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# What is exchanged in psychological contracts? Multiple sets of obligations, targeted effort and uncertainty reduction

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore the currency underlying the employment relationship of allied health workers by investigating the mechanisms of their psychological contracts.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Path analyses were conducted on the survey responses from Australian allied health professionals ( $n = 112$ ; a 46 per cent response rate).

**Findings** – The analyses revealed that psychological contract promises decreased organizational citizenship behaviours relating to the organization (OCBO), while contract fulfilment increased commitment and reduced psychological distress. Contract breach reduced organizational commitment.

**Originality/value** – The results indicate that obligations may be the primary currency in their psychological contract, with career commitment forming a set of obligations by which employees determine their OCBO, highlighting the nature of the resources exchanged to be targeted to their perceived source, in this case organizational promises begetting discretionary contributions to the organization. Further, fulfilment may reduce uncertainty, which in turn can reduce strain and increase OCBO.

**Keywords** Employee attitudes, Employee behaviour, Psychological contracts

**Paper type** Research paper

The understanding and management of the employment relationship for employees in professional or highly technical work, particularly in medical or clinical fields, is extremely important, yet has received little attention (Bunderson, 2001). For example, allied health professionals currently make up a notable percentage of the healthcare workforce, are a vital component in ensuring safe, patient-centred and effective healthcare (Arena *et al.*, 2011) and are a key exemplification of the demand for relational skills that are important in many industries (Bailly and Lene, 2013). The lack of research regarding this professional group is concerning as retention is a major problem for healthcare organizations. Improving allied health professionals' work perceptions, through a better understanding of their psychological contracts, could help address this issue (Schofield, 2009).

Psychological contracts are the perceptions of the relationship between employees and employers and are considered to be a foundation of employee relations (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Morrison and Robinson, 1997). The concept of the psychological contract is based on social exchange theory, where people are motivated by maintaining a balance between inputs and outputs when reciprocity is sought in social transactions (Blau, 1964; Tekleab and Chiaburu, 2011). Social exchanges are unspecific and varied (Blau, 1964), and thus, the currencies and mechanisms by which individuals measure the exchanges in the psychological contract tends to be unclear (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005), where the currency of the social exchanges in the employment relationship could be in terms of one or more of a variety of obligations and/or in terms



of various foci of effort. Although aspects of the psychological contract have been consistently linked with organizational commitment (Bal *et al.*, 2008; Gakovic and Tetrick, 2003), career commitment, having a different focus to organizational commitment (Blau, 2003), may represent different obligations and therefore may be linked to different psychological contact components. Consequently, this study broadens previous work taking a multidimensional approach to commitment (e.g. Jonsson and Jeppesen, 2013) by taking a multi-foci approach to commitment. Further, there have been calls for research that includes psychological health in psychological contract research (Robbins *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, psychological contracts are related to organizational citizenship behaviours (OCBs; Robinson and Morrison, 1995; Van Dyne and Ang, 1998) where their discretionary nature means OCBs may be easily given or withheld (Organ, 1988) making them an ideal currency for employee reciprocation. The impact of the psychological contract onto OCBs, either directly or indirectly is unclear (e.g. see Lapalme *et al.*, 2011).

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the currency of the employment relationship by investigating the underlying mechanisms of the psychological contract. The study will investigate the full direct and indirect (mediated) links between the employment relationship (i.e. components of the psychological contract), outcomes of work (organizational and career commitment), health (psychological distress) and work performance behaviours (in-role behaviours (IRBs) and OCBs relating to the organization and the individual) for allied health professionals.

### **The employment relationship**

Social exchange theory suggests that individuals are involved in relationships where diffuse social obligations are relevant (Blau, 1964) and the belief or understanding that their contributions will be reciprocated (Gouldner, 1960), with individuals most comfortable under conditions of balanced exchange (Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly, 2003). The assessment of the state of this exchange is indicated by the individual's perceptions of their psychological contract (Homans, 1961).

The impact of psychological contracts often focuses on their breach, however, there is a growing recognition that psychological contracts consist of multiple components, specifically promises, fulfilment and breach (Anderson and Schalk, 1998). Psychological contract promises and fulfilment involve one party forming a belief that a promise has been made in exchange for a contribution (e.g. high pay for performing well; Rousseau, 1989). The benefits involved in social exchange do not necessarily have an exact price or form, entailing that exchanges are often unspecific and potentially varied (Blau, 1964). In some instances, given that the understanding of an agreement may not be shared by both the employer and employee (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 2001), possible discrepancies between what is thought to be promised and what is fulfilled may occur (Coyle-Shapiro and Conway, 2005; Turnley and Feldman, 1999). Moreover, when an employee perceives their contribution has not been reciprocated, an imbalance can be created, which may be perceived as negative and, in more extreme cases, perceived as a breach of the psychological contract (Bal *et al.*, 2008). For example, employees work to promote their career within the organization in return for appropriate career management from their employer, such as professional development. If this assistance is not forthcoming and their psychological contract is breached, their commitment may drop, potentially leading to turnover (Sturges *et al.*, 2005).

Although psychological contract breach is often defined as the opposite of fulfilment with the two contrasts considered interchangeable, having similar although opposite

effects on employee outcomes (Zhao *et al.*, 2007), recent research has indicated that they are distinct constructs that should be investigated simultaneously (Conway *et al.*, 2011; Lambert *et al.*, 2003). Specifically, breach assesses the extent to which obligations are broken on a broad level (Gakovic and Tetrick, 2003; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994), while fulfilment assesses specific obligations (e.g. promotion and advancement, or training and pay; Conway and Briner, 2009). Fulfilment also provides an indication of the level of promised obligations received by an employer; however, breach only assesses if a promise is perceived as broken.

The psychological contract components of promises, fulfilment and breach have been shown to influence important employee outcomes, including organizational commitment (Bal *et al.*, 2008), career commitment (Yeh *et al.*, 2007) and affect well-being (Conway *et al.*, 2011). The pattern of results across studies suggests that breach would have more severe consequences compared to the positive effects of fulfilment (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 1989) and that fulfilment of obligations is more important to employees than the promises themselves (Lambert *et al.*, 2003). Breaches are also thought to have an affective impact (Morrison and Robinson, 1997), while promises and fulfilment may be more influential for discretionary behaviours.

However, the effects of all three psychological contract components (promises, fulfilled obligations and breach) are rarely examined concurrently. Therefore, given the ambiguity of exchange processes, there is a need to extend our understanding of the mechanisms of exchange in the psychological contract by examining the all three components on to a variety of employee outcomes.

### **The mediating role of work and health outcomes**

Perhaps one of the most consistent findings in relation to the psychological contract dimensions of promises, fulfilment and breach are their associations with organizational commitment (Bal *et al.*, 2008; Gakovic and Tetrick, 2003; Tekleab *et al.*, 2012). To some extent this consistently observed relationship is because reciprocity may be a key mechanism underpinning commitment (Settoon *et al.*, 1996), just as reciprocity is inherent to psychological contract exchanges. Further, organizational commitment may be construed as an “array of obligations” (Robinson *et al.*, 1994, p. 149). In particular, commitment entails a volitional contribution and dedication (Klein *et al.*, 2012), characteristics which may make it exchangeable within the psychological contract.

Further, commitment can have different foci, such as affective organizational commitment relative to affective career commitment (Blau, 2003). The emphasis of career commitment is the extent to which the employee identifies with and values their profession or vocation (Goulet and Singh, 2002). The importance of career activities is highlighted within employee relations research by the relationship between psychological contract breach and career management (Sturges *et al.*, 2005). Consequently, by extension, career commitment represents a bond to a different form of target, which may represent a different array of obligations or promises that could be exchanged within the psychological contract. By investigating a wider range of foci of commitment, such as organizational relative to career commitment, this study broadens previous work taking a multidimensional approach to commitment (e.g. Jonsson and Jeppesen, 2013) by taking a multi-foci approach to commitment, thereby investigating which psychological contract components are associated with which arrays of obligations.

Among the studies on employee outcomes, there have been calls for investigations into the effect of the psychological contract on employee psychological health,

particularly because only a few studies have explored this relationship (Robbins *et al.*, 2012). Breaking psychological contracts is linked to emotionally charged negative reactions (Rousseau, 1989) and to ill-health (Robbins *et al.*, 2012). That is, psychological contract breach contributes to employee strain (Gakovic and Tetrick, 2003). Similarly, the better the state of the psychological contract, the better the individual's psychological well-being (Gracia *et al.*, 2007) and the more the organization has fulfilled the psychological contract, the lower the levels of emotional exhaustion. A proposed mechanism for the impact of the psychological contract on strain involves perceptions of predictability and control (Gakovic and Tetrick, 2003) whereby, for example, fulfilled promises act to reduce uncertainty, which reduces strain. These perceptions of predictability have parallels to the importance of uncertainty that have been highlighted in stress research and meta-analyses (e.g. Gilboa *et al.*, 2008).

Extending the relationships to these employee outcomes, previous research has consistently found links between the work outcomes of organizational commitment (Organ and Ryan, 1995), career commitment (Carson and Carson, 1998) and psychological distress (George and Brief, 1992) with work performance behaviours, such as OCBs, in addition to the impact of the psychological contract (Lapalme *et al.*, 2011; Robison and Morrison, 1995). These results suggest the employee outcomes may mediate the relationship between psychological contract components and performance behaviours.

### Work performance behaviours

Work performance behaviours form one way employees may reciprocate psychological contract obligations (Settoon *et al.*, 1996). That is, just as organizational commitment may embody a commodity of exchange, OCBs and IRBs may represent effort as a commodity of exchange (Settoon *et al.*, 1996). However, although past research has shown links between the psychological contract, work and health outcomes and performance behaviours, the full relationships between the variables has not been explored. That is, commitment and psychological distress may mediate the relationships between the psychological contract and work performance behaviours.

OCB can be measured in terms of extra-role behaviours that benefit the organization (OCBO; e.g. giving advance notice when unable to come to work), or behaviours that benefit specific individuals (OCBI; e.g. helping others who have been absent; Williams and Anderson, 1991). The decision to engage in OCBs depends on the organizations treatment of the individual (Organ, 1988). Given OCBs are multidimensional, employees may engage in one aspect rather than engaging in OCBO and OCBI equally. In addition to OCBO and OCBI, the next core component of work performance behaviours is IRB (Williams and Anderson, 1991), which refers to the duties and responsibilities individuals execute as an integral part of job assignments (Vigoda, 2000).

The discretionary nature of OCBs means they may easily be given or withheld (Organ, 1988), making OCBs ideal for reciprocation (Settoon *et al.*, 1996). OCBs have been linked to psychological contract promises (Van Dyne and Ang, 1998), fulfilment and breach (Robinson and Morrison, 1995). However, employees may seek to reciprocate in the social exchange in ways that enhance the likelihood that the partner to the exchange will notice the effort (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). Consequently, employees may direct their reciprocation efforts to the source of benefits received, where the exchange partner benefits, in order to reduce indebtedness (Settoon *et al.*, 1996). The discrimination of the reciprocation is supported by empirical findings that both psychological contract fulfilment and psychological contract breach appear to be more strongly linked to withheld OCBO, rather than OCBI (Turnley *et al.*, 2003).

Similarly, when employees perceive that their employers have failed to fulfil their promises they may withhold their contribution to the organization (Robinson and Morrison, 1995) in terms of the potential for extra effort in performing required duties (i.e. IRBs), making IRB one way employees can fulfil obligations to employers (March and Simon, 1958; Settoon *et al.*, 1996). Empirical studies have found that IRB is associated with psychological contract breach (Turnley and Feldman, 2000); with employees more likely to reduce their IRB when they believe that the organization has intentionally reneged on its commitments (Turnley *et al.*, 2003). Overall, both in-role and extra-role behaviours indicate ways in which employees can respond to psychological contracts and work and health outcomes. These behaviours may have multiple sources and may suggest differing levels of effort required.

### Current study

This study aims to examine the direct and indirect (mediated) relationships between the psychological contract components (i.e. promises, fulfilment and breach), outcomes of work (organizational and career commitment) and health (psychological distress), on to work performance behaviours (OCBO, OCBI and IRB). Both direct and indirect relationships between the psychological contract components and the outcomes are expected. In regards to direct effects between psychological contract and the work and health outcomes, it is hypothesized that:

- H1a.* Psychological contract promises will be positively related to the organizational commitment and career commitment.
- H1b.* Psychological contract fulfilment will be positively related to organizational commitment and career commitment.
- H1c.* Psychological contract breach will be positively related to psychological distress.

With regards to the direct effects of the psychological contract components and the work performance behaviours, it is hypothesized that:

- H2a.* Psychological contract promises will be positively related to OCBO and OCBI.
- H2b.* Psychological contract fulfilment will be positively related to OCBO and OCBI.
- H2c.* Psychological contract promises and fulfilment will be positively related to IRB, while psychological contract breach will be negatively related to IRB.

Finally, in regard to the mediating effects of the work and health outcomes, it is hypothesized that:

- H3a.* The relationship between psychological contract promises and the work performance behaviours will be mediated by the work outcomes of organizational and career commitment.
- H3b.* The relationship between psychological contract fulfilment and the work performance behaviours will be mediated by the work outcomes of organizational and career commitment.

*H3c.* The relationship between psychological contract breach and the work performance behaviours will be mediated by the health outcome psychological distress.

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

The sample for this study consisted of allied health professionals from a medium to large healthcare organization in Australia. Surveys were distributed to employees using the internal mail service. Once staff had completed the surveys, they were returned to the university research team using reply paid envelopes. The sample consisted of 112 allied health professionals, reflecting a response rate of approximately 46 per cent. Participants were mainly female (84.9 per cent) and over 55 years of age (21.9 per cent). In regard to length of employment, 19.9 per cent of participants had been employed by the organization for less than one year, 30.7 per cent had been employed for 1-4 years, 19.9 per cent for 5-9 years and 27.7 per cent 10 or more years. The largest sub-group of participants were employed on a full-time basis (45.2 per cent), with the remainder employed on a part-time or casual basis. With regards to the highest level of formal education completed, 48.2 per cent of participants had completed a tertiary degree or diploma and 31.9 per cent had completed post-graduate studies.

### *Materials*

*Psychological contract breach.* The perception that an employee's psychological contract was breached by the organization was measured using the five breach items from Robinson and Morrison's (2000) scale of perceived psychological contract breach and violation. Respondents indicated the level to which much they agreed with statements (e.g. "My employer has broken many of its promises to me even though I've upheld my side of the deal") on a five-point rating (from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree").

*Psychological contract promises and fulfilment.* The reported status of each employee's psychological contract was measured using a scale adapted from Rousseau (1990). The scale was composed of two subscales, each with the same seven items (e.g. "promotion and advancement" and "high pay"). The items comprising the psychological contract promises subscale asked respondents to indicate how much they perceived their organization owes them based on an implicit or explicit promise or understanding for various aspects of exchange. Respondents also indicated the extent to which the organization had fulfilled these same exchanges, representing the psychological fulfilment subscale. Responses ranged on a five-point rating from 1 ("not at all obliged" or "not at all fulfilled") to 5 ("very obliged" or "very well fulfilled").

*Organizational commitment.* Allen and Meyer's (1990) eight-item affective commitment scale was used to measure organizational commitment. Participants rated the level each item (e.g. "I really feel as if this organisation's problems are my own") reflected their point of view on a five-point rating from 1 ("disagree strongly") to 5 ("agree strongly").

*Career commitment.* Career commitment was measured using a slightly adapted version of Meyer *et al.* (1993) six-item affective occupational commitment scale. Participants rated the level to which they agreed with each statement (e.g. "I strongly identify with my occupation") on a five-point rating from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

*Psychological distress.* The Kessler-10 (K10; Kessler and Mroczek, 1994) was used to measure self-perceived psychological distress. Participants rated how often in the past 30 days they experienced issues relating to their health (e.g. "Did you feel tired out for no good reason?") from 1 ("all the time") to 5 ("none of the time").

*OCB.* Podsakoff *et al.* (1990) 21-item scale measured OCB. The scale consists of three subscales measuring:

- (1) OCBO (seven items, e.g. "My attendance at work is above the norm");
- (2) OCBI (seven items, e.g. "I help others who have been absent"); and
- (3) IRB (seven items, e.g. "I adequately complete my assigned duties").

Participants rated the extent to which each of the statements aligned with their behaviour at work from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree").

## Results

The scale means, standard deviations, Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficients and correlations are presented in Table I. Amos 19 (Arbuckle, 2010) was used to conduct path analyses, which calculates the strength, direction and statistical significance of multiple simultaneous relationships. The model consisted of three groups of variables:

- (1) employment relationship variables (psychological contract breach, fulfilment and obligation);
- (2) work and health variables (organizational commitment, career commitment and psychological distress); and
- (3) work performance behaviour variables (OCBO, OCBI and IRB).

There is no universal agreement on a single optimal test of fit for structural equation modelling (Maruyama, 1997), thus a variety of fit indices were used, including the ratio of the chi-squared statistic to the degrees of freedom, the comparative fit index (CFI) and the goodness of fit index (GFI). The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) is an absolute measure of fit with a value  $< 0.08$  considered a good fit (Hu and Bentler, 1998). The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) examines how well the model, with unknown but optimally chosen parameter estimates, would fit the population's covariance matrix. Values of 0.05 or less indicate a close fit, while values  $> 0.08$  should be rejected (Brown and Cudeck, 1993).

The mediation model was tested (as per Baron and Kenny, 1986) and had a  $\chi^2(df)$  of 19.54(6),  $p < 0.05$ . The non-significant paths were then removed. The resulting model had a  $\chi^2(df)$  of 38.30(25),  $p < 0.05$ , a difference of  $\Delta\chi^2(19) = 18.77$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . The work performance variables were then correlated resulting in a final model (see Figure 1) with a  $\chi^2(df)$  of 18.31(22),  $p > 0.05$ , and a difference of  $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 20.00$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , indicating a significantly improved model. The goodness of fit statistics for the final model include: CFI = 1.000, GFI = 0.965, SRMR = 0.051 and RMSEA = 0.000 (90 per cent CI 0.000, 0.063).

*H1a* predicted that psychological contract promises would be positively related to organizational commitment and career commitment was not supported. With regards to fulfilment, *H1b*, which predicted it would be positively related to organizational commitment and career commitment, was supported, with fulfilment linked to decreased psychological distress. Psychological contract breach was expected to be negatively related to psychological distress (*H1c*), however, surprisingly it was only



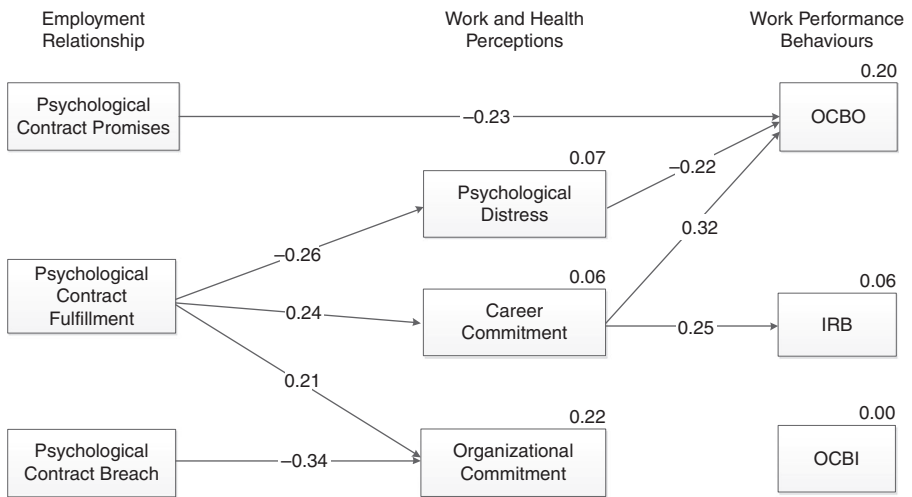
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
(1) Psychological contract breach	12.61	4.80	(0.91)								
(2) Psychological contract fulfillment	21.38	5.44	-0.40**	(0.83)							
(3) Psychological contract promises	23.29	6.19	0.12	0.31**	(0.87)						
(4) Psychological distress	15.25	5.42	0.14	-0.26**	-0.14	(0.86)					
(5) Career commitment	24.98	3.25	-0.18	0.24**	0.12	0.03	(0.86)				
(6) Organizational commitment	25.11	5.94	-0.43**	0.35**	0.09	-0.15	0.13	(0.72)			
(7) OCBI	40.30	4.71	-0.05	-0.08	0.11	0.00	0.10	0.02	(0.80)		
(8) OCBO	42.93	3.79	-0.18	-0.02	-0.13	-0.22*	0.30**	0.08	0.13	(0.57)	
(9) IRB	43.79	4.18	-0.16	0.07	0.09	-0.09	0.27**	0.00	0.16	0.42**	(0.66)

Notes: The Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficients are in parentheses on the diagonal. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

What is  
exchanged in  
psychological  
contracts?

**Table I.**  
The means, standard  
deviations, Cronbach  
 $\alpha$  coefficients and  
correlations of the  
variables analysed

**Figure 1.**  
The final model showing significant relationships between the employment relationship, work and health, and work performance behaviour variables



**Notes:** For clarity the correlations between the predictor variables have been removed. The variance explained for each outcome is indicated above the variable. For example, 0.22 indicates 22 per cent of the variance for organizational commitment was explained

positively related to organizational commitment. *H2a* was partially supported, with increased obligations decreasing OCBO. However, fulfilment was not related to either of the OCBs, thus *H2b* was not supported. *H2c* was also not supported with none of the psychological contract components directly related to IRB.

The work and health perceptions did not mediate the relationship between psychological contract promises or psychological contract breach and the work performance behaviours, indicating *H3a* and *H3c* were not supported. *H3b* was partially supported with psychological distress mediating the relationship between psychological contract fulfilment OCBO and career commitment mediating the relationship between fulfilment and OCBO and IRB. Increased psychological distress was linked to decreased OCBO and increased career commitment was linked to increased OCBO and IRB.

## Discussion

The current study explored the relationships between the employment relationship, work and health outcomes, and work performance behaviours. Importantly, the final statistical model revealed support for both direct and indirect effects across many of the variables, demonstrating excellent goodness of fit statistics. The results of the study, most notably the indirect effects, highlight the importance of testing the variables in combination. More specifically, the indirect relationships highlight the important role of career commitment in mediating the effects of psychological contract fulfilment for work performance behaviours. That is, increased perceptions of psychological contract fulfilment were linked to increases in OCBO and IRB through career commitment and psychological distress. These findings extend previous research (e.g. Turnley *et al.*, 2003; Turnley and Feldman, 2000) by examining the three main psychological contract dimensions and the performance behaviour components simultaneously, highlighting that psychological contract fulfilment is more influential to IRB, via career commitment,

than psychological contract breach. The pattern of results across previous studies suggests that breach would have more severe consequences compared to the positive effects of fulfilment (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 1989) and that fulfilment of obligations is more important to employees than the promises themselves (Lambert *et al.*, 2003). However, this pattern of results might be due to variability in the definition of psychological contract breach (Conway and Briner, 2009), particularly in studies that did not cover all three evaluative components of the psychological contract.

In addition to the indirect effects of the psychological contract components, several direct relationships, without mediation effects were also observed. Psychological contract fulfilment was positively linked to both organizational and career commitment, while psychological contract breach was negatively linked to organizational commitment, supporting previous research on organizational commitment (e.g. Bal *et al.*, 2008), and extending these to highlight the role of career commitment. This extension to career commitment builds on previous psychological contract research demonstrating the importance of career management activities (e.g. Sturges *et al.*, 2005).

To some extent, we would suggest that these consistent relationships with both forms of commitment are because reciprocity may be a key mechanism underpinning commitment (following Settoon *et al.*, 1996), just as reciprocity is inherent to psychological contract exchanges. That is, because organizational commitment can be seen to represent an “array of obligations” (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994, p. 149), obligations may be the currency of exchange for the psychological contract. Further, commitment can have different foci, such as organizational relative to career commitment (Blau, 2003), and either form of commitment entails a volitional contribution and dedication (Klein *et al.*, 2012), which are the characteristics that make commitment exchangeable within the psychological contract. In this case, increased fulfilment from the employer has led to increased contributions from the employee to the organization via career commitment, where, although career commitment represents a bond to a different form of target, career commitment appears to represent another array of obligations that could be exchanged within the psychological contract. That is, obligations are a key currency of exchange within psychological contracts.

Further, only psychological contract fulfilment was linked to decreased psychological distress. In turn, decreasing psychological distress increased OCBO. Among the studies on these outcomes there have been calls for investigations into the effect of the psychological contract on employee psychological health because few studies have explored this relationship (Robbins *et al.*, 2012). Previous studies have found that the better the state of the psychological contract, the better the individual’s psychological well-being (Gracia *et al.*, 2007). A proposed mechanism for the impact of the psychological contract on strain is through perceptions of predictability and control (Gakovic and Tetrick, 2003) where fulfilled promises act to reduce uncertainty, which leads to reduced strain. This is in line with the role of uncertainty in stress research (e.g. Gilboa *et al.*, 2008) and suggests that fulfilling the psychological contract can act as a safety valve, while simultaneously acting to improve career commitment, which may be a pressurizing mechanism that improves OCBO and IRB.

The only direct relationship from the psychological contract components onto the performance behaviours was negative from psychological contract promises to OCBO, suggesting that having high work-specific expectations, where the employer is seen as over-promising, can be harmful to performance behaviours. This finding partially supports previous research on obligations and fulfilment (Lambert *et al.*, 2003), suggesting that fulfilment of obligations is more important than making the promises.

The current study's results show that psychological contract promises did effect behaviour, but fulfilment was more important in predicting positive employee outcomes and behaviours (i.e. career commitment, organizational commitment, OCBO and IRB) and reducing negative outcomes (i.e. psychological distress).

Our results confirm that the discretionary nature of OCBs means they may easily be given or withheld (Organ, 1988), verifying that OCBs are ideal for reciprocation (Settoon *et al.*, 1996). OCBs have been linked to psychological contract promises (Van Dyne and Ang, 1998), fulfilment and breach (Robinson and Morrison, 1995). However, employees seek to reciprocate in the social exchange in ways that enhance the likelihood that the partner to the exchange will notice the effort (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). That is, when employees believe the promises they are reciprocating originated from the organization they are more likely to place their effort into behaviours that benefit the organization directly, such as where promises and career commitment develop OCBO, above behaviours that benefit individuals. These results have strong parallels with the source-specificity of other psychological contract studies, such as those finding client commitment linked to client-oriented discretionary behaviour (Lapalme *et al.*, 2011). The results of this study also suggest that employees distinguish the social entity of the organization to be separate from proximal individuals. Similarly, there were no significant links to OCBI, which is also in line with previous research suggesting that discretionary effort is targeted at the specific source (Lapalme *et al.*, 2011; Turnley *et al.*, 2003), but may possibly be because allied health professionals may not engage in OCBI behaviours due to the nature of their work, which can be more individually oriented, resulting in fewer opportunities to contribute by performing OCBIs.

Similarly, when employers fulfil their promises employees can use extra effort in performing required duties (i.e. IRB) as one mechanism employees can use to exchange effort for obligations to employers (per Settoon *et al.*, 1996; March and Simon, 1958). The results regarding IRB are not in line with previous research that has associated IRB with psychological contract breach (Turnley and Feldman, 2000). However, increased psychological contract fulfilment was linked with IRB, supporting Turnley *et al.* (2003). Further, career commitment mediated the relationship between fulfilment and IRB. Together, these results suggest the importance of the source of the obligation with regards to the type of performance behaviours employees engage in. Promises viewed as originating with the organization were linked to OCBO, while the fulfilment of obligations was linked to IRB. The lack of relationship with OCBI highlights the discretionary nature of citizenship behaviours with employees directing effort in situations that would balance the social exchange relationship.

Overall, the psychological contract variables had different relationships with several of the outcomes, providing further support for the importance of investigating the psychological contract dimensions distinctly (Morrison and Robinson, 1997). That is, there is a need to further extend our understanding of the currency/ies of exchange in the psychological contract, particularly because the currencies of the exchange are unspecific (Blau, 1964) and have been shown here to have complex interrelationships, with obligations and effort often being source-specific and source-directed. The results from this study confirm the proposed differential impacts of the psychological contract dimensions, with fulfilment highlighted as a key driver of both work and health outcomes as well as performance behaviours. However, over-promising should be avoided in order to enhance OCBOs. These results are in line with the proposed mechanism that the impact of the psychological contract on strain

are through perceptions of predictability and control (Gakovic and Tetrick, 2003) whereby fulfilled promises reduce uncertainty, which in turn reduces employees strain and, in this study, then increases OCBO.

#### *Limitations and future research*

The main limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design, which prevents the authors from drawing conclusions about the direction of causal effects between the variables in the study. Future research using a longitudinal design would be beneficial to further explore any cause-effect relationships that may exist between the variables. A further limitation of the study is that the data were collected solely through self-report measures. However, because the variables studied are theoretically perceptual, these measures are the most appropriate (following Goffin and Gellatly, 2001). The reliability coefficients for OCBO and IRB were lower than desired, thereby limiting the maximum possible proportion of variance explainable in the analyses. However, both of those variables were significantly predicted, suggesting that the reliabilities were not a barrier and that the results presented here may be understating the strength of those relationships. Finally, this study sampled only allied health professionals. The key role of career commitment may have occurred due to the qualifications allied health professional are required to obtain, suggesting a higher level of dedication to their profession. However, this characteristic would most likely apply across many professions, although it suggests that the results of this study may apply more to service work in areas with higher levels of skill recognition than occurs in some other industries, with varying levels of recognition of key skills in formal qualifications by occupation, as discussed in Bailly and Lene (2013).

#### *Conclusion*

This study explored the exchange relationship through investigating the links between three dimensions of the psychological contract, outcomes of work and health, and work performance behaviours. The strong relationships observed among the variables highlights their importance in understanding the social mechanisms of the psychological contract. The mediated relationships observed offer more detailed information regarding the currency of the exchange relationship that can be used to develop strategies to recruit and retain staff. Specifically, the currency of the exchange appears to be primarily in terms of promises, particularly in terms of the extent to which obligations have been fulfilled or breached, and extends previous research (e.g. Sturges *et al.*, 2005) by showing that career commitment forms a set of obligations that may be a mechanism for mapping the expression of career management. The source of the obligation was found to influence the discretionary performance behaviours employees chose to engage in. A caveat in the results is that the fulfilment of promises may reduce uncertainty, which can reduce strain and increase OCBO; however, the over-fulfilment of obligations should be avoided in order to enhance OCBO.

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