

THE ANTICIPATORY PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: HOW TO BALANCE BETWEEN OBLIGATIONS AND INDUCEMENTS?

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Abstract

Anticipatory psychological contract (APC) defined as individuals' beliefs about their prospective employment, including obligations to the future employers and inducements they expect to receive in return might be seen as a valuable framework to understand graduate students' expectations about prospective employment relationships.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper was to explore how final year university students from two study groups, technical and psychology, perceived obligations to future employers and inducements they expect to receive in return. The sample consisted of 138 participants (psychology=82 and technical studies=56) from RN Macedonia and Serbia. To assess APC content questionnaire with 48 statements was applied. Cronbach alpha reliability of the employee contributions and employer inducements subscales was 0.71 and 0.91, respectively.

Independent t-test revealed that technical studies students had significantly higher expectations concerning relational and transactional obligations in the prospective employment relationship than psychology students. Paired samples t-test was performed to analyze differences in anticipated relational obligations and relational inducements, as well as, transactional obligations and transactional inducements. Results showed that students hold higher expectations about inducements from the prospective organization than to their own contributions in the working environment. Results are discussed in light of their importance for HRM practices in organizations.

Keywords: *anticipatory psychological contract, prospective employment relationship, university students, mutual obligations*

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Introduction

Psychological contract as an employees' beliefs about mutual obligations with the organization, is an important construct to understand changes in the employment relationship (Guest, 2004; Herriot, 1996; Nikoloski, 2003; Rousseau, 1995). In that line, Bankins et al. (2020) have argued that there is a need for establishing/defining a new direction to further explore psychological contract processes.

According to Rousseau (2001), it is based on a mental schema that exists before the first employment and can determine the way individuals interpret the information of the organization (Coyle-Schapiro & Parzefall, 2008). This incomplete pre-employment mental structure or anticipatory psychological contract (APC) is defined as individuals' beliefs about their future employment relationship, including obligations to the prospective employer and inducements they expect to receive in return (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). Its formation is influenced by the family, school, peers, media, contacts with employees and personal experience (Coyle-Shapiro, 2006), professions, labor market conditions, and the way organizations practice the employment law (Rousseau, 2001). As suggested by Temprou and Nikolaou (2011) pre-employment expectations along with pre-employment information gathered on the basis of the organizations' brand and image are important for the prospective psychological contract, particularly in young graduates. That is, pre-employment beliefs about employee-employer exchanges may play a significant role during the period of early organizational socialization and adjustment (Rousseau et al., 2018), and even earlier, in the recruitment and selection processes (Shore & Tetrick, 1994) when organizations sent promises and information regarding employment conditions. A very recent study confirmed the importance of the pre-entry expectations for the employment relationship and the significance of the post-entry experiences for stabilizing the psychological contract (Welander et al., 2020). Additionally, APC among university students may contribute to their intention to join an organization (Prasad, 2017).

Gresse et al. (2013) reported that the most important expectations about prospective employment among university students were salary, reasonable employment, and work conditions, followed by well-being and respect, while skills development and training opportunities were found to be less important. Similarly, De Hauw and De Vos (2010) reported on high expectations regarding job content, training, career development, and financial rewards, and lower expectations for work-life balance and social atmosphere at work. A study conducted by De Vos and Megank, (2006) suggested that graduate students with high career aspirations were less willing to demonstrate commitments to their employer,

but expect an interesting job, high salary, and career opportunities from the employer. Also, the authors concluded that APC is more affected by graduates' career goals than by employment chances. On the contrary, a recent study by Gresse and Linde (2020) revealed that final years university students hold higher obligations towards the future employer and expect less in return. Another recent finding showed that all parties in a triadic employment relationship (employer, employing agency, and employees) perceived their own obligations in transactional terms, but observed obligations of others towards them as relational (Handy et al., 2020).

The aim of the present study

Considering that APC could be important for both university students entering the labor market and organizations when planning HRM practices, the aim of this article was to explore how final year university students enrolled in psychology and technical studies anticipate obligations to the prospective employers and inducements they expect to receive in return. Two types of anticipated obligations and inducements were investigated, *relational* (e.g., loyalty, commitment, organizational support, job/employment security) and *transactional* (e.g., high performance, performance-based payment) (Rousseau, 1995). Transactional and relational elements could be considered as separate and independent dimensions (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000), but both types may construct a psychological contract (Conway & Briner, 2005).

The aforementioned study findings implied that both relational and transactional elements consisted/constructed APC, but with different importance as prescribed by the participants. In addition, it was mentioned that professions are one of the factors in APC formation/content. Accordingly, it was proposed that:

a) technical studies students will express stronger beliefs in transactional mutual obligations with the prospective employer/employing organization than psychology students,

b) beliefs in relational mutual obligations in the prospective employment relationship will be less expressed among technical studies students if compared to psychology students,

c) both groups of students will report stronger beliefs in regard to relational and transactional inducements than regarding relational and transactional obligations (i.e. there will be differences in regard to expressed relational obligations and relational inducements, as well as among transactional obligations and transactional inducements).

Method

Sample and procedure

The sample in this study consisted of 138 university students in the final (fourth) year of study (psychology=82 and technical studies=56). Of them, 67 were from Macedonia, and 71 were from Serbia. They did not have formal work experience.

The data was collected during their regular classes, with the explanation that participation is anonymous and voluntary, that responses would be stayed confidential and used solely for research purposes. The questionnaire was completed in 10-15 minutes. Data gathering was realized with the prior consent of the Dean Administration of the faculties.

Measure

A questionnaire with 48 statements organized in two sections was used to assess APC content. The items were developed on the basis of Rousseau's (2001, 1995) work on psychological contract content. Twenty-four items in the first section asked for relational employee contributions (15 items) and transactional contributions (9 items). Another section with 24 items measured relational employer inducements (15 statements) and transactional employer inducements (9 items). Answers were given on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1-*completely disagree* to 5-*completely agree*). The total APC score for each dimension was divided by the number of items in respective scales and transformed on a 5-point scale. A higher score indicated stronger beliefs about employee contributions, i.e. employer inducements. The internal consistency of the employee contributions scale was $\alpha=0.71$. The reliability coefficient of the employer inducements scale was $\alpha=0.91$.

Results

Descriptive statistics of the APC dimensions, transformed on a 5-point scale, are presented in Table 1. If compared to the midpoint of the scale which was 3, it can be concluded that beliefs regarding relational obligations in the employment relationship were moderately expressed ($M = 3.52$). Transactional obligations ($M = 4.11$) and relational inducements ($M = 4.33$) perceived as a part of the prospective employee-employer relationship were rated relatively highly, while beliefs regarding transactional inducements were found to be very strong ($M = 4.67$). As could be seen, students who participated in this study expect to receive more benefits from the prospective employer than to contribute to the future employment relationship. This tendency was observed for both relational and transactional obligations in comparison to relational and transactional inducements.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of the APC dimensions among psychology (N=82) and technical studies students (N=56)

APC dimensions	Study group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min/Max	Sk	Ku
Anticipated relational obligations	psychology	3.45	.41	2.00/4.67	-.13	1.66
	technical studies	3.63	.53	2.73/4.87	.68	.00
	total	3.52	.47	2.00/4.87	.48	1.12
Anticipated transactional obligations	psychology	4.06	.32	3.44/4.78	.14	-.64
	technical studies	4.24	.40	3.22/5.00	-.45	-.17
	total	4.13	.37	3.22/5.00	-.02	-.52
Anticipated relational inducements	psychology	4.18	.46	3.00/5.00	-.46	-.21
	technical studies	4.36	.52	3.27/5.00	-.48	-1.08
	total	4.26	.49	3.00/5.00	-.38	-.82
Anticipated transactional inducements	psychology	4.47	.41	3.22/5.00	-.71	.03
	technical studies	4.66	.35	3.67/5.00	-1.00	.13
	total	4.55	.40	3.22/5.00	-.82	.09

In order to test the differences in four dimensions of APC among both psychology and technical studies students (assumption a and assumption b) independent samples t-test was performed. Results presented in Table 2 showed that all four APC dimensions differ significantly across examined groups. In line with hypothesis a, anticipated transactional obligations ($t(136)=-2.84, p < .01$, Cohen' $d=.50$, and Hedges' $g=.51$), and anticipated transactional inducements ($t(136)=-2.85, p < .01$, Cohen' $d=.50$, and Hedges' $g=.49$) were higher among technical studies students who participated in this study in comparison to their counterparts. Considering the values of Cohen' d statistic (uncorrected effect size), as well as, Hedges' g statistic (corrected/unbiased effect size), it could be concluded that both registered differences showed medium effect size (both, uncorrected and corrected values were almost equal) (Cohen, 1988). Contrary to what was proposed in hypothesis b, anticipated relational obligations ($t(136)=-2.26, p < .05$, Cohen' $d=.38$, and Hedges' $g=.39$), and anticipated relational inducements ($t(136)=-2.10, p < .05$, Cohen' $d=.37$, and Hedges' $g=.37$) were less expressed among psychology studies students

who participated in this study if compared to technical studies students. As seen from both tests, Cohen' *d* and Hedges' *g*, these differences had a small effect.

Table 2

Differences in four APC dimensions across psychology and technical studies students: independent t-test results

	<i>D</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI <i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>	<i>t</i>
Anticipated relational obligations	-.18	.08	-.34	-.02	-2.26*
Anticipated transactional obligations	-.18	.06	-.30	-.05	-2.84**
Anticipated relational inducements	-.18	.08	-.34	-.01	-2.10*
Anticipated transactional inducements	-.19	.07	-.32	-.06	-2.85**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Paired samples t-test was applied to examine if study participants hold higher expectations about prospective employer's obligations toward them in comparison to their own obligations towards the prospective organization (assumption c). Findings as seen in Table 3 revealed that anticipated relational inducements were significantly higher than anticipated relational obligations in study participants ($t(137)=-19.05, p < .001$). The same results were obtained about the difference in the transactional obligations and transactional inducements as expected by the surveyed university students ($t(137)=-12.88, p < .001$). In sum, a similar pattern of the level of expectations about own relational and transactional obligations as prospective employees, as well as of the level of expectations about relational and transactional employer/organization obligations was registered.

The pattern of the obtained results on differences in anticipated obligations and anticipated inducement obtained among psychology and technical studies students separately was very similar ($t(81)=-16.30, p < .001$ for differences in anticipated relational obligations and relational inducements and $t(81)=-9.52, p < .001$ for differences in anticipated transactional obligations and transactional inducements in psychology students; ($t(55)=-10.65, p < .001$ for differences in anticipated relational obligations and relational inducements and $t(55)=-8.68, p < .001$ considering anticipated transactional obligations and transactional inducements in technical studies students).

Table 3

Differences in anticipated obligations and inducements among study participants: paired-samples t-test results

	<i>D</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI		<i>t</i>
			<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>	
All participants					
APC_RO – APC_RI	-.73	.04	-.81	-.65	-19.05***
APC_TO – APC_TI	-.41	.03	-.48	-.35	-12.89***
Psychology students					
APC_RO – APC_RI	-.73	.04	-.82	-.64	-16.30***
APC_TO – APC_TI	-.41	.04	-.49	-.32	-9.52***
Technical studies students					
APC_RO – APC_RI	-.72	.07	-.86	-.59	-10.65***
APC_TO – APC_TI	-.42	.05	-.52	-.32	-8.68***

Note: APC_RO Anticipated relational obligations, APC_RI Anticipated relational inducements, APC_TO Anticipated transactional obligations, APC_TI Anticipated transactional inducements

*** $p < .001$

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore differences in anticipatory psychological contract content among final year university students from two study groups, psychology, and technical studies. It was found that study participants strongly believe that mutual obligations to the prospective employer/employing organization are more transactional than relational. That is, more transactional and less relational elements constituted their APC. Probably, this result may be explained by the notion that newcomers in the early stage of organizational socialization have a predominantly transactional psychological contract which could be true for APC in the pre-employment phase, as well. The rationale for this explanation is that graduate students are not formally part of any organization nor have already established employment relationships which may contribute to more exchanges, influences, and experiences, acceptance of organizational culture, and finally, development of organizational commitment and loyalty.

Further, the study revealed that surveyed final years' university students expected to receive more relational and transactional inducements, but as reported, they had less relational and transactional obligations towards prospective

employer/organization. This implies that there is an imbalance in inputs and outputs in the employment relationship as anticipated/expected by the graduate psychology and technical studies students. This result might be seen in the context of the Millennial generation characteristics need for information about the mutuality of the employment relationship. Namely, empirically-based conclusions revealed that Millennials have high expectations from the employment (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010, De Vos & Megank, 2006) and high career goals (De Vos et al., 2009, Lub et al. 2015), that they value interesting work and good information to work effectively (Kuron et al. 2015), personal advancement and open communication with and quick feedback from/by subordinates (Pyoria et al., 2017), as well as, career opportunities, attractive working conditions, and rewards (Lub et al., 2015). Potential characteristics of young employees from the employer perspective were found to be a lack of understanding of work standards, extremely high expectations in regard to wages and work conditions, not realizing that employment relationships should be based on mutual exchange (Gawrycka et al., 2019).

Consistently with Rousseau's (1995) assumption that professions may lead to differences in psychological contract, the obtained results demonstrated that technological studies students' beliefs in transactional mutual obligation were significantly strongly expressed in comparison to psychology students. On the other hand, anticipated relational obligations and inducements were also strongly expressed among technology studies students, contrary to the assumption that these types of APC would be greater among psychology students. Differences may be due to the socialization in chosen studies, i.e., during education for the chosen profession. Moreover, signals sent by potential employing organizations, employment opportunities in the respective sector, and labor market conditions in general, might be seen as a possible explanation why technical studies students hold higher expectations in regard to employment relationship not only as a transaction but also as a relationship based on loyalty and support.

Strengths and limitations of the study

This study contributed to the enlargement of the empirical data on APC in mentioned countries and in the Balkan region as well. According to the best of our knowledge, there are only a few studies on APC in our region in which social and economic conditions are different from those in Western Europe. The study highlighted the distribution of the anticipated mutual obligations with the prospective employer among final year university students in psychology and technical studies facing school-to-work transitions, and consequently, showed what they expect from the employment relationship.

However, the limitations of the study should be considered. First, self-reported measures were used which need to be combined with structural interviews in order to get a deeper insight into graduate students' APC. Second, the study was cross-sectional, so a longitudinal study in order to explore changes of APC content after establishing the employment relationship with actual employer/employing organization could reveal important findings on its role in further development of PC in the work environment and eventual perception of contract breach. Third, in this research, only participants from two study groups/faculties were included. In addition, the sample was convenient and thus, the generalizability of the results is limited. Future studies should be conducted on a more heterogeneous sample in regard to types of study programs/ faculties and consist of a higher number of participants.

Implications of the study

Taking into consideration what was stated previously, this study implies that APC is important for management in the creation of HRM practices in the organizations (e.g., Tekleab et al., 2019). Namely, APC might be considered as a basis for the development of HRM practices oriented toward the retention of young employees, particularly highly skilled and talented ones. In that line, Zupan et al. (2018) have stated that millennials will stay in the organization and be loyal only if they will receive expected inducements. On the other hand, students as potential job applicants and prospective employees need to be informed about reciprocity and mutuality of the employment relationship.

Since anticipatory expectations could be found inconsistent with perceived obligations in the employee-employer relationship as was registered in this study, it is important for pre-employment expectations to be managed properly (Temporou & Nikolaou, 2011), and consequently, recruitment and selection processes to be planned carefully. In addition, organizations during the recruitment process need to send only promises that can be kept (Woodrow & Guest, 2020).

Accordingly, it is likely that a lack of reciprocity can lead to perceived unfairness in the organization, which in turn can lead to withdrawal behavior and turnover intentions. It was confirmed that psychological contract breach (PCB) leads to lower engagement (De Ruiter et al., 2017), less trust and higher intention to leave the job (Abela & Debono, 2019), lower job performance (Bal et al., 2010) and perception of unfairness of the organization (Cohen, 2013). However, fairness is based on balanced inputs (efforts by the employees) and outputs (rewards provided by the employers).

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АНТИЦИПИРАН ПСИХОЛОШКИ ДОГОВОР КАЈ СТУДЕНТИ: КАКО ДА СЕ ВОСПОСТАВИ РАМНОТЕЖА ПОМЕЃУ ОБВРСКИТЕ И ПРИДОБИВКИТЕ?

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Кратка содржина

Антиципираниот психолошки договор (АПД) е концептуализиран како индивидуални верувања за идното вработување, вклучувајќи ги личните обврски кон идниот работодавач и придобивките кои се очекува да се добијат од работодавачот за возврат. Според тоа, овој конструкт може да претставува важна рамка за разбирање на очекувањата што студентите ги имаат во врска со заемните обврски со идниот работодавач, односно очекувањата од идните работни односи.

Целта на овој труд беше да се испита како студентите во завршна година на студии од две студиски групи, технички науки и психологија, ги перципираат обврските кон идниот работодавач и придобивките што очекуваат да ги имаат од вработувањето. На примерок од 138 студенти (психологија=82 и технички науки=56) од РС Македонија и Србија им беше зададен прашалник со 48 тврдења за процена на АПД. Интерната конзистентност на супскалите за мерење на личните обврски кон идниот работодавач (релациски и трансакциски) и на обврските на работодавачот кон нив (релациски и трансакциски) добиени во истражувањето изнесуваше $\alpha=.71$ и $\alpha=.91$, соодветно.

T-тестот за независни примероци покажа дека студентите кои студираат технички науки имаат значајно повисоки очекувања како во однос на релациските, така и во поглед на трансакциските заемни обврски со идниот работодавач споредени со студентите кои студираат психологија. Со цел да се испитаат разликите во изразеноста на антиципираните релациски обврски и антиципираните релациски придобивки, но и разликите во антиципираните трансакциски обврски и антиципираните трансакциски придобивки беше применет t-тест за изедначени примероци. резултатите покажаа дека студентите имаат значајно повисоки очекувања во врска со обврските на идниот работодавач/организацијата кон нив отколку во однос на нивните лични обврски во идното вработување. Резултатите се дискутирани низ перспектива на нивната важност во планирањето на практики во/за управувањето со човечките ресурси во работните организации.

Клучни зборови: *антиципиран психолошко договор, перцептивен работен однос, студентски, меѓусебни обврски*