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The “Psychological” Contract of Employment

A Qualitative Analysis of Psychological Contract Violation Within English Professional Rugby Union

Mike Rayner

Abstract

Recent research illustrates that violated psychological contracts within the sports industry can have negative consequences on organisational relationships and productivity (Barnhill & Turner, 2014; De Ruiter, Schalk, Schaveling, & van Gelder, 2016; Matthijs Bal, Chiaburu, & Jansen, 2010; Nichols, 2013). While these studies contextualise the significance of the psychological contract to organisational behaviour and volunteer practices, little is known with regard to the impact of psychological contract violation within the professional sports industry. Therefore, this study explored qualitatively how psychological contract violation affects attitudes, behavior, and organisational performance of professional rugby union players' within England. The results illustrate that psychological contract violation has a significant attachment to the concept of “marquee” signings that are allowed outside of the salary cap in professional rugby union within England, while also illustrating a relational psychological contract amongst the professional players despite the evident lack of any long-term contracts in the sport. Consequently, these results illustrate that effective management of the psychological contract should be a core component of human resource practices within professional rugby union.

Keywords: *Psychological contracts, Rugby Union, professional sport*

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Background and Literature Review

The International Rugby Football Board's (IRFB) declaration on the August 27, 1995 to legalise professionalism within rugby union signified the transformation of the relationship of the player to the game (Rayner, 2017). The play spirit of intrinsic pleasure to be derived from playing was displaced or overwritten by a contractual relationship to the game in which the player became an employee paid to provide a service, paid to perform, employed to produce skills and abilities for the organisation (Singer, 2000). Through both professionalism and a formal playing contract, professional rugby players became a highly valued commodity almost overnight, and it can be argued that in the continued professional era that they are a club's greatest assets. Although they may be replaceable, there is a greater responsibility on the club administrators to manage these assets.

Through the acceptance of professionalism, rugby union has been undergoing a constant growth in international competition, deregularization, and globalisation. Consequently, these constant influences on the professional game of rugby union, such as the introduction of a salary cap in 1999 and the increased levels of player migration, have caused the professional clubs to become more flexible and responsive to market conditions to increase productivity (Rayner, 2017). Subsequently, this has seen the traditional variants of contract design, such as casual, temporary, and fixed-term, attached to the professional player contract. These varying types of contract cannot only cause a reduction in job security and psychological and emotional problems for the professional rugby player, but a professional club can also suffer by employing the use of such contracts with research illustrating a deterioration in the workplace relationship. However, by fulfilling obligations relating to pay, job security, and career development, rugby clubs are creating a need for professional players to reciprocate, and this can take the form of altitudinal reciprocity through enhanced commitment and consequently influence employees to stay with the organisation. These issues faced by both the professional rugby union player and the professional clubs make the psychological contract of employment a critical topic of research within professional rugby union at this period of time.

The psychological contract is a theoretical framework popularized by Rousseau, which has been used to understand mutual obligations between an employee and an employer (Rousseau, 1989, 1995). Based on these beliefs, employees make inferences about what employers have promised them as organizational inducements, in return for the workplace contributions that employers expect of them (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002). Although psychological contract literature within the sports industry has given considerable attention to psychological contract violation (Barnhill & Turner, 2013; Pate, 2006; Rigotti, 2009) psychological contract breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997), organizational relationships and productivity (Barnhill & Turner, 2014; De Ruiter, Schalk, Schaveling, & van Gelder, 2016; Matthijs Bal, Chiaburu, & Jansen, 2010; Nichols, 2013; Rayner, 2017) there

are limited theoretical and empirical insights into the psychological contract when measured in alignment with professional sport.

In the professional sport environment, the psychological contract may be classified as relational or transactional. Under a relational psychological contract, employees offer loyalty and commitment to their organization in exchange for security of employment that is guaranteed by long-term contracts. However, as previously mentioned, the sport of rugby union is constantly undergoing growth in international competition, deregularization, and globalisation, which reduces the ability for professional clubs to have stability in their markets to be able to offer long-term contracts to their players. Transactional psychological contracts have a narrow scope of responsibilities related to an employee's temporary involvement in the fulfilment of organizational goals and are short-term in design. Within a professional sport context, under this form of contract, players are focused on advancing their careers and use the organisation and any subsequent success to advance their future employability. Consequently, a transactional psychological contract moves the risk of unpredictable economic circumstances from employers to employees. From a professional rugby union players' perspective, a transactional psychological contract allows players to change jobs regularly; advance their economic value; and places the emphasis of career, knowledge, and transferable skill development onto themselves.

However, the psychological contract is subject to variability, flexibility, and adaptability, which are all components that define the professional sport industry. Consequently, failure for organisations to understand the psychological contract can have negative consequences on organisational relationships and productivity that can lead to psychological contract violation.

Psychological contract violation has been defined by a range of authors as a failure of an organisation to fulfill one or more of an individual's psychological contract of employment (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). It is the process of moving from the identification of an issue toward an emotional reaction in response to the belief that an organisation has failed to maintain the psychological contract (Barnhill & Turner, 2013; Pate, 2006; Rigotti, 2009). Therefore, varying ranges of emotional responses to psychological contract violation have been associated with lower levels of organisational citizenship, reduced commitment, and the psychological contract itself becomes more calculated and transactional even if the initial employment contract was not designed in this manner (Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Modaresi & Nourian, 2013; Pate & Malone, 2000; Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2006; Suazo, Turnley, & Mai-Dalton, 2005).

Whilst identification of the variances of psychological contract violation has been noted, it is also important to understand how these emotional responses are triggered. A psychological contract violation may occur when the organization does not meet the employees' expectations regarding distributive (perceived

uneven distribution, e.g., financial rewards) and or procedural (perceive unfair application of procedures, e.g., promotion) elements of a job role (Barnhill & Turner, 2013). These triggers can result in a psychological contract violation, which then may result in either an attitudinal or behavioral response (Guest & Conway, 1997). Attitudinal responses include reduced organisational commitment and job satisfaction, whereas behavioral responses may include reduced effort and organisational citizenship. Therefore, breaking the psychological contract may have implications for employee and organisational performance, something that has yet to be examined within the context of professional rugby union within England. This is of particular importance due to the sport's late entry into the professional sports market in 1995 and its continuous attempts to compete for market share with already established professional sports (Rayner, Webb, & Webb, 2016).

Method

The intention of the research was to explore the experience of psychological contract violation of professional rugby union players' within England. Consequently, the very process of examining experience signifies that "meaning" is central to the research question (Dubin, 1956). It is the content and complexity of these "meanings" rather than a measure of frequency that suggested a qualitative approach was the most appropriate design for the research project (Marshall, 1996).

Research Design

The use of qualitative research enables the examination of how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, or produced; based on methods of data generation that are flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data are produced; and based on methods of analysis and explanation building that involve understandings of complexity, detail, and context (Mason, 1996; Mishler, 1979). Therefore, the research strategy involved an ethnographic enquiry incorporating the use of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the participants' experience of any psychological contract violation (Ross, 1989; Smith, 1996). Using the IPA lens, events and objects are to be understood by investigating how they are experienced and given meaning by an individual through that individual's life/world, and IPA is the most appropriate process of ascertaining such data in a systematic manner (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Participants and Recruitment

In order to explore the participants' experience of psychological contract violation, individuals had to be carefully selected through purposive sampling in order to address the aim of the research project (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). In line with the purposive sampling strategy adopted, participants had to currently be contracted as a full time professional rugby union player at a professional rugby

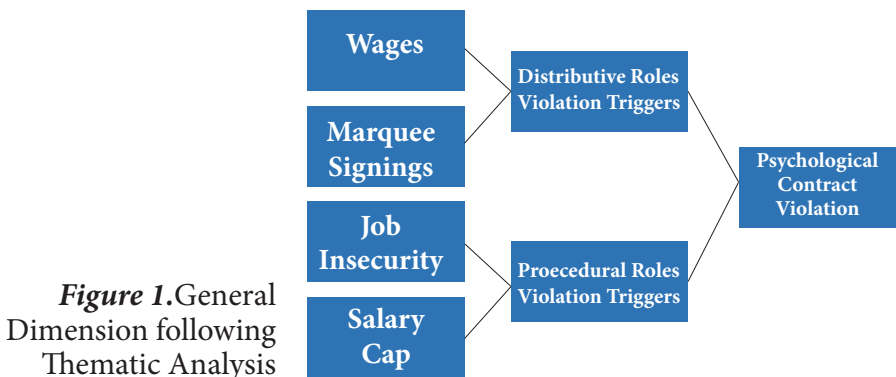
union club within England and also have held a professional rugby contract for a minimum of four years. Consequently, the study was able to recruit two full-time professional rugby union players from each of the 12 professional rugby union clubs within England, creating a total of 24 participants ($N=24$).

Interviews and Anonymity

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants and on average lasted roughly 60 minutes ($m=57.3\text{min}$). The semi-structured interviews utilised components of Robinson and Morrison's (2000) 5-item scale of psychological contract breach and violation, Meyer, Allen and Smith's (1993) affective commitment model, and explored the psychological contract with topics for conversation formed around the scales reported in De Vos, Buyens, and Schalk (2003). While the intention of a semi-structured interview is not to be prescriptive and let the interview develop organically, the research alluded to above enabled consistency and a framework in which to generate conversation rather than be rigid in the approach. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim by the author. The anonymity of the participants was ensured throughout the research paper through the use of a three-character pseudonym.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interview and the transcription process, the data was inductively analysed to ensure immersion in the data and to develop insights into the phenomena being studied. Once emerging themes were identified, they were then grouped together according to conceptual similarities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process of thematic analysis can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches and is compatible with essentialist and constructionist paradigms. The present study adopted a constructionist stance to report upon the experiences of professional rugby union players as an active process of interpretation. This process was replicated for each transcript before the construction of superordinate themes and a general dimension (Psychological Contract Triggers), which provides the structure for the forthcoming sections of the paper (see Figure 1).



Results

Triggers of psychological contract violation emerged as a central theme within the data and pointed towards a perceived sense of injustice (distributive violation) when it came to wages and the classification of “star players” amongst the professional rugby union players. This was noted as a particular issue within professional rugby union in England due to the salary cap (procedural violation), which restricts the amount of money each team in the Aviva Premiership (England’s professional league) can spend in terms of salaries on players. The participants within this study illustrate that the impact of the salary cap has created attitudinal responses that have impacted upon job satisfaction and organisational citizenship, which ultimately have the potential to affect organisational performance.

It seems ridiculous to say, but the salary cap clearly provides a financial structure within each club but it still doesn’t seem fair. I work just as hard as the next man but somehow some people get paid more based on the perception of people in their ivory towers. (Interviewee: BR1)

The salary cap introduced in 1999 has been regularly reviewed by the governing bodies of rugby union and is aligned to the growth of the rugby union product. The salary cap for the 2017/18 season in the Aviva Premiership is set at £7 million and includes the provision to sign two players outside the capping system. This ability to sign players outside the restrictions of the salary cap was introduced into the Aviva Premiership in the 2013/14 season and has led to “star” players returning to the English domestic game. However, the introduction of this process has been illustrated as a further example of both distributive and procedural contract violation:

A few years ago you wouldn’t have dreamed of having your worth measured by money within rugby union; now it’s in the media and it’s a bone of contention amongst the players every day at training. I’m not saying the angst is directed at the players themselves, but probably on a daily basis a question arises (internally) about worth and value in the team and more often or not I question which club will want to make me their marquee signing. More recently, I have started to try and work out how much money I get paid and where I sit within the salary cap; do I earn too much and could be disposed of, or do I earn too little and over little to no value to the club? (Interviewee: WW1)

These feelings of insecurity illustrate perceptions of procedural and distributive psychological contract violation and show a shift of employee attitudes within professional rugby union in England as the sport has developed

alongside its professional counterparts. However, given the sport's late arrival into the professional sport market, the players acknowledge their role in ensuring the sport's survival within the professional sport economy even if there is evident psychological violation, as one employee commented:

Look, these new “star” player contracts are frustrating but they are important if the game is to grow and be recognised on the global market. I love my job, it's a genuine privilege, and whilst there are issues that really get my back up and have made me question my value, I would do anything for the game, and if that means just being one of many, then so be it. Although it would be nice to be the “star” player and the money wouldn't be bad either. (Interviewee: NS2)

Despite evidence of psychological contract violation, the players clearly illustrated an ability to return to a stable psychological state either for a personal perspective or for the growth and development of the sport itself. The feelings of job insecurity or even evident levels of contract violation did not impinge upon the players' levels of organisational citizenship or commitment to the sport, illustrating a relational psychological contract despite the lack of any long-term contract with their respective clubs. However, despite this level of commitment to the game, the data suggested that since the introduction of a ‘marquee’ player into English professional rugby union, the psychological contract for the professional rugby player has become more calculated and transactional when it concerns money.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to determine how psychological contract violation affects attitudes, behavior, and organisational performance of professional rugby union players within England. Consequently, through a qualitative analysis and the evident emotional responses of the players, the results clearly indicate that psychological contract violation is strongly linked to the concepts of the “salary cap” and “marquee” signings that were introduced into professional rugby union within England in 1999 and 2013, respectively. These results can be mapped against the literature, specifically the concepts of procedural and distributive psychological contract violation and the potential impact upon organisational citizenship behaviours (Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Modaresi & Nourian, 2013; Pate & Malone, 2000; Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2006; Suazo, Turnley, & Mai-Dalton, 2005).

Despite clear evidence of psychological contract violation, the results illustrated there was no impact upon organisational performance and demonstrated an ability of the players to return to a stable psychological state should a contract violation

occur. Additionally, the players demonstrated a relational psychological contract in regard to protecting and even growing the game of professional rugby union despite evidence of a transactional psychological contract in regards to personal financial economics.

Implications for Managers

The key implications from this study for human resource managers within the professional rugby union industry are to focus on the transactional components of the psychological contract of employment when engaging in employment practices. This transactional component of the psychological contract develops an underlying personal relationship between employees and management through respect, and the data from this study illustrates that it is increasingly being perceived as fundamental to effective human resource management within professional rugby union in England. Furthermore, while developing a personal relationship between employees and the professional rugby union club through a transactional component of the psychological contract, there is also the potential to reiterate the relational attachment that the players have to the game of rugby union. While rugby union's late professionalisation in 1995 has significantly increased revenue in the sport, in particular from broadcasting and sponsorship, professional rugby union clubs have year-on-year collectively failed to post a pre-tax profit, and debt levels have risen in the professional game. Human resource managers can use procedural components of the employment contract to manage both the transactional and relational elements of the psychological contract to avoid violation and help manage the future of the sport through the salary cap and any future instability in the wider economic climate.

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