preferred psychological contract contributions (frequency)
	'My reporting officer thinks that I have a wealth of experience to share.' (Interviewee 27, female, 48 years old, program manager, 10 years with organization)	'I want to give something back. I do so by imparting my knowledge to other colleagues.' (Interviewee 26, female, 33 years old, deputy director, 5 years with organization)	'I enjoy grooming another person because I have come to a point that I am very confident of my inputs.' (Interviewee 7, male, 39 years old, senior IT policy officer, 2 years 6 months with organization)
Sponsor (5 responses)	Exercise significant influence in the organization (5 responses) 'I'm expected to make a fair bit of decisions for my division.' (Interviewee 30, female, 55 years old, divisional director, 5 years with organization)	I am a leader charting directions (5 responses) 'I see myself in a leadership position. I would say that there is a mixture of decisions to make on a daily basis.' (Interviewee 12, male, 45 years old, divisional director, 20 years with organization)	Direct work to achieve organizational or departmental objectives (3 responses) '… really to guide and direct the team.' (Interviewee 12, male, 45 years old, divisional director, 20 years with organization) Facilitate cooperation and unity among staff in the department (2 responses) '… translating the intent of senior management to what my staff can deliver … so that the expectations can be moderated.' (Interviewee 11, female, 32 years old, head of department, 1 year and 8 months with organization) Make suggestions to improve the organization (2 responses) 'I like to think out of the box for solutions that matter to my organization.' (Interviewee 30, female, 55 years old, divisional director, 5 years with organization)

schedule', 'increasing responsibilities', 'interesting job', 'limited involvement in the organization', 'opportunities for promotion', 'performance-based rewards', 'retirement benefits from current organization' and 'supervisory understanding for personal problems'. The participants' descriptions in this regard were thematically similar to various psychological contract inducement items already identified in the literature (e.g. Herriot et al., 1997; Kelley-Patterson and George, 2002; Kickul, 2001; Roehling et al., 2001).

The participants' career stages (Super, 1957, 1980), roles and self-concepts were matched to their preferred psychological contract inducement items accordingly. We next look at the links between the participants' preferred inducements and their career-stage-relevant roles and self-concepts.

Exploration stage

In terms of role, the participants who saw themselves in the exploration career stage believed that their employers would think of them as trying out their workplace. These participants were considered new to their organizations and had yet to embed themselves in their organizations. To illustrate, consider this participant's reply: 'My boss understands that I am still very new here. So I'm expected to find out how things work here' (Interviewee 16, male, 26 years old, analyst, one year and four months with organization).

The interviewees in this career stage also harbored the self-concept of people who were crystallizing their self-concepts. They seemed to have only a vague idea of how they would progress in their current organizations and what the future held for them. An interviewee put it this way:

> I'm still too young to know what I want to do in the next 10 years. I have a vague idea of what I want to do, but it is not really clear yet. I think more exposure from the organization will be good for figuring out what I want to do. (Interviewee 17, male, 26 years old, economist, one year and six months with organization)

Some of these interviewees would like their organizations to provide them with career guidance and mentoring. They were evaluating the suitability of the work at hand and would therefore appreciate more employer advice on their careers and future directions. This preference is reflected in the following reply: 'I believe it is very important that my organization provides me with the proper support to learn and grow on the job. The learning curve is very steep here' (Interviewee 22, female, 26 years old, economic officer, three weeks with organization).

There were also exploration-stage participants who suggested that an interesting job (psychological contract inducement) would motivate them. They added that they must enjoy the process of doing the work involved. For example, this interviewee said: 'In a job, there are things that you like to do and there are things that you don't like to do. I would prefer to enjoy the things I do' (Interviewee 17, male, 26 years old, economist, one year and six months with organization).

These participants' self-concepts of crystallizing their workplace identities were linked to this preference. This was because they would be better able to identify with their new-found jobs, organizations, and perhaps careers, if they at least enjoyed what they were doing.

Establishment stage

The participants who identified with the establishment career stage opined that their organizations expected them to be keen on proving themselves. For example, an establishment-stage participant made this remark, thus illustrating the role: 'My organization sees me as someone who is proactive enough. Eventually, the direction should be for someone on the ground, like me, to be asked to contribute and make things better' (Interviewee 1, male, 31 years old, manager, eight months with organization).

In regards to self-concept, the participants believed that they were go-getters that their organizations should groom. For example, the same interviewee elaborated that he was aggressive in pursuing work objectives and eager for achievements: 'I'm not afraid to speak up for certain things that I represent at work. With enough power and lever[age] to make things work, I can make things happen and achieve results' (Interviewee 1, male, 31 years old, manager, eight months with organization).

The inducements that appealed to these participants took on three themes. First, some of them felt that they should be given more responsibilities. For instance, this establishment-stage interviewee said: 'Currently, at this point of my career, I suppose the opportunities to expand the job scope, to have lateral exposure, and increased responsibilities, more towards developing myself, are more immediately relevant to me' (Interviewee 19, female, 31 years old, manager, four years and two months with organization).

This seemed to have arisen from their wish to meet the role expectation of proving themselves. It was also possible that, because they saw themselves as go-getters, they wanted additional workplace responsibilities as a way to profile themselves to their management.

Second, some establishment-stage participants opined that their organizations should give them more opportunities for promotion. This desire again tied in quite naturally with the role of proving themselves. Because these participants believed that their organizations saw them as eager to prove themselves, they would appreciate it if their organizations could provide the relevant opportunities for them to do so. Furthermore, because they saw themselves as go-getters to be groomed, they would like such opportunities to help them fulfill their self-concepts. An illustration is provided in this participant's reply: 'I feel that I can take on a higher position. I just need the chance to show management that I can do it' (Interviewee 24, male, 26 years old, policy officer, 1 year and 3 months with organization).

Third, one participant, Interviewee 1 (male, 31 years old, manager, eight months with organization) expected performance-based rewards. Interviewee 1 felt that his organization thought of him as being keen to prove himself. He thus harbored an expectancy of rewards based on performance. The expectancy was reinforced by his self-concept of being a go-getter, which suggested confidence in proving himself in the workplace. His establishment-stage role and self-concept thus help explain why he desired rewards commensurate with performance.

Maintenance stage

The participants in the maintenance career stage expected their organizations to treat them as employees who had reached a plateau and would remain at their current career statuses. For instance, a maintenance-stage participant said that his employer did not

seem to expect him to do any more than what he was doing: 'I don't feel a push from my bosses to do more. It seems business as usual' (Interviewee 7, male, 39 years old, senior IT policy officer, 2 years and 6 months with organization).

The participants in this career stage also felt that they were re-evaluating their lives' priorities and preserving their status quo. As an illustration of the 're-evaluating priorities' self-concept, consider this interview reply: 'At the moment, I felt that I've got other priorities. I felt that working is only part of my life. The rest I would like to have my own free time to do other stuff' (Interviewee 2, female, 39 years old, teacher, 10 years with organization).

Furthermore, the self-concept theme of preserving status quo is reflected in various participants' comments, such as this one: 'The horizontal part is where I see, after a certain time, I have kind of maximized. It's not that I don't contribute, I can, but it's going to plateau already' (Interviewee 12, male, 45 years old, divisional director, 20 years with organization).

As these maintenance-stage participants intend to keep to the status quo and pursue other priorities in life, it was not surprising that they would appreciate autonomy to do their jobs in their own ways. This would allow them better control over their status quo. For instance, Interviewee 10 (female, 52 years old, divisional director, 30 years with organization) liked it that her management entrusted her with much autonomy so long as she did her work. It also seemed reasonable that some of these participants wanted to be kept appraised of what was happening in their organizations. As they wanted to maintain the status quo, they would need to keep up with organizational developments that might disrupt their status quo. They wanted to prepare in advance how best they should approach potential organizational changes. This preferred inducement is reflected in the following interview reply: 'I think knowing what's happening around me is important. Not knowing what's going on in my organization is a very scary thought' (Interviewee 7, male, 39 years old, senior IT policy officer, two years and six months with organization).

Furthermore, the participants suggested that they preferred having flexible work schedules. This was because they were keen on the non-work priorities in their lives, and wanted greater control over their time between work and non-work objectives. As an illustration, consider this reply: 'Arrangements that will help me meet my work–life balance goals will be attractive to me, which is why I accepted the current job that I have' (Interviewee 20, female, 36 years old, senior officer, seven months with organization).

Finally, some also suggested that they would like supervisory understanding for their personal problems. It seemed that this inducement could provide them with some leeway from work to address their non-work priorities as well. For example, Interviewee 2 highlighted that she saw her health as being more important than work achievements. She felt that her supervisors should understand: 'I feel that the management should pay more attention to what we want and also try to accommodate. I would like to have more time to rest. Health is more important' (Interviewee 2, female, 39 years old, teacher, 10 years with organization).

Disengagement stage

The participants in the disengagement career stage were close to their retirement age. In terms of role, they believed that their organizations expected them to go into near-retirement mode, considerably slow down their work pace, and prepare for retirement. To illustrate, an

interviewee in this career stage highlighted her organizational role as follows: 'My boss understood that I was going to retire in a few years' time and I had to slow down' (Interviewee 13, female, 65 years old, teacher, 40 years with organization).

Two themes emerged in terms of self-concept. The first theme was one of being less adept than before in handling work challenges. Various participants felt that they had somehow become less competent. For example, this interviewee said: 'I just do what I can do for now. I cannot compete with, say, the younger workers in terms of speed. I am not fast now' (Interviewee 18, female, 60 years old, clerical officer, 27 years with organization).

The second self-concept theme was that of having post-retirement plans. Another participant who was in this career stage, said: 'I've been thinking of retirement, talking to people. I take it as the next phase of my life. If I can spend my remaining years doing something else, it is a new and wonderful change to me' (Interviewee 14, male, 54 years old, uniformed officer, 28 years with organization).

In terms of preferred inducements, most of the participants said that they would like to limit their involvement with their current organizations. This preference seemed to follow naturally from their role expectation of preparing for retirement. For example, this interviewee said she hoped that her organization could make her workload lighter: 'I think my organization should start interviewing people to find someone to replace me. Going forward, I should do less and prepare to get out of this' (Interviewee 28, male, 50 years old, department head, 12 years with organization).

Interviewee 14 (male, 54 years old, uniformed officer, 28 years with organization) said that he was looking forward to the retirement benefits that his organization had promised him (preferred inducement). He elaborated that his post-retirement plans involved using his retirement benefits (gratuity payment) to fund a small business start-up. The retirement benefits formed an integral part of his plans.

The above findings suggest that the participants at different career stages could prefer different psychological contract inducements. Furthermore, the participants' role and self-concept sub-themes seemed to offer a plausible explanation for their preferences for certain psychological contract inducements. Table 3 shows the participants' role and self-concept themes arising from their Super (1957, 1980) career stages, corresponding preferred psychological contract inducement themes, and the illustrative quotes supporting the themes.

Discussion

In this article, we contribute to theory by amalgamating two established but largely unlinked streams of research: psychological contract and career stages. In this way, we contribute to both sets of literature. First, our research shows that employees hold preferences for various contributions and inducements. These preferences reflect the workplace contributions that the employees would willingly make to their employers and the organizational inducements that they felt their employers should provide them. Knowing employees' preferences bears implications for psychological contracts, as the preferences may act as antecedents of their psychological contracts. Although employers will not always be in a position to promise the fulfilment of employee preferences, an explanation of the reasons for why certain promises are not being made will help both employee and employer gain a better understanding of mutual constraints and needs, and

Table 3. Interviewees' career stages (Super, 1957, 1980) and examples of preferred inducements via roles and self-concepts.

Career stages (frequency)	Roles (frequency)	Self-concepts (frequency)	Preferred psychological contract inducements (frequency)
Exploration (8 responses)	Evaluating suitability of work (8 responses) 'My boss knows that I'm exploring the workplace now.' (Interviewee 8, female, 35 years old, program manager, 2 days with organization)	I am crystallizing my workplace identity (8 responses) 'I think I am still young and there are many opportunities available for me in this organization. I think I will go for job rotation when I have spent at least two years in the present department.' (Interviewee 21, male, 28 years old, program manager, 10 months with organization)	Career guidance and mentoring (4 responses) 'Getting good guidance from the supervisors in terms of how they have deliberated on these issues before.' (Interviewee 16, male, 26 years old, analyst, 1 year 4 months with organization) Interesting job (4 responses) 'It boils down to the point about interesting job, that's the most important thing I'm looking for.' (Interviewee 8, female, 35 years old, program manager, 2 days with organization)
Establishment (7 responses)	Keen on proving oneself (7 responses) 'My organization seems to recognize my efforts. I can feel that they are trying to groom me.' (Interviewee 25, female, 25 years old, senior officer, 2 years with organization)	I am a go-getter (7 responses) 'Now my focus is on developing myself, and my professional capabilities. I want to take whatever remaining time I have for myself to really find out more about what I'm capable of. So the opportunity for lateral movement is very attractive to me.' (Interviewee 19, female, 31 years old, manager, 4 years 2 months with organization)	Increasing responsibilities (3 responses) 'I won't mind taking more responsibilities and grow.' (Interviewee 4, female, 35 years old, senior manager, 1 month with organization) Opportunities for promotion (3 responses) 'I think the recognition is important. I should progress in my career here if I continue to prove to be an asset.' (Interviewee 25, female, 25 years old, senior officer, 2 years with organization) Performance-based rewards (1 response) 'Monetary rewards based on what I do for the organization.' (Interviewee 1, male, 31 years old, manager, 8 months with organization)

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued)

Career stages (frequency)	Roles (frequency)	Self-concepts (frequency)	Preferred psychological contract inducements (frequency)
Maintenance (10 responses)	Remain at current career status (10 responses) 'My organization probably thinks I will just continue doing my work. Don't think there is anything to change in terms of my role.' (Interviewee 27, female, 48 years old, program manager, 10 years with organization)	I am re-evaluating the priorities in my life (7 responses) 'I've started realizing that I more or less have enough to spend. I'll say, maybe I was running too fast, and I need to have a little bit more time for family now.' (Interviewee 7, male, 39 years old, senior IT policy officer, 2 years 6 months with organization) I am preserving my status quo (3 responses) 'I am quite happy with my work–life balance now. I don't intend to do anything more than what I have achieved now.' (Interviewee 26, female, 33 years old, deputy director, 5 years with organization)	Autonomy to do job in own way (2 responses) 'One thing I like about this place is the management don't disturb you so long as you do your work.' (Interviewee 10, female, 52 years old, divisional director, 30 years with organization) Constant information on corporate issues (3 responses) 'It will be really helpful if management can share more information with all levels of staff.' (Interviewee 29, male, 40 years old, assistant head, 9 years with organization) Flexible work schedule (5 responses) 'It's also the work–life balance.' (Interviewee 10, female, 52 years old, divisional director, 30 years with organization) Supervisory understanding for personal problems (4 responses) 'I'm glad my boss understands. I cannot stay back late …' (Interviewee 27, female, 48 years old, program manager, 10 years with organization)

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued)

Career stages (frequency)	Roles (frequency)	Self-concepts (frequency)	Preferred psychological contract inducements (frequency)
Disengagement (5 responses)	Preparing for retirement (5 responses) 'My boss knows that I am leaving soon.' (Interviewee 28, male, 50 years old, department head, 12 years with organization)	I am less adept at work challenges (3 responses) 'I find myself slower these days … I must be getting old.' (Interviewee 30, female, 55 years old, divisional director, 5 years with organization) I have post-retirement plans (2 responses) 'I want to pick up from where I left off previously. I'm writing a book.' (Interviewee 28, male, 50 years old, department head, 12 years with organization)	Limited involvement in the organization (4 responses) 'I would prefer to work, say, three days per week.' (Interviewee 18, female, 60 years old, clerical officer, 27 years with organization) Retirement benefits from current organization (1 response) 'I want my retirement benefits as promised. I'll maybe use it to go into a small business after retirement.' (Interviewee 14, male, 54 years old, uniformed officer, 28 years with organization)

shape the psychological contract subsequently formed (Bordia et al., 2014). In the event of psychological contract breach, being able to partially address employees' preferences might also help moderate their reactions. Delving into employee preferences is thus an important step towards appreciating psychological contracts more fully.

Second, we have pointed out how employees' career stages and psychological contract preferences may be linked. As our findings revealed, the roles the participants expected to play and the self-concepts they held at each career stage could have shaped their preferred psychological contract contributions and inducements.

Over the course of the career life-cycle, employees play different roles (Lee et al., 2011). These roles depict the characteristic parts that employees play in their organizations (Neale and Griffin, 2006). Like theatre actors who refer to their role scripts for the relevant behavior on stage with respect to the other actors, employees refer to their organizational roles for the expected behaviors with respect to the other organizational agents (Parker, 2007). The roles which employees play create a normative influence on them to follow attitudes and enact behaviors that suit those roles (Neale and Griffin, 2006). Employees' roles specific to different career stages guide them on what to consider appropriate workplace contributions and organizational inducements.

Employees also hold different self-concepts over the courses of their lives (Cooper and Thatcher, 2010). Employees' self-concepts inform them of who they are and how they as unique individuals fit into their organizations (Gibson, 2003). Unlike organizational roles that an employee largely learns through his or her interactions with organizational agents, self-concepts are internalized by each employee from his or her own experience over time (McConnell, 2011). Employees' self-concepts evolve with their work and non-work experiences throughout their career stages, and they seek to implement them (Cooper and Thatcher, 2010; Gibson, 2003). As employees implement their self-concept in a particular career stage, they deem certain psychological contracts more desirable than others at that career stage.

For instance, consider the individuals in Dalton et al.'s (1977) 'mentor' career stage. They were expected to develop other colleagues, and they also saw themselves as capable enough to take on the additional responsibility of coaching others. As such, these individuals harbored the preference for 'take initiative to help subordinates improve knowledge and work-related skills' as a psychological contract contribution. Also, consider those in Super's (1957, 1980) 'exploration' career stage. In terms of role, they were expected to clarify their suitability for the work at hand and, in relation to self-concept, they believed that they were crystallizing their workplace identities (Super, 1957, 1980). Hence, they felt the need for entry-level socialization and found organizational inducements like 'career guidance and mentoring' attractive.

Third, in delving into the roles and self-concepts relevant to different career stages, we have found another way to interpret employees' attitudes and behaviors at different points in their lives. Traditionally, career-stage studies have laid out employees' experience of career stages linearly, in a sequential manner, according to their chronological ages, organizational tenures, or organizational positions (Ornstein et al., 1989). Applications of the career-stage research tend to describe how employees would think and act as they progressed through career stages sequentially. However, employers are finding it increasingly difficult to anticipate employees' career-related choices with the rise in non-linear

career pathways, typified by the protean and boundaryless careers (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). Employees in protean careers take on career self-management and, based on their own values, unilaterally decide to re-order or skip certain phases of career development (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). On the other hand, employees with boundaryless career attitudes may purposefully seek out opportunities to work in different organizations, thus making their career pathways unpredictable (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). Our findings showed that, despite an age difference, both Interviewee 11 (32 years old) and Interviewee 30 (55 years old) would contribute as sponsor-stage employees (Dalton et al., 1977); and although Interviewees 1 and 5 were both managers by organizational position, Interviewee 1 was more comfortable than Interviewee 5 in working independently with little supervision. These employees' beliefs seemed to be guided by their career-stage-relevant roles and self-concepts, instead of traditionally accepted factors like age and organizational position. Our research thus also extends theorizing on career stages by breaking away from traditional linear sequences, and drawing attention to employees' career-stage-relevant roles and self-concepts as the way to contextualize their career-related decisions (Lee et al., 2011).

Limitations and future research

We want to acknowledge the limitations of our study. Firstly, the sample characteristics may limit generalizability. Our study was conducted with Singapore public sector employees as research participants. Public sector organizations may have characteristics that are different from private sector organizations. For example, the structure of public sector organizations may be more hierarchical than that of private sector organizations (Cooper and Kurland, 2002). This difference suggests that employees in public and private sector organizations may experience Dalton et al.'s (1977) and Super's (1957, 1980) career stages differently, which, in turn, may influence the psychological contract preferences of public- and private-sector employees. There may also be country-level differences that limit the generalizability of the findings here. Singapore has its own unique cultural and economic circumstances that are different from those of other countries (Galovan et al., 2010). Thus, the career-stage-specific psychological contract preferences found in this study may vary if replicated in another country. However, note that the study sought to build theory on how employees' roles and self-concepts at different career stages guide their choices of psychological contract contributions and inducements. Our findings suggest important links among career stages, roles, self-concepts and psychological contract preferences, which deserve further research attention. Although the specific manifestations of career stages and psychological contract elements may vary between contexts, the theoretical linkages proposed in this article among career stages, roles, self-concepts and psychological contract preferences should translate to other contexts.

Secondly, the study did not address the issue of confounding factors such as interviewees' age (Bal et al., 2012). Such factors could affect employees' psychological contract preferences as much as their career stages. Although the study has found instances of interviewees whose career stages were independent of their age – for instance, both Interviewee 26 (age 33 years) and Interviewee 27 (age 48 years) identified with Dalton

et al.'s (1977) 'mentor' career stage – we recommend that future research further disentangle the effects of age versus career stages.

Finally, the interview data were collected at a single point of time. Responses on roles, self-concepts and career stages might be influenced by the consistency motif (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We did reduce the possibility of desirable responses by assuring confidentiality. Also, the fact that we received a wide range of responses on roles and self-concepts for the same career stage gives us confidence that the consistency motif did not create artificial responding. However, we recommend that future research adopt a longitudinal approach to tease apart the causal relationships and shed light on how employees negotiate divergent preferences in psychological contracts in non-linear career pathways.

Conclusion

Organizations will benefit from the understanding of employees' differential expectation of contributions and inducements depending on their career stages. Our study findings have implications for how organizations can more effectively motivate employees. Increasingly, research has shown that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work (Marinova et al., 2010). As a way forward, we suggest that organizations appeal to employees' evolving aspirations and needs by customizing their appraisal and compensation practices to employees' psychological contract preferences related to their career stages. We argue that employers who allow employees to make workplace contributions and provide them organizational inducements which help them enact their career-stage-relevant roles and self-concepts would do relatively better at attracting and retaining them.

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