

A SCHEMA THEORY PERSPECTIVE ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTING PROCESSES OF INTERNS OVER TIME

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INTRODUCTION

Learners transitioning to employment face challenges not experienced by previous generations (Loon, 2021). One such challenge is their construction of employment expectations in the ever-changing world of work and ubiquitous information sources. This qualitative empirical study explores the work expectations of undergraduate interns from a psychological contract schema theory perspective over time. To answer our research question - how are the work expectations of university students transitioning to employment (re-)constructed over time? - we examine literature related to internships, schema theory, and the psychological contract. We then present the methodology and findings of this study followed by discussion, implications, limitations and recommendations for future research.

LITERATURE: INTERNS, SCHEMA THEORY, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS

An internship is a short-term practical work experience opportunity (Zopiatis, 2007). Literature collectively portrays how impactful this experience is in career exploration and career management behaviors, social skills, work expectations, college performance, and management of career shock events (Velez & Giner, 2014). This makes it an ideal experience through which to explore schematas and the psychological contract (PC). The PC represents a person's beliefs and expectations about the employment exchange relationship (Rousseau, 2001), with PC fulfilment the goal. Scholarly endeavours have focused heavily on the negative effects of mismanaged PC. Less insight is available on the process through which a PC is constructed (Sherman & Morley, 2015). The PC has been conceptualised as embedded in or built upon social schemata (De Vos & Buyens, 2005; Rousseau, 2001; Sherman & Morley, 2015). A schema is a mental model or cognitive structure an individual constructs to organise and make practicable conceptually related information (Stein, 1992). These schemata act as filters through which new information is processed and evaluated. They may function as incomplete lenses through which newcomers interpret experiences and information (Tomprou & Nikolaou, 2011). People use existing schemata to fill in blanks where information is lacking (Crocker et al., 1984). "Schemas vary in their complexity" (Rousseau, 2001:514): veteran workers will possess complex layers of schemata based on extended experience (Carr, Pearson, Vest & Boyer, 2006; Louis, 1980), while

neophytes (Carr et al., 2006) or novices (Rousseau, 1995) may hold simpler, more malleable, schemata. Thus, early work experience novices provide an ideal sample for researching schema construction and PC development. Therefore, in the context of reduced availability of information and the events experienced, the information acquired before and at organizational entry holds significant sway on newcomers (Bauer & Green, 1998) and their PCs. PCs may be disrupted by unfulfilled expectations (PC breach) or by an extreme negative emotional reaction rooted in breach (PC violation) (Rousseau, 1989). However, Rousseau, et al. (2018) highlight that it is not only breach or violation that disrupts the PC. Affective events may also act as triggers and also cause disruption. Given that this PC is at an early stage of development, it is inevitable that “critical events” (Schalk & Roe, 2007:170) or affective events (Rousseau, et al., 2018), and relational exchanges (Tomprou & Nikolaou, 2011) in the form of PC breach, violation, or fulfilment will occur and cause disruption for the PC holder. Though organizational newcomers at any stage of life or career may need to revise and reconstruct their PCs, interns are particularly susceptible to the demands of changing PCs. We now provide a brief over of the methodology and methods employed in this study.

METHODOLOGY

Process methodology investigates how things develop, change, and terminate over time (Langley, 1999). We take an abductive, iterative, and qualitative approach (Maria, 2018; Van de Ven, 2007) over a one-year period. Qualitative research provides rich, deep, and nuanced insight to complex and dynamic phenomena (Maria, 2018). We conducted 93 semi-structured interviews with and collected reflective accounts from 30 participants. Our sample consisted of 30 university students embarking upon a structured full-time internship lasting between 9-12 months from the same institution in Ireland. A convenience sampling method was used (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant was interviewed a minimum of 3 times over a minimum period of 12 months. Interviews were conducted over three phases from beginning and throughout the internship until return to education. Interview transcripts and reflective accounts were analysed manually using codes phase by phase and transcription began as soon as each phase of interviews were concluded, in line with best practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Coding centred around identifying what influenced the development of the PC and how the PC evolved over time from the perspective of the interns. We identified clusters and trajectories and began reducing the vast data structure to theoretically abstract the process story one step higher (Langley, 1999) creating a story versatile for use in further studies.

FINDINGS: THE DYNAMIC PROCESS OF EVOLVING PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS

Before the employment relationship began, interns already possessed expectations of the imminent employment relationship. We labelled these as antecedents to the PC. These expectations formed rudimentary schemata about what is to be expected in the employment relationship. These expectations influenced the experience of transitioning to new employment and became the filter through which interns made sense of new experiences presented by the internship. Once interns officially began working, they faced events and situations which often did not align with their expectations or schematic based PC. Misalignment of their expectations

caused challenges in the transition to work. We found that these expectations were based upon various sources of influences collected over time from their social, educational, and organizational experiences, though most had never worked in full-time or long-term employment. Most participants only had work experience of part-time low-skilled labor. We found that intern PCs were influenced by their original expectations but that the PC required revision throughout the period of the internship. This revision took place in various phases with each phase embodying certain characteristics and being dynamically linked. This is not to say that each individual enacted a similar linear process as experiences were unique, idiosyncratic, and contextually influenced. Some experienced a recursive process with two to three phases repeated a number of times before moving to the next phase. However, from our data, we identified process stories with commonalities making these findings versatile for exploration and application in other contexts. In summary, our findings show most interns were influenced by the antecedents of their PCs which were formed upon multiple various sources. We found that interns experience a dynamic process of PC evolution over the course of the internship and that this evolution continues to bear influence even after the internship is complete.

DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

There is a scarcity of research addressing the process of how PCs are formed and constructed over time (Bankins, 2015; Conway & Briner, 2005; Rousseau et al., 2018). We addressed calls in literature to empirically explore the theorised dynamism of the PC over time (Rousseau, et al, 2018), deepen understanding of the PC building blocks from a schema theory perspective (Sherman & Morley, 2015), and investigate student PCs (Knapp & Masterson, 2017;2018). We found most interns in our sample possessed unrealistic, outdated, and somewhat traditional expectations of the working relationship. This is different from generational expositions which often paint Generation Z, the age group of this sample, as demanding instant feedback, work life balance, and close work relationships (Emerald, 2021). The influence of pre-experience sources of information on PCs is an important insight lacking in management and higher education literature. This aligns with De Vos et al.'s (2009) research arguing that antecedents influence the management of the graduate PC. Theoretically, we make clear links between schema theory and the dynamic process of PC construction. The data shows that even without explicit organizational experience, interns possess influential expectations concerning what organizational relationships should be like (Louis,1980) which may lead to challenges when expectations and the reality of working life do not align.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION

Understanding learners' expectations of work is essential for business educators and organizational representatives preparing these learners for the workplace. Realising the impact of expectations on perceptions of work, educators can address these perceptions using varying approaches and educational mediums before undergraduate learners progress to their internships. Thus, educators can provide accurate depictions of employment reducing the challenges faced by interns when expectations do not align with the realities of working life. Despite great efforts by business schools to address the challenges of the school to work transition (Friga, Bettis, & Sullivan, 2003), for example through internships and practice-based curriculum (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010), much dissonance between expectations and reality exists. Engaging with

learners about their employment expectations gives educators a student-led point from which to exchange knowledge. While the organization and scaffold constructed by business schools and mass higher education may be necessary, it may contribute to learner challenges later on (Ozlem, 2019). Educators could consider means by which distinctions can be made between necessary layers of administration in the educational setting as opposed to the individual working relationship. Educators can also be informed through this study that interns may return with revised expectations for the lecturer-learner relationship. Understanding the dynamic PC enables organizations to engage with employees' subjective expectations and increases the chances of managing the PC more effectively. Being aware of interns' expectations in particular gives organizations a head-start in internship and graduate recruitment processes. Understanding the expectations of new recruits can aid employer branding choices, onboarding and socialisation processes, and contribute to content for managerial and 'buddy system' training. Learners and interns themselves can benefit from understanding how their expectations may be formed. Having this insight may empower one to enact career management strategies more effectively.

This study was a focused qualitative study in one university in Ireland. A larger sample may garner more varied results. Participants were limited to interns in their early to mid-twenties. While this was ideal and necessary for the purposes of exploring novice schemata, future research could investigate PC schematic development in an older and more experienced sample. Further research could follow a sample into graduate employment and compare schemata with those not completing an internship.

The study explored the evolution of interns' PCs over time from a schema theory perspective. We contribute to literature on schema theory, the dynamism of the PC, management learning and internships, transitions, and qualitative methodology conducted over time. We advocate for a phased approach over time to understand the evolution of intern expectations in relation to internships and future work. We explored an under researched sample in relation to PCs and schemas and provided an empirically informed discussion of the PC evolution process that is of value to educators, organizations, and interns.

ENDNOTES

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 873105

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