The Psychological Contract of Volunteer Youth Sport Coaches

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Volunteer youth sport coaches are an important human resource in the sport and recreation sector, and a vital component of the production of youth sport opportunities. Under its pillar of “Enhanced Capacity,” the Canadian Sport Policy identifies the importance of developing, supporting, and retaining qualified coaches in order to deliver youth sport programs (Sport Canada, 2002). The Canadian Sport Policy also highlights the importance of youth sport coaches to achieve the goal of “Enhanced Participation,” with more Canadians living an active lifestyle and increasing their health and well-being (Sport Canada, 2002). Thus, it is important to understand factors that impact coaches’ attitudes, performance, and retention (Cusckley, Hoye, & Auld, 2006).

Psychological contract theory provides a useful framework for examining the work environment. With its basis in social exchange theory, a “psychological contract is individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization” (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). It comprises an individual’s perception of what they expect from the organization (e.g., decent pay, safe work environment, opportunity for advancement) and what they expect to provide to the organization (e.g., hard work, loyalty, quality work), and generally goes beyond what has been formally agreed upon. Psychological contracts consist of transactional (exchange of economic resources) and relational (exchange of socio-emotional resources) aspects, although the former are presumed to be less important in the volunteer setting (Taylor, Darcy, Hoye, & Cusckley, 2006; Kim, Trail, Lim, & Kim, 2009). According to psychological contract theory, it is the perceived fulfillment (expectations are met), breach (expectations are unmet) or violation (intense emotional reaction to a breach) of a psychological contract that impacts on an individual’s attitude and behaviour with respect to the organization (Conway & Briner, 2005). Research has focused on the paid workforce, although a few studies have examined the content and impact of psychological contract in the volunteer and sport settings (Farmer & Fedor, 1999; Kim et al., 2009; Liao-Troth, 2001, 2005; Starnes, 2007; Taylor et al., 2006).

The psychological contract is specific to the implicit and explicit promises between an employer and employee or volunteer, and thus may be unique to a particular context. For example, national culture (Rousseau & Schalk, 2007), context stability (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998), and the nature of human resource practices in a given organization (Guest & Conway, 2002) are purported to influence the content of a psychological contract. Therefore, it is important to understand the features or elements of a contract in a given context or even a particular role (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). Research to date on psychological contract in the sport setting has been delimited to volunteer administrators and sport event volunteers.

This study represents the first phase of a larger research project examining the nature and impact of psychological contract of youth sport coaches. The purpose of this study is to identify the psychological contract of volunteer youth sport coaches in community sport clubs; that is, what coaches expect their club to provide to them, and what they expect to provide to the club. A sub-purposes of this study is to determine whether there is any variation in psychological contract by coach gender, tenure (novice, experienced), and level (recreational, competitive). These variables are of particular interest because of the potentially different experiences of men and women youth sport coaches, the possible shift in psychological contract as a coach’s relationship with the club evolves over time (Rousseau, 1989), and the philosophical differences between recreational and competitive sport programs. Data collection is currently underway and involves in-person semi-structured interviews with a sample of 30 coaches from community sport clubs in one mid-sized city in Ontario, Canada. The interview guide is designed to elicit insight into the elements of both transactional (if any) and relational aspects of coaches’ psychological contracts. The interview style setting allows for the researcher to clarify or delve deeper into a question that has been posed (Patton, 2002), and thus allows for a deep understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). This approach is consistent with previous psychological contract research (Conway & Briner, 2005; O’Donohue, Donohue & Grimmer, 2007; Rousseau, 1995). Participants were identified through their clubs and are representative of the sub-variables of interest here (gender, tenure, level). Interviews are audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and are being returned to the interviewees for any further clarification or elaboration (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Analysis will involve emergent coding which allows the inductive identification of themes that represent various elements of the psychological contract of youth sport coaches, including any variation by gender, tenure or level. The interview data will be managed by the computer-aided data analysis software NVivo (Weitzman, 2003).

The findings will highlight coaches’ understanding of their relationship with their club, and lay a foundation for the further investigation of the perceived fulfillment, breach or violation of their expectations and its impact on youth sport coaches’ attitudes and behavior. The study extends the limited research to date on psychological contract in both the voluntary and sport...
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