

## ACTIVATING FACTORS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT DISRUPTION

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**Purpose:** The article examines the idiosyncratic processes that lead to violations of the psychological contract in work relationships. The purpose of the study was to understand how the various activating factors, the recurrence of their occurrence, and their interrelationships affect perceptions of psychological contract violation.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The qualitative study was based on the critical incident technique and the narrative event mapping technique, in which 62 female graduates of the “Mommypreneurs” project shared their memories of significant experiences of returning to work after maternity leave.

**Findings:** The results of the study show that the process of violating the psychological contract is idiosyncratic and non-linear, involving, among many unnoticed stimuli, activating factors that lead employees to consciously analyze their psychological contract. Activating factors, through an iterative process of interference, stop automatic processing and arouse conscious attention to the terms of the contract, activating sense-making and affecting the psychological contract.

**Originality/value:** A key finding indicates that it is only the accumulation and recurrence of activating factors over time that can lead to crossing a certain threshold, after which employees perceive a contract violation. The results obtained suggest that managers should implement personnel practices that reduce the accumulation of activating factors, thereby helping to prevent psychological contract violations.

**Keywords:** psychological contract dynamics, disruption process, activating factors, psychological contract violation.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

### 1. Introduction

Psychological contracts (PC)s reflect the mutual expectations of employees and the organization, constituting mental models governing the exchange of commitments in the work environment (Rousseau, 2001). Violations of these contracts, resulting from perceptions of an employer's failure to fulfill promises, are associated with negative consequences for employee attitudes and behavior (Conway, Briner, 2005; Rogozińska-Pawelczyk, 2020).

Previous research has often viewed violation of a contract as a single, isolated event, analyzed in the context of a linear cause-and-effect relationship (Van Hootehem, De Witte, 2019). However, growing interest in the dynamic nature of PCs (Griep, Vantilborgh, 2018; Bankins et al., 2020) suggests that contract violation should also be analyzed as a process that can unfold over time and involve an accumulation of individual events (Chaudhry, Song, 2014).

However, the literature lacks an understanding of the factors that initiate the process of disrupting the PC and the mechanisms that guide its dynamics over time. The existing phase-based model of Rousseau et al. (2018), considers the dynamics of contract change in the context of a misalignment between expectations and reality (a shortage or excess of commitments), but ignores the key research questions posed in this article: what activating factors precede the disruption, how they are interpreted by employees, and how they affect the perception of violations. Thus, there is a need to extend this theoretical model with practical research to better describe the activating factors of the psychological contract violation (PCV) process, and the interpretive and emotional mechanisms that influence employees' perception of violations. The purpose of this article is to examine the idiosyncratic processes that lead to the formation of perceptions of PCV, and to identify the factors that initiate these processes. This study aims to fill the research gap by deepening the understanding of PC dynamics, enriching the model based on the phases of Rousseau et al. (2018), and providing a new perspective that takes into account the iterative effects of activating factors.

The article provides an important contribution by showing that the accumulation of interrelated activating factors can exceed individual tolerance thresholds, leading to the perception of violation. The approach presented empirically examines how these interactions affect the process of assessing violations over time. In addition, an analysis of the dynamics of these processes allows us to understand the nonlinear nature of PCV, offering a new perspective on their causes and consequences.

## **2. Psychological contract in the perspective of appraisal and sensemaking theory**

A PC refers to an employee's subjective beliefs about mutual obligations (Rousseau, 2001). Unlike formal contracts, PCs are idiosyncratic and shaped by personal experiences, expectations and interpretations of mutual relationships. A characteristic of the PC is that it is rarely fully realized by the individual (Freese, 2007). Understanding its role, however, becomes crucial in situations where there is a shake-up or change in the work environment, which can lead to a disruption of mutual obligations. Employees are particularly sensitive to situations that they perceive as a failure of the organization to fulfill its promises, which initiates processes of evaluation and renegotiation of contract terms. Evaluations of these changes automatically

activate the process of making sense of the discrepancy between expectations and reality by evaluating the situation and making sense of it (Bankins, 2015; Tomprou et al., 2015). Therefore, the theories of appraisal and sensemaking serve as the conceptual basis of the present study, in which the perception of PCV is explored.

Appraisal theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the cognitive processes involved in responding to changes in the work environment. According to Harrington and Lee (2015), primary appraisal provides a quick and automatic way to recognize whether a factor poses a potential threat to an individual's values or goals. When the PC is disrupted, this assessment indicates whether the change in the work environment is positive or negative. This is followed by a secondary, more conscious and complex assessment, which involves assigning meaning to the identified factors. Catino and Patriotta (2013) emphasize that this process serves to build a more complex picture of the situation and enables the individual to adapt his actions to the new conditions. In the context of the PC, the secondary assessment allows the employee to decide whether to take corrective action and renegotiate the terms of cooperation or accept or reject the change.

When there is a discrepancy between expectations and reality, a key role is played by the process of sensemaking, which helps individuals understand the new circumstances. As Bankins (2015) and Diehl and Coyle-Shapiro (2019) note, sensemaking enables the identification of activating factors of PC disruption and their significance in the broader organizational context. The process of sensemaking is particularly important in situations of uncertainty, which often accompany PC disruptions. In such cases, individuals seek information to fill cognitive gaps, often using social comparisons as a source of data to build explanations (Weick, 1995). This dynamic interaction between appraisal and sensemaking lays the groundwork for understanding the mechanisms of recognizing and interpreting disruptions.

While existing research provides a wealth of information on appraisal and sense-making processes, there is still a lack of clear guidance on the specific factors that cause distortions that lead to PCV. Due to the unconscious, automatic nature of many appraisal processes (Moors et al., 2013), it is important to identify more precisely those factors that draw the conscious attention of employees and cause their PC to become relevant in a given situation. Conducting research in this area can provide new insights into the mechanisms for evaluating disruptions and help organizations better anticipate employee responses to changes in the work environment. In particular, the identification of activating factors for violations will allow the development of strategies for managing employee-organization relations that minimize the negative effects of such situations.

### 3. Methods

The study was conducted using a qualitative method, using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), which allows the study of significant events (incidents), how they are managed and their effects in cognitive, emotional and behavioral terms (Chell, 1998). CIT focuses on the analysis of short episodes considered by participants to be central to their experience. This description includes facts, emotions and, where relevant, respondents' behaviors, allowing an understanding of reality from the respondents' point of view (Pratt, 2009). The method is also used to help participants uncover their own attitudes and the ways in which they interpret the behavior of others, and thus is particularly useful in research on the processes and dynamics of PCs, as it captures narrative sequences of events over time (Pentland, 1999). Previous research on PCs has used the CIT technique to analyze issues such as how employees perceive organizational commitments (Nadin, Williams, 2011), reactions to perceived contract violations (Parzefall, Coyle-Shapiro, 2011), the impact of individually negotiated terms (i-deals) on acceptance of new PCs (Davis, Van der Heijden, 2018), and the dynamics of PCs (Van der Schaft et al., 2019). For this reason, it is considered a particularly suitable method for the qualitative study of the processes and dynamics of the PC through the collection of participants' stories that, in their own words, depict unfolding and ongoing sequences of events while describing relevant experiences and processes (Atkinson, 2007). The study used semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to freely present experiences of disruptions in their PCs.

The research context of the study was the professional support of young women mothers returning to the labor market after maternity leave, implemented within the framework of the international project “Mommypreneurs”<sup>1</sup>. The project aimed to counteract barriers to women's professional activity, including the mismatch between their education and the requirements of the modern labor market and gender stereotypes. The project, whose participants were women who were economically inactive during maternity leave, provided them with training (training component) in entrepreneurship and information technology, as well as preparation for running their own businesses. As part of the research component, a survey was conducted that included only those participants who returned to work after their maternity leave and agreed to participate in the study. Of the 150 project participants, a total of 62 women were eligible for the study. The respondents' recollections of their experiences of returning to work formed the basis of the qualitative analysis. After 41 interviews were conducted, the sample was expanded to include 21 women who had already quit their jobs by mutual agreement before joining the Mommypreneurs project, thus increasing the diversity of the sample and enriching the data

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<sup>1</sup> The “Mommypreneurs” project is co-financed by Norwegian funds, implemented within the framework of the EEA-Norway International Programme for Youth Employment on the basis of an agreement concluded with an international organization or a foreign entity of the EEA-Norway Funds for Youth Employment No. 2017-1-277. The author of the article acted as project manager.

(Palinkas et al., 2015). The final research sample included 62 female graduates of the program who had work experience and returned to work after maternity leave. The average age of the respondents was 30.38 years ( $SD = 4.58$ ), and their average work experience was 6.02 years ( $SD = 3.08$ ). Respondents represented a variety of industries: manufacturing (9.5%), construction (6.3%), energy and environment (7.9%), agriculture (1.6%), trade (9.5%), transportation (14.3%), food service (6.3%), information and communication (11.2%), financial services (15.9%), public services and education (3.2%), healthcare sector (9.5%), other services (4.8%) and three levels of education: high school (9.7%), bachelor's degree (38.7%) and higher education (51.6%). The interviews were conducted between September and December 2023. At the beginning of each interview, participants were explained the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded and transcribed. Respondents were asked to give examples of disturbances in their PCs and to describe the emotions, actions and contexts that accompanied them. A timeline of events, developed jointly with the participants, helped identify the chronology and dynamics of the disruptions. A pre-prepared interview questionnaire allowed exploration of key themes, and questions were modified during the course of the study to accommodate emerging findings.

Data analysis was carried out in four stages, using coding techniques in MAXQDA software. The coding process was guided by Gioia et al. (2013), according to which any discrepancies were resolved by re-analyzing the data, discussing them together, and developing a common understanding to reach consistent interpretations.

In the first stage, lower-order coding was used: In vivo coding (Maher et al., 2018) was used, based on the authentic expressions of female participants, which were later grouped and interpreted. In the next stage, higher-order coding was carried out: Similar codes were grouped into broader categories, allowing the identification of key concepts and patterns (Chenail, 2012). In the third, categorization of the phases of violations was applied: Following Morse's (2008) approach, the analysis re-coded to link identified phases to potential outcomes, focusing on systematically linking meanings, actions and social structures, and unifying analytical ideas based on theoretical meanings of the data and grounded theory approaches (Chenail, 2012). Two main categories were identified - identification of activating factors of contract violation and idiosyncratic conscious sensemaking - that structured the processes of PCV. The analysis was supported by collaboration with independent researchers, which increased the reliability of the results. The fourth stage was a validation check: In order to confirm or deny the patterns found (Pandey, Patnaik 2014), the results were verified in an organizational context with additional female respondents ( $n = 21$ ), which confirmed the accuracy of the conclusions drawn.

Narrative event mapping (Langley, 1999), in turn, made it possible to visualize the connections between activating factors in the PC. Plots of individual cases were tested in collaboration with the participants, and a research journal provided a tool for reflection and

documentation of the analysis process. This approach made it possible to develop a complex, multidimensional theory to explain the dynamics of PCV.

## 4. Results

CIT's findings reveal a general mechanism in which 62 female respondents identify activating factors for PCV, and then consciously assign meaning to these events and determine the impact that the activating factors play in the process of PCV.

### 4.1. Characteristics and types of activating factors of psychological contract disruption

The participants were asked to recall a critical event in their relationship with their employer. In the course of conducting the interview, the respondents recalled a variety of more-or-less significant events that followed one another and, in effect, made up the occurrence of a critical incident. One of them (P54) recalls: *Several situations arose in our relationship with the employer over the past few months, which gradually built up tension and affected my perception of this cooperation. At first it was small things - for example, the fact that my ideas in team meetings were not always taken into account, although later I saw that very similar solutions were implemented, only under different names. Later I began to notice that in conversations with my superiors my achievements were taken a bit for granted, while other team members received a lot of praise for their actions. All of this began to accumulate, but the breaking point came when I heard from the management team that a project task (...) that I particularly cared about had been assigned to a colleague of mine. This was a difficult moment for me, because not only did I feel really committed to the project, but I had long clearly communicated how much I wanted to participate. I spent a lot of time preparing, followed similar projects that would be useful - and all this in the hope that I would get a chance. In the end, I realized that this decision was not due to a lack of my competence, but rather, I think, to the fact that my work and commitment were not properly recognized and appreciated. This was the moment for me when I began to wonder whether my presence in this organization actually made sense in the long term.* Sequences of consecutive events, such as this one, disrupt the daily routine of the female participants while simultaneously eliciting conscious attention to the terms of the contract. An excellent example is the following statement (P28): *(...) I immediately thought, this doesn't bode well. In an instant you start analyzing everything - your role, your place in the team, the way you are perceived. Such moments hit self-confidence and make you start to wonder if you are definitely where you should be.* In this way, accumulated critical events, treated as activating factors, activate the PC of the participants, generating their conscious attention to their perceptions of the discrepancies in the terms of the contract, as a result of the shift from automatic processing of stimuli to a conscious level of

processing (Schein, 1980). According to earlier work by Bankins (2015), activating factors foreshadow the process of nascent disruption, as employees' interpretation and reaction may ultimately lead to perceptions of contract violation.

A number of activating factors were identified during the narrative analysis of the interviews. All of these factors signaled a deviation from the norm and activated the conscious attention of female respondents toward the exchange relationship. Three types of activating factors were categorized in the data obtained: negative (69%), ambivalent (24%) and positive (7%). Positive factors refer to events that could theoretically be perceived as favorable, since they are related to over-fulfillment of contractual terms, but ultimately lead to a mismatch between the employee's expectations and reality (Morrison, Robinson, 1997). For example, a respondent (P5) stated: *I got a promotion, great! (...), but it turned out to involve a huge amount of additional responsibilities that no one announced to me beforehand*. Negative factors are situations directly perceived as unfavorable and contrary to expectations, such as the lack of reward for work done (Conway, Briner, 2005). One respondent (P20) expressed it as follows: *I was promised a bonus for that year of work, but in the end I only got a thank-you note - I felt cheated*. The research also revealed the existence of ambivalent activating factors, which occur when a situation arouses mixed emotions, such as when an employer's decision is logical from the organization's perspective, but at the same time perceived as unfair by the employee. An example of such a situation is the statement (P51): *I understand that the colleague has more experience, but I still find it difficult to accept that he is the one who was assigned the task (...) for which I was so prepared after returning from maternity leave*. These three types of activating factors indicate the multifaceted nature of contract disruption, which arises as a result of activating conscious attention to the terms of the PC.

#### **4.2. Idiosyncratic processes leading to psychological contract violation**

Narrative event mapping was used to determine how PC disruptors arise, and the interconnectedness and recurrence of their occurrence. To do this, various events that were reported in each interview were identified, such as attending a meeting, emails from a supervisor or passing on information. Then, these events were placed on a timeline and asked to rate the likelihood of a PC disruption activating factor recurring in the future based on the respondents' retrospective experiences. This generated unique stories for each person, which determined how a conscious perception of a contract violation developed through the accumulation of related activating factors over time.

Following the activating factor of the PCV, the respondents tried to change their contracts based on past experiences, but the frequent succession of related activating factors seemed to hinder the process. This manifested itself through a sense of intensifying contract disruption. As a result, the respondents analyzed the situation of contract disruption not only by analyzing the initial activating factor of the perception of contract disruption, but by analyzing the sequence of other triggers that emerged over time. Here is one respondent's story (P8):

*Returning to work after maternity leave was a huge challenge for me. I remember the first week I was invited to a meeting to discuss the project I had been working on before my leave. However, it turned out that its direction had been completely changed, and I was not informed about it. (...) I felt as if my previous involvement was null and void. The next day I received a message from my supervisor with new tasks that were not at all in line with what we had previously agreed upon. This was the moment when I first felt that something had changed - as if the expectations of me had been reevaluated without my knowledge. (...) In the weeks that followed, there were more situations like this - for example, my plan for flexible working hours, which was supposed to enable me to reconcile my professional duties with childcare, was not respected. I constantly had to negotiate with the team to adjust my working hours to meet their needs, which in practice meant that I was the one who had to bend. (...) These events began to accumulate - one after another undermined my sense that we could act in accordance with previous agreements. When I analyze this in retrospect, I see that these factors were interrelated. Each successive one intensified my feeling that my place in the company was no longer the same as before. I feel that the likelihood of this happening again is high because the company seems to operate in an unpredictable and reactive manner, and communication between me and my supervisor is still limited. All of this has caused me to start redefining my expectations and attitude towards working here - although, to be honest, it's not easy, because such constant changes make it difficult for me to rebuild trust and a sense of stability.*

All idiosyncratic plots that were identified by narrative event mapping contained at least three or more consecutive interrelated activating factors. It was only after several activating factors were present that respondents tended to notice that they had noticed something unusual, and then turned their conscious attention to the specific context. In this situation, most of the female participants began to feel emotional tension about their professional futures. One participant (P60) reports: *(...) now I can already see what is happening around me, and I think, moment! I have to be careful, because something is approaching that resembles a situation I've experienced before.* It turns out that activating factors of disturbance can create fear or uncertainty, prompting respondents to watch their surroundings more closely for additional critical events. The accumulation of interrelated activating factors had a significant impact on the perception of PCV by female study participants. Factors that recalled previous experiences of past violations reinforced the emotional response. As one participant (P36) noted: *When I returned after [maternity] leave, I initially ignored minor changes, such as being left out of team emails, but when such situations began to recur, I felt a growing frustration. Each subsequent team email reminded me of earlier omissions and intensified the feeling that my contribution was no longer being taken seriously.* The sequence of related critical incidents gradually increased the strain on the work relationship until the respondents reached a threshold of tolerance and recognized that their PCV had occurred. As one respondent (P11) stated: *After another such event, I thought: how much more do I have to put up with this, (...) because I already felt that everything had exceeded the limit of my tolerance.*



The research also confirms that frequent activating factors can significantly affect respondents' negative attitudes toward fulfilling organizational responsibilities, leading them to engage in job-seeking and withdrawal behaviors. As one survey participant (P4) noted, the frequency of such experiences has become unbearable: *With each quarter I was promised a raise (...), I hoped that something would change, but these changes were only temporary. When the situation repeated itself once again, I stopped believing that things could be different in this organization, and started looking for another place for myself.* It turns out that a key role is played not only by the sequence of activating factors but also by the repetition of their occurrence, which increase the likelihood of perceiving them as elements of a PCV.

## 5. Discussion

The results of this study shed new light on the dynamics of PCV, confirming the key role of activating factors in the process of perceiving a contract violation. The study provides evidence that the perception of breach is not the result of a single event, but the result of a sequence of iterative interactions of activating factors that exceed employees' individual tolerance thresholds thereby triggering disruption. Strongly emotionally charged stimuli, whether positive, negative or ambivalent, were found to play an important role in activating the employee's conscious attention to the terms of the PC.

The proposed concept of the accumulation of activating factors over time supports the theory that the perception of PCV is non-linear in nature (Bankins, 2015; Griep, Vantilborgh, 2018). The study found that the factors activating the disruption and the conscious perception of contract violation leading to a change in contracts based on past experience mutually influence each other over time. This temporal idiosyncratic mechanism leading to perceptions of contract violation was found in all respondents, regardless of whether they returned to work after maternity leave or resigned by mutual agreement. Explaining the model, not only do activating factors cause perceptions of disruption, but the interconnectedness of these triggers over time ultimately affects all respondents' perceptions of breach of contract. The sequence of interrelated activating factors leads to a cumulative effect that can escalate an employee's emotional response and affect their evaluation of the exchange relationship with the organization. Such a model is consistent with the research of Conway and Briner (2002), who suggested that repeated daily events can lead to PCV.

The results also suggest that employees' responses to activating factors are shaped by their past experiences. Different experiences result in the formation of distinct cognitive schemas (Rogozińska-Pawełczyk, 2016), and PCs provide an individual frame of reference that determines whether a stimulus will be recognized as an activating factor (Petrucci, Pecchinenda, 2017). Appraisal theory allows us to understand why some stimuli become the object of

conscious attention, while others are overlooked or suppressed (Catino, Patriotta, 2013). The appraisal process enables the attribution of meaning to stimuli and their selection, separating those that remain unconscious from those that become subject to conscious analysis. Unconscious stimuli are weakened, while selected ones reach a higher level of cognitive processing (Knapp et al., 2020). In the context of the research conducted, activating factors can be defined as stimuli that attract conscious attention, arousing a cognitive response capable of activating the PC pattern. In turn, the activation of conscious attention within the framework of the sensemaking theory depends on the accompanying emotions that signal a deviation from the previous norm, as well as on the previous experienced stored stimuli (Conway, Briner, 2005). This mechanism explains why some stimuli are perceived as activating factors while others go unnoticed. Strongly emotionally charged stimuli - whether positive, negative or ambivalent - as well as those reminiscent of previous situations of contract violation, give meaning to events and attract conscious attention. As a result, less important details are overlooked, while emotionally charged stimuli become clearer and more strongly influence the perception of the terms of the PC.

In addition, the links between activating stimuli may be deeply rooted in the employee's memory, which supports the hypothesis that these stimuli have a long-term effect on the dynamics of the PC. The accumulation of triggers reminiscent of past experiences of contract violations leads to a heightened emotional response and a redirection of conscious attention to past exchange relationships. Posten et al. (2024) indicate that the memory effect can enhance the rapid identification of activating factors, which is reflected in the results of this study. In all subjects, the correlations of factors based on previous experiences were revealed, illustrating how remembered stimuli form a network of interdependencies, automatically activating a PC pattern. These results not only confirm, but also develop the findings of Conway and Briner (2002), who showed that small, everyday events can accumulate and lead to a violation of the contract. This process is particularly evident when activating factors are seen as interrelated, as people make sense of their relationships (Weick et al., 2005).

The study provides a new perspective on the complex, multidimensional nature of activating factors, taking into account their positive, negative and ambivalent nature. Participants who expected to fulfill commitments often showed surprise and were less prepared for the appearance of negative stimuli. As Banks (2015) notes, such experiences can amplify the impact of subsequent negative activating factors. Accordingly, the accumulation of triggers does not simply involve the summation of negative events, but includes the identification of activating factors and the conscious attribution of meaning to related stimuli that build up in a non-linear fashion, exceeding the individual's tolerance threshold and leading to the perception of PCV. Moreover, storing these stimuli in memory gives them a lasting impact (according to the results of narrative event mapping). This process increases the pressure on the exchange relationship until the accumulation exceeds the tolerance limit and leads to a sense of contract violation (Rousseau et al., 2018). As Rigotti (2009) points out, disruptions develop

within tolerance thresholds, where linkages and repetitions of activating factors - expected or unexpected - accumulate until a critical point is reached (Wiechers et al., 2023). The results obtained provide a solid foundation for better understanding this process.

This study extended previous knowledge by complementing the concept of positive and negative affective disturbances described by Rousseau et al. (2018), indicating that there are also ambivalent activating factors, referred to as “mixed interference”. Ambivalent activating factors show less influence on the perception of contract violation, which may be due to the operation of independent brain areas responsible for processing positive and negative emotions (Lindquist et al., 2016). Since these areas function independently, with no flow of information between them, this may explain why participants experiencing ambivalent stimuli experienced conflicting emotions at the same time.

## 6. Theoretical implications

The findings of the present study add significant value to the theory of the PC by deepening our understanding of its dynamics and the activating factors that initiate the disruption process. The findings extend the model of the phases of the PC proposed by Rousseau et al. (2018), adding the iterative nature of activating factors' interactions and their emotional significance. The presented approach emphasizes that the mechanism leading to feelings of contract violation is sequential and cumulative, based on previous experiences, which is an extension of traditional linear approaches. Consideration of the cumulative effects of activating factors provides a better understanding of how employees' perceptions change in response to a dynamic organizational environment.

The use of appraisal theory and sensemaking as stimulus selection mechanisms provides further evidence of the key role of conscious attention and the cumulative effect of related activating factors in shaping the perception of contract violations. Developing this approach can extend the existing theoretical framework with new perspectives on the analysis of the determinants of violation perception.

The identification of ambivalent activating factors as a distinct category is also a theoretical contribution, expanding the existing framework for analyzing PCV. This suggests that the effects of these factors may be more complex than previously thought. Stimulus evaluation theory (Catino, Patriotta, 2013) and emotion research (Lindquist et al., 2016) offer valuable theoretical tools to further explore this topic. This finding opens up new avenues of research on the role of emotions evoked by ambivalent activating factors in the interpretation of workplace stimuli.

## 7. Practical implications

This study provides valuable practical guidance for managers and employers in managing the PCV and minimizing the risk of its breach. The study indicates that the activating factors that lead to a perceived breach of contract can be complex and multidimensional, so management of this process should be regular and tailored to specific organizational circumstances. Managers should particularly focus on identifying activating factors and their interrelationships so that early signals of disruption can be noticed and managed appropriately. Offering support in the form of valuing employee contributions, training and tailored development activities can help minimize the impact of negative activating factors and foster a stronger PC. In addition, individualized approaches to employees and the use of personalized contracts (“i-deals”) can effectively counteract the negative effects of accumulating activating factors while providing greater flexibility and commitment to the contract. In addition, the study underscores the importance of monitoring and responding to changing conditions, such as organizational changes, and providing employees with support in the form of training and coaching to help them better cope with new challenges. Often, the rapid succession of activating factors of various scattered events from multiple sources, which as a whole affect the PC, makes it an almost continuous process. Moreover, by understanding all the possible factors that can provoke a PCV, managers will be more alert to any initial signs in employees, as described in this study, and thus enable them to intervene earlier. The research findings presented here therefore provide a better understanding of the dynamics of the PC and will help employers develop a proactive approach to create a more robust contract framework that is less prone to disruption.

## 8. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study has several important limitations that point to directions for future research on PC disruption. First, the generalizability of the presented results may be questioned due to the specific and unrepresentative research group. Research in different organizational contexts and with more diverse groups, including both women and men, could provide more universal conclusions. Future research should also include dynamic and highly competitive industries, such as banking or the technology sector, to verify the mechanisms of violation in diverse working conditions. As a result, the conclusions drawn from the survey may not be applicable to the broader population of respondents, young female mothers returning to the labor market after maternity leave.

The second limitation relates to the narrative event mapping method used, which only allows retrospective study of the sequence and accumulation of activating factors. In order to more accurately determine the timing of activating factors and their interrelationships, future research should use other methods, such as diary techniques, vignette studies or experiments. This will allow for a better understanding of the dynamics of the violation process and its relationship to employees' emotions and cognitive patterns.

The third limitation is related to differences in the impact of positive, negative and ambivalent factors. The results indicate that negative stimuli have a more lasting impact than positive ones, which is supported by the literature (Baumeister et al., 2001; Harrington, Lee, 2015). However, it remains to be explored how ambivalent activating factors affect the PC. Future research should answer questions about the effects of alternating positive and negative cues and their side effects. It is also worth investigating whether disruptions with ambivalent affect lead to renegotiation, repair or rupture of the contract. A better understanding of these processes will allow the development of management strategies that take into account the complexity and variability of emotional reactions over time.

## 9. Summary

This study uncovers the mechanisms leading to PCV, highlighting the key role of activating factors and their interrelationships. The results indicate that the violation process is not linear, but an idiosyncratic phenomenon in which the perception and evaluation of activating factors accumulate over time until the threshold of conscious attention is crossed and the violation is perceived. The findings suggest that understanding the dynamics of the PC requires analysis of the sequence and interaction of activating factors.

The study extends the existing literature by providing empirical evidence of the complexity and non-linearity of the contract violation process. The results provide a solid foundation for future research on the different types of activating factors, their temporal nature, and the ways in which they affect the renegotiation, repair or rupture of a PC.

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