



# Psychological Contract, Symbolic Interactionism, Social Exchange, and Expectation Violation Theories: A Literature Review

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## Abstract:

This article presents a literature review on Symbolic Interactionism, Social Exchange, and Expectation Violation Theories and their relevance to the Psychological Contract. The review is part of a doctoral thesis on the socialization process and can be helpful to Human Resource Managers (HRM), scholars, and practitioners. The review's findings show that while there are many studies on the newcomer's adaptation in the international literature, there are very few academic studies on this topic in the Brazilian context where the cost of losing a job can induce a golden cage behavior as we see in the public sector companies. Therefore, the review provides a new

perspective on the socialization process of a firm's newcomer by combining the theories above, which have not been studied together before.

**Keywords:** *Psychological Contract, Symbolic Interactionism, Social Exchange, and Expectation Violation Theory.*

## Introduction

This work is part of the doctoral thesis (Aylmer, 2019). In Organizational Socialization and the Profession of Management, the Socialization Process (SP) is one of the most challenging stages of professional life. It describes the stage as "when a newcomer learns the value system, the norms, and the required behavior patterns of the society, organization, or group he is entering" (Schein, 1968, p.3). In general, socializing has the connotation of becoming social and meeting in society. Simply put, it consists of a process that is related to learning and bringing together individuals and social groups in different contexts (Saks & Ashforth,

1997). From a broader organizational perspective, the SP aims to prepare newcomers to become influential members of an existing group, adapt to its norms and values, think, feel, and act in ways the group considers appropriate, becoming part of the group (Moreland & Levine, 1982, 2001; Persell, 1990; Black & Ashford, 1995; De Vos, Buyens, & Schalk, 2003; Myers & Oetzel, 2003; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

In other words, SP refers to the process by which an individual acquires the attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge required to be accepted and participate as an organizational member (Allen et al., 2017; Bauer & Erdogan,



2011; Bauer et al., 1998; Cable & Parsons, 2001; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Although SP is a recurrent process in different career stages, the first experiences in a company convey more dramatic contours than the change of area in the same company (Bauer et al., 2007; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Wang et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2011).

Considering that the decision for the public sector is a long-term career strategy, newcomers may perceive it as a "life commitment" or a "life sentence," depending on the primal experiences; onboarding a newcomer is highly relevant for HRM in the BPS. These future opposite perspectives once solidified as beliefs, will drive many newcomers' behavior towards the company and the work itself, influencing the construction of organizational realities and the foundation for their situational identities. In organizational socialization studies, it is well-known that when newcomers are in probationary positions, socialization encompasses high-stakes and high-stress situations (Bauer & Truxillo, 2000; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), abounding with shocks and surprises (Kim et al., 2005), arising a high level of anxiety (Katz, 1985). Theoretically, the probationary period in the Brazilian public sector includes the first three years after admittance. However, very rarely is someone dismissed, and no mention of this threat has been made in contact with employees or is mentioned in the literature studied. However, appropriate management of the initial period in the company tends to decrease unnecessary suffering considerably, channeling talents and energies to the company's goals rather than deviating energies to deal with anxiety and perceived threats (Allen et al., 2017).

Most of the literature cited above refers to the newcomer's adaptation to the new workplace. However, the present context urges for a broader perspective, as approached by the Psychological Contract Theory (PC), via the individual's perception of the reciprocal obligations that underlie the exchange relationship between the employee and the employer (Delobbe et al., 2016).

Our research takes a unique approach by focusing on the newcomers' perspective in understanding the socialization process in the Brazilian public sector. This is a departure from the majority of literature in Brazil, which primarily examines the organizational perspective and the employee's adaptation to the firm.

Thus, this work presents a literature review on Psychological Contract, Symbolic Interactionism, Social Exchange, and Expectation Violation Theories. Moreover, beyond the organizational or individual perspective, the ongoing social changes reshape organizations and the nature of work, challenging private and public sectors to review people management premises and practices (Alcover et al., 2017; Cascio & Aguinis, 2008). The symbolic interactionism theory (SIT), social exchange theory (SET), and expectancy violation theory (EVT), which approach the construction of the psychological contract (PC), are helpful in better understanding the socialization process for the firms' newcomers.

## Methodology

In this research, we modified our approach to developing the literature review by adjusting our steps and following an inductive and interpretive rationale based on the current epistemology of the topics investigated.

## Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Berger & Luckmann, 1967) is the process of social interaction through which meaning, and identity arise. The underpinning of SIT is the construction of meaning through the actor's (i.e. the person under study) interaction with the world (Aksan, et al., 2009), thus, SIT is the process through which newcomers establish situational identities (Katz, 1980; Wanous, 1992) and make sense of organizational realities, events, practices, and procedures (Reichers, 1987), in other words, SIT is suggested as the

process through which newcomers are socialized.

SIT authors affirm that the source of data is human interaction, and the core subjects of symbolic interaction are these relational perspectives, consequently, meaning results from the relationship between an act, the response to that act by someone else, and the result of that interaction (Blumer, 1969) and empathy is key for developing participants' abilities (Berg, 2001).

For the sake of our study is pivotal to understand the importance of newcomers' perception, independently if their interpretation is accurate or not, because a fact is created by an individual's perception, and it changes in time (Berg, 2001).

The creation of meaning in newcomers-insiders interaction is important to understand the how newcomers construct meaning confronting expectancies and experiences and probing the exchanges among parties in a cost-benefit perspective, comparing alternatives and defining outcomes.

## Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange provides a theoretical keystone of research on work attitudes and behaviors (Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997), Distinct from the economic exchange, social exchange relationships implicate voluntary behaviors that create future obligations and have to be left to the discretion of the other party (Blau, 1964) investing in the relationship.

Social exchange authors (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961; Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002; Wayne, et al., 1997) advocated that employees form a distinct relationship with the organization depending on how they are treated by incumbents; premise also supported by Gouldner (1960) as the norm of reciprocity.

Newcomers-incumbents exchanges are influenced by the Perceived Organizational Support (POS), that includes the relationship with supervisors (Graen & Scandura, 1987;

Henderson, Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2008; Bordia et al., 2010; Sparrowe & Liden 1997) also known as the leader-member exchange (LMX) (Khazanchi & Masterson, 2011; Tekleab & Chiaburu, 2011), and the team-member exchange (TMX) that is the relationship between the newcomer and members of the workgroup (Seers, 1989).

POS represents employees' presumption of the degree their contributions are valued; therefore, the organization will take care of their well-being, providing material and emotional support when they face stressful situations (George, Reed, Ballard, Collin, & Fielding, 1993) In turn, employees feel compelled to reciprocate by taking actions of equivalent value (Gouldner, 1960; Wayne et al., 1997).

High level of POS influences employees' commitment to their organization (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000) and their engagement with the job (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997). It also encourages employees to reciprocate through valued and desirable behaviors (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Wayne et al., 1997).

Depicting the concept of LMX and TMX in the workplace, LMX refers to the extent to which employees perceive high-quality exchange in dyadic relationships with their supervisors (Graen & Scandura, 1987; Wayne et al., 1997) and TMX, the differentiated exchange with peers (Van Dick, Van Knippenberg, Kerschreiter, Hertel, & Wieseke, 2008; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000).

A supervisor has twofold roles in the LMX relationship, to know (a) the supervisor-employee's exchange, in which the supervisor's attitudes fulfill or not the employee's expectancies but also (b) a role as a representative of the organization in the employee-organization exchange, becoming the voice of the organization for the newcomer. High-quality LMX relationships foster employees' autonomy, increasing collaboration and information sharing (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Sparrowe & Liden 1997). High-quality LMX has also been related to increase risk-taking and performance

(Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999). In few words, when newcomers perceive a high-quality LMX, they presume that the organization is fulfilling its part of the mutual obligation and tend to reciprocate (De Vos et al., 2003).

Regarding TMX, relationships with peers are a significant channel for attaining role-related and organizational knowledge (Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2009) reciprocity and consist of a social exchange where "each party must offer something the other sees as valuable, and each must see the exchange as reasonably equitable and fair" (Graen & Scandura, 1987, p.182).

LMX and TMX have been considered, for many authors as determinants of newcomers' adjustment (Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2009; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein, Song, 2013; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992; Reichers, 1987). They are of great importance to comprehend the dynamic of the socialization process (Madlock, 2008; Moideenkutty, Blau, Kumar, & Nalakath, 2001; Sluss & Thompson, 2012) and the construction of the psychological contract as well (Rousseau; 1989).

## Psychological Contract

Very much intertwined with the concept of POS is the Psychological Contract (PC). The seminal work of Denise Rousseau (1989), organizing previous work (e.g. Menninger, 1958; Argyris, 1960) proposed the Psychological Contract (PC) as the individual's perception of the reciprocal obligations which underlie the exchange relationship between the employee and the employer (Rousseau, 1989). Levinson's defined PC as "a series of mutual expectations which the parties to the relationship may not be aware of, but which govern relations with each other" (Levinson, Lipkin, & Meshkov, 1963, p. 21) expresses that an *unaware force may govern newcomers and incumbents' relationship*.

According to Hiltrop (1996), PC defines the employment relationship between the parties and frame the mutual expectancies that influence behavior. Therefore, PC may anticipate the kind of contributions employers will receive from employees and the type of compensation or

benefits employees will receive in return from the organization. Employees and employers tend to uphold a fair equilibrium of the mutual obligations and rewards they offer each other (Rousseau, 2004; Taylor & Tekleab, 2004).

Simply put, the PC constitutes an unspoken exchange agreement between employees and the organization that holds what employees believe they have been promised by the organization and what they believe they are required to give in return (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004; Janssens, Sels, & Van den Brande, 2003; Parzefall, 2008; Rousseau, 1995; Rousseau, 2001).

Differently from other authors, Payne et al. (2008) suggested that employees' psychological contract has its origins yet before admittance when still-candidates-for-the-job look after organizations that will fit their expectations. Expectations can be, for instance, part of an organization with a positive reputation, or join a company that offers attractive incentives, such as job stability, career fast-track growth, professional status, or attractive benefits (Rousseau, 1995).

However, pre-admittance expectations may be imprecise (Mohamed, Orife, & Slack, 2001) and not related to post admittance experiences, creating expectancies breaches as seen in the interviews' reports at Petrobras.

The company locus of our study is the major Brazilian company, top player at the sophisticated O&G industry in Latin America, and world leader in pre-salt deep waters technologies. Thus, it is plausible to consider that the OR elevates newcomers' expectancies to the highest. However, contrasting with this, there is a constant mention of "reality shock after entrance" along the research interviews that, clearly, influenced the PC development. This contrast will be approached by the expectancy violation theory (EVT).

## Expectancy Violation Theory

The *expectancy violation theory* (EVT) helps to understand how preconceived ideas influence relationships since the first interactions,



triggering a sequence of reactions and, somehow, interfering with newcomers' adjustment. These concepts highlight the need of paying close attention to the socialization process, in an effort for reducing or buffering these expectations clashes, mostly in the BPS where a long tenure is the rule.

*Expectancy* is present in most theories around human interaction (Burgoon & Walter, 1990) and is defined as a stable pattern of behavior anticipation one holds regarding the other part (Cappella & Greene, 1982). Behavior anticipation is an evolutionary strategy to avoid from noxious persons and to approach those who appear valuable to associate with (Jones, 1986).

This previously fixed perception is also known as a *stereotype*, “a cognitive structure that contains the perceiver’s knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about a human group” (Hamilton & Troler, 1986, p. 133). Thus, individuals are judged based on beliefs and contextual norms about appropriate behaviors in given circumstances. When a newcomer violates the expectations of what is perceived as *appropriate behavior*, it causes the violator to be judged negatively, influencing the perception regarding the relationship (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon et al., 2000; Leets, 2001; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

In few words, EVT posits that stereotypes provide information about individual's characteristics and are valued upon contextual norms that silently rule what is appropriate or not for a group (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon et al., 2000).

In the case of our study, expectations' clash is the underpinning issue of the socialization process in the BPS. From the newcomer's perspective, there is an expectancy to join the company after a long journey of investing time and money in specific studies to win over the one of the most disputed public contests.

On the other side, there are older incumbents, holder of a hierarchical company's culture (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Smola & Sutton, 2002) somewhat skeptical of the commitment and dedication of these new employees

(Collinson & Collinson, 1997; Raines, 2002) with a well-established routine, and overstretched by other priorities rather than receiving newcomers.

Petrobras is a semipublic company with approximately 85,000 employees at the time of conclusion of this study (Petrobras, 2018), under active Unions, has an important role in influencing the public sector. Petrobras, in the same way as most of the public sector companies in Brazil, is considered a hierarchical company, with clear status distinction and communication formalities. The expected stereotype of a newcomer is someone that will be obedient and willing to comply with incumbents' ways-of-working, likewise incumbents used to do when they arrived at the company many years before (Marston, 2007).

It might be uncomfortable for old-timers, usually in higher rank positions, to accept newcomers who do not share the same work ethic, doubting their commitment and dedication to the organization, dismissing them as selfish or lazy (Collinson & Collinson, 1997; Raines, 2002).

After these judgments are established, authors posited that supervisors tend to interact with newcomers with some level of discomfort, disrespect, or even distrust, threatening the socialization process (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

Furthermore, based on the similarity-attraction theoretical model, individuals are attracted to cooperate and work with people with whom they share common attitudes, beliefs and values (Devendorf & Highhouse, 2008) and absolutely, that was not the situation in most of the cases studied at Petrobras.

Both newcomers and old-timers were unprepared for that encounter, and HR staff were not aware of the dimension of this gap, once there was no previous experience to calibrate it. However, how a company manages (or fails to manage) newcomers' initial interactions with old-timers sends clear indications about the organizational culture (Cable & Parsons, 2001).

The following section will provide information on the Study Context and the Company Background that will aid in outlining the major picture and newcomers' mindset.

## Implications and Discussion

The socialization process is important on both ways, for the company to speed up newcomers' usefulness, connecting them to the new workplace, and, from newcomers' perspective, to reduce uncertainty regarding their future expressed by the first question one makes after entry: "will I fit (in) here?."

The present study uses a *multifoci* approach to the complex newcomers' socialization in the BPS, in which side-bets are extremely high, unusual for new employees in the private sector. Thus, the present study follows a narrative from newcomers' perspective in three stages, to know, (a) the high *pre-entry expectations*, inflated by the organizational reputation, named before as promised land as a place where all my needs will be fulfilled (b) the *reality shock* and the defining relationship with supervisor, considered as "bridge or barrier" with the subsidiary importance of peers, as an alternative route for socialization when supervisors are inattentive or unreceptive (barrier), and (c) the *outcomes*, or observed consequences of the aforesaid interactions.

Central and surprising in this study was the observation of *common mental disorders* (CMD), among almost all the interviewees. According to Goldberg and Huxley (1992), although CMD is not considered a classic psychiatric diagnosis, nevertheless it represents significant psychic suffering, affecting newcomers' relationships and compromising performance in daily activities. CMD is related as an important cause of work withdrawal and economic losses, being a potential substrate for the development of more severe disorders (Fiorotti et al., 2010) and includes symptoms as difficulty in concentrating and forgetfulness, insomnia, fatigue, irritability, feeling of inutility, constant anxiety, and somatic complaints as stomach and head aches, that

affect the performance of daily activities (Goldberg & Goodyer, 2014).

Although digging in the psychiatric elements that are present as outcome of dysfunctional socialization processes is not the focus of the present study, continuous suffering, beyond one's coping capabilities is a well-known cause for the burnout syndrome that conveys severe consequences for the organization as increasing in the turnover and absenteeism rates, reducing productivity and demanding a long and difficult treatment (Aronsson et al., 2017). These implications are also relevant because it can spark legal consequences, once Burnout syndrome is a work-related disease - ICD 11, QD 85, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024).

According to Corley and Gioia (2011); Gioia and Pitre (1990), theory is a statement of concepts and their interrelationships that shows how and why a phenomenon occurs, therefore, a theoretical contribution should offer *original insight* into a phenomenon by advancing knowledge in a way that is considered to have *utility* or usefulness for some purpose, in other words, it must consider two dimensions (a) originality and (b) utility.

The strength of the OR, not evinced in the socialization literature, creates a context in which newcomers act as if they have no choice rather than staying in that company, "no matter what". This belief is enhanced by newcomers' relatives that consider job and payment stability as a prize that covers all the prices one has to pay. When after admittance the socialization experience brings unexpected strains the contrast with the high expectations will be perceived as a reality shock which, in many cases, evokes a strong desire to leave. However, the side-bets are too high and newcomers decide to stay despite their suffering, reflecting on the commitment, performance and satisfaction.

Therefore, sunk costs and side bets are important influencers in the Brazilian public sector' socialization process, leading newcomers to endure situations that, without such advantages, they would not handle.

This study provides a deeper understanding on job socialization *silent suffering*, once the newcomer has no one to complain in and outside the company. Inside the company, some of the interviewees revealed embarrassment to express the difficulties of adaptation and the psychological stress and pain with first experiences after admittance. Supervisors or peers don't realize the level of suffering one may be experiencing, among relatives and friends outside the company, it was muted by the glamour and the status of being approved in a public tender, that in Brazil is considered a motive of pride. Therefore, enduring beyond coping capabilities may lead to mental illness or CMD.

This study anticipates the need of a profound revision of SP in the Brazilian public sector, opening some avenues for future researches, contributing to the current conversation on newcomers' socialization with a critical redirection of existing views on phenomena (Conlon, 2002).

In sum, the present research advances previous work on newcomers' socialization, digging on seminal papers on the subject that explored the phenomenon via newcomer's unfavorable reactions to the employer's failure to fulfill perceived obligations (Delobbe et al., 2016; Dulac et al., 2008), the psychological contract developed even before admittance (Payne et al., 2008) and as a response to perceived employer inducements and employee contributions (Delobbe et al., 2016; De Vos & Freese, 2011).

This study extends previous works on newcomers in the socialization process in three ways. First, under the umbrella of symbolic interactionism theory (Aksan et al., 2009; Blumer, 1969, 1986; Carter & Fuller, 2015; Handberg et al., 2015) we approach the process of verbal and social interaction through which meaning, and identity arise guiding newcomers on the journey of understanding organizational realities and establishing their situational identities.

Second, from the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2004; Sluss & Thompson, 2012), we propose that newcomers

have a strong impact from the contrast of the organizational reputation and the organizational reality, influencing their psychological contract, represented by the metaphors of aiming a promised land and getting trapped in a golden cage. In this subject, we advance the studies on the importance of the dyadic relationship with supervisor (LMX) and, followed by peers (TMX).

Third, we investigate how newcomers' perceptions of their "moral" obligation to stay in the public sector – indirectly explain socialization undesired outcomes, namely work withdrawal, common mental disorders and eventually, burnout syndrome.

This approach explores different standpoints in tandem and offers an insider's perspective, allowing a profound, surprising and unconventional dive into phenomena as preconized by Mintzberg (2005), building a theoretical model that provides a better understanding or permits accurate predictions about the observational set (Dubin, 1978).

These discoveries have many ramifications for study in several domains, including (i) negotiations with governmental agents (Araujo, C.; Dias, M., 2022; Correa, Teles, Dias, M., 2022; Dias & Navarro, 2018); (ii) business mediation (Dias, M., 2018); (iii) retail business negotiations (Dias, M. et al., 2015; Dias, M. et al., 2015, 2014, 2012); (iv) industrial negotiations (Dias, M., Navarro and Valle, 2013, Dias, M., et al., 2014; Dias, M., et al., 2013; Dias, M., & Davila, 2018); (v) debt collection negotiations (Dias, M., 2019, 2019b; Dias, M. and Lopes, 2019); (vi) interbank negotiations (Dias, M.; Pereira, L; Vieira, P., 2022), for instance.

## Limitations and Future Research

One limitation is that we relied upon only two sources to collect our data—Google Scholar and the EBSCO database. Future research could include more and different databases.

## Conclusion

This research aims to address a vacuum in the existing literature by conducting a comprehensive literature review that explores the concepts of Psychological Contract, Symbolic Interactionism, Social Exchange, and Expectation Violation Theories. The outcome is a revised literature review that succinctly outlines the elements, behaviors, and instruments that have the potential to impact the socialization process of newly arrived individuals in organizations. With this comprehension, businesses might devise novel tactics to enhance online work and negotiations in this constantly evolving working setting.

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