

Between Jean-Jacques and Denise: Professional Identities and the Rousseauian Contracts

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the formation of professional identities and its importance on employee's perceptions of social and psychological contractualization in the employment relationship. Combining extensive readings and an exploratory study (50 in-depth interviews with pharmacists) the results indicate an important dynamics between the social and psycho-cognitive levels in professional identity narratives becoming salient upon the appraisal of the psychological contract and determining both attitudinal and behavioural related outcomes. A model capable of guiding future research is developed incorporating the concepts of professional identity, social contract and psychological contract.

Introduction

The challenge of managing changes in the employment relationship needs a deep understanding of what employees value. The multitude of different jobs available offers a chance for choice in which work significance assumes itself as one of the decisive factors [1, pp. 2]. We intend to provide a theoretical model that incorporates professional identity in the employment relationship as an important determinant of the perceived delivery of the psychological contract, mediated by a social contractualization dimension with a regulative or normative character. Employment relationships are developed from macro-social levels and social contract perceptions define beliefs concerning the preferred or ideal terms of contract [2, 3].

Occidental societies tend to see careers as an individualized Project (careers as action or agency); however, contextual influences in individual choices are explicit or implicit in people's narratives [4, pp. 234]. Facing a specific employment relationship we develop beliefs about mutual obligations between employer and employee that can, or not, offer alignment between the social contract and the psychological contract [3]. Nonetheless, even assuming that the social contract and the psychological contract are two distinct conceptual entities in literature there are few empirical studies addressing this particular issue. Social contracts are not based on promises but they influence how promises are interpreted and its norms affect the very nature of the promises [2, pp. 14]. There is a need to investigate the consequences of discrepancies between the social bounded terms of the contract and the known terms of the psychological contract that can contribute to job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, turnover or reduced organizational citizenship behaviours [3].

Studies dealing with the potential role of identity in organizational identification do not emphasize the social categories associated with the occupation, describing the congruence, or lack thereof, of values, concepts and characteristics (demographic or otherwise), not anchored in the professional normative. Assuming that the psychological contract may have variations related to national culture [5], we assume the relevance of contextual variables that are at least implied, and that may stand out through comparison of differences or violation of assumptions. We consider that the social level of analysis should be further included in every modelling of the employment relationship [e.g. 6]. The social contract for a profession influences the psychological contract, yet we are not in the sphere of social contract as it is commonly understood that is the individual's relationship with the social matrix, but rather to its impact on specific employment relationships. Clarifying, we intend to publicize the existence of a normative social impact on the employment relationship. We integrate the occupational focus of identification (in identifying) with the organization, verifying its impacts on the psychological contract; in this context, the understanding of career choices is critical in two dimensions: i) it can help individuals manage their careers more efficiently and ii) organizations can benefit from understanding the career decisions and dilemmas that their employees face [7, pp. 13].

Procedures for Collecting Data

Using a (profession) case-study methodology with a qualitative content analysis of the interviews to Pharmacists, we emphasized the social constructive nature of the observed concepts. The validation of the aprioristic and *post-hoc* model was rigorously scrutinized by Grounded Theory principles [8]. We tried to perceive the importance of these ideas in one of the relevant dimensions of the social contract, professional identity. We started from a main research question: Can social contracts and namely professional identities and role definitions impact the perception of the delivery of the deal in psychological contracts? Measuring and discovering causality nexuses between variables misses the discovery of the nexuses between the processes thus taking qualitative methodology to excel in key dimensions as in the approach of the subject and his thought [9]. We have been sensitive to the need of a profound critical thought knowing that there are no final, monolithic and authoritarian meanings when research relies on case studies.

We considered the micro level of analysis, the individual level, including perceptions and attitudes, understood in the context of the social integration within the organization. We used the semi-directive and semi-structured interview, assessing a pre-defined model and collecting data using a pro-iterative process of theory construction. More than a script we defined objectives and discussion topics which have powered the relevant information for a review of theoretical and conceptual thread, based on the perceptions of the actors. Content analysis was implemented with the use of MAXQDA© 2007.

Results

Results from this exploratory study have two different sources and will be equally presented throughout the text, in an attempt to simplify the reading process and provide enough data to understand the proposed model of analysis: i) main conclusions

from primary data analysis from interviews (no excerpts transcribed) and ii) a review on various established concepts.

Employment relationships are developed from macro-social levels and social contract perceptions define beliefs about the preferred or ideal social contract [2, 3]. The future of employment relationships is, in the employee's perspective, impacted by previous experiences or by social and economic dynamics, increasing or decreasing expectations [3, 10]. Literature has failed to deliver proposals for effective measures of the assumed conceptual separation of the social and psychological contract. Edwards and Karau [3] sought to develop a discriminative scale. In this sense they differentiated the general perceptions of a proper employment relationship (social contract) and a separate and distinct perception of employer's promises and obligations (psychological contract). There are two separate but coexisting foci, and when an analysis of the employment relationship is particularized there may be readjustments, justified and justifiable for the individual and that, in practice, offers no contradictions capable of creating cognitive dissonance.

Since employees can not select many of the characteristics of their work, perceptions of the psychological contract may be caused more by situational constraints than by individual perceptions of control [3]. The contextual organization is assumed as a social category of extreme importance in the formation of individual self-concept, positioning itself centrally in the identification process. The organizational identification is one of the dimensions of individuals' identity, superior in the making of the self-concept on personal identity and other social dimensions. However, the multiplicity of possible partial identifications with different social categories requires the aggregation of the overall concept in organizational identification, being occasionally emphasized the identification with a specific function or role in the concept of instrumental commitment. There will be a tendency for individuals to adopt standards, mannerisms, attitudes and social rituals as a means of inclusion and allowing space for the desired performance of social roles [11].

Professions and Careers

It seems clear that professions accessed by a specific and highly State regulated study plan, as in the case of health (e.g. pharmacy, medicine and nursing), necessarily differ from other less regulated accesses and multiple routes of entry. The profession is defined as a psychological group, beyond the terms of Turner et al. [12], characterized as a collection of individuals sharing the same social identification or defining themselves as members of the same social category. Identification with the organization is mediated by extra-organizational, institutional based factors, as the identity that individuals expect to role-play [13]. The saliency of a social identity category is a continuous variable depending largely on the interaction of the accessibility and suitability of a particular circumstance [13]. Particular organizational identities (within a normative sense) are built in a political arena and promoted by discourse [11]. We found that when there is a fit between (what the employee believes is) the organizational and the employee views of the professional identity there is a propensity for a bigger identification with the organization. We found that professional identity patterns appear as irreducible in organizational contexts where organizational identities are less salient, acting as the lowest common denominator in a supplementary regime. Occupational socialization rhetorics represent a set of modular frontiers for social and occupational roles and for carrier paths as well. Collin and Young [14] refer that the new carrier

rhetoric is about flexibility, autonomy and self-determination, ending shared standards. Our position differs as we say that there are fundamental standards in the enactment of professions, embodied in identity normatives that have impact on both psychological contracts and career choices. It is expected that members of a profession develop a professional identity; this being one of the notions commonly accepted by scholars providing the separation between professions from other occupations [15]. The knowledge and skills important for professional practice are necessary but not sufficient conditions for professional success, favouring the need for a strong professional identity in order for an individual to behave with the authority, trust, and conduct that would convince others of his/her competence [15, pp. 29]. In health professions this structural functionalist vision, though criticized in its monolithic and reified essence of roles and identities and its *quasi* passive and nihilistic notion of prospective members may take on even more relevance.

A profession has some distinctive features, including a code of ethics, a standardized education and criteria for certification with a recognized professional association and the monopoly of a specific labour market by regulating the entry of members [16]. The image is vital to replace the ambiguities of the functional contents and individual knowledge as well as the subjective recognition of their capabilities by the evaluators and peers [16]. These issues are fundamental in the socialization logic. The concept of identity regulation defines the process for standards production by which employees are expected to govern themselves and those may be of various types: identification with the organization as an institution, cultural control, standardization and subjectification [16]. This takes the ability to generate a greater identification with a specific job since the fit is produced on individual needs [16].

Studies dealing with career aspirations and prospects for professional access by Pharmacy students like Syracuse et al's reveal that the majority has a Career Guidance for "direct care to patients" albeit they are concerned that this is not the reality of the retail Pharmacy [17]; the perception of a patient care related career is comparable to other professional sub-cultures such as nursing and medicine [18]. The altruistic intentions are mentioned, in self-report as one of the most prominent factors for career choice, being scientific factors, employability and the possibility of self-employment in the following line of consideration [19]. Choosing the Pharmaceutical Sciences course often comes as a second choice for Medicine, cases where professional access is not gained by identification with the Pharmacist profession. Accesses to other professions are made by identification with the professional and then choosing the appropriate training. For a relevant part of the practicing pharmacists (27 out of 50 in our sample: 54%) the entry process starts from a second choice and professional identification comes after. The meaning of being professional is an important discursive construction, making the individual often unique and valuable, supporting his/hers assumptions on occupational, organizational and societal expectations [11]. The importance of professional identity is felt after the professional access, informed by means of access, more or less ritualized, and the activities of regulators, including the Professional Associations. If we do not consider a career as a journey, including access to mandatory training, we will not realize when professional identity becomes relevant. For students taking Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences we defined two profiles: i) those who integrated the result, because it was an effective choice, though not the first or as a reaction to frustration and ii) those who actively sought to change course and failed or those that upon completion of studies in pharmacy entered other courses.

Careers help understanding how change and stability occur in an organization. Institutions are characterized by relative permanence, and they include sets of behaviours or formal standards of individuals in complementary functions [20]. Institutions are reproduced in careers, and institutions can also be changed with the careers, when individuals alter occupational roles or role sequences in the organization [20]. Institutions identify the form of social construction of knowledge and its translation in places by individuals [20]. Institutions and individuals are interdependent, as noted by Scott [21]. Neo-institutional theory in sociology has inputs from cognitive and cultural theories [21]. Cognitive psychologists have wavered between the view of the individual as a competent and rational being and a view with limitations for rationality and its biases [21, pp. 38]. Today sociologists also claim the non-passivity of the individual in relation to contextual factors, social systems and roles, as stated by Identity Theories [21]. Careers as properties capture the social knowledge of how things work or should work, linked to roles and relationships of roles, such as institutional logics, divisions in labour and including the identities, mechanisms of governance and guiding behaviours in a particular institutional context [20]. Careers have the characteristic of staging roles and role relationships in organizations and occupations [20]. Institutional processes encode or dissociate the social knowledge of roles and role relationships through processes of habitualization, objectification, sedimentation and deinstitutionalization [20]. Objectification occurs when knowledge of social roles and role relations turns into social facts, collectively shared, facilitating its survival across generations [7]. The sedimentation implies that roles and relationships between roles are taken for granted; however, sequences of events can trigger deinstitutionalization, providing new visions for the same issues.

Psychological Contract

The psychological contract is defined as the perception of obligations between the individual and the employer as a result of a reciprocal exchange situation [2, 22-24]. The formation of the psychological contract involves two sets of factors: i) the organizational ones such as the institutional messages and social cues from peers and working groups and ii) the individual ones such as the interpretations, predispositions, cognitive constructions, career motivations and references [2, 24]. A psychological contract is formed when individuals infer promises that generate beliefs regarding reciprocal obligations [24].

Denise Rousseau established a tripartite typology for the psychological contract, distinguishing different sources: i) standard, ii) based on position, and iii) idiosyncratic [25]. The standard psychological contract points to the coercive interference of institutional principles (legal and negotiated natures). The psychological contracts based on position, though characteristic of an organization, can be informed by the social normative for the profession. The growing number of contracts with idiosyncratic dimensions instead of the standard dimensions creates ample space for violations and breaches derived from the complexity of expectations [6]. The psychological contract incorporates aprioristic dimensions, which are independent of any employment relationship however present, thus influencing notoriously and decisively the notion of compliance. We believe that the social level is under-represented in most of the employment relationship models and the Self, within the cognitive paradigm, is more represented than the social structure. The role of institutions in creating and defining identity and the orientation for life paths, including careers, is not fully understood.

Another no less relevant dimension is the alternate identities and the replicability of the contract, which will determine attitudinal and behavioural consequences not negligible in the reading of the psychological contract and alternatives for action. The psychological contract is formed of explicit, implied or inferred promises, but also of expectations developed in the continuity of the employment relationship. The social contract is defined as a set of assumptions and rules for a wide range of employment situations. Thus, we find that an action that is believed to be a violation of an idiosyncratic psychological contract may be in conformity with a social contract. But breaks or breaches in the social contract may in fact impact the employer-employee relationship. The existence of a greater congruence of values between individuals and organizations will lead to lower psychological contract breaches perceptions [26]. This is particularly significant and can be tested in the congruence of values associated with visions of organization and employee as regards to the professional identity.

Social Contract

Denise Rousseau defines the social contract as a set of pervasive taken for granted beliefs regarding obligations within a society [2, 27]. Morrison and Robinson define it as the assumptions, norms and beliefs about appropriate behaviours in a social unit [28]. Thus we realize the importance of the social contract in the definition of roles and roles relations in different contexts, including that of the employment relationship. Some authors have reported the existence of a new psychological contract under the understanding that employment relationships are now different from other temporal moments of our economic history; however are implicitly referring a new social contract model for the employment relationships. In fact, taken the psychological contract as a reading of the obligations and expectations of an employment relationship in particular, and considering that a reinterpretation of these authors words is not an abuse we can say that a change in the view of the employment situations in a general way refers to a new social contract that influences the psychological contracts. Employment relationships incorporate these socially accepted concepts. Although not based on promises, the social contract influences how the promises are interpreted and its rules affect the nature and interpretation of promises [2, pp. 14]. Social contracts are a background for the interpretation of promises and represent the differences in employment relationship in several countries [2].

The profession is based on a set of tacit and explicit beliefs shared between pharmacists and patients on a community pharmacy, for example, regulating mutual expectations and determining the contours of the social contract that defines the profession. Professional labelling is a mechanism for remote control in the sense that it constructs on the job identities and appropriate behaviours [29].

Professional Identities and the Process of Identification

Identity is a fundamental topic for individuals in organizations, and the existence of irreconcilable differences between the identity promoted by management and that endorsed by the employees can lead to a polarization with powerful effects in the sense of who the individual is and what he/she stands for [30]. Identity formation has a performance based element, built on Goffman's concept of social encounters in which individuals behave in order to enact who they are in an interactive way [31]. Professionals can find stability in an ambiguous environment using anchors of identity as being expert or being different [31]. Representations (physical, symbolic, verbal, textual and behavioural) become imbued with meaning and are taken as part of identity

[31]. The regulatory aspects of identity are seen as a form of normative control operating an attempt to compromise the worker with the organization through identification, although subversion or resistance is possible [31]. In the definition of a social identity individuals tend to use images that combine more relevantly with their work organizations [30, 32, 33]. The result of this process binds self-esteem to the identity of the organization (including its external image), leading to different results in behaviour if the individual is identified or deidentified with that identity [32, 34, 35]. The incongruence between subjective perceptions of professional identity (individual) and the identity promulgated by (top) management can cause problems in the identification process [30, 33].

Norms, such as professional ones, are relevant for identity. They configure a supra-individual and extra-organizational conception that does not enter directly in the previous theoretical models. They provide a space for identity and identification with the analysis of the impact of psychological contract fulfilment that is not properly researched. Even when we consider the individual level they arise from an external identity and function as an autonomous centre for identification. Organizations lack the ability to determine identities, and their employees are not always swayed by their workplace and can challenge and ridicule the identities prescribed. Within the organization individuals and groups have considerable freedom in creating their reality, yet often shaped by the social discourses available [30]. This impact of pre-formatted logical meanings as social conventions, community scrutiny and legal norms is felt in the narratives about individual or collective identity [30]. The meaning of the narratives is relativized by the position of the individual in the organization, assuming the importance of perspective [36].

Proposed Model

A model incorporating the findings is proposed inspired by David Guest's model on psychological contract in employment relationship in the contextual and background variables and the outcomes [6] yet assuming an important role of professional identity in the evaluation of the delivery of the deal. Contract replicability supports explicit references to an organizational exit barrier [37]. Organizational identification is dependent on the perception of the encounter between professional identity, itself a product of the social contract and other normatives, and the enactment of that identity in a specific organization.

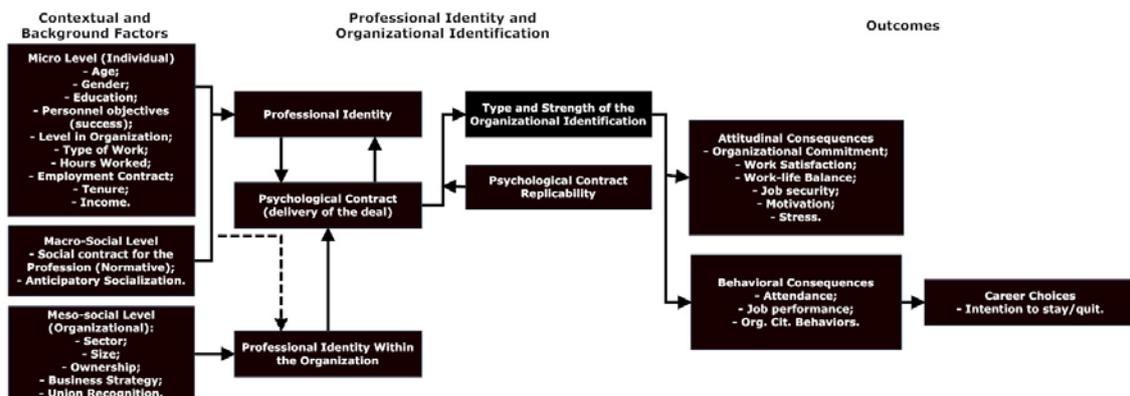


Figure 1. Professional Identity, Psychological and Social Contract and Attitudinal and Behavioural outcomes

Conclusions

An individual's professional identity is impacted by institutional references and that effect is felt upon the view of the psychological contract. Professional norms and status related aspects are an upper individual and extra organizational conception that does not enter directly in many previous theoretical approaches. They convey an identity and identification forum with direct, however implicit, impacts in the perception of the delivery of the psychological contract. Social contractualization of a profession shapes individual knowledge or beliefs about the social matrix in which employment relationships are built. The pharmaceutical profession is based upon tacit and implicit beliefs about behaviours and roles shared both by pharmacists and their publics, regulating mutual expectations and determining the contours of the social contract. Identification with the organization is mediated by extra-organizational factors institutionally based, such as professional identities. The salience of a social category is a continuous variable and depends largely on the interaction of the accessibility and adequacy of a certain circumstance [13]. The majority of studies on identities and identification do not stress occupational social categories, instead it describes the congruence, or its absence, of values, concepts and characteristics (demographic or other) not anchored in professional normatives. The standard of professional identity, which legitimizes individuals in their occupations, has an irreducible nature. The rhetoric of occupational socialization represents a set of borders, attributed to, firstly, the social and occupational roles and, secondly, their own career paths. Collin and Young [14] report that the new rhetoric of career is about flexibility, autonomy and self-determination, and there are no longer shared standards. Our position is inconsistent with theirs, asserting the existence of basic standards in reading the route of the profession, embodied in the normative professional identity.

International and Managerial Implications

Employees experiencing incongruence between their social contract and psychological contract perceptions are more likely to consider a poor delivery on the psychological contract. This articulation between social contract and psychological contract should be considered for the evaluation of psychological contracts and related outcomes. This is particularly important in assessing person-organization fit and could lead to an inclusion or further assessment between perceived identities on recruitment, job distribution and other related aspects. Managers should include the professional identity topic when evaluating expectations and perceptions, finding possible incongruences that could peril the employment relationship. In fact, employment relationship models for professionals are potentially different in nature, integrating professional institutionalization aspects. Organizations that have in mind that an employee perspective on the social contract could impact on its psychological contract assessment can prevent, or at least foresee, disruptions and a number of perceived breaches or violations.

Limitations and Future Research

The model and its conceptual relations should be tested in other contexts. This study was centred in the pharmaceutical sector and other sectors should be compared, although with professions as in this conceptualization. More testing should be done considering different approaches either more quantitative or mixed in order to shed light on the causal relations between professional identities and social contract and psychological contract.

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