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Editorial The psychological contract in retrospect and prospect

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The psychological contract in retrospect

Picture the scene. Dixon, the main character in Kingsley Amis' book 'Lucky Jim' (1953) has a temporary position as lecturer at a provincial English university. His full professor and the senate of the university have yet to take the crucially important decision on extending his contract for a further period. Although in the first instance Dixon tries to do his utmost to meet the myriad of expectations over job tasks and job performance (for example, be greatly appreciated by his colleagues and students, publish prolifically in respected journals, and so forth) all his valiant attempts to achieve this lead to a succession of woeful failures. After this succession of disappointing under-achievements, motivation wanes. This culminates in the dramatic finale to Amis' tale when Dixon is apparently drunk when giving a lecture to local and university dignitaries. His content and presentation style at first makes the attenders astonished, later indignated. Dixon's appointment is, as could be expected, not extended. Amis' tale of the unfortunate Dixon all too vividly illustrates that organizations set demands on the job performance of employees, based on multiple and varied notions of what an employee is obligated to do and not to do whilst at work. On the other hand, employees also have multiple and varied notions about what the organization should be providing them with. This may include, for example, job content, job security, training and development, rewards and benefits, and future career prospects (for a compelling account of such expectations, see Herriot and Pemberton, 1995).

Most employees (in contrast perhaps with Dixon) develop a positive and enduring psychological bond with their organization, based on a pattern of expectations about what the organization should offer them, and what it is obligated to provide them with (e.g. Rousseau, 1995). If, whatever the reason may be, the organization is not able or willing to fulfil these expectations and obligations, this may lead to strong emotional reactions (e.g. Schalk and Freese, 1993). In the relationship between employer and employee, *mutual obligations* are the central issue. These mutual obligations are partly put on record in the written formal contract of employment, but are for the most part implicit, covertly held and only infrequently discussed.

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In this introductory editorial paper for this Special Issue of *JOB* we describe recent developments in the conceptualization of, and empirical research into, the psychological contract, giving an overview of the current state of affairs, and addressing the question of what still remains to be done in the future regarding key directions for research into the psychological contract and its application to employment relations in the changing world of work.

Developments in conceptualization

Argyris (1960) first utilized the concept and terminology of the *psychological contract*. He analyzed the situation in two factories, using data from interviews with employees and supervisors. He used the concept 'psychological work contract' to describe the relationship between the employees and the foremen in one factory and that it was, in his opinion, dominated by the following phenomenon: 'Since the foremen realize the employees in this system will tend to produce optimally under passive leadership, and since the employees agree, a relationship may be hypothesized to evolve between the employees and the foremen which might be called the psychological work contract. The employee will maintain the high production, low grievances, etc., if the foremen guarantee and respect the norms of the employee informal culture (i.e., let the employees alone, make certain they make adequate wages, and have secure jobs. This is precisely what the employees need' (Argyris, 1960, p. 96).

It is quite possible that because Argyris (1960) noted only in passing the concept of the psychological contract, but did not clearly define it, or because the concept is not listed in the index of Argyris' book (Manning, 1993), Levinson who further developed this concept claims to be 'father' of this concept (Guzzo, R. A., personal communication, 7 August 1995). Levinson *et al.* (1962) describe in an elaborate case-study of a utility company the psychological contract as the unwritten contract. The psychological contract is, according to Levinson *et al.*, the sum of mutual expectations between the organization and the employee. The concept is used to highlight implicit and unspoken expectations which antedate the relationship between employer and employee. Some expectations are more conscious than others: for example, expectations with respect to salary, but others are more unconscious and are only revealed indirectly, for instance, longer-term promotion prospects.

Schein (1965, 1980) also pays attention to the psychological contract, defining it as a set of unwritten expectations present at each moment between each member of the organization and others in the organization. The psychological contract according to Schein has two levels: individual and organizational. Schein states that although the psychological contract is unwritten, it is an important determinant of behavior in organizations. Herriot and Pemberton's (1995) view on the psychological contract is that it is the perception of both parties (employer and employee) of their relationship and the things they offer each other in this relationship.

The above approaches are undoubtedly founded upon the precept that the psychological contract is essentially an *exchange relationship* between two parties: employer and employee (see also the dialectic exchange between Rousseau and Guest as the opening three papers in this special issue). Although several authors do not state this explicitly, this notion is derived from models in social psychology on exchange relationships, such as the 'inducement-contribution' model (e.g. March and Simon, 1958); Homans' 'Social exchange theory of elementary social forms' (e.g. Homans, 1974); and Adams' equity theory (Adams, 1965), amongst others. These approaches to the psychological contract assume an exchange relationship between employer and employee, in which the expectations and obligations of both parties involved need to be taken

into consideration if one is to determine whether there is agreement or disparity of opinion. This is immediately problematic because expectations of different levels (organizational and individual) are compared. Moreover, on the part of the organization there is the problem who or what represents the organization: an organization can hardly be considered as a uniform set of expectations (Schalk and Freese, 1993); rather it is a multiple collective of diverse and differing expectations held by a whole set of actors. Rousseau (1990), therefore, introduced a more narrow definition of the psychological contract. She conceives the psychological contract to be the individual's beliefs about mutual obligations, in the context of the relationship between employer and employee (Rousseau, 1990, p. 391; this issue). By using this definition the perspective shifts from a bilateral relationship between two parties at different levels (individual and organizational) to the unilateral, singular level of the individual. The psychological contract in this view is a subjective, individual perception of obligations of the employee towards the organization and of the obligations of the employer towards the employee (Schalk and Freese, 1993). That two different conceptualizations of the concept exist, can lead to confusion and misunderstanding, and this must be kept in mind when looking at the literature on psychological contracts.

The current state of affairs: what is the added value of the concept?

Talking with employers and employees it is abundantly clear that the psychological contract as an explanatory notion has impressively high 'face validity'. Everyone agrees that it exists and most employees appear able to describe the content of their contract. Certainly in situations of organizational transformation, which often have consequences for the existing pattern of expectations, it is clear for managers and employees that the psychological contract is an important issue (e.g. Cartwright and Cooper, 1994; Herriot and Pemberton, 1995, 1996; Hiltrop, 1995; McLean Parks and Kidder, 1994; Ridolfi and Hater, 1996; Rousseau, 1996). But the fact that it is so easy to talk about this concept, and that it seems to be closely connected with current developments in organizations where employment relations are characterized by 'new deals' (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995) founded upon by greater flexibility, mobility and self-reliance (see Bowmer, 1996), leads to the danger that the concept will degenerate into empty rhetoric (e.g. Arnold, 1996; Guest, 1996; Herriot, 1996). Therefore, it is important to critically assess the scientific value of the concept (Arnold, 1996; see again Rousseau and Guest in this issue).

An important problem in this respect is that there is no consensus about what the psychological contract is (see Thomas and Anderson, this issue for a typology of psychological contract definitions). A comparison of the definitions given earlier by Schein (1978), Kotter (1973), Herriot and Pemberton (1995) and Rousseau (1989) shows that different combinations of terms are used like *perceptions*, *expectations*, *beliefs*, *promises* and *obligations* (Conway, 1996; Guest, this issue). Rousseau's approach (Rousseau, 1995; this issue) sets the borders around the psychological contract as individual employee beliefs about the mutual exchange relationship between employer and employee. Most of which will be discussed in the following section is based on this approach. Here, we move on to discuss different types of contracts, the function of the psychological contract, characteristics (features, content, differences in psychological contracts between different groups of employees) and the effects of changes in psychological contracts on the behavior and attitudes of employees.

Types of contracts

Not only in Work and Organizational Psychology, but also other disciplines like sociology and economics, have contractual relationships been subject to scrutiny (see Rousseau and McLean Parks, 1993 for a comparative overview). What is the distinctive contribution of Work and Organizational Psychology in this respect, and how does the psychological contract differ from other forms of contracts? The most clear delimitation is given by Rousseau (1995), who, from a basic definition of a contract as individual beliefs about mutual obligations between two or more parties, makes a distinction between four types of contracts. She distinguishes between contracts on an individual and group level, and between contracts as perceived by a contract party or by others (non-contractual parties). Psychological contracts are individual beliefs of the employees as party in the contract. The counterpart at the group level (shared psychological contracts by a group) are labeled *normative contracts* by Rousseau. The beliefs of others about one specific contract is the *implied contract*. General beliefs in society about contracts are, according to Rousseau, *social contracts*. Of course, the study of contracts other than psychological is very worthwhile, but we limit ourselves here to aspects which play a role in the psychological contract at work.

The function of the psychological contract

First, is the question what it the *function* of the psychological contract? McFarlane Shore and Tetrick (1994) address this issue. The first function is reduction of insecurity: because not all possible aspects of the employment relationship can be addressed in a formal, written contract, the psychological contract fills the gaps in the relationship. Further, the psychological contract 'shapes' employee behavior. An employee weighs his or her obligations towards the organization against the obligations of the organization towards them as an employee and adjusts behavior on the basis of critical outcomes. Finally, the psychological contract gives the employee a feeling of influence on what happens to her or him in the organization (see McFarlane Shore and Tetrick, 1994 for a detailed account of these functions).

Characteristics of the psychological contract

With respect to the *characteristics* of the psychological contract, Rousseau (1995) argues that in essence it is a *subjective* perception which differs between individuals. Second, the psychological contract is *dynamic*, which means it changes over time during the relationship between the employer and employee. Third, the contract concerns mutual *obligations*, based on given promises, in which both parties invest in their relationship with the expectation of a positive outcome for them. Finally, psychological contracts are tied to the context of the relationship: individuals or organizations cannot separately create psychological contracts (Schalk and Freese, 1993), but they develop as an inescapable result of the interaction between the parties. Another point to note is that there is (implicit) consensus between psychological contract researchers that although the psychological contract is rarely explicitly discussed, it is an important determinant of the behavior and attitudes of employees. This does not mean, however, that when the psychological contract is discussed and made explicit, it ceases to exist. We will return to this later in the paper.

Rousseau's approach has not been without criticism. Herriot (personal communication, May 1995), for example, points out that this approach does not take into account changes in career

ambitions of employees, which may occur disconnected from changes in the organizational context. According to Herriot, older employees have different psychological contracts than younger employees, independent of the type of organization they work for.

Although each psychological contract is individual and unique, there are in general two kinds of psychological contracts: *transactional contracts* and *relational contracts*. These contracts have been argued to differ on five important dimensions (Rousseau and McLean-Parks, 1993), with respect to the *focus* of the contract, *time frame*, *stability*, *scope* and *tangibility*. Focus concerns the aspects which are important for the person who works: for instance, are solely economic, extrinsic aspects (money) involved, or are other (social–emotional) needs fulfilled also? Time frame refers to the length of the contract: is there a certain endpoint, or is the length undetermined, i.e., open-ended? Stability concerns the nature of the agreed tasks; in transactional contracts this is stable and inflexible, in relational contracts it is more flexible and dynamic. Scope reflects the influence of work on the identity and self-esteem of the employee. Relational contracts are likely to involve more aspects which may be related to the private lives of employees, compared to the more limited transactional contract. With respect to tangibility in relational contracts, it is often less clear what demarcates the responsibilities of employees. They are more subjective, covertly understood but rarely explicitly agreed. In a transactional contract it is clear for observers where the boundaries are. McLean Parks, Gallagher and Kidder (this issue) address this distinction in more detail.

The content of the psychological contract

It is also possible to look at differences in psychological contracts in another way: which aspects are involved in the psychological contract, in other words what is the *content*? Because the psychological contract may contain thousands of items (Kotter, 1973), making a complete list is virtually impossible. However, it is generally agreed amongst researchers and practitioners alike that the content of the psychological contract has changed in recent years (e.g. Hiltrop, 1995; Rousseau, 1995). Developed from Hiltrop's (1995) original model, Table 1 presents a summary of these changes.

Although universal agreement is lacking about how the changing content of the psychological contract should be measured (see Rousseau, Tijoriwala and Guest, this issue) it is arguably very worthwhile to do this, because the outcomes may provide a diagnosis of the state of affairs, and be a starting point for interventions in organizations (Anderson and Thomas, 1996; Freese and Schalk, 1997). Also, several studies have shown that certain groups of employees have specific needs, and thus specific psychological contracts (see for example Guzzo, Noonan and Elron, 1994 on expatriates; Schalk, Freese and Van den Bosch, 1995, Freese and Schalk, 1996 on part-time and full-time employees; Freese and Schalk, 1995 on younger and older employees; Thomas and Anderson, this issue on army recruits).

The context of the psychological contract

Many authors in Work and Organizational Psychology, and more generally across the management sciences, have portrayed the various and deeply rooted changes to working relationships between employers and employees over recent years (see, for instance Howard, 1995; Herriot and

Table 1. Past and emergent forms of psychological contract

Characteristic	Past form	Emergent form
Focus	Security, continuity, loyalty	Exchange, future Employability
Format	Structured, predictable, stable	Unstructured, flexible, open to (re)negotiation
Underlying basis	Tradition, fairness, social justice, socio-economic class	Market forces, saleable, abilities and skills, added value
Employer's responsibilities	Continuity, job security, training, career prospects	Equitable (as perceived) reward for added value
Employee's responsibilities	Loyalty, attendance, satisfactory performance, compliance with authority	Entrapreneurship, innovation, enacting changes to improve performance, excellent performance
Contractual relations	Formalized, mostly via trade union or collective representation	Individual's responsibility to barter for their services (internally or externally)
Career management	Organizational responsibility, in-spiraling careers planned and facilitated through personnel department input	Individual's responsibility, out-spiraling careers by personal reskilling and retraining

Source: Developed and extended from Hiltrop, J. M. (1995), 'The changing psychological contract', *European Management Journal*, **13**, (3), 286–294.

Anderson, 1997). That the striking pace of such changes has swept away previously operationable and generally agreed psychological contracts between employers and employees has been highlighted by several researchers, but what has been most important for many people at work has been the simultaneous loss of job security coupled with increasing demands from employers for them to be more flexible, innovative, and willing to contribute to the organization 'above and beyond the letter' of their formal job descriptions or contracts of employment (e.g. Hartley *et al.*, 1995). Such quantum shifts in the balance of the reciprocal 'agreement' between employers and employees have been one of the driving forces which lie behind the renewed interest and attention by researchers in Work and Organizational Psychology to the psychological contract as a general explanatory framework as explicative of these shifts in employment relations. Figure 1 represents our conceptualization of the driving factors which are behind this growth of interest in organizational behavior into the psychological contract.

As a result of all these factors, from the mid-1980's to the present day, psychological contract research has come of age; we have witnessed unerring efforts to clarify our constructs (see Rousseau, Guest, and Thomas and Anderson, this issue); empirical studies have become substantially more sophisticated and have addressed an increasingly wide range of psychological contract questions (e.g. Shore and Barksdale, Porter, Pearce and Tripoli, this issue); innovative conceptual models have been proposed to facilitate future research (McLean Parks, Gallagher and Kidder, this issue); and not least, attention has been given to a number of intractable difficulties in measuring the psychological contract with validity and reliability (Rousseau and Tijoriwala, this issue).

Effects of changes in the psychological contract

Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau (1994) examined the experiences of graduates in their first job and concomitant developments in the psychological contract. They found that over time these

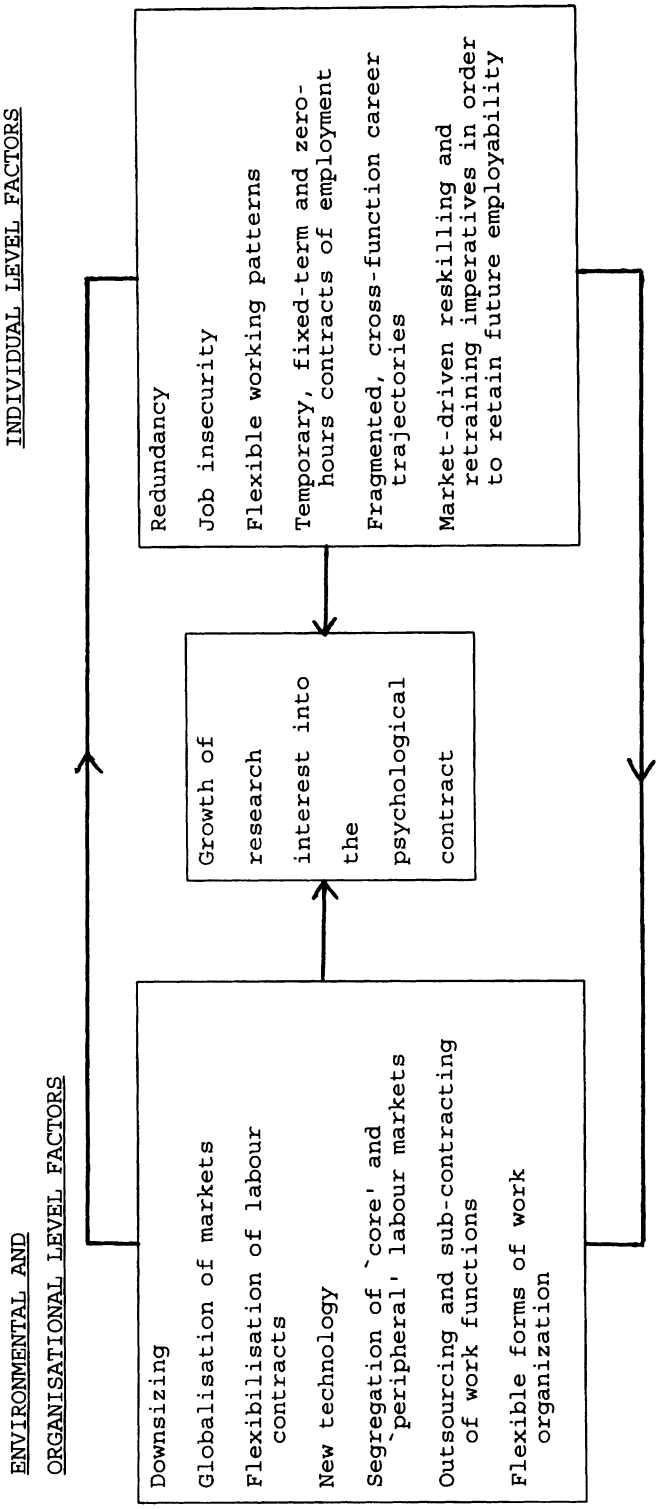

Figure 1. Factors influencing the growth in psychological contract research

employees felt that the obligations of the organization towards them increased, while their own obligations decreased. They saw their working for an organization as an investment in the organization, which resulted in a perceived increase in organizational obligations. One can imagine why many employees think that their psychological contract has been 'violated', which means that they think that the organization did not fulfil one or more of its obligations. More than half of the employees followed in their first job reported one or more violation of their psychological contract (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). A violation of the psychological contract occurs when an employee experiences a discrepancy between the actual fulfilment of obligations by the organization, and the promises previously made about these obligations. The degree of experienced violation depends on the type of violation, the degree of discrepancy, and whether the organization is held responsible for the violation (McFarlane Shore and Tetrick, 1994).

Because psychological contracts are formed on the basis of trust, violation may lead to strong emotional reactions and feelings of betrayal (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). But also less severe violations have consequences: higher turnover (Guzzo *et al.*, 1994; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Schalk *et al.*, 1995), lower trust and job satisfaction (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994), lower commitment to the organization (Guzzo *et al.*, 1994; Schalk *et al.*, 1995), earlier return from expatriation (Guzzo *et al.*, 1994), and less Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB: Robinson and Morrison (1995)), amongst others. Robinson *et al.* (1994) state that psychological contracts become more transactional after a violation. The employee withdraws from the relationship and will pay more attention to financial and other economic aspects. Herriot and Pemberton (1996) agree with this. According to them violations of transactional contracts lead to explicit negotiations, or adjustment of own investment or quitting the job. In the case of violations of relational contracts, emotions play an important role. Disappointment and distrust may develop, and because of this the contract may become more transactional, but at the core of the change may be the re-evaluation downwards by the employee of what they owe to the organization relative to what it owes to them.

The psychological contract in prospect: Future research directions

Although there is a growing literature on the conceptualization of the psychological contract, and much empirical research has been done on content, types and effects of psychological contracts, we believe that there is still much to be done and a multitude of important themes of research to further explore. Major areas are (1) *conceptualization*, (2) *measurement*, (3) *assessing the added value of the construct* and (4) *dynamic changes in psychological contracts*.

As far as *conceptualization* is concerned, we concur wholeheartedly with Rousseau (personal communication, 10 December 1996; and this issue) that the ease with which the construct has secured a firm place in management jargon has led to the danger of loose use and rhetoric (see again the insightful exchange of views between Rousseau and Guest following this editorial in the this issue). Researchers should clearly clarify what is meant when using the term psychological contract and further elaborate the content and features of psychological contracts. This does not necessarily mean that there only has to be one definition in use. As is the case with other concepts in organizational behavior, diversity in opinions, and competing theories and models will remain, and this is not necessarily counterproductive; indeed it may spawn a diversity of research efforts. Closely linked to conceptualization is the question how to assess the psychological contract, that

is, its *measurement*. Rousseau and Tijoriwala's contribution to the present special issue shows that there is great richness in qualitative and quantitative methods, but that there is a need for further development.

A major point of criticism of the basic concept of the psychological contract is that it is redundant, that is to say that it has no *added value* above explanations of organizational behavior on the basis of other theories or constructs (Guest, 1996; this issue). This is indeed an important issue, and one which has not received much attention so far. Although clear relationships have been found between psychological contracts and attitudes and behavior of employees, tests against alternative explanatory constructs have not yet been done. These kinds of studies certainly will have to be done in order to give the concept a robust position in the management sciences. Porter *et al.*'s (1996) contribution to this issue is perhaps one of the first attempts to assess the added value of the concept.

Another important issue is the *dynamics* and effects of change in psychological contracts. Recently, Morrison and Robinson (1997) presented a model of determinants and characteristics of violations in psychological contracts. Roe and Schalk (see Schalk and Freese, 1997) developed a model to describe dynamic processes in the psychological contract, and the effects of changes on attitudes, especially organizational commitment. They distinguish three patterns of changes in psychological contracts. According to Roe and Schalk, in normal situations the perception of what the organization offers the employee is in balance with the perception of the employee of what he or she offers the organization: there is a fluctuation between certain boundaries possible, without the need to revise the content of the psychological contract (i.e. 'balancing'). When the perception of the employee (or employer) about what the organization (or the employee) offers comes outside the boundaries of what is considered as appropriate (positive or negative) there are two possibilities: either the psychological contract is revised ('revision'), creating a new contract with different boundaries and content, or the contract is terminated ('abandonment').

This leads us full circle to the psychological contract of Dixon. In the first instance Dixon tried conscientiously to meet his obligations, but by his failure to do so, the boundaries of the contract were overstepped. Since revision did not seem to be possible Dixon had in fact already abandoned the organization some time before his employment contract was not renewed. In this special issue of *JOB* we hope that you, the reader, will find a diversity of approaches to the psychological contract and a variety of empirical and conceptual papers, which, together, push forward knowledge and understanding of the psychological contract at work.

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