

Employee Perceptions of The Psychological Contract are Not
Symmetrical: Cautions Derived from Analyses of The Dimensionality of
the Psychological Contract Inventory

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Psychological Contract Inventory (PCI) (Rousseau, 2000) as a measure of an employee's perception of their psychological contract with their employer. All 80 items in the PCI from both the employer and employee scales were included. Structural equation modelling was used to analyse the responses from 436 currently working, non-student respondents. The results demonstrated a non-symmetrical perspective on the employer and employee promises and obligations. The dimensionality of the PCI needs further investigation and possible expansion to ensure it best represents the employees' perceptions of the psychological contract construct.

Keywords: Psychological contract, obligations ,promises, organizational behaviour

INTRODUCTION

The phrase "psychological contract" is often attributed to Argyris (1960), who speculated on the working relationships observed in a field study. The managers in the organization were promoted from the rank and file employees. When they began their new roles, the managers were already familiar with their subordinate workers. The relationship between manager and subordinates seemed to be sustained by unwritten agreements about how the two parties would work together. Extra break time was acceptable in some circumstances and allowances were shown on both sides. Each party seemed to have an understanding of what was or was not acceptable, despite no written contracts or stated agreements covering the details. Argyris (1960) speculated that the new manager, having been part of the rank and file prior to promotion, knew how to get the best from the employees by accommodating the needs the manager knew so well. The new manager had been socialised into the role and knew what was important, the values in the department and the benefits that were valued. The promoted managers knew the "give and take" in optimally managing the workers. Argyris referred to this as the psychological contract.

The recent literature on the psychological contract has been dominated by the work of Denise Rousseau (including, but not limited to Rousseau, 1989; Rousseau, 1990, 1996, 2001, 2004; Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). The psychological contract definition refined by Rousseau extends Argyris' and others' definitions to include mutuality:

“An individual’s belief in mutual obligations between that person and another party such as an employer (either firm or another person). This belief is predicated on the perception that a promise has been made (e.g. of employment or career opportunities) and a consideration offered in exchange for it (e.g. accepting a position, foregoing other job offers), binding the parties to some set of reciprocal obligations” (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998, p. 679).

The psychological contract may be either formally contracted or implied (Herriot, Manning, & Kidd, 1997). If implied, the perceptions come from the expectations each party holds of the other and communicated either subtly or not so subtly. Each party could have a different perception of the nature of the obligations. Others have argued (e.g. Guest, 2004, Herriot & Pemberton, 1997) that Rousseau’s definition is fundamentally different from that of Argyris (1960) and Schein (1978). The key difference appears to be that Rousseau’s approach places more emphasis on the psychological contract being in the mind of the employee. The situation becomes more confused by Rousseau’s suggestion that employees vary in their belief that their psychological contract is with their supervisor, management, or “a personification” of the organization (Rousseau, 1998, p. 669).

Rousseau contends that perception, rather than fact of mutuality is the heart of the psychological contract, crediting this insight to Levinson (1965) and Argyris (1960) (Rousseau, 1998). The psychological contract exists at the individual level, representing “a person’s beliefs regarding the terms of his or her exchange relationship with another” (Rousseau, 1998, p. 668). The psychological contract is not an implied or third party interpretation, nor a situation where a social unit shares a common set of psychological contracts. Guest (2004), however, maintains there is increasing acknowledgement that the employer’s point of view is important in assessing the psychological contract.

For example, the increasing usage of the term psychological contract in the context of management activities and/or employee-employer relationships can indicate a broader use of the term

with more emphasis on the employer's perspective (Guest, 2004). Explorations of the employer's perspective by Kotter (1973) and others have emphasised either the employer perspective and/or the multiple perspectives that contribute to the psychological contracts within the organization. Yet the dominant perspective in the literature to date is that of Rousseau's individually-oriented approach, potentially only one side of the psychological contract. The subsequent calls for a debate about which perspective on the psychological contract is the more useful and why, and also raises concerns about the conceptual clarity of the construct and its construct validity, which needs to be more fully established (Guest, 2004).

As the psychological contract literature moves through this debate, there is an increasing emphasis on finer distinctions on the psychological contract, breach and violation effects. Calls are being made for work defining and discriminating the psychological contract, determining the appropriate levels of analysis and the contextual domain boundaries as different distinctions on the psychological contract (Roehling, 1997). Additional work on the psychological contract would be helpful to expand our understanding of psychological contract fulfilment, the degree of mutuality between employee and employer, as well as the effects of violation. Given that a body of work on the individual's psychological contract already exists, a starting point is to further explore the conceptual clarity of the individual's perceptions of the psychological contract.

The Dimensionality of the Individual's Psychological Contract

A construct is operationalised using indicators established to have construct validity. Although empirical research on psychological contracts is relatively recent and questions of validity abound in any emerging research area, a considerable amount of supporting research already exists (Rousseau, 2004). Construct validity has been supported for the operationalization of a variety of measures of the nature, states and consequences of psychological contracts. For example, researchers consistently find that psychological contract violation is distinct from unmet expectations (e.g. Robinson, 1996, Rousseau, 1989, Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993, Rousseau, 1995). In developing a psychological contract assessment measure, Rousseau interviewed 'more than a dozen' human resources (HR) managers. Rousseau acknowledges this method of collecting employment terms is imperfect and may

not “fully tap the array of possible commitments” employees and employers can make to each other (Rousseau, 1990, p. 398). The subsequent survey measure has, however, provided the basis of a substantial amount of psychological contract research (for example, Shore & Barksdale, 1998). The HR managers’ interview responses were used to create a list of generally agreed obligations for new hires (Rousseau, 1990). The HR managers indicated to what extent they believed the employer was obligated to, or owed their new employees seven particular terms of employment – promotion, high pay, pay based on current level of performance, training, long term job security, career development, and support with personal problems. HR managers then indicated the employee obligations to the organization. Eight employee obligations to the organization were assessed. They were to what extent the employee obligations to the employer included: working extra hours, loyalty, volunteering to do non-required tasks on the job, advance notice if taking a job elsewhere, willingness to accept a transfer, refusal to support the employer’s competitors, protection of proprietary information, and spending a minimum of two years in the organization (Rousseau, 1990, p. 394).

The result of this work was the Psychological Contract Inventory, a generalizable assessment of the psychological contract across persons and settings (Rousseau, 2000). Employee psychological contracts are more or less relational, balanced, transactional, or transitional. From the perspective of the individual, each psychological contract type has been operationalised by creating scale measures representing a sub-division of each component into “conceptually homogeneous components” (Rousseau, 2000, p. 5) for the individual’s perception of both their side of the psychological contract and the employer’s side. The reason for these sub-divisions is again not necessarily driven by theory, but “in a manner that produces scales with high convergent and discriminant validity” (Rousseau, 2000, p. 5). Employee and employer obligations for each of the PCI’s scales are detailed in Table 1.

The instability of this dimensionality has been highlighted by several studies. For example, factor analyses of a large-sample psychological contract study revealed a training factor in addition to the expected relational and balanced psychological contracts (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). These and other findings raise the possibility that training is a separate psychological contract dimension rather than being absorbed within the psychological contract types of relational, balanced, and transactional dimensions (Arnold, 1996). Conversely, evidence of construct validity is found in the

specific and discriminant relationships of psychological contracts with other variables. For example, transactional contracts are positively related to careerism (Rousseau, 1990), and lack of trust in the employer (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1996), while relational contracts are negatively related to careerism and positively related to trust and acceptance of change (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1996).

Table 1. Dimensional components (types) of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 2000).

Scale name	Employee obligation	Employer obligation
Relational		
Stability	To remain with organization and do what is required to keep job	To offer stable wages and long term employment
Loyalty	To support the organization, manifest loyalty and commitment to the organization's needs and interests. Be a good organizational citizen.	To support the well-being and interests of employees and their families.
Balanced		
External employability	To develop marketable skills	To enhance worker's long-term employability outside the organization as well as within it.
Internal advancement	To develop skills valued by this employer	To create worker career development opportunities within the firm.
Dynamic performance	To successfully perform new and more demanding goals which can change again and again in the future, to help the firm become and remain competitive	To promote continuous learning and to help employees successfully execute escalating performance requirements.
Transactional		
Narrow	To perform only a fixed or limited set of duties, to do only what employee is paid	To offer the worker only limited involvement in the organization, little or no training or other employee development
Short term	To work only for a limited time	To offer employment for only a specific or limited time, not obligated to future commitments
Transitional		
Mistrust	Employee believes the firms sends inconsistent and mixed signals regarding its intentions; employee mistrusts the organization	Employer has withheld important information from employees. Firm mistrusts its workers
Uncertainty	Employee is uncertain regarding the nature of their obligations to the firm.	Employer measure assess the extent that the employee is uncertain regarding the employer's future commitment to him or her
Erosion	Employee expects to receive fewer future returns from their contributions to the firm compared to the past; anticipates continuing declines in the future	Employer has instituted changes that reduce employee wages and benefits, eroding quality of work life compared to previous years.

Despite these findings, an important issue has been raised that may weaken many of the above results – the tendency by Rousseau and others to study MBA students. This “unfortunate” tendency has been more generally noted (Herriot, Manning, & Kidd, 1997, p. 152):

“Almost all previous research in this area (psychological contract) has examined the psychological contract violations experienced by a single cohort of MBA graduates making the transition from school to work (e.g. (Robinson, 1996; Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994; Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994).”

This paper contributes to knowledge of the operationalization of psychological contracts by exploring the dimensionality of the individual’s perception of the psychological contract. The study is increased in value by the use of a range of employees from currently working, non-student, occupations, rather than MBA students.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

Data for this investigation was collected as part of a wider employee survey of a large Australian regional local government council. The council’s responsibilities include road and sewer construction and maintenance, library operations, waste collection, rates collection, recreation and natural resources management, arts and cultural services and community development services including child care facilities, youth services and aged care. Departments supporting the provision of those services include integrated planning, finance, supply, information management, fleet services, customer services, legal services and organizational development. Employees volunteered to attend information sessions at which the survey was distributed and completed. Of 560 surveys distributed, 495 were returned, representing an 88% response rate on surveys distributed and 51.2% of the 966 employees currently working at the organization. Responses represented a range of occupational groups including labourers, clerical and administrative employees, professional and service occupations.

The sample of useable responses was reduced to 436 responses after removing responses with missing data and outliers (e.g. using Mahalanobis’ distances). This comprised 118 female (27.1%) and 309 male (70.9%) responses, who reported an average age of 42.73 years. Tenure ranged from less than one to 40 years, with an average tenure at the organization of 8.53 years. Educational attainment included 91 (20.9%) with high school qualifications, 177 (40.6%) with trade or other certification,

127 (29.1%) with university qualifications and 14 (3.2%) with post-graduate qualifications. The sample included 256 (58.7%) staff employees, 136 (31.2%) supervisors, and 14 (3.2%) managers.

Measures

Items from the Psychological Contract Inventory (Rousseau, 2000) were used to assess employees' perceptions of their psychological contract. For the employer scales: forty items were used to determine the employee's perception of the employer's obligations to them. The items for the transaction, relational, and balanced subscales were prefaced with "To what extent has your employer made the following commitments or obligations to you? To what extent have they indicated..." An example of an item is "A job for a short time only". Items for the transition subscale were prefaced with the stem: "To what extent do these statements describe your employer's relationship to you?" A five point Likert scale from 1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *To a great extent* was used. The full set of employer items is included in Appendix A.

For the employee scales, another 40 items were used to determine the employee's perception of their obligations to the organization. The transaction, relational and balanced items were prefaced with "To what extent have you made the following commitments or obligations to your employer? To what extent have you indicated you may..." An example of an item is "Quit whenever I want". The items in the transition subscale were prefaced with "To what extent do these statements describe your relationship with your employer?" A five point Likert scale from 1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *To a great extent* was used. The full set of employer items is included in Appendix B.

RESULTS

The descriptive statistics, reliabilities, means, standard deviations and correlations of all employer and employee scales are included in Table 2. All scales demonstrated good or excellent reliability, with Cronbach alphas above .7 found for all scales (using Rousseau's original allocation of items to scales), other than Employer Narrow (.52) and Employee Short Term (.65).

The contribution of each item in each scale was then checked using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to generate congeneric models. Amos 5 (Arbuckle, 1994-2003) was used to conduct

the SEM analyses. Each scale was inspected for items with abnormal contributions and to find the model that best fit the data. Adjustments were made in the process of building up the model. Poorly loading items were tested for better fit on other factors in the PCI, possible new factors and finally where no improvements could be made, considered for removal.

Table 2. The means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations of employer and employee subscales.

Employer scales	Mean	SD	Correlations: Employer scales											
			Stbty	Lty	Ext	Int	Dyn	Nrw	ShtTm	Mstst	Uncty	Ersn		
Stability	3.19	.946	.75											
Loyalty	2.71	.980	.53**	.85										
External	2.20	.895	.48**	.59**	.75									
Internal	2.42	1.036	.53**	.67**	.74**	.88								
Dynamic	2.86	.965	.54**	.74**	.71**	.77**	.84							
Narrow	2.80	.734	.24**	.21**	.15**	.14**	.23**	.51						
Short Term	2.07	.931	-.22**	-.03	.14**	-.01	.01	.25**	.72					
Mistrust	2.99	1.057	-.32**	-.49**	-.32**	-.47**	-.50**	-.03	.17**	.85				
Uncertainty	2.90	1.077	-.40**	-.53**	-.34**	-.49**	-.51**	-.05	.24**	.84**	.87			
Erosion	2.62	1.051	-.44**	-.43**	-.28**	-.43**	-.47**	-.09	.16**	.65**	.69**	.80		

Employee scales	Mean	SD	Correlations: Employee scales											
			Stbty	Lty	Ext	Int	Dyn	Nrw	ShtTm	Mstst	Uncty	Ersn		
Stability	3.27	1.162	0.84											
Loyalty	3.13	.916	.43**	0.75										
External	2.74	1.071	-.22**	.03	0.82									
Internal	3.71	.858	.28**	.55**	.40**	0.83								
Dynamic	3.76	.803	.32**	.59**	.21**	.72**	0.83							
Narrow	2.17	.920	.01	-.17**	.08	-.19**	-.23**	0.73						
Short Term	2.03	.866	-.27**	-.11*	.27**	-.10*	-.07	.43**	0.65					
Mistrust	2.53	1.117	-.23**	-.15**	.15**	-.10*	-.15**	.13**	.32**	0.85				
Uncertainty	2.70	1.116	-.27**	-.21**	.22**	-.09*	-.14**	.19**	.33**	.78**	0.87			
Erosion	2.59	1.156	-.11*	-.03	.12**	-.08	-.06	.17**	.25**	.58**	.55**	0.80		

N = 436

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Analyses were conducted on the Relational, Balanced, Transactional and Transitional PCI scales for the each of the employee’s perceptions of the employer’s obligations and promises and for the employee’s perceptions of their own obligations and promises. The PCI employer scales were examined first. Among the items constituting the Relational subscales, item 28 (“Stable benefits for employees’ families”) was removed. For the questions in the Balanced subscales, items 20 (“Potential job opportunities outside the organisation”) and 27 (“Contacts that create employment opportunities elsewhere”) were directed to a new, separate construct called “external people and jobs”. From the

items originally allocated to the Transactional scales, item 3 “Limited involvement in the organisation” and item 17 “A job limited to specific, well-defined responsibilities” were removed from the Narrow and Short Term scales respectively. For the Transition scales, the Mistrust and Uncertainty scales were combined. The removal of Erosion item 59 (“My employer demands more from me while giving me less in return”) and Uncertainty item 61 (“There is an uncertain future regarding my employer’s relations with me”) improved the scale discrimination and fit of the model.

Figure 1 shows the revised model for the Employer scales.

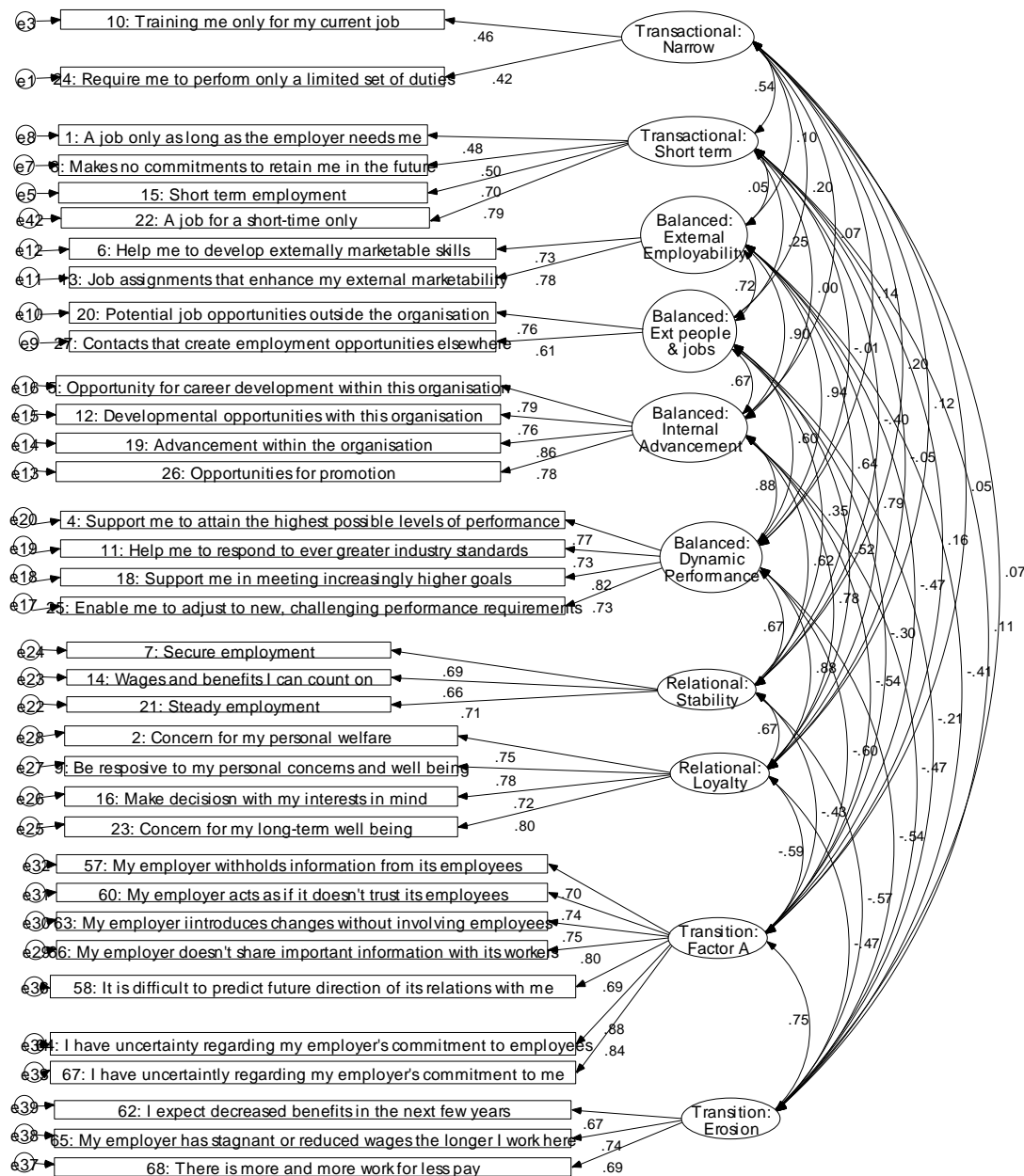


Figure 1 PCI Employer Scales, revised model

The measurement model for the employer scales prior to our adjustments (Appendix A, Chi-square = 1741.695, df = 695, p = .000, CMIN/DF = 2.505, GFI = .829, AGFI = .798, TLI = .870, CFI = .884, RMR = .091, RMSEA = .059) was significantly improved when the recommended adjustments were incorporated into the revised model (Chi-square = 1244.043, df = 515, p = .000, CMIN/DF = 2.416, GFI = .860, AGFI = .829, TLI = .894, CFI = .908, RMR = .082, RMSEA = .057).

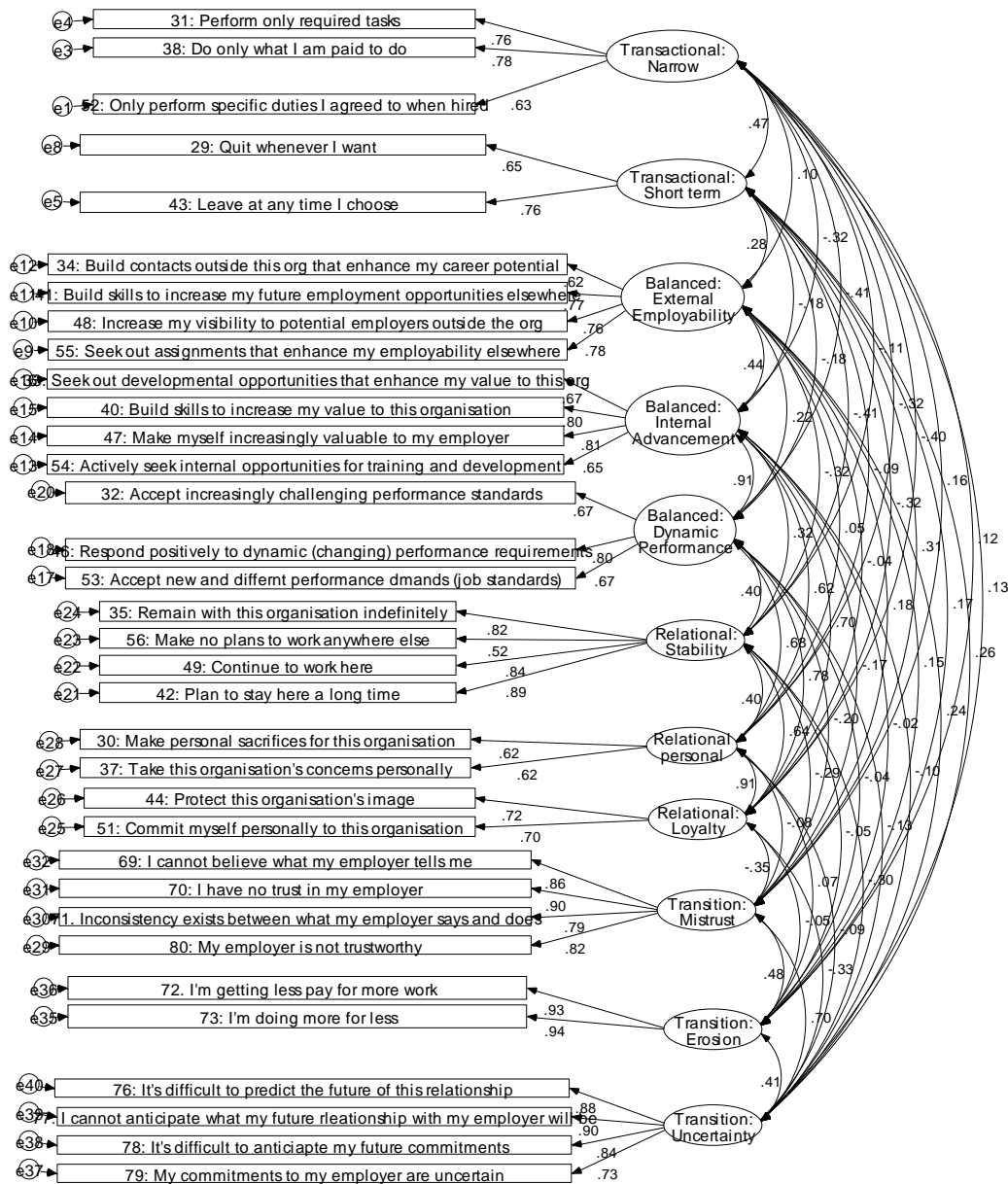


Figure 2 PCI Employee Scales – revised model

The PCI employee scales were examined next. The employee scales also demonstrated some abnormalities indicating that changes may improve the model. The Relational Loyalty scale was split into Loyalty and Personal Concern scales. The Balanced, Dynamic Performance item 39 (“Adjust to changing performance demands due to business necessity”) was removed. In the Transaction scales,

items 36 (“I have no future obligations to this employer”), 45 (“Fulfil limited number of responsibilities”), and 50 (“I am under no obligations to remain with this employer”) were removed. Finally, the Transition Erosion items 74 (“I expect less from my employer tomorrow than I receive today”) and 75 (“I expect increasing demands from my employer for little return”) were removed. Figure 2 shows the revised model for the Employee scales.

The results and fit of the original set of employee scales (Appendix B, Chi-square = 1616.207, $df = 695$, $p = .000$, CMIN/DF = 2.325, GFI = .839, AGFI = .810, TLI = .888, CFI = .900, RMR = .099, RMSEA = .055) were significantly improved upon after the adjustments were made as a result of our analyses (Chi-square = 984.354, $df = 472$, $p = .000$, CMIN/DF = 2.085, GFI = .882, AGFI = .851, TLI = .924, CFI = .936, RMR = .071, RMSEA = .050).

DISCUSSION

This study conducted a close inspection of the PCI’s scales using a substantial sample of non-student, currently working employees representing a range of occupations. The study demonstrates where the scales perform well and where improvements may be made. Each of the relational, balanced, transactional and transitional scales is now discussed. Of particular note is the non-symmetrical nature of the employee’s perception of the employer and employee scales, which was not expected.

A Relational employment relationship is based on the two dimensions of stability and loyalty. The results of the employee scales indicated that employees see the Stability items loading well while the Loyalty items are better spread across the two different factors of Personal and Loyalty. The Personal factor relates to the individual employee, while the Loyalty factor relates to loyalty to the organization. There is poor discrimination between these constructs (.91), indicating more work is required to make distinctions in how employees view their loyalty to the organization. On the other hand, when employees perceive the organization’s Relational Stability, almost the opposite occurs with the two constructs. All the Loyalty items load well to a single factor/construct while the three remaining Stability items remain together.

The Transactional scales represent relationships that are specific and short term, represented in the PCI by the Narrow and Short Term scales. In the employee’s view of their own obligations,

clear distinction is made between the constructs but both constructs degrade from the original model design with the loss of one or two items. The employee's perception of the employer's obligations discriminates similarly despite some poor Short Term loadings and the loss of two Narrow items.

The Balanced scales represent employment relationships that are neither fully relational nor fully transactional, but have a balance of both – so the employee may maintain their skills, grow their skills, but also be flexible to move away from the organization. From the results of the employee scales, it appears that the way the employee sees their own obligations to develop their skills to remain valuable to the employer, the Internal Advancement scale, is barely distinct from their perception of the changing and increasingly challenging aspects of their obligations to the employer (the Dynamic Performance scale), with a correlation of .91 between the two scales. The employee's view of their obligations to develop their own externally marketable skills, External Employability, however, is quite separate and unrelated to the other two skill-improvement scales. On the other hand, when the employee thinks of the employer's promises or obligations for the employee's external marketability, employees make the distinction between the organization providing opportunities for career improvement and the organization providing opportunities to update employee skills to meet changing organizational needs. In addition, when employees look at the employer's obligations to enhance the employee's long-term external employability, employees make a distinction between the projects and assignments the employee is exposed to, and the contact with people and direct external job opportunities that are available to the employee.

The implications of these findings may be extended to organizations attempting to encourage a resilient workforce, where employees have confidence in their ability to maintain their career and are less fearful of losing their current jobs. In those organizations, it may be helpful for management to make a stronger link between, say, training opportunities that represent change in the organization (such as training on software upgrades) and training opportunities for direct career advancement (such as training in supervisory skills). Employees make the distinction in promises and obligations they make to the employer for their own external marketability, but don't see that the organization makes that promise or obligation.

The Transition scales of Mistrust, Uncertainty and Erosion in the workplace relationship are perceived by employees as separate constructs. However, employees' perceptions of the employer's obligations indicate the distinction between Mistrust and Uncertainty is blurred into a single construct, while Erosion is seen separately. Employees do not make a distinction between employer Mistrust and Uncertainty. This is important information for employers, especially when employers are keen to be trusted despite going through times of uncertainty. It would be useful for employers who wish to maintain strong relationships with their employees to pay particular attention to this aspect of their communication with employees. If employees see mistrust and uncertainty as the single factor, then stronger corporate attention could be applied to neutralising the effect of any mixed messages the organization generates inadvertently.

The results, concurring with Rousseau (2004), confirm that a psychological contract exists at the individual level, in the form of a person's beliefs regarding the terms of his or her exchange relationship with the employer. The determination of the individual's perceptions of both their "side" of the psychological contract and that of the organization's side, confirms the view (of Rousseau, 2004) that at least the employee's side of the psychological contract is distinct from an implied (or third party interpretation) contract.

A key issue in the debate between Guest and Rousseau is whether the psychological contract measures support psychological contract theory. In the case of the PCI and Rousseau's individual-perception approach to the psychological contract, these results highlight that the individual's perspective does exist in the broader workforce. Further, the results demonstrate asymmetrical dimensionality of the PCI that highlights that the individual's perceptions of what the employee and employer bring to the psychological contract have some common dimensions and importantly, some differing dimensions.

Although this study did not explore the employer's perceptions of the broader psychological contract, the Guest (2004) and Rousseau (2004) sides of the psychological contract debate may be reconciled by accepting that both perspectives are legitimate. This investigation of the employees' perceptions of the psychological contract builds from the tighter individually-oriented view in the first instance and highlights some implications for employment relations policies and practices -

especially, the current potential for an organization to miscommunicate. Miscommunication in the psychological contract field may be overcome by the careful use of language and by further research on who is deemed to act as an agent of the organization in shaping the psychological contract.

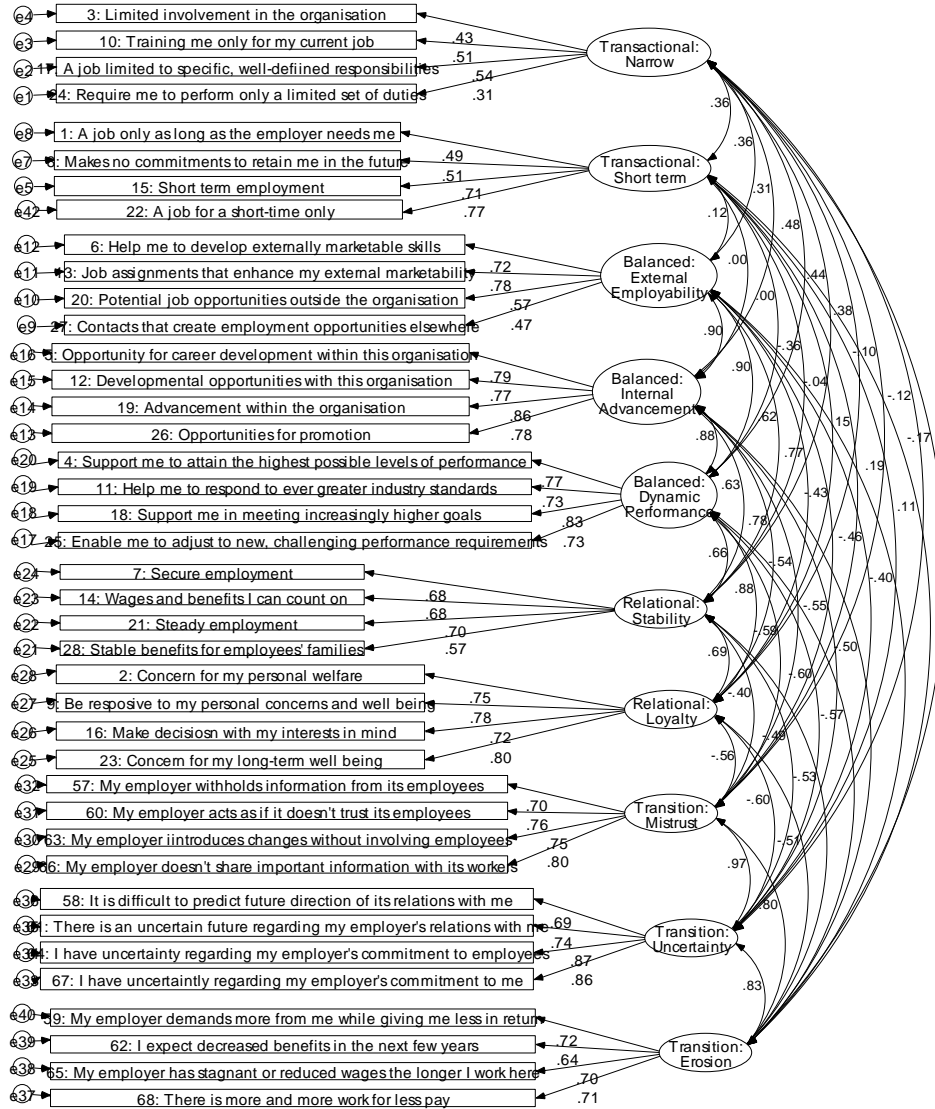
Recognising the potential link to the employee relations literature, Rousseau (2004) contends that creating mutuality in psychological contract understanding is in practice the goal or “gold standard” in employment relationships (Rousseau, 2004, p. 123). Conversely, this staged approach to investigating the psychological contract may help to address some of the “anxiety about anthropomorphizing the organization” referred to by Guest (2004, p. 675).

In summary, therefore, we can say the employee’s perspective of their own and their employer’s promises and obligations are constructed differently for the Balanced, Relational and Transitional scales. This non-symmetrical perception of the relationship reminds both management and scholars of the necessity to not assume that the employees’ perceptions of promises and obligations are mirror-images of each other, acting as some sort of simply-summed balance sheet.

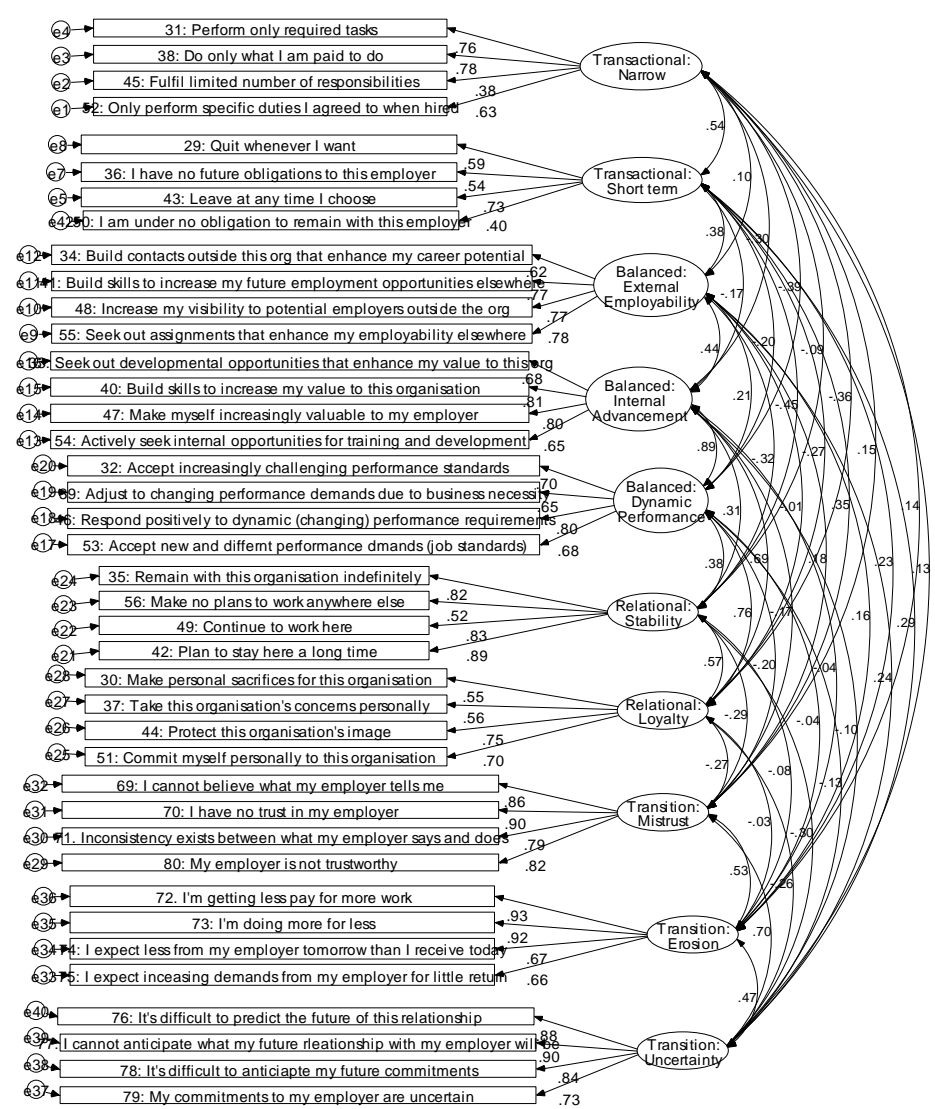
The potential limitations of this research should be noted. Respondents to the survey were from a single organization at a single point in time and the results should be confirmed before being generalised to a wider employee population. Respondents were 71% male and caution should be applied when generalising to both genders. The data was based on self-report surveys of employee perceptions, although this is appropriate given the theoretical approach being examined.

This study contributes to the literature on organizational behaviour by demonstrating the specific, multi-dimensional and non-symmetrical way in which employees perceive their own promises and their interpretation of their employer’s promises and obligations in their employment relationship. The study improves the reliability of Rousseau’s (2000) Psychological Contract Inventory and in doing so, increases our understanding of the operationalization of the psychological contract. The results of this study also imply that it is possible that the PCI may not have full coverage of the domain of the psychological construct even from only the employee’s perspective and that future research may wish to investigate whether the PCI’s domain could be expanded.

Appendix A PCI Employer Scales, original Rousseau (2000) model



Appendix B PCI Employee Scales, original Rousseau (2000) model



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