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# Introduction to the *Handbook of Research on the Psychological Contract at Work*

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The psychological contract is “an individual’s beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the focal person and another party” (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123). The psychological contract represents the employee’s mental model or cognitive schema about the exchange relationship with the employer. This schema comprises the employee’s perceived mutual obligations to contribute certain resources (e.g., time, loyalty, work effort) to the organization, as well as the organization’s obligation to contribute certain resources (e.g., competitive pay, training and development, flexible working hours) in return. The psychological contract influences the employee’s interpretation of employer actions (or non-actions) and guides employee emotions, attitudes, and behavior toward the organization. Decades of research have shown that perceived psychological contract fulfillment is associated with positive employee attitudes and behaviors, whereas perceived psychological contract breach is associated with negative such reactions (for a meta-analysis see Bal, De Lange, Jansen, & van der Velde, 2008; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007).

Although psychological contracts have been empirically explored extensively over the last 50 years (Conway & Briner, 2009), psychological contract research makes a number of assumptions about how employees conceptualize and experience their psychological contract (Conway & Briner, 2005). It is thus not surprising that many, including prominent psychological contract researchers, have criticized the lack of theoretical, conceptual, empirical, methodological, and analytical rigor of most psychological contract research. For example, Guest (1998, p. 663) has argued that “The psychological contract is beset with conceptual problems and still has to establish itself as a useful and valid psychological construct.” Millward and Brewerton (2000, p. 50) say that “Much work remains to be done in clarifying our use of the term, both theoretically and empirically.” Marks (2001, p. 454) goes on and says that

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Despite the common usage of the concept, there is considerable evidence that the concept does not have the analytical rigor of more enduring psychological constructs and as such it is not only being misused, but also being diminished as an explanatory framework.

Conway and Briner (2005, p. 183) claim that “The major problems with psychological contract theory are that there simply is not enough of it and what exists is underdeveloped and underspecified.” Seeck and Parzefall (2008, p. 474) utter their concerns about the ability of psychological contract research to adequately capture everyday work as it is experienced by employees when saying that “Very little is known about the employees’ role in influencing the psychological contract and its content in everyday work and about employees’ perceptions of their psychological contract obligations.” Finally, Conway and Briner (2009, p. 108) summarize these problems with psychological contract research as follows: “We are in little doubt that insight into psychological contracts will not develop to any significant degree if we do not change how we research it.”

### OBJECTIVES OF THIS BOOK

Thousands of excellent book pages have been written about the theoretical, conceptual, and empirical work on psychological contracts (e.g., Conway & Briner, 2005; Guest & Conway, 2000, 2001, 2004; Guest, Isaksson, & De Witte, 2010; Kiazad, 2010; Petersitzke, 2009; Rousseau, 1995, 2015; Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). It was not our objective to repeat, update, or revise the content of these different books. That is, we did not focus the book to a particular topic (e.g., cross-national perspectives—Rousseau & Schalk, 2000; supervisor psychological contract management—Petersitzke, 2009). Instead we included a broad range of critical evaluations of existing psychological contract research and paradigms such as a critical reflection of five decades of psychological contract research (Chapter 1), how mutuality and reciprocity relate to psychological contracting (Chapter 2), how psychological contract theory is in need of more conceptual clarity and a further refinement of what breach and violation imply (Chapter 3), how psychological contract literature may benefit from lessons learned in emotion research (Chapter 4), and how psychological contract researchers see the future of the field (Chapter 5). Second, we charged our authors to push the field forward by proposing new, or expanding existing, models and approaches to the psychological contract, such as

the inclusion of ideological currency (Chapter 6), i-deals (Chapter 7), the role of social context (Chapters 8 and 11), the role of sensemaking (Chapter 9), and the aftermath of psychological contract violation (Chapter 10). Finally, because psychological contract theory and research are becoming increasingly dynamic (for an overview see Hansen & Griep, 2016), we deemed it crucial to improve our understanding of how time and timing played a role in psychological contract research (Chapter 12), how thresholds and non-linear dynamics may push the boundaries of our traditional understanding of psychological contract research forward (Chapter 13), and how different workplace events may unfold and trigger perceptions of psychological contract breach (Chapter 14). These conceptual and theoretical changes go hand in hand with a series of new methodological and analytical challenges. Therefore, we included chapters that focus on formal dynamic and computational modeling of psychological contract processes (Chapter 15), changing psychological contracts over time via individualized psychological contract networks (Chapter 16), different analytical approaches to capture perceptions of psychological contract fulfillment and breach (Chapter 17), the use of experiments in psychological contract research (Chapter 18), and the usefulness of an in-depth qualitative narrative approach to psychological contract research (Chapter 19). We end the book with a chapter in which a team of international psychological contract researchers lay out the future of the field (Chapter 20).

## THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

This book is organized into four parts: Part I evaluates and revisits current assumptions in psychological contract research; Part II offers new conceptual and theoretical developments to push the boundaries of psychological contract theory; Part III introduces the dynamic psychological contract as a way to move away from a static view on the employee–employer relationship; and Part IV offers new methodological and analytical developments. These are followed by a concluding chapter that critically evaluates the existing conceptual, theoretical, and empirical work and makes suggestions for future research directions.

### **Part I**

In Chapter 1, Neil Conway and Claire Pekcan take a critical approach to more than 50 years of psychological contract research by reviewing the

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psychological contract definition and the main parts of psychological contract theory and research, and then turn to several important challenges researchers have raised against the psychological contract, why they are important, and the extent to which they remain problematic. They end the chapter with a list of important gaps in the literature that can guide future research.

In Chapter 2, René Schalk and Melanie De Ruiter conduct a systematic review of empirical studies in which reciprocity and mutuality were examined. The aim of this chapter is to further our understanding of mutuality and reciprocity and assess how these concepts have been defined and operationalized in existing research. The authors offer proposals for clear definitions and assessments of mutuality and reciprocity in psychological contract research.

In Chapter 3, Samantha D. Hansen identifies and addresses problems of construct ambiguity with regard to constructs used in the psychological contract literature. This chapter ends with a discussion of recent efforts to strengthen construct clarity in the study of psychological contracts.

In Chapter 4, Tina Kiefer and Anne Antoni challenge the predominant focus on cognitive processes in the psychological contract literature and propose, based on an overview of emotion literature, six opportunities to further our conceptual understanding of psychological contracts from an emotion perspective.

In Chapter 5, Johannes M. Kraak and Barend J. Linde surveyed psychological contract researchers from 30 different countries about the usefulness of the psychological contract as a theory and research topic. The chapter outlines several challenges that need to be overcome in the future and discusses researchers' suggestions on how to advance the psychological contract field.

## **Part II**

In Chapter 6, Pam Kappelides and Samantha K. Jones highlight the role ideology has played in progressing our understanding of social exchange relationships in the workplace and propose critical questions to aid in furthering the integration of the ideological components of psychological contracts into the broader psychological contract framework.

In Chapter 7, P. Matthijs Bal and Severin Hornung discuss the links between psychological contracts and idiosyncratic deals. Specifically, they discuss how individualization as a broader societal process has

influenced the study of psychological contracts, as well as the subsequent shift toward the phenomenon of idiosyncratic deals.

In Chapter 8, Jos Akkermans, Simon de Jong, Jeroen de Jong, and P. Matthijs Bal bring together the available theoretical and empirical literature on the role of social context in the psychological contract. In doing so, they hope to inspire researchers to explore the role of social context in psychological contract processes as a relatively new and unexplored topic.

In Chapter 9, Marjo-Riitta Diehl and Jacqueline A-M. Coyle-Shapiro argue that sensemaking can provide a valuable lens for examining how psychological contract schemas are created, maintained, or changed. In their chapter, they take stock of this knowledge base and provide suggestions on how the application of a sensemaking lens might further enrich our understanding of psychological contracts.

In Chapter 10, Maria Tomprou and Sarah Banks review literature related to how employees recover from psychological contract violation, and how employees manage emotions and re-establish relationships with their employer. In addition, they extend the research implications for this psychological contract research stream by focusing on the role of calling and vulnerable workers.

In Chapter 11, Omar Solinger critically evaluates the current state of the psychological contract literature's emphasis on the individual level of analysis, and offers an alternative by exploring what psychological contracting may look like if viewed as a socially situated process. The chapter examines person-centric and alternative "normative-contextual" assumptions in four substantive areas: level of analysis, the role of social influence, the organization as interaction partner, and the societal context.

### **Part III**

In Chapter 12, Safâa Achnak and Samantha D. Hansen discuss the relevance of time to psychological contracts, review and expand on existing psychological contract work that recognizes temporal aspects, and identify shortcomings of traditional methods; underscoring the importance of time-sensitive methodologies in future research.

In Chapter 13, Thomas Rigotti and Jeroen de Jong review theoretical ideas as well as different study designs and empirical approaches dealing with non-linear relations between psychological contract evaluations and diverse outcomes. In addition, they discuss the role of moderator variables that may impact the association between psychological contract breach and outcomes from a non-linear perspective.

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In Chapter 14, Hermien Wiechers, Jacqueline A-M. Coyle-Shapiro, Xander Lub, and Steven ten Have adopt a process-oriented lens to understanding how psychological contract breach occurs. They develop propositions about how breach is affected by direct, indirect, and slow triggers that elicit conscious attention of the psychological contract terms and demand a shift from automatic processing to conscious attention.

### **Part IV**

In Chapter 15, Justin Weinhardt, Yannick Griep, and Joanna Sosnowska focus on how formal dynamic and computational model approaches can advance our understanding of psychological contract dynamics. They discuss how formal dynamic and computational models can address the existing dynamic issues in the psychological contract literature. Furthermore, they provide an overview of useful books, journals, articles, and websites for researchers who are interested in building their own formal dynamic or computational model.

In Chapter 16, Tim Vantilborgh introduces the individual psychological contract network (iPC-network) model as an alternative approach for studying psychological contracts. In particular, this chapter illustrates how iPC-network models allow researchers to study the actual exchanges in the psychological contract over time, while acknowledging its idiosyncratic nature. Doing so allows for more precise predictions of psychological contract breach and fulfillment consequences.

In Chapter 17, Joeri Hofmans and Tim Vantilborgh offer an overview of different ways of measuring psychological contract breach and fulfillment. Drawing on the idea of methodological fit, this chapter discusses measures of psychological contract breach and fulfillment and their associated analytical methods. By discussing the strengths and limitations of each method, this chapter offers a useful guide for researchers in their search for an appropriate methodology to assess psychological contract breach and fulfillment.

In Chapter 18, Jeroen de Jong and Thomas Rigotti review and summarize research that uses experimental designs to study psychological contracts. Furthermore, this chapter introduces a tentative research agenda with topics in psychological contract research that could benefit from experimental research designs.

In Chapter 19, Sarah Bankins explores the power of a narrative approach for investigating the psychological contract. The chapter starts by providing an overview of the narrative field, then assesses how psychological contract researchers have utilized narratives to date, and

finally explores two potential pathways for psychological contract research, focused on narrative and antenarrative (story) analyses.

In the concluding chapter, several psychological contract researchers have teamed up to critically evaluate some key themes that emerged from the previous chapters. In doing so, they hope to challenge and refine the way scholars think about the psychological contract in the workplace.

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