Setting the scene: Psychological contract and an assessment of personality traits in the dance industry

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ABSTRACT

The psychological contract research predominantly concentrates on the employer-employee relationship. In recent years there has been a trend to investigate this construct in education and sports. This paper explores psychological contract in the dance industry and investigates the influence of personality traits on psychological contract formation and perceived contract breach of psychological contract. Based on a review of research on personality traits, propositions are presented to predict how the Big Five (openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism and extraversion) and locus of control affect the psychological contract dynamics. The research agenda presented contributes theoretically to the literature by exploring the effect of personality traits on psychological contract formation, an under researched area, and practically by considering the dance industry’s obligations to its dancers.

Keywords: Attitudes, behaviour, control, creativity, individual learning, perception.

There is an abundance of literature focusing on psychological contracts between employer and employee, particularly in the business and organisations sector (for example, Anderson & Schalk 1998; Dabos & Rousseau, 2004; Dick 2006, King & Bu 2005, Kotter 1973; Millward & Hopkins 1998; Purvis & Cropley 2003; Rousseau 1989, 1990, 1995, 2001). In this context, organisations will hire an individual to carry out their required long-term and short-term duties and in return will provide the employee with potential for skill development, further training, job promotion, personal growth and most importantly, a pay check. Considering that psychological contracts are based on a reciprocal relationship between two or more parties (Turnley & Feldman 1999) and that the concept of psychological contract is not restricted to paid employees (Liao-Troth 2005), it can exist in other relationships such as consumer-service provider (Kingshott & Pecotich 2007), student-educational provider (Bordia & Bordia 2008; Bordia, Hobman, Restubog & Bordia in press; Wade-Benzoni, Rousseau & Li 2006) and sports coach-player (Campos 2000). Following this line of enquiry, this paper explores the dynamics of the psychological contract of dance trainees and dance institutions.

Rousseau (1990, 1995, 2001) defines psychological contract as ‘an individual’s belief regarding reciprocal obligations’. Given that psychological contracts are self-constructed, it makes logical sense that personality traits and individual differences will have some affect on formation of psychological
contracts, breach and resultant behavioural outcomes. Individual differences can operate such that
certain individuals feel they are entitled to rewards and benefits, regardless of their contributions
(Huseman, Hatfield & Miles 1987). In addition, Rousseau (2001:532) states that “more research is
needed on how worker characteristics impact employee’s willingness to promise and vice versa”.
Raja, Johns and Ntalianas (2004) provided an important contribution to the psychological contract
literature with their study that measured the relationships that personality traits [extraversion,
conscientiousness, neuroticism, self-esteem, equity sensitivity and locus of control] had between
psychological contract type, perceptions of contract breach and feelings of contract violation. Their
research provides some empirical evidence merging the importance of individual differences in
matters concerning psychological contracts. However, Raja et al. (2004) do not consider the role of
personality in the formation of psychological contracts. For example, individuals high in
conscientiousness may expend more effort at work than their low in conscientiousness counterparts.
In return, highly conscientious employees may have greater perceptions of organisational obligations
than their low in conscientiousness colleagues. By exploring the impact of personality traits on the
process of psychological contract formation, this paper makes an important contribution to the
literature. In terms of practical contributions, the exploration of psychological contracts in the dance
industry will help this industry to foster positive relationships with its dancers. Given the social and
dyadic relationships that exist between a dancer and their institution, psychological contracts are
inevitably part of the individual dancers’ mental schema when interacting with the dance institution.
Yet very little research has been dedicated to this in sport and recreational management in general and
in the context of dance training in particular. This article highlights the importance of understanding
perceptions of institutional obligation in the dance industry in order to improve and maintain dancers’
adherence to participation. In this paper, psychological contract literature will be reviewed and
applied to the dance industry context. Finally, the effect individuals’ personality can have on
psychological contracts in this industry will be considered and propositions presented based on the
personality literature.
THE DANCE INDUSTRY

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008), there were 726 performing arts operation businesses/organisations at the end of 2007 generating an income of $733.4 million with $65.4 million being generated from dance production. There are currently 50 dance companies and more than 200 choreographers in Australia taking the art form of dance into new territory through exciting collaborations. In 2006 1,625,000 people in Australia, or 10 per cent of the population aged 15 years and over, attended dance performances, with 25 per cent of these attending twice. The success of Sydney Festival’s showcase of Australian dance in 2008, with near sell-out audiences, underlines a new excitement about dance. Recent successes such as the musical Billy Elliot (which has already been seen by more than 250,000 people), and television’s So You Think You Can Dance (which attracted approximately 1.8 million viewers weekly) confirm the impact Australian dance is having in Australia. International demand for Australian dance is on the increase with more overseas theatres featuring Australian work (Australian Council for the Arts 2009). Much of research on the dance industry has focussed on eating disorders (Abraham 1996), sporting injuries (Kennedy, Hodgkins, Colombier & Guyette 2007) and issues concerning construction of physical ‘identity’ (Wellard, Pickard & Bailey 2007), stereotyping (Clabaugh & Morling 2004) and maintaining the perfect dancers figure (Benn & Walters 2001). However, there are few researchers dedicated to discovering the nature of dance from a perspective of organisational obligation towards dancers.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS

Psychological contract comprises subjective beliefs regarding an exchange agreement between an individual and typically their employer (Rousseau 1995). Based on the social exchange theory (Blau 1964), psychological contracts are an implicit arrangement of give and take between two parties (Turnley & Feldman 1999). It is different from a written or legally binding contract as the set of promises are primarily perceptions of responsibilities and entitlements and are often not overtly expressed (Rousseau 1989; 1995). The formation of the psychological contract is typically a process,
rather than a one-time occurrence (Rousseau 2001). Psychological contracts develop during initial stages of information seeking from advertisements, word of mouth and interview panels and during early experiences in the organisation (Turnley & Feldman 1999). The lack of information in the recruitment stage means that psychological contracts are able to develop over time. As trusted and precise information is communicated between both parties, psychological contracts develop and both parties are able to identify appropriate behaviour and maintain commitments, therefore fulfilling an ideal relationship (Rousseau 2001). However, in the attempt to recruit potential employees, employers may exaggerate the scope of the position, therefore leading to inaccurate perceptions being formed from the employees’ perspective (Ozone 2007).

When a contract is perceived to have been dishonoured or that the obligations towards the employees have not been met, this is perceived contract breach. Perceived contract breach “represents a cognitive assessment of contract fulfilment that is based on an employee’s perception of what each party has promised and provided to the other” (Morrison & Robinson 1997:230). It signals an imbalance in the social exchange process in which an employee does not receive expected outcomes from an organisation for fulfilling his or her obligations (Morrison & Robinson 1997). As a reaction to perceived breach, contract violation refers to the emotional distress felt by the employee. Violation is the feelings of anger, betrayal and wrongful harm arising from the realisation that one’s organisation has not fulfilled a highly salient promise (Morrison & Robinson 1997; Rousseau 1989). “Underlying a psychological contract is trust, which develops from a belief that contributions will be reciprocated…a damaged relationship is not easily restored” (Rousseau 1989:128), therefore perceived contract violation will often lead to feelings of betrayal and deeper psychological distress (Rousseau 1989). Previous researchers have suggested two basic causes of psychological contract violations; reneging and incongruence (Morrison & Robinson 1997; Rousseau 1995). Reneging occurs when the organisation knowingly breaks a promise to its employee, whereas incongruence occurs when the organisation and employee have a different understanding of what is perceived to have been promised to the employee. In the case of violations resulting from incongruence, organisations feel they have kept their end of the agreement and only the employee feels that the
organisation has failed to fulfil one or more of its obligations (Turnley & Feldman 1999). Contract violation can lead to employees loosing commitment to the organisation and no longer feeling obligated to follow through with their perceived obligations (Schalk & Roe 2007). Other effects of contract breach such as lack of work motivation, low organisational citizenship behaviour, low satisfaction and turnover have also been found (e.g., Bordia, Restubog & Tang 2008; Restubog, Hornsey, Bordia & Esposo 2008; Rousseau 1995; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski & Bravo 2007).

In the dance context, dancers many come with a set of perceived obligations they want the dance institution to fulfil in order to make their experience a positive one. Some of these perceived institutional obligations may be generated from advertisements, brochures and other forms of communication from the dance institution itself while others may come from informal word of mouth from current dancers and alumni of the institution. The enrolment prices of the dance classes, the standard of their professional performances and even the acceptance of individuals into the institution may be sources that generate certain facets of psychological contracts. For example, if a dance institution is known to have produced famous professional dancers, new students enrolling into the institution may expect to get superior quality training, state of the art facilities to rehearse in and development workshops with reputable dance companies. Formation of psychological contract will typically begin when the individual is enquiring about a particular style of dance (i.e. jazz, ballet, contemporary) or dance program they wish to enrol in. This will continue to develop during the audition stage, which is a typical component of the enrolment process. For example, a dancer may be surrounded by well-known choreographers in the dance audition giving them the impression that these choreographers will be training them and working with them in their dance institutions. Fulfilling this perceived obligation may lead to a strong and positive relationship between the dance trainee and their institution. In contrast, perceived breach of such perceived obligations may have a serious consequence on their perceptions of the dance institution and their subsequent adherence to participation. For example, when the dancer realises that they are not taught by those well-known choreographers from the audition process, they may experience contract breach.
EFFECT OF PERSONALITY TRAITS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS

Personality traits are often defined as enduring “dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings and actions” (McCrae & Costa 2003:25). McAdams and Pals (2006:204) herald the Big Five as “arguably the most recognizable contribution personality psychology has to offer today to the discipline of psychology as a whole and to the behavioural and social sciences”. The Big Five Inventory (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism) developed by John, Donahue and Kentle (1991) provides a good tool to determine how personality traits may be used to moderate various pathways including the nature of psychological contracts, experience, breach, violation and ensuing behavioural outcomes. Personality appears to have a link to psychological contract as indicated by recent literature (for example, De Vos, Buyens & Schalk 2005; Raja et al. 2004). However, the effects of personality on organisational behaviour have not been well specified (Raja et al. 2004). This link is important considering that psychological contracts are self-constructed (Raja et al. 2004; Rousseau 1989). This paper will review these personality traits as well as locus of control, in presenting propositions on how these affect psychological contracts in the dance context.

Conscientiousness

People that are highly conscientious tend to possess characteristics of being hardworking, well organised, punctual, ambitious and persevering. Those that are low in conscientiousness tend to possess characteristics of being negligent, disorganised, late, aimless and unreliable (McCrae & Costa 2003). Several studies have concluded that conscientiousness was a strong predictor of job performance (Hough & Ones 2001; Ones & Viswesveran 2001; Saldago 2002). Hurtz and Donovan (2000:870) suggest that “it makes sense that individuals who have characteristic tendencies to be dependant, careful, thorough and hardworking should be better performers in their job”. Raja et al. (2004) found that people with low conscientiousness were the most likely to experience perceived breach of psychological contract. This may be due to the idea that highly conscientious people might engage in a more careful job search, thus reducing their probability of experiencing perceived breach. However, Bordia, Hobman, Restubog and Bordia (in press) found that the effect of psychological contract breach is stronger among conscientious people than their less conscientious counterparts so it
may be that although highly conscientious people are less likely to experience perceived breach, for those that do experience breach, the effect will be much greater. In the dance context, dancers can’t always rely on their dance ability. Quite often, dance companies and choreographers are looking for a ‘complete package’, which includes an exceptional dancer plus their ability to manage time, manage injuries appropriately, take on additional dance classes to refine their technical skills, have a positive attitude towards dance and be hard working. Successful dancers will often rate high in conscientiousness because of the independent nature of dance and so will usually possess such traits that enable them to successfully negotiate a career in dance. Therefore it is anticipated that dancers will have greater perceptions of institutional obligation because of their efforts to secure a position with the dance company. It is also anticipated that conscientious people are likely to keep their end of the deal and therefore are more likely to react to perceived breach more strongly. Therefore we propose that:

Proposition 1: Dancers who record higher ratings of conscientiousness will have greater perceptions of institutional obligation and will feel greater impact of perceived breach of psychological contract than their less conscientious counterparts.

Openness to experience

Openness is one of the personality traits that was not included in the Raja et al. (2004) study because of its generally weak relationship to organisational behaviour (for example, McCrae & Costa 2003). However, open individuals are imaginative, creative, original, curious and prefer variety (McCrae & Costa 2003) and due to the creative and artistic nature of dance, this variable should be explored as a measure. Furthermore, Barrick, Mount and Gupta (2003) demonstrated that openness was a predictor of success in artistic jobs. Closed individuals (or those rated low in openness to experience) tend to be characterised as uncreative, conventional, uncurious and prefer routine (McCrae & Costa 2003). Studies in the 1990’s (see John, Caspi, Robins, Moffitt & Stouthamer-Loeber 1994; Robins, John & Caspi 1994) showed that openness predicted school performance in early adolescence, with openness also predicting the total years of education completed by middle adulthood (Goldberg, Sweeney, Merenda & Hughes 1998). In a typical dance class, quite often the dance instructor will give the
dancers a word (for example, taxi) that they have to interpret through movement. For example, they may emulate the taxi driver, a passenger, the car itself or even the letters in the word taxi. This exploration of new ideas and new experiences is very much central to dance. Dancers who are open to new experiences will often become successful dancers because they are willing to consider ‘out of the box’ options. Furthermore, Barrick and Mount (1991) found that openness was positively related to training proficiency, suggesting that open individuals are the most willing the engage in learning experiences, therefore may place lesser importance on the level of perceived institutional obligation and perceived breach may not have such a strong impact on the individual. Therefore we propose that:

Proposition 2: Dancers who record higher ratings of openness will have lesser perceptions of institutional obligation and will feel less impact of perceived breach of psychological contract than their less open counterparts.

Extraversion

Extroverts are highly social, talkative, energetic, enthusiastic, assertive and ambitious. In contrast, introverts are generally more reserved, quiet and passive (McCrae & Costa 2003). Introverts are not necessarily unhappy, they just don’t have the same high energy levels of an extravert. Extraversion is a predictor of job performance (Barrick & Mount 1991) and it’s not surprising that an individual possessing characteristics of being social, active and assertive would be good indicators of being successful in their job. Dance is a high risk physical activity where extraversion is a key component of artists and dancers would be inclined to develop long-term contracts where there are opportunities for growth and success. Although extroverts and introverts may feel the same level of institutional obligation, extroverts are more inclined to voice their views as they are more assertive and ambitious. This is supported by Rousseau (1995) who suggests that individuals who are vigilant about perceived breach might actually encounter more breach. Furthermore, it is predicted that extroverts will closely monitor their success in the dance school and will therefore be most susceptible to perceived breach of psychological contract (Raja et al. 2004). Therefore we propose that:
Proposition 3: Dancers who record higher ratings of extraversion will feel greater impact of perceived breach of psychological contract than their introverted counterparts.

Agreeableness

Agreeable people tend to be trusting, generous, soft-hearted, lenient and good-natured. In contrast, less agreeable individuals are more suspicious, antagonistic, critical and irritable (McCrae & Costa 2003). Raja et al. (2004) suggested that because of their preference for close relationships and their cooperative good nature, individuals that are high on agreeableness would report more relational contracts and be less prone to experiencing breach or violation. There are two dominant types of psychological contracts; transactional and relational (Rousseau 1989). A transactional psychological contract refers to contracts that are economic, extrinsic, close-ended, specific and public, whereas a relational contract refers to contracts that are socio-emotional, intrinsic, open-ended, dynamic and subjective. Typically dancers will form relational contracts with their dance institutions for two main reasons. First, the dance culture tends to be sporadic and sometimes dancers will go without work for a period of time (say a few months) or will forfeit any income while working for the opportunity to showcase themselves to potential dance companies that may hire them once they have completed their training. For any person to undertake this kind of unpredictable career, a great sense of intrinsic motivation to dance is central to any individual hoping for a successful career in dance. Second, having the right attitude is important for a dancer to be successful in the dance industry. When directors, producers and choreographers are filling dance positions, they are looking for someone with not only dance ability but a positive attitude that they can work with. So a dancer that possesses traits of being agreeable, getting along with other people, being kind and good natured will have more success in gaining work in the dance industry. It is anticipated that dancers who are likely to rate higher in agreeableness, are more inclined to form relational contracts with their dance institution. Also, because of their amicable nature, they may be willing to give the organisation a second chance by not being so heavily affected emotionally by perceived breach. Therefore, we propose that:
Proposition 4: Dancers who record higher ratings of agreeableness will have greater perceptions of relational institutional obligation than transactional institutional obligation and will feel lesser impact of perceived breach of psychological contract than their less agreeable counterparts.

Neuroticism

Neuroticism is another component of the Big Five and refers to individuals that are more self-conscious, emotional, vulnerable, tend to worry a lot and are temperamental (McCrae & Costa 2003). The “characteristics associated with neuroticism suggest that such individuals will not engage in relationships that require long-term commitments on their part and demands high social skills, trust in others and initiative” (Raja et al. 2004:351). Individuals with neurotic characteristics tend to be limited in social skills and avoid situations that demand taking control (Judge, Locke & Durham 1997). Individuals with less neurotic tendencies are more calm, even-tempered, comfortable and hardy (McCrae & Costa 2003). Given that dance is performance based and quite often dancers will need to be responsible for their own professional development by attending dance workshops and introducing themselves to potential choreographers and directors, those with neurotic characteristics may not be able to manage a successful long-term career due to the competitive and independent nature of the industry. In addition, Raja et al. (2004) indicated that neurotic individuals often lack trust, therefore don’t have high expectations that their perceived obligations will be met but might be expecting breach to occur and might be inclined to see breach more easily. Therefore, we propose that:

Proposition 5: Dancers who record higher ratings of neuroticism will exhibit lower perceptions of institutional obligation and will feel greater impact of perceived breach of psychological contract than their emotionally stable counterparts.

Locus of control

Locus of control is a variable reflecting how people perceive the strength of the link between their own actions and the outcomes of those actions (Rotter 1966). People with an internal locus of control
tend to believe that they are responsible and in control of their own lives, while people with an external locus of control tend to attribute success or failure to factors outside of their control. An internal locus of control has been positively related to academic (Brockway & Njus 1999), social and economic advancement (MacArthur & MacArthur 1999), whereas an external locus of control has been positively related to college drop-outs (Pugliese 1994). Raja et al. (2004) suggest that individuals with an external locus of control will form psychological contracts that allow maximisation of the short-term outcomes of their inputs. They will not closely monitor perceived breaches of psychological contract because they believe that outcomes are under the control of luck and influential others (Raja et al. 2004). It is also predicted that dancers with an internal locus of control will form greater perceptions of institutional obligations because they feel their performance and outcomes will be a result of their effort and skill and will not be left to chance or influential others. Therefore, we propose that:

Proposition 7: Dancers who record ratings of an internal locus of control will form greater perceptions of institutional obligation and will feel greater impact of perceived breach of psychological contract than their external locus of control counterparts.

Raja et al. (2004) included self-esteem and equity sensitivity in their study but as they found no relationship between those traits and perceived breach of psychological contract, they were omitted from this paper.

CONCLUSION

Understanding what contributes to dancers’ perceived obligations of the dance institution will enable them to clearly identify mutual obligations and retain their loyalty and commitment to the dance institution. It is anticipated that dancers who feel that their obligations have been met or are still in the process of being met, will express positive feelings towards the dance institution and are less likely to have the intention of leaving and will be overall more satisfied with the dance institution. In contrast, dancers who feel their perceived obligations have not been met are likely to respond with intentions to leave the dance institution and/or lower satisfaction with the dance institution. An understanding of
how the psychological contract contributes to the terms of the student-institution relationship should therefore reduce the likelihood of perceived contract breach (De Vos, Buyens & Schalk 2005; Rousseau 2001; Shore & Tetrick 1994). Acknowledging that psychological contracts are temporal in nature and having an understanding of how personality traits can influence perceptions of the psychological contract will be a useful application in the dance industry. It will allow dance institutions to apply the concept of psychological contract to their recruitment program and retention strategies in order to maintain and positively develop the relationship with their dancers. Some practical suggestions could be to include a mentoring program (where dancers are provided a mentor to guide them through the training process and on their career objectives), educate the dance educators (how to work constructively with all dancers) and educate the students (for example, provide a personality development course where dancers can maximise on their current strengths in personality). Such recruitment and retention strategies will maximise all dancers’ likelihood of success.

Given the newness of applying psychological contract to the dance context, there are a number of methodological issues to consider. First, initial qualitative research will assist in gaining information about dance institutions, institutional obligations that dancers form of their dance institutions and the role that personality plays on psychological contract. Second, modifying the existing psychological contract scales to be more appropriate for a context outside of the employee-employer relationship, so more specifically in a context where individuals are paying an organisation for skill development and training, resulting in a career in their chosen field. Finally, longitudinal quantitative studies should be done to test these propositions. As indicated by Rousseau (2001), psychological contracts are temporal in nature and develop over time. Turnley and Feldman (1999) also suggest psychological contracts begin to form during the recruitment stage and develop during early experiences. Therefore a study monitoring the formation of the psychological contract over time, say from the recruitment stage through to 12 months, would provide evidence that psychological contracts develop until dancers understand the culture of the industry and adapt their psychological contracts accordingly.
REFERENCES


