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Scholar's Online Organizational Engagement and its Consequences for Higher Education Sustainability

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Abstract

Currently, there is an increase in online organizational engagement in the academic profession. This paper fits in this context and aims to analyze the scholar's online organizational engagement in higher education sustainability. For that purpose, the authors carried out a collection and documentary analysis of publications on this topic. The results of this conceptual analysis allow concluding that some academics may perceive the requirements for online engagement as excessive. These academics question the confidence they have in their institution and, consequently, the psychological contract itself and the distinction between professional life and personal and family life, which they may perceive as a new form of control and monitoring. However, it is worth highlighting the difference in expectations between academics themselves, caused, among other factors, by the type of contractual experience and by their digital literacy, as well as by their ideological representations about the academic profession and, consequently, in the relative importance of their professional autonomy. In this scenario, the pre- and initial organizational socialization processes are critical in the (re)definition of the psychological contract of scholar's online organizational engagement in the context of higher education sustainability.

Keywords: Online organizational engagement, Psychological contract, Academic profession, Scholar, Organizational socialization process, Higher education sustainability.

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Contents

Contribution of this paper to the literature

The scholar's online organizational engagement is an unavoidable dimension in today's academic world. However, this process, while being inevitable, by shaping the academic profession nowadays and increasingly in the future, is experienced in different ways by different scholars. Furthermore, it is a challenge both at the personal and the organizational level in the higher education institutions' functioning and mission. This paper seeks to add to a better understanding of this process of scholar's online organizational engagement in higher education, in its implications for the (new) psychological contract. In this context, the pre-, initial and in-job organizational socialization processes are critical for the (re)definition of the psychological contract in the scholar's online organizational engagement, with the consequent impact in higher education sustainability.

> "However the role of scholars in an era of post-truth, alternative-news, and the surveillance university remains one of prodding the dominant discourses that seek to frame and constrain our lives and channel our commitments" (Jakubowicz, 2018).

1. Introduction

In the contemporary educational sphere, there is an increase in online organizational engagement in the academic profession. This paper falls within this context and aims to analyze scholar's online organizational engagement and its consequences for higher education sustainability. The methodology used in this study consisted of a collection and document analysis of publications on this topic.

According to Swepresad, Ruggunan, Adam, and Krishna (2019) qualitative studies on new management policies and how they shape higher education academics' psychological contracts are not abundant. Furthermore, the few existing studies on this topic demonstrate that there is an influence of the new management practices in the psychological contract that is not easily perceived, and that entails positive and negative consequences. In terms of positive consequences, these new management policies may be a form of organizational learning. Regarding negative consequences, they may embody a form of control and de-professionalization.

Although there are several perspectives on the academic profession, legitimate autonomy, as control over its action, emerges as one of the key characteristics of this concept (Dubar, 1997). One of the professions where this feature emerges(ed) as most evident is that of the academic/scholar, and legitimate autonomy is, to a large extent, incorporated in the academics' expectations (Fenton & Smith, 2019; Nutakki, Reddy, & Balan, 2015): autonomy in their performance (Swepresad et al., 2019).

Recently, in higher education institutions (HEIs), there has been a change towards an increase in marketization, national and international competition, and a form of managerialism that hyper values economic performance and the centrality of training for the market. Thus, the State is no longer the only source of control and funding, and the private sector starts to take on an increasingly relevant role and centrality in this arena (Koskina, 2013; Krivokapic-Skoko & O'Neill, 2008; Nutakki et al., 2015; Swepresad et al., 2019; Tipples, Krivokapic-Skoko, & O'Neill, 2007; Topa & Morales, 2008; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2013).

All of these shifts in HEIs – with increasing external and internal control of institutions at the administrative, financial and academic-action levels and, consequently, in the academic profession – may have implications in the expectations that academics have in their relationship with their employer and the consequent sustainability of these institutions (Mzangwa, 2019). As Tipples et al. (2007) comment regarding HEIs, "Evident in innumerable management and leadership initiatives, and growing top down control, universities are less collegiate and more bureaucratic and corporate" (p. 33). Also, there is the technological possibility that the academic is permanently online, even outside the institution or during office hours, which raises serious issues about the public/private distinction and the allocation of time dedicated to the job.

The changes reported above take place, in Europe, in the post-Bologna Process implementation practice, with profound implications for academics' psychological contracts (Tipples et al., 2007). These implications regard the relationship of trust established between the employee and the organization, which is based on expectations deemed to be being met by both parties, and that foster quality and quantity work, in the case under analysis, of the academics. In this regard, De Boer, Fahrenwald, and Spies (2018) sustain that "The Bologna Process is a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications" (p. 1). This reconfiguration of the higher education universe has had, of course, clear and profound influences on HEIs' routines, practices and identities.

However, and despite the importance of the psychological contract, the studies that analyze this problem in the academic sector are, as already mentioned, scarce (Asiedu-Appiah, Akwetea, & Bamfo, 2016; Jafri, 2014; Koskina, 2013; Krivokapic-Skoko & O'Neill, 2008; Niyivuga, Otara, & Tuyishime, 2019; Nutakki et al., 2015; O'Toole & Prince, 2015; Tipples et al., 2007). Tipples et al. (2007) argue that, since the psychological contract is analyzed in a broad context, and its influence on professional relationships and the employees' performance is proven, the psychological contract between academics and the institutions where they work has not been sufficiently studied. The authors maintain that "[…] understanding the formation and content of academics' psychological contracts is crucial to understanding and managing the work performance of academics" (Tipples et al., 2007).

This paper is structured as follows: it starts by detailing the methodology used in its development. After, it discusses online organizational engagement a then, it focuses on the topic of the psychological contract in the academic sector, particularly, the psychological contract in the HEI. Afterwards, it exposes and questions the academics' diverse expectations and, finally, it addresses the psychological contract as a process. It concludes by discussing the information presented and offering some theoretical and practical implications of this work.

2. Method

This paper seeks to answer the following research question: how do academics perceive their online organizational engagement and which are the consequences of these perceptions in the psychological contract, within the context of higher education sustainability?

To seek to answer this research question, the authors carried out a meta-analysis of publications that directly focus on this topic. The collection was based in the consultation of the b-on database of the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) in Portugal, an electronic library that includes databases such as Web of Knowledge, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals) and SCIELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online), among others, as well as institutional repositories. A comprehensive search was carried out between February 1 and 15, 2020, by searching for the following expressions/keywords, both in the Abstract and in the Title: "academic online engagement", "psychological contract" and "academic profession"; and by title, abstract and terms of the topic. This online bibliographic search was supplemented with the collection of complementary bibliographic material directly related to the topic under analysis.

3. The Psychological Contract in the Academic Profession

Organizational professional socialization is critical in the development of social and professional identities, in a legitimate and legitimizing organizational integration, as a set of "[…] social constructions that entail the interaction between individual trajectories and employment systems, work systems and training systems" (Dubar, 1997).

According to Ott (1989) stance, organizational socialization is a vital means for the preservation and transmission of the organizational culture. People who are part of an organization, of any nature, are receptive to socialization, in the sense of apprehending assumptions, values, beliefs, and behaviors that characterize the organization that they have just joined. Moreover, "The culture of the person's reference group(s) determines what the person must learn to be effective in his or her new role" (Dubar, 1997). The psychological contract, which is discussed below, always underlies this process.

3.1. The Psychological Contract

The scientific literature has not yet provided a universally acknowledged definition of the concept of psychological contract. This concept is highly complex, but the perception between employee-employer obligations is always a common platform (Burch, Batchelor, Burch, & Heller, 2015; Eichler, Lemos, & Neves, 2019; Guerrero, 2005; Jafri, 2014; Larkin & Neumann, 2012; Maia & Bastos, 2019; Mittal & Mishra, 2017; Nutakki et al., 2015; O'Toole & Prince, 2015; Peirce et al., 2012; Richard, McMillan-Capehart, Bhuian, & Taylor, 2009; Rios & Gondim, 2010; Smithson & Lewis, 2004; Swepresad et al., 2019; Tavares, 2006; Tipples et al., 2007).

The psychological contract is based on "[…] promises, which can be explicit or implicit. With the consolidation of the contract, the promises gain strength and form a mental model guiding the employee-employer relationship" (Eichler et al., 2019).

Several research studies confirm the relationship between the psychological contract and the quality of professional performance of the members of an organization (Asiedu-Appiah et al., 2016; Koskina, 2013; Krause & Moore, 2017; Krivokapic-Skoko & O'Neill, 2008; Topa & Morales, 2008). Nutakki et al. (2015) for example, highlight that "understanding the mutual expectations of the teaching staff and the employer to build a positive psychological contract is crucial to the institutions' ability to manage the commitment and work performance of the faculty" (p. 35). In turn, Swepresad et al. (2019) describe the characteristics of the psychological contract, making a comparison between the old and the new psychological contract, depicted in Table 1.

Table-1. The comparison between the old and new psychological contract.

Characteristics	Old	New
Employers key input	Time and effort	Knowledge and skills
Employees key input	Stable income and career advancement	Opportunities for self- development
Employers key responsibilities	Fair pay for good work	High pay for high performance
Employees key responsibility	Good performance in present job	Making a difference
Focus	Security	Employability
Scope	Broad	Narrow
Duration	Permanent	Variable
Format	Structured	Flexible
Underlying principle	Tradition	Market forces
Intended output	Loyalty and commitment	Value added

Source: Theron (2011) cite in Swepresad et al. (2019), p. 3.

Next sub-section analyses the influence of online organizational engagement (Sandu, 2019) on the psychological contract for academics.

3.2. Influence of Online Organisational Engagement on the Psychological Contract for Academics

Studies that analyze organizational behavior in the specific context of higher education underline the key role of active involvement and commitment of academics for the HEI to attain its institutional objectives. These are only met if and when employees, and specifically the teaching staff, understand and accept that their institution has defined them to safeguard their interests. Academics' attitudes and behaviors either act as barriers (if not accepted) or levers (if incorporated by academics) for the successful implementation of these practices and reforms (Nutakki et al., 2015).

The digital world, with the Internet, e-mail and the proliferation of online platforms that can be accessed from anywhere (Sandu, 2019) enables permanent contact between people, whether in a social or professional context. For instance, e-mail can function as an element of participation but also as a tool for control and monitoring by the

center of the organization (Cunha, Rego, Cunha, & Cabral-Cardoso, 2007). In this process, there may be self-control and control, that is, "a monitoring of the process in progress and not a posteriori verification" (Javeau, 1998).

This monitoring can be formal and/or informal, and this may have a direct influence on the psychological contract, according to the professional ideology in question, leading, ultimately, to the breach of trust and, consequently, to the demobilization of professionals (Khan, Ma, Abubakari Sadick, & Ibn Musah, 2018; Richard et al., 2009; Saboor, Malik, Pracha, Ahmed, & Malik, 2018; Thomas, Ravlin, Liao, Morrell, & Au, 2016; Tipples et al., 2007). In this regard, Saboor et al. (2018) argue that "Vigilance is another significant construct that impacts perceived contract breach. Vigilance denotes the level to which employees observe how their employing firm is fulfilling her psychological contract" (p. 282).

3.3 Breach of the Psychological Contract

The psychological contract is dynamic and, as such, literature considers it as a process that takes place continually over time, as the object of a permanent (re)negotiation (Cunha et al., 2007). Smithson and Lewis (2004) highlight a set of relevant elements that should be present in any definition of the psychological contract:

- "Incorporation of beliefs, values, expectations and aspirations of employer and employee, including beliefs about implicit promises and obligations, the extent to which these are perceived to be met or violated and the extent of trust within the relationship.
- These expectations are not necessarily made explicit. It can be regarded as the implicit deal between employers and employees. It implies fairness and good faith.
- An important aspect of the notion of a psychological contract is that it can be continually renegotiated, changing with an individual's, and an organisation's, expectations, and in shifting economic and social contexts. It is not static, but dynamic and shifting. However, most research provides only a snapshot of one point in time thereby capturing only one stage in this social process.
- Because it is based on individual perceptions individuals in the same organisation or job may perceive different psychological contracts, which will, in turn, influence the ways in which they perceive organisational events (e.g. redundancies or developing or modifying a flexitime system)" (Smithson & Lewis, 2004).

Particularly on the violation or breach of the psychological contract, there is a rupture in the expectations of the employees of an organization. This rupture generates feelings such as betrayal, disappointment, disenchantment, feeling of injustice, and frustration regarding their work and the organization (Cunha et al., 2007; Khan et al., 2018; Nutakki et al., 2015; O'Toole & Prince, 2015; Solinger, Hofmans, Matthijs Bal, & Jansen, 2015; Tipples et al., 2007). Cunha et al. (2007) stress that the most important in the violation or breach of the psychological contract is not exactly its real non-compliance, but rather the employee's perception of its non-compliance.

The expectations of the members of an organization may change over time, as well as a result of their job-position changes, the new roles played, the conditions of the organization and its exterior, and the cultural context itself (Cunha et al., 2007; Eichler et al., 2019; Guerrero, 2005; Krause & Moore, 2017; Leach, 2016; Rios & Gondim, 2010; Tipples et al., 2007; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2013; Zagenczyk et al., 2012). These changes may occur at the level of the worker, whose expectations about what to expect from the job and the organization change over time. They may also take place at the level of institutions, which experience changes as a result of external factors (economic, political, ideological and of market logics), but also by the will of their leaders and managers, which has numerous consequences for the configuration of the psychological contracts (Rios & Gondim, 2010).

Barman and Saikat (2011) developed a model that entails the factors – that the authors identified in their quantitative study – that affect faculty engagement. These factors are: "Institutional attachment, primary involvement, secondary involvement, recognition and networking, career orientation and guidance, credibility" Barman and Saikat (2011).

Nutakki et al. (2015) studied the topic under analysis in the context of Indian higher education – the second-largest higher education system in the world – and that currently seeks to attain excellence in this sector based on high-quality inputs and high-quality outcomes. The authors systematized the outcomes of the psychological contract breach with the academics as shown in Table 2.

Table-2. Outcomes of psychological contract breach.

Breach Area	Breach Outcomes
Promotion	Trust Decline
Professional Development	Job Satisfaction Decline
Remuneration	Motivation Decline
Work Flexibility	Loyalty Decline
Academic Freedom	Commitment Decline
Professional Autonomy	Work Output Decline
Support for Research	Seek Alternative Employment
Support for Teaching	Change Employment Conditions
	Research Output Decline
	Teaching Quality Decline

Source: Nutakki et al. (2015), p. 40.

This whole analysis highlights the need for academics to feel that they have to be professionals, autonomy being safeguarded by their expectations (Holbrook, 2017; Jafri, 2014). This need takes place in a context where academic freedom and professional autonomy appear to experience some restrictions (Krivokapic-Skoko & O'Neill, 2008; O'NEILL., Krivokapic-Skoko, & Dowell, 2010; Tipples et al., 2007).

Swepresad et al. (2019) alert to the existence of two and opposed narratives of contemporary management regarding the psychological contract. On the one side, there are academics, whose perception of their psychological contracts is that they are broken through processes of de-professionalization. On the other side, there are HEI managers, who see these contracts as being based on calls for justice and organizational learning. These contrasting positions can lead to the existence of an environment conducive to conflicts between institutional actors, with the consequent harmful impacts on the teaching profession.

4. Conclusion

Dealing with the psychological contract is critical for the academic profession and the mission of HEIs (Asiedu-Appiah et al., 2016; Larkin & Neumann, 2012; Mittal & Mishra, 2017; Saboor et al., 2018; Tipples et al., 2007).

Swepresad et al. (2019) state that new management policies have a relevant influence on the establishment and development of the psychological contract. They may exert a positive influence, as they may be a form of organizational learning, with the potential to "create more equitable, skilled, and accountable workplaces" (Swepresad et al., 2019) or a negative influence, as they may be a form of control and de-professionalization.

This analysis allows concluding that the requirements for online engagement may be perceived, by some academics, as excessive, calling into question the confidence they have in their academic institution and, consequently, the psychological contract itself and the distinction between professional life and personal and family life, and may be perceived as a new form of control and monitoring. However, the difference in expectations between academics themselves is to be highlighted. It is motivated, among other factors, by the type of contractual experience and their digital literacy, as well as their ideological representations about the academic profession and, consequently, the importance of their professional autonomy. In this context, the pre-, initial and in-job organizational socialization processes are critical for the (re)definition of the psychological contract in scholar's online organizational engagement, with the consequent impact in higher education sustainability.

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