

# **An empirical investigation into the formation of psychological contracts within supplier distributor relationships**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Whilst scholars have attempted to explain the interaction between suppliers and distributors from a number of theoretical perspectives, social exchange theory has begun to take prominence because of its capacity to explain complex, multi-faceted and interdependent relationships between parties. In the management literature, psychological contracts have been successfully employed to help model similar types of relationships within the context of the employer-employee interface (Rousseau 1990; Robinson 1996; Turnley and Feldman 1999). This construct is grounded in social exchange theory and is centred on promissory-based obligations that are also crucial aspects within long-term marketing relationships. Given that there appears to be no empirical studies devoted to this important construct within the extent marketing literature, the core proposition is made that psychological contracts are also inherent within supplier-distributor relationships. Confirmatory factor analysis provides the first empirical support that the psychological contract is also inherent within close interdependent marketing relationships. Closer analysis also reveals that the construct is second-order in nature and manifests itself through a four-factor structure, corroborating the multi-faceted nature of supplier-distributor relationships.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The emergence of relationship marketing has necessitated the need to expand the intellectual core of the discipline (Brodie et al 1997; Grönroos 1994). One of the main reasons is that existing paradigms and theories do not adequately explain these relational practices within the firm (Webster 1992), stemming principally from a discipline that is currently attempting to redefine its domains (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995). Whilst scholars have attempted to explain the relational paradigm from a number of theoretical perspectives (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987), the theory of social exchange (Thibaut and Kelly 1959) has begun to emerge as an excellent vantage point within supplier-distributor relationships. This can be principally attributed to the notion that social exchange relationships entail cooperation between individuals for the purposes of gaining mutual benefit that result from past, current and future

activities between the parties (Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau 1994). Given that relationship marketing is defined as: “*all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges*” (Morgan and Hunt 1994:22), the principal aim of this paper is to provide further empirical substantiation that relationships can be modeled from the perspective of social exchange theory.

### **THEORY AND PROPOSITION DEVELOPMENT**

Social exchange theory is underpinned by the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960), which manifests itself through perceived obligations between actors within any particular social system. The obligatory nature of social exchange relationships are also reflected within the context of long-term marketing relationships, particularly when one considers that relational success hinges upon two inextricably linked activities, namely: (1) the making of realistic promises; and, (2) the implementation of strategies that enable their delivery (Bitner 1995). Promises have been modeled within the context of employer-employee relations, under the guise of the psychological contract (cf. Anderson and Schalk 1998; Morrison and Robinson 1997; Robinson 1996; Rousseau 1990, 1995). Psychological contracts are said to exist when an individual believes that certain promises have been made that result in perceived obligations that the perceiver believes they are entitled to receive as a consequence of their interaction within a relationship (Robinson 1996). Rousseau (1995) believes that individuals tend to ‘think contract’ when: (1) someone believes that a commitment has been made that binds the parties to some future action; (2) there is reliance by the parties, stemming from their understanding about that commitment; and, (3) choices have been made about the relative harm of accepting alternatives that fail to honor these particular commitments. To date, there is ample empirical evidence within the extent management literature to support the view that psychological contracts are inherent within the employment relationship (cf. Herriot, Manning and Kidd 1997; Robinson 1996; Rousseau 1990; Turnley and Feldman 1999)

Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau (1994) point out that the mere perception of relational obligations, stemming from implicit or explicit promises of future exchange, are sufficient to engender the presence of the construct. They describe relational obligations as “*the beliefs held by individuals that each is bound by a promise or debt to an action or course of*

*action in relation to the other party*” (p.138). Psychological contracts therefore transpire when: (1) one party believes a promise of future return has been made; and, (2) a contribution has been given that results in obligations being created to provide future benefit (Robinson and Rousseau 1994). Rousseau and Tijoriwali (1998:679) define the psychological contract as: “*an individual’s belief in mutual obligations between that person and another party*”. They proposed that the construct should comprise the following conceptual boundaries, namely that: (1) it is an individual perception; (2) the individual defines their obligations as well as the other parties’ obligations within the relationship; (3) it is the *perception* of mutuality and not mutuality, per se, that constitutes the psychological contract; (4) the psychological contract entails expectations, however, not all expectations form contracts; and, (5) the psychological contract differs from the more general concept of expectation because they are promissory and reciprocal in nature.

Any belief about obligations is predicated on the perception that implicit or explicit promises have been made, which is one of the hallmarks of any type of relationship (Robinson and Rousseau 1994). Within a marketing context, firms that aspire to have longer-term customer relationships need to focus their marketing efforts on establishing, maintaining and enhancing enduring relationships (Grönroos 1990). Grönroos (1990) points out that the *establishment* of relationships involves the giving of promises, whereas the *maintenance* of relationships comprises the fulfillment of these promises. The *enhancement* of relationships can only be accomplished with a new set of promises that are totally contingent upon the fulfillment of earlier promises. On the one level, these assumptions appear to be highly congruous with the conceptualization of the psychological contract, given that the construct comprises promissory-based obligations.

On another level, as one of the main functions of the psychological contract is to ‘gap-fill’ the details within the relationship (Turnley and Feldman 1999), logic tends to suggest the presence of the construct within the context of complex marketing relationships. Longer-term relationships imply that the firm-customer interface is more expansive in nature than market mechanisms of governance. Non-market forms of governance are more complex because they embrace dimensions such as flexible terms of exchange, supplier assistance, information exchange, monitoring the supplier, trust, commitment, cooperation, and, expectations of

continuity (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987; Gundlach, Achrol and Mentzer 1995; Leuthesser and Kohli 1995; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Noordeweir, John and Nevin 1990; Wilson 1995). Relationships that incorporate these and other dimensions become extremely open-ended in nature, therefore, the capacity of the psychological contract to represent mental models that help frame events (Rousseau 1990) should come into prominence. It is thus proposed that psychological contracts will exist within the context of supplier-distributor relationships, expressed more formally as:

*P<sub>1</sub> = Psychological contracts will develop within supplier-distributor relationships.*

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample Frame

A national sample of 1,700 distributor firms within the motorized vehicle industry was randomly generated from the Dun & Bradstreet Standard Industry Classification (SIC) mailing list. Fieldwork was conducted over a 10-week period using two rounds of questionnaires, which resulted in the return of 343 usable responses - representing a total response rate of 20%. Analysis of key organizational demographics (not reported here) confirmed that no significant differences existed between the two waves of responses, signifying that non-response bias was not problematic within the data set (Armstrong and Overton 1977).

The mailing was personally addressed to spare parts/service managers employed by distributor firms within the motorized vehicle industry, because they were regarded as key informants within their firms' supplier-distributor relationships. The sample frame was chosen principally because the products and services offered by these distributor firms were specialized and technical in nature, thus increasing the likelihood that the supplier would adopt a proactive role in nurturing the relationship with their distributors. This was important considering that the analysis was attempting to *tap* the distributors perception of obligations promised by the supplier within the relationship. Given that the empirical literature within the employee-employee context confirms the development of the resultant psychological contract in close relationships, it was anticipated that the presence of the construct would also manifest itself within marketing relationships that were expansive in nature. Expansive marketing

relationships are expected to exist within a channel context that transacts in 'high service' products and services, as characterized by these distributors and their suppliers.

### **Measure of Psychological Contract**

The specific terms of the psychological contract comprise beliefs about what a party feels they are entitled to receive from another party as a consequence their joint interaction (Robinson 1996). Perceived obligations comprise the psychological contract, and this is 'translated' into the specification of what the individual believes they 'owe' the other party, as well as what they believe they should receive from the other party in return (Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau 1994). The psychological contract has been conceptualized as a second-order construct comprising a four-factor structure (Rousseau 1990), reflecting the complexity and multi-faceted nature of close and interdependent relationships. The scale offered by Rousseau (1990) has been shown to be extremely robust and has become the most widely accepted measure of the construct within the extent literature. Therefore it has been adopted for this study (*see* Appendix 1).

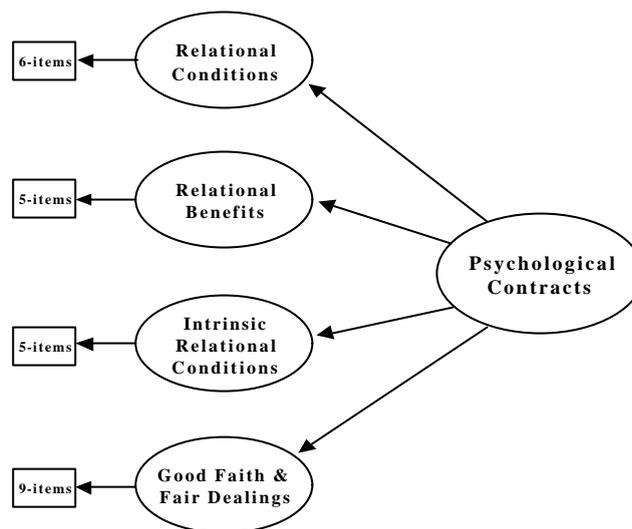
Some modifications to the semantics were deemed necessary to reflect the specific supplier-distributor relationship context. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent that they felt the supplier had implicitly or explicitly made a range of promises, reflected through the items in the questionnaire. The terms of the individuals' psychological contract represent perceived obligations and were measured with an 11-point Likert-type scale, using 0 = "to no extent at all" and 10 = "to a very great extent" as anchors.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

Due to the different research settings between this and the original study, a number of the items within the original measure of psychological contact were modified. The revised instrument was then pre-tested, prior to the fieldwork, to ascertain the relevance of the measures within the context of supplier-buyer relationships. Whilst no significant changes were deemed necessary, a small number of items in the original scale were eliminated due to their irrelevance in this context.

Rousseau's (1990) original psychological contract scale embraced 32 items and comprised a four-factor structure, namely: (F<sub>1</sub>) working conditions, (F<sub>2</sub>) benefits derived, (F<sub>3</sub>) intrinsic job characteristics, and, (F<sub>4</sub>) good faith and fair dealing between the parties (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Factor Structure of Distributors' Psychological Contract with Suppliers**



Given that these factors were known, *a priori*, confirmatory factor analysis was therefore used in order to ascertain whether the construct, as well as the proposed four-factor structure, was inherent within the supplier-distributor context.

The proposed factor structure model was analyzed with AMOS 4.01 (Arbuckle 1994-1999). The generated fit statistics suggest that the data supports the model reasonably well. Reliability analysis conducted on each of the factor measures also indicates a robust measure of the psychological contract (Table 1).

**Table 1: Psychological Contract Factor Structure and Fit Statistics**

Psychological Contract Factors	Alpha	Factor Score
F <sub>1</sub> = Relational Conditions (6-items)	0.88	0.119
F <sub>2</sub> = Relational Benefits (5-items)	0.90	0.096
F <sub>3</sub> = Intrinsic Relational Characteristics (5-items)	0.87	0.508
F <sub>4</sub> = Good Faith and Fair Dealing (9-items)	0.96	0.213
Chi-squared = 4; <i>df</i> = 1; p-value = 0.05 TLI = 0.9971; GFI = 0.994; AGFI = 0.943; RMR = 0.065		

However, psychological contracts are never 'neat bundles' of clearly specified terms (Guzzo and Noonan 1994), and measurement is challenging because the construct often represents agreements that are potentially idiosyncratic and situational bound (Shore and Barksdale 1988). Notwithstanding these complexities, the four-factor structure was found to be highly congruous with the original study presented by Rousseau (1990). Three of the factors were relabeled, namely: (1) relational conditions; (2) relational benefits; and, (3) intrinsic relational conditions to more accurately reflect the nature of supplier-distributor relationships.

Relational conditions ( $F_1$ ) tap the perceived promise of resources that distributors expect from the supplier in order to perform their role more effectively. These are important considerations because they may represent non-retrievable investments and thus reflect the level of instrumental commitment (Gundlach, Achrol and Mentzer 1995) within the relationship.

Relational benefits ( $F_2$ ) reflect the nature of the expected outcomes perceived as being promised by the supplier for remaining within the relationship, which are essentially financial in nature. Interestingly, the relatively low second-order factor score implies that distributors are not placing too much value within the relationship upon short-term monetary returns. This finding appears to be consistent with the literature in so far as distributors are more concerned about nurturing the relationship rather than focusing upon outcomes, per se.

The most emphasis appears to be reserved for perceived promises related to intrinsic relational conditions ( $F_3$ ), which reflect the extent to which distributors feel their suppliers should provide them with opportunities for self-determination within the interdependent relationship. This could be due to the notion that distributor firms place high value upon independence of decision-making and autonomy within the context of interdependent supplier-distributor relationships.

Good faith and fair dealing ( $F_4$ ) tapped the perception that supplier firms have promised their distributors high levels of collegiality and cooperation within their dealings.

The second order factor loadings were found to be higher for the two more intangible factors ( $F_3$  and  $F_4$ ) and are highly congruous with the literature. Guzzo and Noonan (1994) make the conceptual distinction between tangible and intangible terms of the psychological contract. Whilst this empirical finding adds support for this particular viewpoint, it also corroborates the notion that psychological contracts 'gap-fill' the details within the relationship (Turnley and

Feldman 1999), which could have a number of significant implications for relationship managers.

### **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS, DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

These empirical findings are among the first of their kind within the extant marketing literature in terms of modeling supplier-distributor relationships from the perspective of developing psychological contracts between the parties. The presence of the construct within buyer-distributor relationships indicates that decision makers need to reconsider the manner in which their valuable interdependent relationships should be managed. In the context of employee relations, whilst the development of the psychological contract acts as the “glue that binds” parties together (Guzzo and Noonan 1994), it also has the potential to engender dispute and disagreement between parties (Rousseau and Parks 1993). The effects of the psychological contract upon buyers and suppliers needs to be considered, given that they impact negatively upon relationships when breached (Robinson and Morrison 1995).

Heide and John (1990) point out that successful marketing relationships should be based upon expectations of relational continuity between the parties. Ganesan (1994) contrasts the mindset of firms with short-term orientations, from those with a much longer-term outlook towards their customers. The former dictates that firms should only be concerned with options that generate outcomes during the current period. They should rely principally upon the efficiencies of the marketplace to maximize returns. The latter results in firms achieving future outcomes via efficiencies derived from multiple transactions, arising from joint synergies and shared risk taking that act to improve the overall effectiveness of both organizations. Ganesan (1994) points out that a longer-term mindset is based around the perception of interdependence that entails expectations of joint outcomes as the principal mechanism for yielding benefits to the firm. With this in mind, it is evident that parties within supplier-distributor relationships may rely upon their partners based upon their own interpretation of the terms of the psychological contract, but these may not necessarily be mutually held understandings of the terms of exchange.

Rousseau (1995) points out that psychological contracts reside within the mind of the individual, therefore scholars need to fully explore the specific structure of these contracts

within various market settings. This is particularly important considering that breaches to the psychological contract may result when one party is perceived to have failed in their relational obligations. McLean-Parks and Schmedemann (1994) point out that although the psychological contract is subjective in nature, it nonetheless supports strong expectations of good faith and fair dealing, which could have significant consequences for the organization when breached. Clearly, when there is a divergence in the perception of obligations between parties, it is possible that unnecessary breaches may result that could severely effect the overall relationship. Guzzo and Noonan (1994) refer to the relationship between tangible and intangible elements of the construct as the transactional-relational 'balance' of the psychological contract. The relational aspects of the psychological balance are often intangible and often prove very difficult for either of the parties to quantify. Given that the second-factor weightings upon each of the factors within this research show higher levels of intangible contract terms within buyer-supplier relationships, this implies that breaches may be inevitable within this marketing context. Decision makers need to preempt potential breaches, which will only result if they have a clear understanding of their partner's interpretation of how the relationship has and should be defined.

This is important because the specific effects of breaches to the terms of the psychological contract were found to have a strong negative effect upon the level of trusting behavior that employees direct towards their employers (Robinson 1996). Given that trust is the central tenet within marketing relationships (Doney and Cannon 1997; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Wilson 1995), and has been found to have a direct and positive effect on the level of commitment (Morgan and Hunt 1994), psychological contract breaches could ultimately erode the level of commitment between suppliers and distributors. Although not exhaustive in nature, the above discussion shows the potential effects of the development of the psychological contract within the context of marketing relationships. Clearly as the role of the construct upon interdependent marketing relationships needs to be empirically explored further, this research hopefully paves the way for more scholarly attention.

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### Appendix 1: Psychological Contract Measure

<p>In the relationship with this <i>supplier</i>, please indicate the <u>extent</u> that you feel they have explicitly or implicitly <u>promised</u> the following.</p>	<p>To No Extent at all</p>	<p>To a Very Great Extent</p>
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1.	The <i>resources</i> necessary for your firm to perform its role effectively.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2.	A healthy working environment between your two firms.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
3.	The <i>tools</i> necessary for your firm to perform its role effectively.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4.	An environment that promotes the opportunity for your firm to learn.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
5.	Materials and equipment needed by your firm to perform its role.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
6.	A clean and safe work environment for your firm to operate within.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
7.	Necessary skill development for your firms' employees.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
8.	Further training and/or information for employees within your firm.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
9.	An attractive benefits package to your firm for distributing their products.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
10.	Positive financial returns tied to your firms' performance.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11.	A flexible benefits package for distributing their products.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
12.	A relatively secure business relationship with their firm.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
13.	Good opportunities for advancing your firm.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
14.	A competitive return for distributing their products.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
15.	Extra bonuses linked to your firms' performance.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
16.	Reasonable relationship security for your firm.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
17.	A relationship role that is interesting to your firm.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
18.	A meaningful role for your firm within the relationship.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
19.	A distribution role that provides your firm high levels of autonomy.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
20.	Fair treatment within the relationship.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
21.	A distribution role that is challenging to your firm.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
22.	Open communication within the relationship.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
23.	Additional support within the relationship.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
24.	A distribution role that has high levels of responsibility.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
25.	A collaborative work environment between your firms.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
26.	Candid and open feedback within the relationship.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
27.	Respect for your firms' efforts within the relationship.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
28.	A cooperative working relationship between your firms.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
29.	Honest treatment towards your firm within the relationship.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
30.	Professional collegiality directed towards your firm.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
31.	A high willingness to respond to your firms special needs.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
32.	Development of inter-personal bonds within the relationship.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Based upon the original work of Rousseau (1990)