

# Tremors Caused by Interrelated Triggers, How a Breach of a Psychological Contract can Occur

Ali Rizwan\*

Editorial Office, Journal of Psychological Abnormalities, Belgium

## Corresponding Author\*

Ali Rizwan  
Editorial Office, Journal of Psychological Abnormalities, Belgium  
Telephone: +32(800) 709-48  
E-mail: psycholab@journalres.com

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## Abstract

We investigate the mechanisms that underpin the establishment of a psychological contract breach using an intra-individual procedure. Thirty-seven distinct storylines reveal how selected stimuli shake employees' psychological contracts to attention and cause perceptions of breach as a result of an iterative process of disrupting (introducing triggers that prompt a shift from automatic processing to conscious attention of psychological contract terms), appraisal (revealing elements—goals, attribution, fairness, and resources—playing a role in appraising and making sense of triggers), and (problem-solving).

**Keywords:** Psychological contract

## Introduction

We examine the ramifications of accounting for breach in the absence of a discrete event and use selective attention theory to distinguish when stimuli become triggers capable of activating the psychological contract. We enhance previous research by exposing the distinctive role that triggers and their interconnection play in the cognition of contract breach, increasing pressure until a threshold is exceeded and the breach is seen. Our research emphasizes the need of managers employing measures to deescalate the buildup of triggers. Downsizing, restructuring, and reengineering are examples of ongoing organizational changes that not only restructure organizations but also have an impact on employees' psychological contracts. Employees' mental representations of the exchange agreement between themselves and their organization are captured by psychological contracts. If an employer appears to fall short of their commitments, this can lead to employee impressions of a psychological contract breach, which can have a negative impact on employee attitudes and behavior. Empirical studies on the repercussions of contract violation have operationalized a breach as a self-contained/isolated event and studied it in terms of a simple cause-and-effect relationship. However, there are reasons to supplement this viewpoint with one that accounts for the accumulation of minor occurrences that may eventually give rise to perceptions of breach. Employee views of their psychological contract can vary monthly, weekly, and even daily, implying that studies that consider breach as a discrete event do not completely reflect the degree of dynamic of these contracts. Rousseau and colleagues (2018) created a phase-based model of psychological contract processes to account for contract dynamism. The model covers both under delivery (a deficit) and over delivery (an excess),

where the organization fails to deliver or delivers more than they promised, resulting in variable levels of positive or negative reactions. This lack of fit (whether positive or negative) disrupts an individual's psychological contract, resulting in a transition from the status quo (i.e., the stabilized contract) to contract renegotiation or reparation, in which an employee attempts to restore the contract to its original state or create a revised set of obligations. While the concept of disruption is central to the dynamic phase-based model of psychological contract processes, it is unclear how employees interpret these disruptions and whether they pick up on signals that precede the disruption, activating their attention and highlighting their psychological contract. We set out to analyse the intra-individual mechanisms that underpin the emergence of perceived contract breach by addressing the following research question: How does the breaching process evolve and unfold over time? Our research responds to a recent call for a more rigorous, bottom-up investigation of the psychological contract as a process. Our approach, in particular, contributes to the existing understanding of the processual nature of breach perceptions by conducting an empirical investigation of how selected stimuli prompt attention to psychological contracts and give rise to perceptions of breach as a result of an iterative process of disrupting, appraisal, and coping. Second, we expand understanding by exposing an underappreciated aspect of breach perceptions: the interconnectivity of stimuli as the driver of contract breach emergence. Unattended, isolated stimuli, on the other hand, usually go unnoticed. The first restriction of this study is related to the sample size. Despite the fact that we validated our findings with a purposive sample, more study is needed to understand how the mechanisms that underpin the breach process operate in more fast-paced, dynamic, unsettled, and highly competitive contexts (e.g., banking, high-technology firms, and fast-growth new ventures). Second, future studies could use different research approaches to replicate the current results. Because negative occurrences are easier to recall than happy ones, the current method (CIT) may be insufficient for detecting the process of disruption caused by over fulfillment. An explanation for these findings could be that feelings of contract breach have a higher lasting impact than comparable positive experiences, which is consistent with Baumeister and colleagues' research of the profound impact of negative events. In relationships, for example, negative experiences appear to be five times more impactful than positive events. As a result, another study technique (e.g., a daily diary technique) is required to investigate the process of over fulfillment and to spot potential disruptions more closely as they occur.

Finally, future research studies must pay more attention to within-person processes because the degree of breach is determined by how an individual discovers and assesses a trigger, and the accumulation of triggers raises the chance of breach perceptions. More understanding of the micro processes that underpin the breach process (e.g., how individuals feel and activate complete attention to triggers) can provide employers with methods to detect the early signs of an impending breach. This would allow employers to ease (early) dissatisfaction when their organizations undergo organizational change, reducing the likelihood of psychological contract breach. Emergence of a psychological contract breach demonstrates the unique significance that triggers and their interconnection play in contract breach cognition. The breach process appears to be a nonlinear, idiosyncratic process involving the perception, appraisal, and dealing with interrelated triggers over time, which strains the job connection until a threshold is exceeded and the psychological contract breach is perceived. Our findings add to the current literature by elucidating some aspects of the dynamic, complicated, and nonlinear process of contract breach, as well as pointing the way forward for future research.

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