

Psychological Contract of Speech-Language Therapists in Public Services

Boon Seng. Tan, Suzanne C. Purdy, and Helena. Cooper-Thomas

Abstract—A qualitative cross sectional study was conducted to investigate the nature of formation and content of the psychological among speech-language therapists (SLTs) working in public services. The key findings were that SLTs form psychological contracts with the employer either directly, or through the perceived representatives of the employing organization. Although SLTs perceived themselves as having obligations to multiple interactional entities at work, the employer or employing organization is the only interactional entity with which SLTs perceived as having an exchange relationship.

Keywords—Psychological contract, speech-language therapist, public services, qualitative method

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The psychological contract

THE psychological contract refers to an employee's belief about the exchanges that occur in an employment arrangement [4], [5], [17]. In the contemporary workplace, psychological contract is used to describe the exchange of unwritten, often implied obligations between an individual and the entities with which they interacts at work [5], [7], [16], [17]. Psychological contract is usually an employee's beliefs and perceptions in relation to the obligations in the employment relationship rather than obligations in fact [4], [5], [7], [17]; as such, an agreement between interactional entities may also not necessarily exists in fact but as perception in the interacting partners, similar to perceived obligations [4], [7], [9], [11]. Having being established on individual perceptions and inferences, the psychological contract is inherently subjective and is bound to evolve as personal or organizational circumstances change [11], [20]. Even though an employee's perceived obligations may not have been the organization's initial intentions, the employee's perception fulfillment or non-fulfillment of the perceived obligations nonetheless influence the employee's experience in the workplace [1], [3], [5], [17].

Boon Seng. Tan is a lecturer in social work program at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Malaysia (e-mail: bstan@fss.unimas.my).

Prof. Suzanne C. Purdy, is the Head of Discipline of Speech Science, University of Auckland, New Zealand (e-mail:sc.purdy@auckland.ac.nz)

Dr. Helena. Cooper-Thomas is a senior lecturer in industrial & organizational psychology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand (e-mail: h.cooper-thomas@auckland.ac.nz)

In many instances, the positive or negative experiences accumulated by the employee will influence their level of job satisfaction and future organizational behaviors such as organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviors, and turnover intentions [3], [6], [17], [22].

Using diary study, [3] investigated affective responses to contractual breaches and exceeded promises among individuals employed in the financial sectors. In the study, participants were instructed to note their mood and record any breached or exceeded promises by the employer on a particular working day. Results from this study indicated that breached of perceived promises accounted for negative affective responses such as, feelings of betrayal, and hurt. On the other hand, when the organization delivered more than the employees' perceived promises, the employees reported higher feeling of self-worth, feeling cared for, and being pleasantly surprised. Their findings suggested employees' perceived fulfillment and non-fulfillment of obligations by the organization are significantly linked to the employee's affective responses. These outcomes were consistent with findings by [14] and [15].

A study conducted by [11] to examine breach of psychological contract using semi-structured interviews through critical incidence technique (CIT). The participants involved were asked to describe an incident where they thought their employer had failed to fulfill an obligation towards them and to clarify when this had happened. Subsequent thematic analysis indicated that breaches commonly occurs as a single event, connected events, secondary events, minor events, or any combinations of the aforementioned. Moreover, regardless of the triggering event giving rise to a perceived breach of obligations, breaches were directed at the employer or those who are deemed to be representing the employing organization's interest. Findings from [11] were fairly similar to [3] and earlier research conducted by the likes of [6] and [16].

B. The speech-therapy profession

Speech-Language Therapists (SLTs) are often employed in the public sectors that are subjected to bureaucratic mechanisms in their day-to-day operations similar to those seen in most sizable organizations [10], [12], [21]. As such, it can be expected that with respect to psychological contracting, SLTs may share similar patterns of perceptions with employees in other large organizations [3], [6], [11], [12].

However, with SLTs being a professional group which is involved in the provisions of caring services, the perceptions of SLTs on the obligations and reciprocity dynamics in their psychological contracts may differ from other professional groups [10], [18], [21]. In this light, the current study is geared towards understanding the different interactional units that SLTs form psychological contracts with, and the content of the psychological contracts that exist between the therapists and the different interactional units in their work settings.

II. METHOD

A. Context of study

Participants were practicing SLTs employed in the New Zealand public services. These samples were drawn from three participating organizations. The SLTs involved were of diverse practice experience. Female practitioners and practitioners of European descents are over represented in the current sample. This is reflective of the biases observed in the profession still persisting at the time of study [10].

B. The interviews

A total of 24 SLTs were interviewed using minimally-structured interview. A minimally-structured interview is deemed to be the most appropriate way to approach this sampling group because few participants would be able to respond in a constructive and informative manner had they been asked directly about the implicit obligations in their employment relationship. Many would not understand the questions, let alone find an answer had the questions been asked as they were on the questionnaire. Moreover, it would be difficult to engage the participants in in-depth discussions about their psychological contracts, which is important for ensuring adequate coverage and exploring new dimensions of the construct. Less psychological jargon and a less abstract mode of discourse is therefore required. It is for the reason of ensuring the effectiveness of the interview that the questions were designed to serve only as a guide and additional probing questions were built on responses from the participants. Our interview questions were developed based on the recurring properties of psychological contracts highlighted in existing research on psychological contracting (e.g. [3], [11], [16]).

C. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using template analysis. Template analysis provides a structure starting off with some initial codes/themes, which were proximally determined by the interview questions in this study. And through the course of the analysis, the codes/themes can be revised and expanded or contracted as required [2]. It is an appropriate analytical approach in our study because the theoretical background would have provided an initial set of codes/themes but at the same time, participants are expected to contribute unique information as all individuals will have variable experience in their practice [21]. Segments within each individual passage were coded as part of thematic content analysis protocol. The coding process was done in multiple stages and was revisited

after each stage to identify lower and higher order themes. Coded segments hold specific information associated with a particular theme from which our grounded theories and research hypotheses were derived from. The processes of coding, sifting and sorting the codes were repeated until a point of data saturation in the conceptual themes is reached. Data saturation is defined as the point where a conceptual theme has adequately captured accounts in a specific area from all participants in a concise and meaningful way [2], [8].

III. RESULT

Our findings indicated perceived exchange relationships by the SLTs with the interactional unit 'Organization; Employer; Superior'. All other interactional units being 'Colleagues; Subordinates', 'Profession; Career' and 'Clients' were not perceived to be having any exchange relationship. Absence of perceived exchange relationships with the other interactional units are characterized by the SLTs' perceptions of obligations to but not obligations from the other interactional units. Thus, with the exceptions to the employers and employing organizations, SLTs do not form psychological contracts with the other interactional units within their employment. 'Organization; Employer; Superior' is considered as a single interactional unit to the SLTs because the unit consists of organizational entities that have managerial mandate over the SLTs. Perceptions of exchange relationships by the SLTs with the interactional unit 'Organization; Employer; Superior' indicated that SLTs form psychological contracts with this interactional unit. A total of 106 statements were related to SLTs' perceived obligations to the employing organization and 124 statements were related to perceived organizational obligations. From the initial thematic analysis, seven categories of SLTs' perceived obligations to 'Organization; Employer; Superior' and seven categories of SLTs' perceived obligations from 'Organizational; Employer; Superior' were identified. The SLTs perceived obligations to 'Organizational; Employer; Superior' is presented in TABLE I and perceived obligations from 'Organizational; Employer; Superior' is presented in TABLE II.

IV. DISCUSSION

Findings from this study indicated that SLTs form psychological contracts with the organization/employers and that the characteristics of the psychological contracts are influenced by a number of factors. Influential factors on the psychological contracts include perceived fulfillments of promises, perceived fairness of exchanges and knowledge about the organization/employers. With exceptions to the organization/employers, thematic analyses did not indicate the formation of psychological contract with the other interactional units in the SLTs' employment. Findings indicating the formation of psychological contracts occurring solely between the SLTs and their employing organizations were consistent with previous studies which highlighted psychological contract as a perceived exchange of perceptually "mutual" obligations between interacting units [7], [16], [17],

[19]. Such is the synergy of the psychological contract that when one party delivers on their (perceived) obligations to the other, it is anticipated that some reciprocal inducements will be granted in the future.

Our findings indicating SLTs do not form psychological contracts with other interactional units in the workplace, as reflected by the SLTs' lack of perceived obligations from the other interactional units, is consistent with findings by [13] and [18], which had earlier suggested that individuals who pursue caring careers tend to derive job satisfaction from their interactions with their colleagues as well as with their clients. The perceived obligations to their colleagues and clients could have reflected the SLTs' attempts to facilitate and maintain the perceptually rewarding relationships within their employment. Such is their emphases on the humanity aspects in employment, individuals undertaking caring careers have been observed to indicate high levels of job satisfaction in light of excessive workloads and seemingly unfair work conditions [13], [18].

A. Limitation of study

The findings pertaining to psychological contracts in this study are specific to the speech-language therapy profession and as such its relevance may only reflect upon a limited range of employment settings. Furthermore, the utilization of sample comprising solely of workers in the caring profession could have given rise to biased response. As is noted in previous studies using similar sample (e.g. [13], [18]), individuals working in caring professions have a higher tendency to derived satisfaction from other sources at work as oppose to emphases on perceived obligations fulfilled by the employers; this could restrict the application of our findings in professions that are not proximally related to speech-language therapy or other caring professions in general.

V. CONCLUSION

Our study investigated the entities within an employment setting with which SLTs form psychological contracts with and revealed some of the contents of the psychological contract for this profession. Although SLTs appears to perceived obligations to all interactional units in their workplace, only the employer or perceived representative of the employing organization is perceived to have a reciprocal role in terms of obligation fulfillment. The caring nature of the speech-language therapy profession may have accounted for low level of perceived obligations from the other interactional units.

TABLE I
THEMES & FREQUENCY OF THEMES ARISING IN SLTs PERCEIVED OBLIGATIONS TO 'ORGANIZATION; EMPLOYER; SUPERIOR'

Themes in SLTs perceived obligations to	No. of relating theme	SLTs to	Frequency of theme arising	% of responses	total
Work	13		28	26.4	
Self-presentation	14		19	17.9	
Hours	12		14	13.2	
Honesty	11		14	13.2	
Self-development	10		13	12.3	
Loyalty	5		8	7.6	
Flexibility	5		8	1.8	
Misc.	2		2	1.8	
Total			106	100	

TABLE II
THEMES & FREQUENCY OF THEMES ARISING IN SLTs PERCEIVED OBLIGATIONS FROM 'ORGANIZATION; EMPLOYER; SUPERIOR'

Themes in SLTs perceived obligations to	No. of relating theme	SLTs to	Frequency of theme arising	% of responses	total
N – S fit	20		39	31.5	
Professional-development	14		23	18.6	
Environment	10		23	18.6	
Humanity	11		14	11.3	
Parity	8		9	7.0	
Justice	6		8	6.5	
Misc.	6		8	6.5	
Total			124	100	

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