

Examining Psychological Contract Breach and Commitment Relationship Evidences from Higher Education

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Abstract

As higher education institutions face increasing financial pressure and competition, there is a growing reliance on contingent workers. Despite similar educational qualifications, these workers often experience disparities in compensation and working conditions compared to their permanent counterparts. Drawing on psychological contract theory, this study aims to address management strategies for diverse university workforce segments, thereby providing insights into fostering institutional reputation, equity, and quality. Specifically, the study examines the relationship between psychological contract breaches and commitment within the higher education sector of Jammu and Kashmir, comparing the experiences of contingent and permanent workers. Employing a cross-sectional descriptive design, the research tests several hypotheses related to these dynamics. Findings indicate a significant negative correlation between psychological contract breaches and organizational commitment, with contingent workers perceiving breaches more frequently than permanent employees. The implications of these findings are discussed, offering suggestions for future research and practical strategies for university administrators aiming to enhance equity and commitment among their workforce.

Keywords: *Financial pressure; contingent workers; institutional reputation; psychological contract; commitment; breach*

Introduction

The concept of the psychological contract, as introduced by Rousseau (1989) and expanded upon by Laulie, Vos, Jong, and Shapiro (2020), underscores employees' perceptions of mutual obligations within the employer-employee relationship. This foundational element shapes employer-employee dynamics, influencing employee satisfaction, well-being, and health (Isakson et al., 2003). Psychological contracts, though unwritten, delineate the expectations and promises between employees and their organizations (White, Lockett, & Currie, 2019; Kissler, 1994). Robinson (1996, p. 574) defines these contracts as the perceived mutual obligations between employees and employers. These contracts can either be fulfilled or breached, the latter occurring when employees perceive that their employers have not met their obligations (Morrison & Robinson, 1997).

A breach in the psychological contract can lead to varied emotional responses from employees, ranging from disappointment to resentment (Roberts, 2008). The significance of understanding psychological contracts has grown in the context of globalization, increased competition, and significant organizational changes, including those spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic (Altman & Post, 1996; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). In an era marked by the erosion of traditional long-term job security in exchange for loyalty, employees have grown increasingly cynical and

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mistrustful of employer commitments (Guest, 1998 and Topa & Maria, 2022).

Research indicates that fulfillment of psychological contracts leads to positive employee behaviors, whereas breaches often result in negative outcomes, such as emotional exhaustion and diminished performance (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003; Demerouti et al., 2001; Cropanzano, Rupp & Byrne, 2003). Employees also anthropomorphically relate to their organizations, interpreting statements and promises from organizational representatives as binding commitments (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Levinson et al., 1962).

This study explores the distinctions between transactional and relational contracts, the latter being viewed as traditional and derived from long-term relationships, while the former are seen as economic exchanges based on short-term agreements (Hassan, Rahman, & Basit, 2017; Anderson & Schalk, 1998). In the academic sector, especially in Jammu and Kashmir, there has been a significant shift towards contingent academic positions—often termed as adjunct, casual, or contractual faculty—driven by financial pressures and competitive demands (Kezar & Maxey, 2015; Kehm & Teichler, 2007 and Botha & Steyn (2020). This shift towards transactional contracts poses risks to the quality of education and institutional reputation (Percy & Beaumont, 2008 and Jayaweera, Chudzikowski & Jong 2021). The present study, therefore, seeks to assess the impact of psychological contract breaches on employee commitment within the higher education sector in Jammu and Kashmir, focusing particularly on contingent academic staff.

Literature Review

The Evolution and Categorization of Psychological Contracts

The concept of psychological contracts has evolved significantly over time, generally categorized into two key periods: the Pre-Rousseau and the Rousseau Periods. The earliest significant contribution to this theory is credited to Barnard (1938), who posited that people are an organization's most crucial resource. Barnard emphasized the continuous need for management to motivate organizational participants to secure the desired results, laying the foundational idea that mutual expectations drive employee contributions and organizational rewards.

Building on these early ideas, Rousseau (1990, p389), redefined the psychological contract as “the representation of mutual beliefs, perceptions, and informal obligations between an employer and an employee,” which act as antecedents for the contract’s creation. This definition marks a pivotal shift toward understanding the dyadic nature of employer-employee relationships, highlighting the role of mutual beliefs and expectations in forming these contracts.

Robinson (1996) further explored the complexity of psychological contracts, noting their variance due to subjective interpretations and the evolution over time. This evolution is influenced by changing organizational contexts as outlined by Shore and Tetrick (1994) and Collins (2010), suggesting that these contracts develop and are renegotiated over time as organizational and individual goals change.

Rousseau categorizes psychological contracts into four types: transactional, relational, balanced, and transitional. Each type reflects different underpinnings and expectations:

1. **Transactional contracts** are economically focused, of defined duration, and narrow in scope (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Alcover, Martínez-iñigo, & Chambel, 2012).
2. **Relational contracts** are based on socio-emotional exchanges, characterized by long-term, open-ended engagements built on mutual trust (Rousseau, 2000; Rousseau & Parks, 1993).

3. **Transitional contracts**, as identified by Rousseau (1995), reflect a cognitive state more than a contract type, characterized by high turnover and uncertainty due to organizational changes.
4. **Balanced contracts** incorporate elements of both relational and transactional contracts, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of employer-employee dynamics.

Conway and Briner (2002) and Henderson & Kelly (2022) highlight that psychological contracts are crucial for understanding the relationships between employees and their employers, impacting outcomes such as psychological contract fulfillment or breach. Fulfillment occurs when employees perceive that their employers have met their obligations, which Lee et al. (2011) and Gong and Wong (2022) suggest as a primary measure of psychological contract performance. Similarly on the other hand perception of non-fulfillment of obligations from the employer leads to breach of psychological contract.

This discussion between the fulfillment and breach underscores the complexity and dynamic nature of psychological contracts, which are crucial for navigating the modern employment landscape, especially as organizational structures and employee expectations continue to evolve.

Psychological Contract Breach and their Implications

Contract breach or violation is a central focus of contemporary psychological contract research (Ming, 2018; Bari, Ghaffar and Ahmad 2022). As explained earlier in the paper, it occurs when an organization fails, either partially or entirely, to fulfill its obligations to employees (Bal & Vink, 2011; Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Importantly, breaches are subjective perceptions, meaning employees may perceive a breach even if none has occurred, leading to changes in behavior (Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). While fulfillment may seem like the opposite of breach or violation, it may not necessarily be the direct reciprocal (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998).

Scholars traditionally ground the concept of contract breach in Social Exchange Theory, where both employers and employees derive satisfaction from fair exchanges of effort and resources (Blau, 1960). Studies have consistently shown a negative correlation between psychological contract breach and work behaviors, with employees intentionally reducing their contributions to the organization (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Robinson & Morrison, 1995). Furthermore, the failure of employers to fulfill promises can lead to employee frustration, anger, and disappointment, ultimately resulting in lower levels of commitment (Kaya & Kadatapé 2020; Lam, Ng, & Feldman, 2012; Conway, Guest & Trentberth, 2011; Johnson & Kelly, 2003).

This reduction in commitment may manifest in various ways, such as increased intentions to leave the organization (Lemire & Rouillard, 2005) or decreased organizational citizenship behaviors. Notably, the severity of breach varies between transactional and relational contracts, with relational breaches often perceived as more severe due to their long-term nature (Robinson, Kraatz & Rousseau, 1994). Morrison and Robinson (1997) identify two main causes of violation: incongruence and reneging. Incongruence occurs when there are divergent beliefs about contract terms between employer and employee, while reneging involves the deliberate or unintentional breach of promises by the employer. Both types of violation can significantly impact organizational variables, including employee commitment (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000).

Employee Commitment in Psychological Contracts

Employee commitment is a crucial aspect of organizational behavior, encompassing the psychological bond between employees and their employing organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990). The three-dimensional model proposed by Allen and Meyer (1990) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding different facets of commitment: affective, continuance, and normative.

Affective commitment reflects employees' desire to stay in an organization due to their satisfaction with their work and alignment with organizational goals. Employees with high affective commitment are considered assets to the organization as they willingly contribute to its success.

Continuance commitment, on the other hand, arises from employees' perceived need to stay in the organization, often due to limited alternative employment options. While these employees may continue working despite dissatisfaction, they may not be fully engaged or motivated.

Normative commitment stems from employees' sense of duty or obligation to remain with the organization. These employees feel a moral obligation not to leave, fearing that their departure would negatively impact their colleagues or the organization's operations.

The relationship between psychological contracts and employee commitment has garnered significant attention in organizational research. Contingent workers, in particular, are subject to fluctuations in commitment based on the fulfillment of their psychological contracts (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004). While it is commonly assumed that contingent workers exhibit lower levels of commitment compared to permanent employees, empirical evidence is mixed (Isakasson& Bernhard, 2006; Martinez, Cuyper, & Witte, 2010).

The impact of psychological contract breach on employee commitment and performance is also a subject of debate. Some studies suggest that breaches lead to lower commitment and job performance (Chen, Tsui, & Zhong, 2008), while others report inconsistent findings (Conway & Briner, 2000; Dyne & Ang, 1998). These discrepancies highlight the need for further research to contextualize and refine the psychological contract construct (Guest & Clinton, 2006).

H1: Psychological Contract Breach and Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment among employees is cultivated gradually as they develop a firm understanding of their job roles, organizational goals, performance expectations, and the means of maintaining organizational membership (Gilst, Schalk, Kluijtmans and Poell 2022; Mowday et al., 1982). Psychological contract theory aligns with this notion, proposing that when employers fulfill their obligations and uphold promises regarding future rewards, employees are more likely to demonstrate higher motivation and reciprocation (Shapiro, 2002). Incongruence in fulfilling obligations is associated with reduced organizational citizenship behavior (Shapiro & Kessler, 2002) and job performance (Turnley & Feldman, 2000). Conversely, breaches of the psychological contract have been linked to intentions to leave (Tackleab& Taylor, 2003) and absenteeism (Johnson & Kelly, 2003). Moreover, studies have reported a negative relationship between breach and commitment, particularly among young graduates (Stuges et al., 2005). Therefore, we propose:

H1: Psychological contract breach among employees will be negatively correlated with their commitment to the organization.

H2: Psychological Contract Breach and Contingent Employment

Research indicates that a significant portion of contingent workers aspire to secure permanent positions, considering them the preferred form of employment (Gillani, Kutaula and Badhwar,

2021; Isaksson et al., 2006). However, contextual factors such as chronic unemployment and limited opportunities in the private sector often compel individuals to accept contingent employment as a means to avoid unemployment. While contingent employees may not be entirely satisfied with their employment situation, personal motives such as flexibility and freedom can influence their preference for contingent work (Tan & Tan, 2002). Contrary to the assumption that contingent employees lack commitment, studies have shown that they may exhibit higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment compared to permanent workers (Ellingson, Gruys & Sackett, 1998; Lee & Johnson, 1991). This may be attributed to their focus on economic objectives rather than socio-emotional relationships within the organization (Chambel & Castanheira, 2007). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2: Contingent academics perceive more breaches in the psychological contract compared to their counterparts working on substantive basis.

Design, Sample, and Data Collection

The research problem identified in this study necessitates a deductive approach with a mixed research design incorporating both cross-sectional and causal designs. Cluster sampling was employed for data collection, with each university operating in Jammu and Kashmir representing a unique cluster. Four universities were selected based on their age and size for administering the questionnaire.

Data collection took place between June and July 2021. Offline self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 470 faculty members of the selected institutions, with 273 questionnaires returned. Twenty-one incomplete questionnaires were discarded, leaving a total of 252 completed questionnaires for hypothesis testing.

Sample Profile

Demographic analysis revealed that the majority of respondents were male (74.2%), with a median age between 31 and 40 years. Approximately 43.7% of respondents reported working for their current university for 11 or more years, followed by 31.3% for one to five years, and 25.0% for six to 10 years. A significant percentage (77.0%) of respondents held a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree and the rank of Assistant Professor (77.8%), followed by Associate Professor (7.1%) and Professor (15.1%). Thirty-one percent of respondents were contingent academics relative to substantive workers.

Survey Measures

Psychological contract breach was measured using a scale developed by Robinson & Morrison (2000), which has demonstrated reliability and validity across various studies. Employee commitment was assessed using a scale developed by Allen & Meyer (1990), encompassing affective, normative, and continuance commitment sub-scales. This scale has been validated in both Western and non-Western contexts.

Reliability, Validity, and Descriptive

The reliability and validity of the scales were ensured through established and well-accepted instruments with sound psychometric properties. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to check inter-item consistency, while validity was evaluated through item-to-item and item-to-total correlations. Both reliability and validity coefficients surpassed threshold levels. Refer to Table 1.1 for detailed results.

Table 1.1: *Descriptive and internal consistency*

Constructs	Psychological Contract Breach (PCB)	Affective Commitment (AC)	Continuance Commitment (CC)	Normative Commitment (NC)	Employee Commitment (EC)
N	252	252	252	252	252
Mean**	2.72	3.75	3.28	3.44	3.49
SD	0.87	0.73	0.79	0.54	0.5
Maximum	5	5	5	5	4.9
Minimum	1	2	1	1.57	1.97
Cronbach's Alpha	.727	.823	.789	.78	.734
Number of items	6	5	6	5	8

Source: Primary data

***Scored on a 5-point Likert scale where 1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree*

Descriptive Results

Subsequently, we computed the latent variables, and the descriptive results of all latent variables revealed a wide range of responses. The mean value concerning the Psychological Contract Breach (PCB) of respondents was 2.7 (S.D = 0.87), indicating that respondents experienced a contract breach rather than fulfillment.

The Employee Commitment construct yielded a mean value of 3.5 (S.D = 0.5), indicating a moderately high commitment of faculty towards their institutions. Furthermore, the three sub-latent variables of commitment revealed little variations from each other, with Affective Commitment (AC) showing a mean of 3.7 (S.D = 0.73), Continuance Commitment (CC) with a mean of 3.2 (S.D = 0.78), and Normative Commitment (NC) with a mean of 3.4 (S.D = 0.53), suggesting that employees exhibited moderately high commitment levels.

Hypotheses Testing

The study aimed to ascertain the link between Psychological Contract Breach (PCB) and Employee Commitment (EC), as well as the existence of a breach between contingent and permanent academics. Pearson's correlation and multiple linear regressions were used to test Hypothesis 1 (H1), while an independent sample t-test was employed for Hypothesis 2 (H2).

Table 2 indicates a high correlation of PCB with AC ($r = -0.498$, $p < 0.01$), and moderately high correlations of PCB with CC ($r = -0.102$, $p < 0.01$), and PCB with NC ($r = -0.270$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that PCB decreases AC proportionally at higher rates compared to CC and NC. PCB also showed a moderately high negative correlation with EC ($r = -0.395$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that an increase in PCB significantly reduces EC.

Table 1.2: Correlation and Regression Analysis

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Pearson Correlation &Sig. (2-tailed)	Regression Estimates	R-squared
Psychological Contract Breach	Affective Commitment	-.498** ≤.000	-.401	.116
Psychological Contract Breach	Continuance Commitment	.102 ≤.107	-.045	.006
Psychological Contract Breach	Normative Commitment	-.270** ≤.000	-.231	.031
Psychological Contract Breach	Employee Commitment	-.395** ≤.000	-.17	.074

Source: *Primary data*

Regression Analysis Results

Similarly, the results of the regression analysis indicate that PCB has a negative and significant relationship with EC ($\beta = -0.17$, $p < 0.05$), AC ($\beta = -0.401$, $p < 0.05$), and NC ($\beta = -0.231$, $p < 0.05$), and a negative but not significant relationship with CC ($\beta = -0.045$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, we partially confirm H1.

Assessment of Assumptions

Before testing H2, we assessed the latent variables for normality of data and homogeneity of variance. Since we used an independent sample t-test to assess the significance of PCB between contingent and permanent respondents, PCB scores needed to be approximately normally distributed for both categories of workers. Visual inspection of histograms, normal Q-Q plots, and Box plots indicated that the data was approximately normally distributed.

Furthermore, we examined skewness and kurtosis z-values, both of which fell within the threshold levels of -1.96 to 1.96 (Cramer, 1998; Cramer & Howitt, 2004; Doane & Seward, 2011). Additionally, we conducted the Shapiro-Wilk Test, which yielded a statistically insignificant p-value (>0.05) (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965; Razalia& Wah, 2011).

Similar procedures were followed for other non-hypothesized variables. Having satisfied ourselves with these measures, we proceeded with the independent sample t-test.

Table 1.3: Independent Sample t-test

Constructs	status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	p
Psychological Contract Breach	Contingent	79	2.9299	.86145	2.017	0.045
	Permanent	173	2.6859	.90342		
Affective commitment	Contingent	79	3.6278	.85078	-2.444	0.015

	Permanent	173	3.8844	.73488		
Continuance commitment	Contingent	79	3.3713	.75294	1.304	.194
	Permanent	173	3.2235	.86946		
Normative commitment	Contingent	79	3.3852	.63779	-1.100	.273
	Permanent	173	3.4756	.59085		
Commitment	Contingent	79	3.0844	.91827	-5.115	.000
	Permanent	173	3.5615	.55125		

Source: Primary data

Hypothesis Testing Results

The descriptive statistics, t-values, and p-values are summarized in Table 1.3. Contingent workers have a mean score of 2.93 (SD .86) on PCB, which is slightly higher than permanent workers, who have a mean score of 2.68 (SD .90). This suggests that there is more breach among contingent workers than among permanent workers. Moreover, the mean difference is statistically significant, although the effect size is small. The t-value returned was 2.017, exceeding the threshold level of 1.96, with a p-value of < 0.05. Consequently, we confirm H2.

Discussion

The study explored the impact of PCB on the commitment of academia in the leading universities of Jammu and Kashmir, while also examining the differences in perception between permanent and contractual workers regarding the psychological contract. The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between PCB and Commitment, aligning with previous research in different contexts and populations.

The results suggest that parameters of contingent workers have a greater influence on the correlation coefficients than those of permanent workers. This reflects the changing landscape of careers, with individuals taking more responsibility for their career management. The expectation of new careers in different organizations alters existing psychological contracts, signaling the end of the traditional promise of lifelong careers.

The results also indicate significantly higher levels of PCB among contingent workers, highlighting pay disparities and asymmetric working conditions in the local context. Relying on contingent faculty as a cost-saving strategy may have unintended consequences, potentially impacting the quality of teaching and student learning. The breach also stems from lack of efforts from the HEIs to give a sense of organizational citizenship to the contingent workers by giving them membership and say in the committee system in vogue for decentralized decision making. The participation of these workers in designing curriculum, student affairs, administrative and financial decision making is wanting too. These partisan policies breed discrimination and affect the psychologically contract materially.

Moreover, the persistent desire for permanent jobs among contingent workers has led to legal battles with institutions, diverting their focus from teaching and creating division within universities especially colleges in J&K. More often than not these teachers are seen on roads or in media pressing for their demands. Pay disparity between and among the universities have also contributes to the sense of alienation resulting in low psychological contract fulfillments. The low psychological contract fulfillment may also stem from issues faced by permanent workers, such as delays in career progression, insufficient training opportunities, work-life balance issues to name a few.

Implications for Future Research

An inter-university/college or inter-state cross-cultural comparison would provide valuable insights into how diverse cultural contexts influence fulfillment relative to more homogeneous workplaces. This could inform the development of a more comprehensive analytical framework and advance practical knowledge in the field of psychological contracts and contingent employment.

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