

# The Relationships between Perception of Politics and Breach/Violation of Psychological Contracts

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## Abstract

Psychological Contract has been examined mostly in its content, but there is increasing need to investigate the contextual factors that influence evaluation of psychological contract. Purpose of the paper is two folds: Firstly to examine Perception of Politics (POP) as a cause of breach in psychological contract and secondly the role of POP in intensity or level of felt violation. It is proposed that perception of politics may be a cause of perceived breach and level of perception of politics may influence the level of felt violation. This paper will help to find a more complete list of the factors that might be cause of Psychological contract breach. It also explains the procedure how a breach turns into felt violation and impact of POP in evaluation of Psychological contract. It is tried to explain a linkage between Psychological contract and POP theoretically using Social information processing (SIP) theory and psychological contract theory. This linkage may help to reduce the negative attitudes of employees like turnover intentions, decline in Organizational Commitment and Job Satisfaction, which can also be studied empirically in future.

## Introduction

Psychological contracts can be defined as an individual's expectation regarding the obligations that exist in mutual exchange relationships between an employee and an employer (Rousseau, 1989). Research on the consequences of psychological contract breach is broad, as breach is consistently found to predict various attitudes and behaviors like leaving intentions, work satisfaction and citizenship behaviors (e.g., Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007). However, comparatively less has been studied about the factors that lead to evaluations of psychological contract breach on the basis of social context. Specifically, it is unclear how perceptions of the social context of organizations have an effect on evaluations that one's psychological contract has been breached (Robinson & Brown, 2004; Shore et al., 2004) and how he/she will response to this perception of breach.

In this paper it is examined how employees' perceptions of social context aspects, specifically organizational politics, derive from observations of others' self-serving behaviors, is related to employees' evaluations of their psychological contract. Perceptions of organizational politics and procedural justice share an underlying premise of fairness (Andrews & Kacmar, 2001), and both relate to employees' evaluations of their exchange relationships with employers (Aryee, Chen, & Budhwar, 2004; Blader & Tyler, 2005; Hall, Hochwarter, Ferris, & Bowen,

2004; Rosen, Levy, & Hall, 2006). Despite apparent linkages with exchange relationship evaluations, there is rare evidence how employee perceptions of politics relate to perceptions of psychological contract breach (Rosen, Chang, Johnson & Levy, 2008) and felt violation. Rosen *et al.*, 2008 presented an Environmental responsiveness model in which psychological contract breach mediates the effects of politics and procedural justice on work outcomes. This model was based in part on social information processing (SIP) theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). At the core of SIP theory is the basic theme that the social context in which work-life is entrenched provides cues that employees use to build and interpret reality. Thus, in addition to perceiving and reacting to an objective workplace reality, employees also respond to a reality that is partially constructed from social contextual information, such as information communicated by coworkers, observations of coworkers' behavior, and interactions with agents of the organization (Thomas & Griffin, 1983). When the social context is highly political, it creates an impression that the organization is unable of meeting its exchange obligations because organizational agents are believed to be worried with protecting their own self interests and accumulating power, often without concern for how their behaviors impact other members (Hall et al., 2004). Thus, employees are more likely to formulate general impressions that their exchange obligations have been overlooked or unmet. Organizational politics also weaken performance–reward linkages (Cropanzano et al., 1997), which signals that organizations are incompetent or unwilling to meet their exchange obligations. In both cases, perceived politics has a negative impact on employees' evaluations of the extent to which organizations fulfill their promised obligations, which leads to a greater likelihood of perceiving psychological contract breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). To fill this gap, I will examine role of perceived politics in evaluation of psychological contract breach, level of felt violation and work attitudes.

## **Theoretical Frame Work**

### **Psychological Contract: Perceived Breach and Violation**

Researchers have described the psychological contract as an individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of the reciprocal exchange agreement between that employee and the employing organization (Rousseau, 1989; Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993). Psychological contract involve perceived promises, not simply generalized expectations (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Promises are not always explicitly stated, and rather they may be inferred from the employer's actions (Rousseau, 2001). One key issue in the psychological contract theory is the concept of breach, defined as "Perceived breach refers to the cognition that one's organization has failed to meet one or more obligations within one's psychological contract in a manner commensurate with one's contributions . . . perceived breach represents a cognitive assessment of contract fulfillment that is based on an employee's perception of what each party has promised and provided to the other" (Morrison & Robinson, 1997: 230). Violation, however, refers to emotional response, distress and feelings of betrayal, anger, and wrongful harm arising from the realization that one's organization has not fulfilled a highly salient promise (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1989). This difference clearly indicates breach as the result of a more intentional and cognitive search intended at monitoring how well one's psychological contract is being upheld by one's organization. Violation is, on the other hand, a deep emotional response that is more affective and a result of blaming one's organization for a broken promise. At the same time, psychological contracts are personal and idiosyncratic (Rousseau, 1989). Employees may evaluate their psychological contract differently on the basis of their own perception of unjust and unfair practices of the employer. Therefore, they might

evaluate their contract on the basis of their perception of the politics in employer's attitude or behavior that produce a negative cognition (of broken promise) in employees mind. In this particular study it is aimed to focus how perceived politics influences both the perception of breach (cognition) , feelings of violation (emotional response) and work attitudes.

### **Organizational Politics**

Organizational politics is one of the features of organizational/social context and play an important role in organizational and individual outcomes. Organizational politics are activities that are self-serving, illegitimate, and often harmful to the organization or its members (Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989; Kacmar & Baron, 1999). Organizational politics reflect dysfunctional aspects of the work environment that are associated with conflict, gamesmanship, and strong-armed procedure for influencing others (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Gandz & Murray, 1980; Mintzberg, 1983). Research has witnessed the progression of thought from organizational politics as objective reality to subjective perception. Organizational politics has been defined as social influence behaviors that are strategically designed to maximize self-interest (Ferris et al., 1989, p. 145). This definition carries a negative connotation but is consistent with the general view of employees about workplace politics, describe it in negative terms and associate it with self-serving behaviors (Gandz & Murray, 1980). In addition, previous studies have shown that organizational politics are related to employees' evaluations and beliefs about their jobs, including perceptions of injustice (Beugre & Liverpool, 2006), job congruence (Vigoda, 2000), and discrimination (Gibson, 2006). Employees illustrate adverse reactions to organizational politics because politics are a stressor in the work environment (Ferris et al., 1989, 2002) that obstruct employees from meeting personal and career goals (Cropanzano et al., 1997), associated with interpersonal conflict (Vigoda, 2002) and unfairness in mutual exchanges.

Most of empirical research has shown that employees respond in a negative way to their *perceptions* of politics (POP) in the work environment. Because the activities that give rise to POP (e.g. backstabbing, influence tactics, and favoritism-based employment decisions) often occur without concern for the welfare of the organization and co-workers (Kacmar & Carlson, 1997), POP are often, but not always (Fedor & Maslyn, 2002; Fedor, Maslyn, Farmer & Bettenhausen, 2008), perceived as harmful, divisive, and obstructive (Ferris, Adams, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, & Ammeter, 2002; Mayes & Allen, 1977). In other studies, individuals' perceptions of advancement opportunities were found to be negatively related to politics perceptions (Gandz & Murray, 1980; Ferris & Kacmar, 1992). Organizational politics has typically been positioned as a predictor or outcome variable in both theoretical and empirical works (Ferris et al., 1989; Poon, 2003). There is some evidence that supports the usefulness of conceptualizing perceptions of organizational politics as a moderating variable that could operate on organizational outcomes. For example, Hochwarter, Witt, & Kacmar (2000) found perceived organizational politics play a moderating role in explaining the effects of conscientiousness on job performance.

There are three dimensions of politics that are perceived in organizations: general political behavior, going along to get ahead, and pay and promotion (Kacmar & Carlson, 1997). General political behavior is associated with employee perceptions of their co-workers engaging in political activities (e.g., backstabbing). Going along to get ahead represents influence tactics such as ingratiating oneself by agreeing with those in power. Pay and promotion refers to the extent that politics influence human resources functions. These three dimensions indicate that how much an organization or employer is perceived to be political.

## **Work Attitudes**

The work attitudes of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions have received extensive attention in terms of consequences of breach. Job satisfaction is said to be a function of the perceived relationship between what one wants from one's job and what one perceives it as offering (Locke, 1969). Following this logic, a discrepancy between promised and received inducements is likely to lead to feelings of dissatisfaction.

Likewise, when breach occurs, lowered employee commitment to the organization is likely. Organizational commitment describes the strength of an individual's identification with and attachment to an organization (Meyer & Allen, 1984). In Meyer and Allen's (1991) three-component commitment model, affective commitment is the most consistent with the conceptual and operational definition of attitudes, and it has been termed "attitudinal commitment" (Iverson & Buttigieg, 1999). When psychological contract breach occurs, employees are less likely to identify with the organization and maintain their commitment. Turnover intentions reflect the subjective probability that an individual will leave his or her organization within a certain period of time. Similar to organizational commitment, turnover intentions can serve as an indicator of the extent of one's psychological attachment to the organization. In addition, it is less constrained by exogenous factors (such as availability of an alternative job) and thus more accurately reflects one's attitude toward the organization. Intention to quit is a common response to negative events with work (Lum, Kervin, Clark, Reid, & Sirola, 1998). Thus, psychological contract breach, as a negative event for employees, can increase their tendency to leave.

Many potential outcomes may occur when employees perceive the organization to be political in nature. The more obvious responses could be the withdrawal intentions, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Frost (1987) argued that employees may leave to avoid engaging in an organization's political environment. There is evidence of a negative relationship between POP and Job satisfaction (Ferris et al., 1989) and empirical research has supported this inverse relationship (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992; Gandz & Murray, 1980; Parker et al., 1992).

## **Hypothesis and Proposed Model**

### **Role of Perceived Politics in PC Breach**

Many antecedents of psychological contract breach have been investigated but social context variables are also important to be studied to find a more conclusive list of variables that might be cause of perceived breach. Two variables of social context: perceived politics and procedural justice have been studied to evaluate the psychological contract and subsequent work outcomes (Rosen , Chang , Johnson & Levy ,2008). On the basis of Social Information Processing Theory (SIP) (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and Environmental responsiveness model of Rosen *et al*, 2008, it is proposed that POP might be a cause of Perception of breach in Psychological Contract. But how these contextual factors impact the process of psychological contract from a breach to violation, is not been discussed extensively.

Breach is the cognition that the organization has failed to meet its obligations, and is distinct from violation, which is the emotional reaction to breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Because breach (the cognition of broken agreements) and violation (an emotional reaction to breach) are distinct phenomena, we must examine factors that facilitate or inhibit the relationship between them. According to cognition learning process, emotion follows the cognition. Perceived politics might cause the breach (cognition) first and then feeling of violation (emotional response) in the same sequence. Employee's perception of politics create a negative

evaluation of the employers obligations fulfilment due to a feeling of unfairness and self-serving .This negative evaluation give rise to a perception of broken promise and non-fulfilment of the contract by the employer. He/she will make cognition that employer is more self serving, discriminating and is not actually interested in the wellbeing and progress of employee (Gandz & Murray, 1980; Ferris & Kacmar, 1992). This underlying theme of unfairness may lead to non-fulfilment of the obligations and employee perceives a breach in his contract.

*H1: Perceived Politics is negatively related to psychological contract fulfilment*

*H2: Perceived breach is positively related to Perceived politics.*

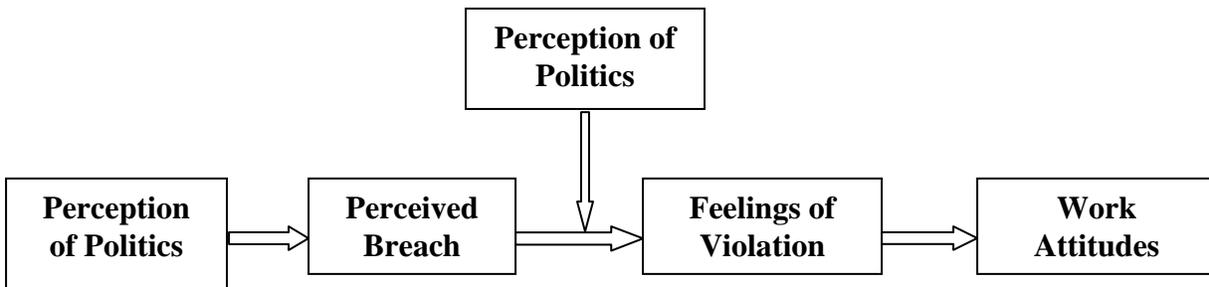


Fig.1 Role of perceived politics in evaluation of perceived breach and level of violation

### **Role of Perceived Politics in Violation**

Many previous studies have indicated that employees’ perceptions of contract breach tend to yield adverse employee reactions that influence job satisfaction, organizational commitment, leaving intentions, trust in the organization, and in-role and extra-role performance (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Johnson & O’Leary- Kelly, 2003; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Turnley, Bolino, Lester, & Bloodgood, 2003). However, few studies have delineated the consequences of psychological contract violations (Raja, Johns, & Ntalianis, 2004; Dulac, Coyle-Shapiro, Henderson, & Wayne, 2008). Accounting for cognitions of breach is a step toward explaining employees’ responses to their employers’ non-fulfillment of perceived promises within mutual exchange relationships, “but unless they first elicit an emotion, cognitions of themselves are incapable of trigger instrumental process” (Zajonc, 1998: 597). This is consistent with Morrison and Robinson’s view that “violation represents a mental state of readiness for action” (1997: 231). Lazarus’s (1991a, 1991b) cognitive-motivational relational theory of emotion supports the idea of violation as a mediator between breach and employee affective and attitude-based reactions. A key component of this theory is a two-step process where by cognition proceeds the emotion and emotion translate into affective outcomes. Extending this theory of emotion to the context of the psychological contract suggests that an employee’s cognition that his/her employer has broken its promises (breach) by self serving behavior and cognition due to perceived politics derive the emotional response (feeling of violation) accordingly. The high level of emotional response come out in the form of the high level of negative outcomes like absenteeism, leaving intentions and turnover etc.

Morrison and Robinson (1997) argued that the extent to which perceived breach fosters violation depends on an interpretation process whereby employees engage in cognitive sense-

making to derive meaning from the cognition of breach. And a more serious breach should lead to stronger feelings of violation.

There is also an extended argument that social exchange variables (LMX and POS) play a moderating role between breach and violation. If the perceived breach is high, violation may be low due to a sense-making process about a positive transaction history of LMX(Leader-member exchange) and POS(perceived organizational support) (Dulac, et al., 2008).

However, in case of perceived politics, if taken as moderator in breach-violation relation, employee becomes more negative because perceived politics produce negative perception about the employer and feeling of violation might be stronger.

In line with above arguments, it is proposed that a higher level of perceived politics may produce higher feelings of violation (a more stronger and affective emotional response).

In present scenario a high intensity of breach due to perception of politics will lead to a higher level of violation. If breach is not of high intensity, perceived politics still as moderator might amplify the feeling of violation. Even if perceived breach is not due to perceived politics ,but perception about employer's previous political behavior still amplify the feeling of violation, and so the outcomes. Therefore in both cases (low and high level) of perceived breach, the perceived politics amplify the feeling of violation.

***H3: In stronger perception of politics, feeling of violation will also be higher***

### **Impact of POP and Psychological Contract on Work Attitudes**

Literature provides the evidence that POP, Perceived breach and felt violation leads to negative work attitudes. So following Hypothesis can be proposed.

***H4: Higher level of violation cause increase in Turnover Intentions.***

***H5: Higher level of violation may cause decrease in job satisfaction.***

***H6: Higher level of violation may cause decrease in Organizational Commitment.***

### **Conclusion**

Psychological contracts do not exist in isolation but social and contextual factors also impact them in an organizational setting. These factors specifically perceived politics play an effective role in evaluation of psychological contract. Psychological contracts are successful up to the perception of fulfillment of mutual obligation, where sense of fairness is very important. Due to a negative connotation of organizational politics with an underlying theme of unfairness, when employee perceive it in employer's behavior, its trust on employer falls and he/she feels a breach through a cognitive process(Gandz & Murray, 1980). Even after perceiving a breach, perceived politics still play a moderating role between perceived breach and felt violation. Feeling of violation is strongly related to perception of politics in case of high or medium perceived breach. Perception of politics amplifies the feeling of violation and so the negative work attitudes like Turnover intentions, Organizational Commitment and Job satisfaction.

### **Managerial Implications**

Psychological Contracts has become very important stream in Organization Behavior research. It is not enough to find the consequences of PC Breach but also very important to

understand and find all the factors that may cause this breach as to overcome the consequences of PC Breach, it is more important to find its reasons. Other than content factors, social context factors like Organizational Politics are very important to be investigated as a cause of PC Breach. Then it is useful to find either all breaches (cognition) turn into violation (emotional response) or not. And what are consequences of level of felt violation on work attitudes like Job satisfaction, Organizational Commitment and Turnover Intentions because these play significant role in well being of organizations and employees.

### **Future Directions**

Role of perceived politics has been examined as a predictor of breach and a moderator between breach and violation. Perception of politics can be studied more clearly using three dimensions of politics i.e. general political behavior, going along to get ahead, and pay and promotion (Kacmar & Carlson, 1997).

There is value in studying the relational and transactional elements of the psychological contract separately (e.g., Raja, Johns, & Ntalianis, 2004). Evaluation of psychological contract can be more extensively studied using types of psychological contract (transactional contract and relational). This investigation may add the further facts about the transition in contract type due to perception of different dimensions of politics. It will help to understand that which dimension may lead to a stronger perception of breach.

Perceived politics has been used in a negative connotation in this study as used in other studies, but if it is used in a positive sense, how it can be used to decrease level of violation, so this is another area to be addressed. Other variables of organizational/ social context that can influence the evaluation of psychological contract should be studied in this line.

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