

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT AND GRADUATE STUDENT ADVISING

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ABSTRACT: *Changes in higher education in Thailand have necessitated that higher education institutions compete for funding and students. Thus, it has become imperative that universities find ways to stay viable. Trends are pointing to a need for higher education providers to expand their focus to different groups of students such as graduate students and the reskilling of older students. Although graduate students may make up a smaller portion of the student numbers, research into areas that address graduate student expectations and satisfaction have potential benefit. As training of graduate students typically involves having them conduct research under the supervision of an advisor, and as this relationship has been said to be one of the most crucial aspects in graduate students' satisfaction with their programs and decisions to leave; study of this relationship dynamic by using the psychological contract theory as a framework may yield useful information applicable to improve the policy and training of graduate student programs. The purpose of this article is threefold: 1) it will introduce the concept of the psychological contract; 2) it will present the concept of the psychological contract as a valid perspective for viewing graduate students' expectations in regard to advising, and 3) it will put forth suggestions for future research on graduate student advising in the hopes that research in this area will contribute to graduate student satisfaction.*

Keywords: *Psychological contract, graduate student, advising*

Introduction

Thailand's demographics have played a significant part in the changing landscape of higher education in the country. Thailand is considered an aging society. The number of Thai people over the age of 65 has increased from approximately five percent in 1995 to 11 percent in 2016 (Michael & Trines, 2018). By 2040, approximately 17 million people in Thailand will be aged 65 or older. Additionally, Thai birth rates have been declining steadily since the year 2000. In 2000, the birthrate was around 16.86 births per 1,000 persons. In 2018, it was 11 births

per 1,000 persons (CIA, 2019). Fewer children born means that there are fewer students and eventually there will be less demand for higher education. These demographic trends have contributed to the overall decreased number of college-aged students in the population. The Ministry of Education has stated that Thailand is facing an unprecedented demographic challenge as having fewer young people will decrease the country's workforce. According to the MOE, student numbers have fallen by as much as 50-70 percent in open universities and private universities respectively. Universities need to expand their traditional customer base and focus more on graduate students and reskilling of older people (MOE, 2019). Expanding focus to other types of students, namely graduate students and their satisfaction may be one area that has benefits for the overall institution. Research related to graduate student satisfaction can be highly beneficial in addressing some of the concerns that higher education institutions in Thailand may

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have. Students' satisfaction with their graduate studies not only has an effect on their completing their studies but also for their retention in the program.

One area that has the potential to greatly affect graduate student satisfaction is graduate student advising. According to Twale (2015), the importance of graduate student advisors and the advising relationship cannot be underestimated and should be considered one of the most important ingredients to a successful graduate program. Supportive advisors can also play a role in increasing retention. Therefore, research regarding effective graduate student advising can play an important part in increasing understanding and satisfaction among graduate students. As this article utilizes research from both US and UK, where the terminology is different, the terms 'advisor' and 'supervisor' are meant to mean the same thing which is the faculty member who is responsible for overseeing the graduate student's research work.

Although graduate student advising has been studied from various perspectives, the perspective of the psychological contract has not been widely studied. Although there have been studies dealing with this theory in educational contexts (Sambrook, 2016; Liao, 2013; Koskina, 2013; Bordia et al., 2010), the psychological contract theory has been mostly studied from the organizational behavior perspective. The purpose of this article is threefold: 1) it will introduce the concept of the psychological contract; 2) it will argue that the concept of the psychological contract is a valid perspective for looking at graduate student's expectations in regards to advising, and 3) it will put forth suggestions for future research on graduate student advising in the hopes that further research in this area will contribute to graduate student satisfaction.

The Psychological Contract Explained

The concept of the psychological contract or PC is not a new and there have been several definitions to describe it since its first mention. The term 'psychological contract' was first used in 1960 by Chris Argyris who studied relationships between employees and supervisors and used the term *psychological work contract*. Psychological contracts came into prominence in the 70's and 80's with the publication of the book, *Organizational Psychology* by Schein. However, it was the seminal work of Rousseau in the late 80's and 90's in the area of organizational research that brought the construct of PC into contemporary attention (Roehling, 1997). Rousseau is credited with developing the concept of PC more thoroughly and emphasized the promissory nature of the psychological contract and its being an individual level phenomenon. She also introduced the concept of psychological contract violation (Rousseau, Tomprou & Montes, 2013).

According to Rousseau, the definition of a psychological contract is "an individual's belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123). A psychological contract is formed when an individual believes that the contributions they have offered to the other party obligates the other party to a reciprocal exchange. PCs are subjective perceptions that are held by individuals in a relationship and may not be the same for both parties. An element of trust can be said to form the basis for this belief, whereby one party feels that their actions or contributions should be reciprocated by the other party as there is a relationship that binds them to one another. Violations of the PC are said to have strong repercussions, especially when one party or the 'victim' feels strongly that they have been treated unfairly or treated in ways that violate what they perceived to be expected patterns of behavior or codes of conduct. The more intense the feelings of injustice and wrongful harm, the more intense

feelings of anger and resentment as the individual feels that they have been let down or betrayed (Rousseau, 1989).

It should be reiterated that the psychological contract is an individual perception and different from implied contracts. Implied contracts are based on what social norms or others may believe to be obligations. An example of this would be the doctor and patient relationship. When a patient goes to see a doctor for treatment, the doctor is expected to provide the best care possible and the patient would be expected to pay any required fee. While this obligation would not be expected to be set out in writing, it is an accepted exchange agreement as there is mutual consent. Because the PC is based on the individual's beliefs of what they should receive in reciprocity from the other party, there is high subjectivity as to what those beliefs constitute. An additional point that should also be noted is that PCs involve reciprocal obligations and are not solely based on expectations. This is an important aspect of the psychological contract theory as it is based on the understanding by the two parties involved that there will be a mutual reciprocity or an exchange (Rousseau, 1998).

In terms of theory, the psychological contract theory or PCT is defined as individual cognitive structures that demonstrate how people think about their exchange relationships. It involves their system of beliefs in relation to how they view the obligations that exist between themselves and their exchange partners. These in turn influence how they think, feel and behave in the relationship. PCT is applicable to any exchange relationship where two parties come together to trade things of value, be it services, goods, knowledge, or expertise. The main tenets of PCT are that they incorporate psychological principles and are shaped by the cognitive capacity of individuals who may selectively choose to interpret events in ways that support their existing beliefs and PC's although relatively stable, can

change over time and individuals may have experiences that influence their beliefs and they may revise their existing PCs (Rousseau, Tomprou & Montes, 2013).

The Psychological Contract and Graduate Student Advising

Traditional modes of graduate student advising have utilized the 'apprenticeship model' whereby advisors or as they may sometimes be called, supervisors, take the lead and guide the work of the thesis or dissertation from beginning to end. Although this method has been used extensively in graduate programs all over the world and at both the master's and doctoral levels where thesis or dissertation requirements are necessary for successful completion of the programs, the degree of guidance and the notion of what constitutes appropriate guidance can be found to differ widely among both advisors and advisees (Oh, 2019; Zhao et al. 2007). The relationship between the graduate student and the faculty member is typically built around research-related activities and collaborations in research studies, whether for the student's own work or the faculty member. Although traditional research regarding the psychological contract has been carried out in the context of employer-employee relationships, the concept of PC can also be applied to education and, in viewing faculty-student relationships (Wade-Benzoni, Rousseau & Li, 2006). If we return to the previously mentioned definition of the PC as it being a reciprocal exchange agreement between two parties, we can compare the work of research collaboration where the student is working under the guidance of a faculty member and develops a set of beliefs about what they have to do and what the faculty member should provide them with in terms of assistance or advice. In return, the faculty member or advisor also has expectations about the performance and progress of the student. If the two sets of expectations are not in sync, it may signal to one of the parties, mainly the student, that a promise

to assist in their work, has been broken and thus would occur a violation of the student's psychological contract with the faculty member.

According to Wade-Benzoni, Rousseau and Li (2006), the nature of the research collaboration or we might also call it the advising relationship, is very imprecise. There are little, if any, written contracts or instructions both for the advisee and advisor. Students' expectations and interpretations on what advisors' roles are and what reciprocal actions are expected of the student in order to complete their theses or dissertations is vague. In addition to this potential conflict arising out of violation of psychological contract is the tendency for students to avoid confrontation as they perceive themselves to have less power in the relationship. These conflicts can have many repercussions, not in the least, causing them to leave the program. From the opposite perspective, in a study of advising relationships, advisors were asked to describe and characterize their relationships with their advisees, those advisors that reported problematic advising relationships indicated that there needed to be power negotiations where advisors felt that they had to 'play their power cards' (Knox et al., 2006). The study found that even among advisors, there were differences in what were seen as advisees' professional characteristics, respectful behavior, and effective communication. The advisors in the study felt a strong desire to help their advisees complete their degrees. Nonetheless, they did not receive any formal training to learn how to be advisors and mostly relied on their own experiences as graduate students.

The research on graduate student advising has shown us that the relationship between the graduate student and their advisor and the perceived support they receive from their advisors is one of the main keys to successful graduate student retention and completion (Blanchard & Haccoun, 2019; Litalien & Guay, 2015;

Lovitts, 2001). Nonetheless, the nature of and content of the support may also vary among advisors and various academic disciplines. In a study of doctoral student supervision (Doloreirt, Sambrook & Stewart, 2012) which used a focus group of both students and supervisors to discuss supervisory relationships, it was found that for the focus group, discussing the topic was quite new to them and that members of the focus group needed time to consider their experiences and construct their own realities and beliefs of what they considered to be components of the supervisory relationship. In the same study it was also found that there was a potential for power imbalance in the supervisory relationship as the students felt that they were dependent on the supervisor.

According to Sambrook (2016), the PC in doctoral student supervision develops at various stages of the supervisory relationship. Initial expectations of how advisors will act include information based on word-of-mouth, contact with potential advisors, or how and where the advisor was contacted or located. Once the relationship is formalized, the psychological contract develops and evolves as they work together. Nonetheless, there is relatively little thought about mutual obligations and expectations unless a problem or psychological contract breach occurs. Psychological contract breach is felt strongly by students, especially in advising relationships that are sanctioned or formalized by the university. In comparison, mentoring relationships, in which the mentor or instructor helps and supports the student, but may not be their official advisor, is also subject to feelings of psychological contract breach but the attributions for the breach and feelings of violation are not as strong (Haggard, 2012).

Suggestions for Future Research Regarding Psychological Contracts and Graduate Student Advising

As suggested by Wade-Benzoni, Rousseau and Li (2006), the PC offers a

different perspective to view faculty-student relationships. As the supervisory relationships between graduate students and advisors are not typically explicitly set out or agreed to either orally or in writing, the expectations of the parties and dynamics of the relationship are very much dependent on the interaction between faculty member and student. The psychological contract can provide an important perspective in looking at this type of relationship. The dependence on graduate students on their advisors for research guidance and assistance to graduate and for other aspects of their studies and even future career assistance makes the relationship aspect of dependence and power an interesting perspective. Furthermore, as expectations and obligations are very subjective and the conflicts that arise from them can be serious due to power imbalance and avoidance of confrontation, studying the relationship in terms of the psychological contract may mitigate serious consequences such as graduate students leaving the program.

Research regarding policy and practice in the training of graduate students is an area that can be improved by conducting PC research. By looking at both the expected and the required obligations of both parties and trying to determine the areas of potential misunderstandings, more realistic expectations and personal responsibilities can be made more explicit, thus reducing perceptions of PC breach. Quantitative comparisons of PC's in other cultures and countries and advising relationships in other academic disciplines can also be carried out. From her research regarding psychological contracts and doctoral supervision, Sambrook (2016), suggests the following: 1). Training should be provided for both students and supervisors so that they can be aware of the existence of a psychological contract, how to deal with breach of PC and how to develop awareness and emotional intelligence, 2). Supervisors should be aware of perpetuating bad habits that they

may have received from their own graduate training and be trained how to give feedback, 3). PCs should be monitored and assessed formally in programs where graduate supervision is a component.

In light of the changes in higher education around the world and in Thailand where more and more institutions must compete for funding and students, it becomes imperative that universities must find ways to stay viable. Although graduate students may make up a smaller portion of the student numbers, trends are pointing to the need to refocus on this group of students as demographics change. Research into areas that address graduate student expectations and satisfaction should be carried out. As training of graduate students typically involves having them conduct research under the supervision of an advisor, and as this relationship has been said to be one of the most crucial aspects in graduate students satisfaction with their programs and decisions to leave, study of this relationship dynamic by using the psychological contract theory as a framework can be beneficial and yield useful and applicable results that can improve the policy and practice of graduate student training.

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