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Workplace emotion through a psychological contract lens

Michelle L.McGrath
Psychology Department, University of Winchester, Winchester, UK, and
Lynne J. Millward and Adrian Banks
Psychology Department, University of Surrey, Guildford,UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify how psychological contract perceptions are used as a lens through which employees make sense of their workplace emotions. Applying Rousseau's (1995; 2011) conceptualisation of psychological contracts it examines how the emotions linked to both promise perceptions (broken/exceeded) and regulation are made sense of in relation to perceptions of contract type.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper takes a unique perspective into the role perceptions of psychological contract *type* play in the process of emotional sensemaking using qualitative thematic analysis of thirty in-depth interviews. A range of occupations are represented and all participants worked in a full-time capacity.

Findings – The paper identifies how the predominant relationship frame (transactional/relational) is used by employees when making sense of the emotions recalled during specific psychological contract events, as well as the emotions they feel are necessary to regulate while at work.

Research limitations/implication – The mean age of the study sample was 26 years, comparatively young in terms of the span of the employment age bracket. Taking a lifespan approach would potentially broaden our understanding of how employees use their predominant relationship frame in the process of emotional sensemaking at different stages of their life and careers.

Originality/value – This paper identifies an important work-related cue used in the active regulation of specific emotions whilst at work, contributing to both the psychological contract and emotion literature.

Keywords Psychological contracts, employment relationships, sensemaking, emotion, emotion regulation, promises.

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Psychological contracts are cognitive entities encompassing both emotional and non-emotional mental processes (Rousseau, 2011); a definition reflected in the literature through the identification of the various roles emotion plays within the employment relationship. Much of the focus within this literature surrounds the emotional reactions to perceived non-fulfilment of psychological contracts (contract breach and contract violation). It has, for example, been found that perceiving a contract violation can mediate the effect of contract breach perceptions on employee deviance, commitment and trust towards the organisation (Bordia *et al*., 2008; Dulac *et al*., 2008). Essentially, what much of the research focussing on emotion within psychological contract relationships has come to highlight is not only are cognitive perceptions influential in the attitudes and behaviours of employees but so too are emotional perceptions and experiences. The importance of further understanding the interplay between the emotional and non-emotional mental processes within psychological contracts is fundamental both theoretically and practically.

Psychological contracts are considered cognitive schemas; a guiding force in the sense made of information and experiences an individual encounters (Rousseau, 2001). Extant literature investigating how psychological contract schemas inform understanding has focussed primarily on the emotional reactions to particularly negative events, such as, perceived non-fulfilment of psychological contracts (Morrison and Robinson, 1997). The knowledge that previous research has afforded is that experiences within the contract, in particular negative experiences, can serve to influence emotion and result in emotional reactions to experiences. Extension of knowledge from the current study is twofold; firstly, it

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explores how two specific contract types (transactional and relational contracts) may be used as the foundation of these psychological contract schemas informing emotional sensemaking. The aim here is to identify any difference in emotional sensemaking surrounding contractual experiences (namely, the more typical contract breach and the lesser studied contract over-fulfilment) through a transactional or a relational contract lens. A second aim of the study is to explore how a transactional or relational lens is utilised in employee sensemaking of the emotions actively regulated whilst at work. This moves beyond the more typical contractual experiences that have previously been investigated.

Psychological contracts

Psychological contracts pertain to employee perceptions of the obligations and promise-based reciprocal exchanges shared with the organisation (Rousseau, 1995). According to Rousseau (1989), an obligation would arise from a perceived promise, for example, once a promise was implicitly or explicitly made by the organisation, the employee would perceive an obligation for them to carry this promise out. Promises are important in shaping the relationship between an employee and employer as they provide some structure as to the future of the relationship (Rousseau, 1990). Predicting future interactions of the other party to ones relationship gives some indication of how that relationship will play out (Weick, 1981). Most researchers thus consider promises as the predominant belief constituting psychological contracts. Promises are also intertwined with other integral components of relationship perceptions, namely expectations (Morrison and Robinson, 1997). Employee expectations, in line with their perceived promises, can contribute to the context with which experiences are made sense of and understood (Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro,

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2011). Both promises and expectations are, as such, central to the study of employee sensemaking of psychological contract perceptions.

An important question asked within the literature is who constitutes the 'organisation' during these promise-based exchanges? Rather than the organisation being a tangible entity with which employees can engage in these reciprocal exchanges, it is likely to be represented by 'agents' acting within the organisation (Rousseau, 1995). Variation in perceptions of who the 'agent' of the organisation is (e.g., supervisors, line managers, senior managers etc.) will no doubt vary across employees and idiosyncratic perceptions. Extant research has suggested some 'agents' (i.e. middle managers) would experience conflict between their own contractual relationships as an employee and that as a representative of the organisation (Hallier and James, 1997). However, it has also been suggested that an employee is clearer about who the 'organisation' is in these exchanges than is often credited (Conway and Briner, 2005). While the current study does not distinguish who constitutes the 'organisation' for each participant, it is mindful of ensuring participants have a clear and consistent perception of the 'organisation' when discussing their employment relationship. This is a potentially useful strategy for researchers of psychological contracts to take when the organisational 'agent' is not the study focus.

Variation across psychological contract perceptions also applies to the type of contract perceived (Bunderson, 2001; Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2000), across both employees and researcher conceptualisations. Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni (1994), for example, proposed balanced and transitional contracts; the former considered to have high member identification and commitment whilst maintaining a sense of dynamism, whereas, the latter are understood to be high in uncertainty and instability. Others have suggested

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contractual distinctions based on tasks, such as, administrative and professional based tasks (Bunderson, 2001). However, a distinction which is often considered central to describing contractual relationships (Scheel and Mohr, 2013), and that adopted in this research, is of transactional and relational contract types (Rousseau, 1995). Relational contracts can be considered as socio-emotional relationships, concerned with the more social and emotional elements of the employment relationship (Aselage and Eisenberger, 2003; O'Donohue and Nelson, 2007). They are characterised by a high level of member and affective commitment, identification, and stability in the relationship (Rousseau, 1990; 1995). The high levels of subjectivity in these relationships often make them difficult for others to observe. Transactional contracts, on the other hand, are described as being based on calculative, often monetary, foundations; characterised by their low levels of member commitment and identification given their predominantly shorter-term duration (Rousseau, 1990; 1995). There is little ambiguity within these contracts and, as such, can often be more observable than socio-emotional relationships.

The orientation towards more socio-emotional- or transactional-based relationships will differ between individuals. For example: while some employees may inherently gain little satisfaction from the socio-emotional terms of a relationship with their organisation, others may work within an organisation that place little value on the socio-emotional terms of organisational relationships, encouraging more transactional-based relationships through their behaviour. The purpose of the current study was not to identify the reasons behind *why* employees held specific relationship perceptions, rather how the relationship perceptions were used in making sense of promise experiences and emotion.

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These descriptive differences in contract perceptions have previously been linked to differences in perceptions of contract violation and important organisational outcomes, such as; job satisfaction, performance, and workplace deviance (Bordia *et al*., 2008; Raja *et al*., 2011). The findings suggest that those who perceive a more socio-emotional relationship with their organisation are more likely to perceive non-fulfilment of their contract and experience more negative consequences. Support for the emotive differences outlined in the transactional/relational contract distinctions, that relational contracts are more emotive in nature. What is important to note here, however, is that a breach of contract itself is considered less likely to occur within a relationship based on relational contents, given the focus and terms it contains. As such, if a breach of contract is perceived, the reaction will justifiably be emotional given the inconsistency of the experience to the expectations of the relationship (Morrison and Robinson, 1997).

These distinctions made between employees holding either a transactional or relational contract type is in line with the continuum based definition in which the two contract types lie at opposite ends of a continuum (Millward and Brewerton, 2000). The extent an individual feels more or less transactional or relational in their relationship, the less they will perceive the other (Rousseau, 1990). Alternative propositions suggest relational contents build on an initial transactional relationship over time (Isaksson *et al*., 2010). Alternatively, they are mutually exclusive and employees can hold both contract types simultaneously dependent on the context (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2000). While there may be continued debate surrounding how these contract types are related, they remain broadly accepted dimensions (Scheel and Mohr, 2013). The continuum based definition was applied in the current study as it was the best suited to address the aim of the study; to

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identify how specific contract types are used by employees in making sense of workplace emotion.

While distinctions between contract types have been a significant focus of previous psychological contract literature, so too have the experiences and events that occur within the relationship; namely, promise experiences. As previously noted, a commonly studied promise experience is perceived non-fulfilment, specifically contract breach - an event that is generally accepted as being linked to negative outcomes and emotion (Conway and Briner, 2002). The extent of negativity perceived in the outcome of a contract breach has been found to depend upon both the nature of the promise and also justice perceptions (Kickul *et al*., 2002). Kickul *et al.* found that breach of an intrinsic promise (such as, freedom and responsibility) was experienced more negatively if perceptions of interactional justice (i.e. interpersonal sensitivity) were perceived to be low. However, breach of an extrinsic promise (such as, salary and reward) was perceived more negatively if perceptions of procedural justice (i.e. organisational procedures) were perceived to be low. While this evidence supports the understanding that contract breach is linked to negative reactions, it also identifies some complexities surrounding the way in which perceptions of justice are bound up in understanding and reactions to promise experiences.

Exceeded promises are less well-researched and less clear-cut than broken promises. Evidence suggests that exceeded contracts (i.e. over-fulfilment) are linked to both positive and negative outcomes (Conway and Briner, 2002; 2005). The expanded view proposes that contract over-fulfilment can be interpreted differently, in terms of being perceived more positively or negatively, dependent on what the promise comprises of (Lambert, 2011; Montes and Irving, 2008). It is possible also that expectation plays a role in the interpretation

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of an exceeded promise. Emotion regulation literature, for example, identifies discrepancies in expectation as being at the heart of emotional experiences (Kramer and Hess, 2002). When expectations are exceeded the emotional experience will be primarily positive, whereas, expectations not being met contribute to a primarily negative emotional experience. The dialogue afforded through the qualitative nature of the current study will allow participants to discuss promises without the presumption of either being a positive or negative emotional experience. The potential of which will be to contribute to the literature distinguishing the emotion associated with recollections of both broken and exceeded promises.

Cognitions used to interpret both broken and over-fulfilled contracts are likely to include perceptions of justice. Social accounts (Sitkin and Bies, 1993) are considered a form of interactional justice in which an employee will act to either; reframe the outcome of an event (e.g., changing the perception of the outcome to view it in a more favourable light), exonerate the motives of the organisation (e.g., legitimising the action as working towards a shared goal), or mitigate responsibility for the outcome (e.g., unfavourable outcomes are viewed as not under the control of the organisation so negativity can be directed away from them) (Lester *et al.*, 2007). These processes may form part of the cognitive processes used by employees in evaluating decisions made by their organisation. As Lester *et al*. highlight; evaluating and making sense of organisational decisions in light of social accounts, which acts to explain away negativity surrounding the outcome, is implicitly linked to various socio-emotional beliefs, such as trust. Trust is an integral component of psychological contract perceptions for both the employee and the organisation (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001; Searle and Ball, 2004), for example, trust perceptions increase the likelihood of future reciprocation of obligations (Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefall, 2008). In light of this literature, perceptions of trust

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and justice are likely to form an important part of how employees understand and explain organisational decisions in relation to their perceptions of emotion.

The proposition of this study surrounds how perceptions of psychological contract type inform the sense made of promise experiences and the emotions connected to these experiences. How employees express these emotions may too be guided by the contract perceptions that they hold. The expression and communication of emotion within organisations is informed by organisational communication and display rules (the perceived rules associated with the expression and regulation of emotion within the workplace), reflective of the organisational culture (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). Waldron (2000), however, goes further to suggest that the importance of knowing and adhering to organisational display rules is fundamental to developing and sustaining organisational relationships, a finding that has also been echoed in later research (Kramer and Hess, 2002). This offers the possibility of existing relationship perceptions, such as psychological contract perceptions, to work alongside the more culturally evident rules of emotion expression in both informing how employees make sense of their emotions, and how they go on to express them. Previous literature has explored the importance of organisational display rules in the affective reactions to promise perceptions within the employment relationship (Bal *et al*., 2011; Bal and Smit, 2012). However, research is yet to explore how perceptions of psychological contract type have been used as a lens through which employees make sense of any attempts made to regulate their emotion while at work.

Sensemaking

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Sensemaking theory is the process of interpreting and providing meaning to both the self and the world in which the self exists (Weick, 1995), and has been used extensively to understand the interactions and relationships between people and their working environments. Application of sensemaking theory allows observations to be taken down to an individual level, an approach which closely aligns with the premise of the psychological contract; an individual's set of beliefs, surrounding promissory based exchanges, with their organisation (Chaudhry *et al*., 2009; Rousseau, 1995). The individual level perspective evident within these two perspectives makes them suitable to address the aim of the current study, which is: to identify how perceptions of psychological contract type are used as a lens through which employees make sense of their workplace emotions.

The seven key properties now synonymous with the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995) are detailed in Table I. These seven properties are the cornerstone of organisational sensemaking and can either be applied to research in their entirety, or specific properties may be found to be more informative than others dependent on the situation. This study takes an open approach acknowledging that any combination of the seven properties could potentially be utilised by employees in making sense of their workplace emotion.

INSERT TABLE I ABOUT HERE

A sensemaking perspective has been successfully applied to psychological contract literature both theoretically and empirically (De Vos *et al*., 2005; Morrison and Robinson, 1997). Morrison and Robinson's (1997) theoretical paper focussed on the development of contract violation perceptions through the sense an employee made of the situation

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surrounding it. For example; expectation of a situation in line with the existing relationship perceptions, attributions and prior beliefs surrounding the event, and the social contract serving as the backdrop to one's own relationship perceptions all contribute to the likelihood of a contract breach being made sense of and experienced by an employee as a contract violation. In a similar vein, empirical research has identified a series of important sensemaking processes, such as, expectations, implicated in the perceptions and experiences of contract breach (Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro, 2011).

Employee expectation forms a fundamental component of the sensemaking process, perhaps arguably more so when the experience is unexpected. Kickul and Lester (2001), for example, found that contract breach in an area of the contract an employee perceived as unlikely for their organisation to renege (such as, control and autonomy for benevolent employees), the more likely emotional and behavioural reactions to the breach were to be negative. Such findings are supported by emotion regulation literature in which discrepancies in employee expectation of their organisation have been linked to decidedly more negative emotion being experienced (Kramer and Hess, 2002).

Extant literature effectively utilising sensemaking theory has identified many contextual, experiential and cognitive resources that employees can draw upon. For example, how one reacts emotionally to events within the organisational relationship have been linked to the meanings and attributions ascribed to the experience (Lester *et al*, 2007; Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro, 2011). As previously discussed, Lester *et al.* identify social accounts as a way in which employees can explain away any perceived negativity in organisational decisions in an attempt to maintain a more positive perception of their organisational relationship. In a similar vein, Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro identified an important role of attribution in the

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maintenance of a more positively perceived employment relationship when faced with a negative event, such as a breach of contract. Reframing and rationalising the event was a fundamental way in which employees maintained the plausible 'story' that they had come to understand as their relationship and maintain coherence in their sensemaking processes. The use of reframing allowed employees to change the cognitive meaning of the event in such a way that the narrative they created would have a fundamentally different emotional impact (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000). Maintaining a sense of consistency in ones' employment experiences has, therefore, been identified as an important process in both cognitive and emotive sensemaking. While sensemaking theory is well suited to the study of psychological contracts, as an individual level explanatory framework, it remains an underutilised framework within the literature.

Summary

Emotions are understood to be significant components of employee reactions to specific contractual experiences (e.g., perceived non-fulfilment of psychological contracts), with attributions, justice perceptions, display rules and expectations fundamental to how sense is made of these emotions. Psychological contract types are important schemata used by employees in guiding their attitudes, thoughts, and behaviours in the workplace. Understanding how psychological contract types are used to guide perceptions and understanding of emotion within relationship experiences other than contract breach (such as, perceptions of exceeded promises and the regulation of emotion expression), however, requires further exploration.

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Rationale for the study

The aim of the study was to gain in-depth understanding of how the predominant relationship frame (contract type) was used by employees in recollection of particularly emotive events within their employment relationship and emotion regulation. Building on extant literature (e.g., Conway and Briner, 2002; Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro, 2011) by extending the contexts within which emotion is investigated (to include over-fulfilment and emotion regulation). Thus, the aims of the study were to:

- Identify how the predominant relationship frame informs sensemaking of emotions surrounding specific promise experiences
- Identify how the predominant relationship frame informs the sensemaking of emotion regulation

There has long been a bias within psychological contract literature towards the use of quantitative scale based measures. Informative research utilising qualitative methods has been minimal (e.g., Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Vantilborgh *et al*., 2012), while prominent psychological contract researchers call for more descriptive, qualitative methods to be applied (Coyle-Shapiro and Shore, 2007; Rousseau, 2011). To address the aims of the study a qualitative approach was taken, using semi-structured interviews and applying a sensemaking perspective to the employees understanding of emotion.

Method

Participants

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Participants were approached in two ways; existing contacts, or contacts obtained through snowball sampling, were emailed directly. Existing contacts were past colleagues of the researchers who also approached their friends, co-workers, and colleagues on the researchers behalf. Existing contacts were unrelated to the research project and had no more knowledge of the research than any other participant involved in the study. Alternatively, participants were approached indirectly via adverts in various online forums (these were accessed via LinkedIn discussion and group pages the researchers were members of) and social media sites (primarily Facebook which, again, the researchers were members of), to identify participation interest. The information provided in the initial contact was the same regardless of whether recruitment occurred directly or indirectly.

On reply to the initial recruitment email/advert participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the full extent of their participation in the study to ensure they were fully informed before consenting to take part. This included highlighting that participation was voluntary, the interviews would be recorded for later transcription and anonymised for confidentiality purposes, and they were free to withdraw at any time. The only inclusion criteria for participation was to be working full-time but not self-employed. The final sample comprised of 30 volunteers working full-time in various organisations, representing an even spread of constituent nations across the UK. Participants also varied in the positions they held within these organisations (Table II shows participant demographics, including the organisational role held at the time of interview). The average age was 26 years (with a range of 22-35 years), including 18 females and 12 males. Data was collected between May and August 2011.

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Materials: semi-structured interview

A semi-structured approach was used to ensure that both emotions generally and emotions related to specific events were covered in each interview. An interview guide was generated to acknowledge the flexibility inherent in qualitative interviews (King, 2004). However, to ensure there was some continuity in the 'specific events' that were discussed, critical incident technique (CIT) was utilised. CIT for these interviews was in line with researchers who have used CIT to identify the processes of thoughts, feelings and reasons behind behaviours, which have some significant meaning (Butterfield *et al*., 2005; Chell, 2004). A recollection with personal relevance or some significant meaning to an individual is more likely to foster an emotional response; making CIT a suitable approach to take in this study.

Interview questions were divided into three main sections:

Section 1: "Your relationship", general, non-intrusive, questions such as; 'In your own words, how would you describe your relationship with your organisation?' (On answering this question, participants were asked who or what it was that they perceived as the 'organisation' in their answer; it was then advised by the interviewer that this perception of 'organisation' remained the same throughout the interview). The purpose of the questions in this section was twofold; firstly, to ease the participant into the interview process (King, 2004). Secondly, they informed the categorisation of relationship type into one containing more relational or transactional terms in their description during the analysis.

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Section 2: "Your emotions", included questions surrounding the extent to which the participants felt they regulated their emotions when at work, such as; 'To what extent, if at all, are you aware of your emotions when you are at work?'

Section 3: "Promise experiences", included asking the participants to recall two specific promise experiences (the experience of a broken and an exceeded promise) and describe how this incident made them feel, how they understood those emotions and how they dealt with them. The questions included, for example; 'How did you feel emotionally when this happened? – What emotions did you feel?'

Procedure

Interviewees chose to complete the interview face-to-face or over the telephone, whichever was most convenient. Telephone interviews were used alongside face-to-face interviews on the well-defended assumption that both are valuable forms of collecting qualitative data (Cachia and Millward, 2011). One member of the research team carried out the interviews, they lasted approximately 60 minutes and were recorded to allow for verbatim transcription.

Data analysis

An iterative approach was taken, using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), to organise, interpret and code the qualitative interviews. This was done by creating and applying codes to the data, then assimilating themes based on similarities (Leininger, 1985). Analysis of the data followed the phases set out in Braun and Clarke: interview transcripts were read multiple times by the researcher who carried out the

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interviews, actively searching for meanings and patterns within each individual interview. Low frequency codes were not immediately discarded but were put forward for careful consideration of their influence and importance in the final thematic scheme. There was constant reviewing and revision carried out throughout this process to ensure that Patton's (1990) internal homogeneity (maintaining coherence within a single theme) and external heterogeneity (ensuring sufficient distinction between themes) could be applied. At each stage of the coding process 10 per cent of the transcripts were coded independently by another member of the research team and discussed in full, following completion of the coding, to ensure consistency across researchers. Any disagreements in coding were minor and were resolved through discussion between the researchers in order to come to a mutual agreement about the code in question. While the manuscript was primarily prepared by one of the research team, all members were involved in ensuring the analysis was represented accurately throughout development of the manuscript.

During the analysis, distinctions were made between participants who described their relationship with their organisation in more transactional or relational terms. Although it is evident that the interviewer will have gleaned an understanding of the type of relationship the employer was describing with their organisation during the interview, making a judgement about this distinction at the outset of the interview may have impacted how the discussion developed. As such, the final categorisations of contract types were made during the coding stage. Extracts from the interviews to support the categorisations were documented (see Table III for examples of quoted categorisations).

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Findings

In overview, the majority of participants expressed more perceptions of socio-emotional relationships with their organisation. Only seven of the participants described a consistently more transactional relationship with their organisation (Table III shows examples of the quoted excerpts used to make these categorisations). The themes in this study propose that, in relation to understanding and regulating emotions, employees use perceptions of psychological contract type as a sensemaking cue (see Figure 1 for a representation of how contract perceptions are used as a lens through which to make sense of perceived promises and emotion). These findings are discussed in turn, with reference to both the general overview gleaned from the data and individual accounts.

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Theme One: Relationship type as a lens through which to make sense of the emotion surrounding broken and exceeded promise experiences

Broken promises through a predominantly socio-emotional relationship frame: For 14 of the participants, the broken promise was discussed in relation to a change from generally positive emotion, to feeling negative emotion. For four of these participants this negativity was short lived and had subsided within the same day of the breach occurring, maintaining their *'positive perceptions'*:

> ...they said we could go on courses last year and now because of budget

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> cuts we are not allowed to go on so many courses. It's a bit annoying because, you know, I want to develop [...] it was just something at the time when they said they were cutting funding for it that there was an issue there. It's not stayed with me, that feeling, I got over it pretty quickly (A2)

It is particularly noteworthy how protective some employees were about their organisation when discussing their experiences of broken promises. Twelve of the participants provided defensive *'justifications'* as reasons why a promise was broken. Four of these participants expressed understanding why the promise was broken, and some even condoned it: ‘I completely understand [...] and I think it's the right thing to do’ (A27). Others justified this breach by acknowledging that it was a rare thing for their organisation to do: ‘It was only really this once though; it's not something they make a habit of’ (A30). Two participants in particular felt that their organisations were somewhat justified in what they had done because of an omission, or error of their own:

> But at the same time I don’t want to be, you know, whinging and complaining because at the end of the day I think sometimes you have got to learn from your mistakes as well. (A7)

These participants internalised the blame, indicating that it was within their control to prevent this particular breach of contract occurring again, and expressing some sense of agency. In short, 12 of the participants who described a more relational tone to the relationship with their organisation made sense of the experience by removing blame from

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the organisation: 'it's not really their choice, it's out of their control' (A2), allowing them to maintain the sense of justice they have come to expect in their relationship. In doing so, any disappointment and other negative feelings they were experiencing was 'buffered', in a sense, by the fact that they could maintain the perception of positivity they expected to experience through their relationship perceptions.

Interestingly, the broken promises evoking negative emotional reactions that quickly subsided could be considered 'extrinsic' in nature (e.g., going on training courses). Whereas, broken promises that were subject to being justified in the sensemaking process were more 'intrinsic' in nature (e.g., being given responsibility). As intrinsic promises form the foundation of relational-based contract terms, employees expended more effort making sense of these broken promise experiences in a way that maintained continuity in both their expected relationship perceptions and associated positive emotion.

Exceeded promises through a predominantly socio-emotional relationship frame: The promises recalled here could all be described as being 'intrinsic' in nature. For 13 participants the emotion expressed when discussing an exceeded promise was extremely positive: "Very positive […] this just kind of reaffirmed everything: that they were *really* committed to my development, so yeah, really positive emotionally at that point." (A6). For 14 of the participants there was an expression of an even closer *'organisational bond'* after experiencing a promise that went beyond what they had expected. This stronger bond was something that had a lasting impact on the relationship with the organisation. It resulted in five of these participants being more committed to the organisation and working harder because of it: 'it gave me more respect for them and made me want to work harder for them' (A28).

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The emotions experienced in relation to both broken and exceeded promises were made sense of using the socio-emotional relationship lens as an extracted cue. Participants justified (often via social accounts) any negativity that was experienced as a way to maintain or enhance the positivity they expected to perceive within the relationship. This predominant relationship frame was used in the process of employees making sense of a plausible and sensible environment they associated with their organisational relationship.

Broken promises through a predominantly transactional relationship frame: For six of the seven participants who perceived a more transactional relationship, emotions linked to recollections of broken promise experiences were overwhelmingly negative, directed towards the organisation and often long lasting:

> …but when they kept messing me around I kind of felt like, well, sod it, you know. If it ends it ends. I'm not really bothered either way so I kind of lost a lot of interest in the institution. (A13)

The tone of their organisational relationship was largely negative and this was reflected in the way they understood and directed their emotions as well as where they felt the negativity was coming from.

> ...awful, like really upsetting as well it was [...] it was not what I was promised or what I expected when I started the job. That's not what I was told was going to happen [...] it has sort of tainted my

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> view of the organisation. Now I don't expect anything and I know
> promises aren't kept. At least I know now. (A4)

For this particular participant it was evident that the negative emotion experienced as a result of the breach fed back into perceptions of the relationship via a breakdown in perceptions of trust. Counter to those using relational cues, participants using transactional cues were not applying social accounts to remove blame from the organisation, rather, the negativity was perceived as generated by the organisation. This understanding contributed to their constructions working life and their perception of a *'negative story'* surrounding their employment relationship and emotion experiences.

Exceeded promises through a predominantly transactional relationship frame: In a similar vein to that above, perceptions of the employment relationship, as mainly negative, were used to make sense of emotion after an exceeded promise was perceived. Perceptions of an exceeded promise had a relatively minimal positive impact; there were only fleeting feelings of positivity before the cues from the relationship frame were applied, arising in a resounding negative experience:

> ...they offered me some extra paid roles within the department that I
> have wanted to do for a while. So it was quite pleasing to find out that
> I was going to get to do that. But [...] um so yeah it was quite short lived. (A26)

Through the transactional relationship lens, both broken and exceeded promises have an ‘extrinsic’ focus, primarily concerning expectations of tangible outcomes (such as,

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promotion and reward opportunities). Those with transactional relationship perceptions appeared to distance themselves from the more socio-emotional, or 'intrinsic' promises, which were evident in the promise perceptions of those who expressed more relational-terms to their contract. When looking at Table III it is evident that the predominant relationship frame perceived by participants mirrors the behaviour and approach taken by the organisation towards the employee. In summary, it would appear that the emotions employees recall surrounding promise perceptions are inextricably linked to their predominant relationship frame.

Theme Two: Relationship type informing the sense made of emotion regulation

Conscious regulation of emotion was discussed by 11 of the participants and included both those who described their relationship in more relational and more transactional terms (see Figure 1).

Relational contract perceptions informing regulation of negative emotion: Those who described their relationship with the organisation in more relational/socio-emotional terms expressed regulating their negative emotions: 'I do hide the more negative, or bad emotions but I wouldn't hide my more happy or positive emotions' (A22). They described doing this as a way to maintain professionalism:

> I do put on an act to a certain degree to behave in a professional way because I'm in a professional environment. And um, if my managers like really annoyed me then I'll brush that under the carpet and kind of scream silently! [...] rather than expressing it openly. (A23)

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Positive emotions for these participants were welcomed and were not regarded as something that needed to be regulated, rather embraced and shared. Regulating only negative emotions acts to maintain the positive environment and plausible 'story' that these participants have come to understand when making sense of their experiences through a socio-emotional relationship lens.

Transactional contract perceptions informing regulation of all emotion: Those who described their relationship with the organisation in more transactional terms also expressed wanting to maintain a 'veneer of professionalism'. However, this was through the regulation of any emotion, not just their negative emotion:

> ...you have to be very careful of your emotions as well, in order to be professional, [...] it is something that I personally do. I don't think it is something that everyone does where I work, you know, there are a lot of people who don't keep their emotions in check. I suppose I view them as slightly unprofessional as well [...] extreme emotions, or all emotion, sometimes don't have any presence with people in the professional work environment. (A15)

> I think you have to be a bit professional at work, you are there to do a job [...] the emotions you are feeling just aren't right to be sharing or showing to others (A20)

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Both examples highlight how expressing emotion of any kind is not considered appropriate in the working environment for these participants. Again, the active regulation of emotion here runs in line with the environment created by a participant making sense of emotion through a transactional relationship lens. In avoiding the expression of all emotion, these participants are further distancing themselves from any socio-emotional elements of a relationship with their organisation.

Regardless of the type of relationship perceived with the organisation, appearing 'professional' was regarded as a primary reason behind regulating one's emotions. Where the type of relationship appeared to make a difference, however, was in relation to the valence of emotion that was regulated; those with a predominantly relational frame regulating only negative emotion, whereas, those with a transactional frame regulating both positive and negative emotion.

Discussion

Overall, the findings this study support the proposition that psychological contract types are used as cues by employees in the way they make sense of the emotions they perceive (namely, in relation to broken and exceeded promise experiences) and those they regulate and express (see Figure 1). Making sense of emotion through an employment relationship lens was primarily informed by the following sensemaking properties: *focussed on and by extracted cues*, e*nactive of sensible environments*, and *driven by plausibility rather than accuracy* (see Table 1). The schematic nature of psychological contracts (Rousseau, 2001) lends itself to the process of different contract types acting as a cue through which sensemaking processes are instigated. Promise experiences and emotion are processed in a

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way that maintains a sense of consistency in light of this cue, which acts to further confirm the environment in which employees perceive and experience with their organisation.

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INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

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The emotions employees recalled when making sense of promise experiences were in line with their predominant relationship frame, with positive emotion discussed primarily by those who perceived a more socio-emotional relationship, whereas those who perceived a more transactional relationship discussed considerably more negative emotion. In an attempt to maintain emotional consistency, in line with expectation, contract type was used as a cue to assign attributions to promise experiences. This finding extends current understanding of attributions and emotions in extant literature (e.g., Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro, 2011). Those with relational contract perceptions used social accounts in the process of attributing blame away from the organisation, instead directing the blame towards themselves or to factors outside the control of the organisation. This was particularly the case when a broken promise was intrinsic in nature. Those with transactional relationship perceptions, on the other hand, attributed this blame towards their organisation entirely. Further, both broken and exceeded promises through a transactional lens were based on external properties, further preventing socio-emotional elements forming part of the sensemaking process for those employees.

Attributions allowed for a sense of coherence and plausibility to be maintained in the relationship ‘story’ that employees had come to understand. The broaden-and-build theory of emotion (Fredrikson, 2001) could go some way towards explaining this. Predominant emotion valence that has been developed over time, as viewed through the employment

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relationship, is used as a resource with which to deal with and make sense of any unlikely emotion experienced. As such, expectation is also a key explanatory element here. Morrison and Robinson (1997) identified how incongruence with expectation, uncertainty and change can all contribute to the perception of a contract violation, highlighting the importance of continuity in emotional sensemaking. Unexpected changes in the emotions employees have come to expect within the schematic understanding of their relationship (their psychological contract type), act as a prompt to make sense of the emotion. The predominant relationship frame, acting as a schematic lens, potentially explains how contrasting sense is made of the same emotional valence by employees holding either transactional or relational perceptions of their contractual relationship.

Perceptions of psychological contract type were also found to guide how sense was made of the emotion employees felt they should be regulating. There was a sense of importance attached to regulating emotion, regardless of relationship type, in order to maintain a sense of 'professionalism'. A finding which runs in accordance with the proposition that emotions are functional (Lazarus, 1991) and that regulation of emotion to maintain professionalism is the most common display rule in organisations (Kramer and Hess, 2002). While all employees appeared to make sense of emotion regulation as important in exuding a professional persona, which emotions they were required to regulate in order to maintain this persona was dependent on the contractual lens through which they made sense of these emotions.

Developing and maintaining organisational relationships is linked to the knowledge and adherence of organisational communication and display rules (Waldron, 2000). Interestingly, these display rules do not appear to work alone in guiding emotional

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sensemaking, rather, the relationship cue is, again, used as a lens through which emotion is experienced and understood. In doing so, employees are able to maintain a sense of plausibility about their working environment. Perceptions of a transactional relationship with the organisation appear to involve actively distancing oneself from the socio-emotional elements of the relationship. In regulating all emotion these employees are further reducing the possibility of emotion forming how they make sense of their employment relationship. Perceptions of a socio-emotional relationship, on the other hand, encourage positivity, both in experiences and in emotion. Regulating only negative emotion acts to further reinforce this sense of positivity and maintain a plausible understanding of their working environment.

Overall, the findings from this study propose that employees use psychological contract type in two important ways during emotional sensemaking; firstly, it directs how one recalls the emotions experienced in relation to a promise and how those emotions are understood. Secondly, contract type works alongside perceptions of organisational display rules to guide employees understanding of the extent to which emotions can be expressed at work and the valence of emotions that should be regulated.

Practical Implication

An actionable recommendation to come out of this study relates to the expression and suppression of emotion, most notably, making the expression of emotion a more accepted experience within organisations. Regulating emotion through suppression, to maintain an exterior of a neutral mood, has been found to negatively impact employees positive affect (Bal and Smit, 2012). Positive affect has, in turn, been linked to higher work achievement (Staw *et al*., 1994) and job satisfaction (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). While employees and

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employers may perceive the suppression of emotion to be positive in maintaining 'professionalism', there is the potential for this to be damaging employee wellbeing and organisational effectiveness. As such, the expression of emotion within an organisation requires an appropriate outlet that is perceived as safe and accessible. In order for emotion expression to become accepted, organisational climate requires addressing. The outcome of this would potentially allow for emotion experiences in the workplace to be better understood - both by practitioners and researchers alike.

Limitations of the study and further research

There are limitations within the current study, which could be addressed by further research. The first concerns the context of the analysis, obtaining participants from a variety of organisations and occupations risks losing some of the important contextual influences on the sensemaking process. Rousseau and Fried (2001) propose that work settings are important in the underlying dynamics of worker-organisational relationships. Owing to the focus of the current research to explore the employment relationships in a general context, obtaining participants from a range of organisations was necessary. However, it is acknowledged that obtaining a sample from a single organisation, or an organisation experiencing a potentially turbulent event (i.e. a merger), may well have produced different findings. A useful direction for future researchers to take would be to utilise case study methodology, focussing on the sensemaking of emotion during an emotive time for an organisation. This would afford an understanding of the role specific contractual schemas play in sensemaking processes of a very specific event within an organisation.

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A second limitation of this study concerns the specific focus on transactional and relational contract types. This distinction has, over the years, received mixed empirical support and been criticised for not fully representing modern employment relationships (Conway and Briner, 2005; Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2000). Despite the mixed support they remain two of the most commonly applied contract type distinctions within the literature and are often central to describing different contractual relationship (Scheel & Mohr, 2013). The continued application of these contract types was the reason for applying them to the current study; however, as with the previous limitation, it is acknowledged that an alternative distinction (such as, the inclusion of transitional and balanced contracts, or distinguishing contract types on the basis of tasks: Bunderson, 2001; Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1994) could potentially have produced different findings.

A final limitation is that of the age of the sample in the study. The mean age was 26 years, which in relation to the average number of years a person is of employment age, is relatively young. Extant literature taking a lifespan approach to psychological contracts proposes age as an important consideration (Bal and Smit., 2012). Both the understanding and the management of emotion may have been very different in a sample of an older age. A potential reason for this limitation rests with sampling procedures. Firstly, online forums and social media sites were used in recruitment, potentially biasing the age of participants targeted during recruitment. Secondly, a portion of the sample was obtained from the researchers existing contacts, as such; the mean age is partially a reflection of the cohort of contacts known to the researcher. Obtaining a more representative sample of the current workforce would allow for identification of any differences in sensemaking processes of employees at different ages groups and should be a consideration in future studies.

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Conclusions

The unique contribution of this study is the identification of psychological contract *type* as an important cue in emotional sensemaking. The study found that employees understanding of emotions surrounding broken and exceeded promise experiences as well as emotions perceived necessary to actively regulate were informed by their predominant relationship frame. The findings from this research contribute to psychological contract literature by furthering our understanding of the links between psychological contracts and emotion. The research also identified an important practical implication for organisations.

An important question to arise from the findings of this study and one that could serve to direct future research in this area is: how do the links between contract type and expectation of emotion develop? Our knowledge of emotion within psychological contracts, and specifically within psychological contract type, is limited. This research, however, has provided some important theoretical insights and paved the way for some fruitful future research in the area.

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Table I.

Overview of organisational sensemaking properties (Weick, 1995)

Sensemaking property	Description
Grounded in identity construction	Sense is made of experiences through reciprocation between the meanings attached to it and one's sense of identity (or 'self')
Retrospective	Meaning making occurs in a retrospective environment; understanding meaning occurs once the event has been experienced
On-going	There is no clear start or end point, sensemaking is always occurring
Enactive of sensible environments	Employees contribute to the environment they are experiencing and make sense of it in relation to themselves and their own position
Social	No sensemaking occurs as a solitary process, there are always others implicated, even if they are only imagined others
Focussed on and by extracted cues	An extracted cue is a familiar structure acting as the basis of understanding the experience in a broader sense
Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy	The purpose of making sense of an experience is to produce a plausible 'story'

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Table II.
Demographic details

Interview reference	Sex	Age	Occupation	Predominant relationship frame
A1	F	27	Consultant	R
A2	M	25	Town Planner	R
A3	M	24	Travel Writer	R
A4	F	24	Merchandising Associate	T
A5	M	25	Lead worker	R
A6	M	24	Junior Consultant	R
A7	F	27	Consulting Psychologist	R
A8	F	27	Senior Researcher	R
A9	F	34	Careers Advisor	R
A10	F	26	Advisory Consultant	R
A11	F	27	Client Services Manager	R
A12	M	28	Associate Director	T
A13	F	29	Researcher	T
A14	F	23	Hairdresser	R
A15	M	25	Recruitment Consultant	T
A16	F	27	Operations Manager	R
A17	M	27	Recruitment Consultant	R
A18	M	27	Senior Resource Consultant	R
A19	F	28	Lecturer	R
A20	F	22	Waitress	T
A21	M	25	Paralegal	R
A22	F	23	Primary School Teacher	R
A23	F	25	HR Administrator	R
A24	F	26	Researcher	R
A25	M	23	Logistics Manager	R
A26	F	29	Organisational coordinator	T
A27	M	26	Consultant Psychologist	R
A28	F	26	Marketing Executive	R
A29	M	35	Outsourcer	T
A30	F	23	Nail Technician	R

Note: T = transactional relationship; R = relational/socio-emotional relationship

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Table III.

Quoted excerpts used to distinguish predominant relationship frame

Relational descriptions	Transactional descriptions
I have fairly positive feelings towards my work...there is a way of kind of, interpreting, putting your own kind of direction and slant on the job you do as far as possible. They are pretty good at providing work related training, or give you time off for training and putting, well investing in your career development rather than just telling you what to do and when to do it...I would describe it mostly in positive terms (A11)	They want me for the amount of money I make, not because they like me or whatever. So at the end of the day it's about the money I make, so really they are as fickle as anything; they'll only like me as long as long as I make the money as well... they have said 'this is what's going to happen, this is where you're going to go.'...I'm a money-motivated person and I'm making money here. (A15)
I would describe it as, um, a shared responsibility...it is a very supportive relationship, they are very happy to answer any queries, or any issues that I have or any suggestions I might have for the organisation as well. So, supportive and collaborative are I guess the two words that I would use to maybe describe it...I think it is definitely a positive relationship (A5)	The management is non-existent...I thought right, well actually let's just take this for everything that I can...in terms of the relationship with the company itself I view it very much as a means to an end, um, I don't see it as one of those paternal small companies. (A29)
It is very much a two-way investment. They are investing quite a bit of money in me to get chartered and you know, they are being patient with me and my learning. But I am also getting a lot out of it, obviously, so I'm investing a lot of hard work into the team and the tasks that we do. (A6)	I'd describe it as professional, in that I know the level of my roles and responsibilities; I know what time I should arrive and leave... I'm unhappy with their structure and the way they manage people, definitely...makes me not want to do anything extra for them...They said in the contract that I would be delivering training, [and I'm not] (A26)
Very good. I am trusted, ...it makes it a lot more relaxed and they make it so that I can get on with my own thing and they trust me to get the jobs done on time and all the rest of it...I am respected by the bosses...I was given an element of trust and an element of respect (A21)	Quite distant... I think that makes it a negative relationship, it's like a lack of trust...disagreeing and everyone thinks they know best... I don't really feel like I'm a part of it, the organisation I mean...I know what I'm there to do, and I do it. Nothing more than that really. (A20)

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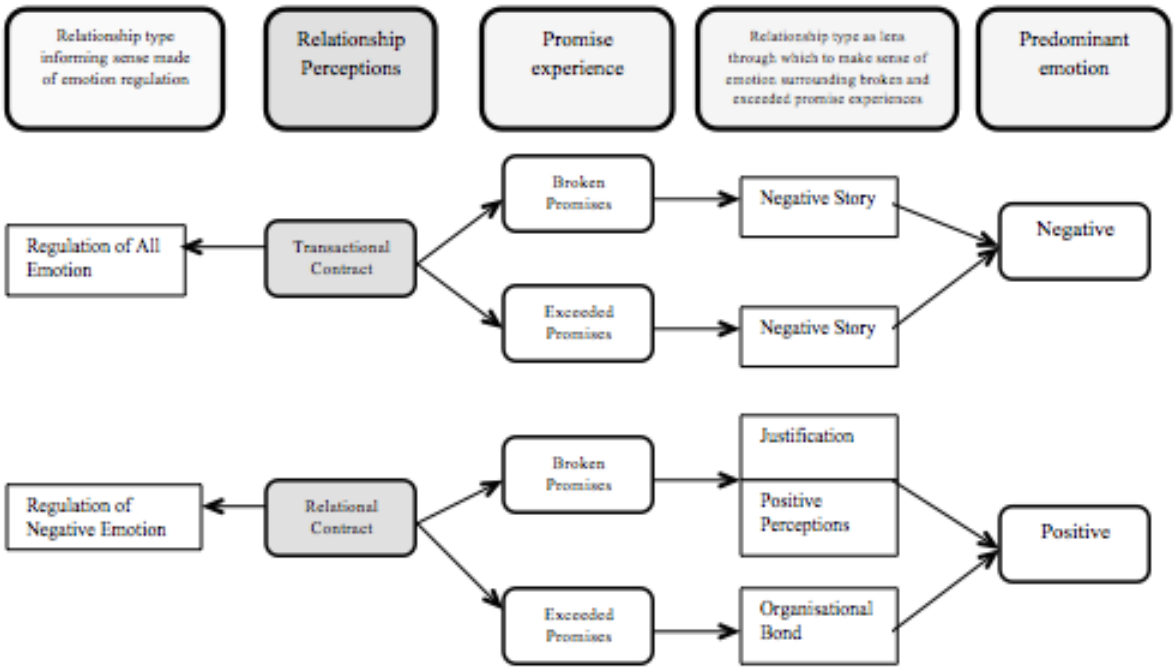

Figure 1.
Thematic diagram illustrating how sense is made of promise experiences and emotion regulation through the lens of relationship perceptions