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Newcomer psychological contracts and employee socialization activities: Does perceived balance in obligations matter? ☆

Stephanie C. Payne^{a,*}, Satoris S. Culbertson^b, Wendy R. Boswell^c, Eric J. Barger^d

^a Texas A&M University, Department of Psychology, 4235 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-4235, USA

^b Kansas State University, Department of Psychology, 492 Bluemont Hall, 1100 Mid-Campus Drive, Manhattan, KS 66506-5302, USA

^c Texas A&M University, Department of Management, Mays Business School, College Station, TX 77843-4221, USA

^d Financial Industry Regulatory Authority, 9509 Key West Avenue, Rockville, MD 20850, USA

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ABSTRACT

We sought to determine the extent to which one's beliefs about the relationship between an employee and an organization at the start of employment influence subsequent socialization activities. The balance of employee exchange relationships, employee perceptions of both their own obligations and the employers' obligations, were collected from 120 newcomers in a public sector organization on the first day of employment and again three months later. We found the relationship between employee obligations and two socialization activities (time with mentor and time spent in training) depended on the employee's perceptions of what the employer owed the employee, such that employees in unbalanced relationships tended to engage in more socialization activities than employees in balanced relationships.

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1. Introduction

In an effort to understand changing relationships between employees and their employers (Roehling, Cavanaugh, Moynihan, & Boswell, 2000), researchers have studied employees' perceptions of the nature of that relationship. This body of research has referred to the employment relationship as a psychological contract (e.g., Rousseau, 1989), an exchange relationship (Shore & Barksdale, 1998), and/or an employee–organization relationship (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997). Central to psychological contract theory is the existence of a link, in the mind of the employee, between the provision of certain levels of effort to the organization in exchange for particular rewards or considerations (Rousseau, 1995). Every employee holds a highly subjective view of reality regarding the terms of an exchange agreement between him or herself and the organization (Rousseau, 1995). The terms of the psychological contract are thus formed from a combination of individual and organizational influences and serve to direct an individual's activities and behaviors within the organization (Rousseau, 1989). The degree of balance that is perceived between the employee's obligations and employer's obligations has important implications for both the employee and the organization (Shore & Barksdale, 1998). In this study, we extend research on the balance within psychological contracts to employee socialization.

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* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 979 845 4727.

E-mail addresses: spayne@psych.tamu.edu (S.C. Payne), satoris@ksu.edu (S.S. Culbertson), wboswell@tamu.edu (W.R. Boswell), Eric.Barger@finra.org (E.J. Barger).

We chose to examine socialization activities in relationship to perceived obligations because of the crucial role such activities play in an employee's adjustment to a new organization (e.g., Haueter, Macan, & Winter, 2003) as well as the relationships such activities have with key outcomes, including person-job fit, job satisfaction, intentions to remain with the organization, and overall job performance (e.g., Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007; Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina, 2007).

2. Psychological contracts

Researchers have attempted to operationalize expectations in employment relationships by examining the employees' *psychological contract*, or their beliefs about the terms and conditions of the exchange relationship between themselves and the organization (Rousseau, 1989). Most of this research has focused on the employee's perception of the *employer's* obligations (Rousseau, 1995, 2001). However, more recent research has incorporated the employee's perception of *both* the employer and the employee's obligations (e.g., Shore, Tetrick, Lynch, & Barksdale, 2006).

The interaction between the employer's obligations and the employee's obligations captures the *degree of balance* or *mutuality* between these obligations. Thus in a *balanced* relationship, both the employer and the employee are perceived to have similar levels of obligation (i.e., both high or both low). In an unbalanced relationship, one party is perceived to be more obligated than the other.

Social exchange theory and equity theory also offer some insight on the issue of balance and unbalance. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) posits that employees seek balance in social exchanges and avoid states of indebtedness. According to Adam's (1963) equity theory, individuals seek equity, and thus balance in their relationships. Based on these theories, balance in exchange relationships is expected and preferred (cf. Dabos & Rousseau, 2004); therefore, most relationships are likely to be balanced, and unbalanced relationships are likely to be temporary (Shore & Barksdale, 1998). Certain unbalanced relationships, however, are likely to occur. For example, employees are likely to seek to maximize profit from the exchange (Homans, 1958) such that they receive more than they contribute; that is, employer obligations are higher than employee obligations. Nevertheless, Adams (1963) argued that individuals have a basic desire to reduce feelings of inequity when they occur, and therefore these unbalanced relationships are likely to be short-lived.

Since balanced relationships are preferred and most desirable (Blau, 1964), employees in balanced relationships are more likely to report positive organizational attitudes than employees in unbalanced relationships. Using a typology approach in which employee and employer obligations were each dichotomized into high and low obligations creating a 2×2 framework, Shore and Barksdale (1998) found some support for this in that mutual high obligation relationships associated with the highest levels of affective commitment and lowest level of turnover intentions compared to the three other combinations of employee and employer obligations. Similarly and consistent with the idea of seeking balance or profit, Tsui et al. (1997) found that mutual high obligation relationships (balanced) and employee under-obligation relationships (i.e., the employer is perceived to be more obligated than the employee) related to higher levels of task and contextual performance and affective commitment than the two other exchange relationships. Thus, a balanced relationship of mutual high obligations has been consistently associated with the most favorable levels of attitudes and behaviors. Tsui et al.'s findings that employee under-obligation relationships were also associated with favorable outcomes suggest that perceptions of high levels of employer obligations may contribute to these positive responses. We seek to extend these findings to the socialization context and specifically, how perceptions of obligations influence an employee's socialization activities.

It is important to note that the balance in psychological contracts can concern a balance in the expected obligations employees and employers have for one another or in the actual fulfillment of those obligations. As discussed thus far, the balance has been in regards to how expectations of obligations. Alternatively, considerable research has examined the role of violations in the development and maintenance of psychological contracts (e.g., De Vos, Buyens, & Schalk, 2003; Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994; Sutton & Griffin, 2004), highlighting the point that balance can also exist in terms of actual fulfillment of obligations, with balanced relationships being those in which the employee and the employer equally fulfill their obligations with one another. In this study, we examine newcomer perceptions on the first day of employment; therefore, we focus on balance of expected obligations rather than fulfillment. It is this balance (or unbalance) in perceived obligations that we posit will drive the engagement of socialization activities. We elaborate on the link between balance and socialization in the following section.

3. Balanced exchanges and socialization

The process of adjusting to a new organization is one of uncertainty reduction (e.g., Berger, 1979) and an effort to increase predictability about interactions that newcomers will have with others in the organization (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The adjustment process is believed to be influenced by both the newcomer and the organization (Reichers, 1987); thus socialization is the result of the interaction of formal organizational tactics and individual employee proactive behavior (e.g., information seeking). Employees can take a proactive role in the socialization process or passively let information come to them. Socialization research has shown that proactive employees socialize more quickly and reap more benefits than reactive employees do (Finkelstein, Kulas, & Dages, 2003; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). Early socialization activities (e.g., information seeking) are believed to shape the psychological contract (Nelson, Quick, & Joplin, 1991; Rousseau, 2001),

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