Perceived Expectations of Self and the Organization: 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 (Cuskelly, 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, & Cuskelly, 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; Starines, 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-purpose 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.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with volunteer youth sport coaches representing different sports in one community (population 350,000). Participants were recruited from the sports of basketball, volleyball, soccer, baseball, hockey, lacrosse, and softball. It was thought that these sports would have the best representation of both men and women coaches, and competitive and recreational programs. Participants were purposefully sampled in an effort to capture and account for possible variation in psychological contract among youth sport coaches by gender, tenure (novice, experienced), and level (recreational, competitive). Interviews were audio-
recorded, transcribed verbatim, and returned to the interviewees for any further clarification or elaboration (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Once all interviews were completed data analysis commenced with a priori coding of transactional and relational expectations. Following the a priori coding, emergent coding was conducted to identify the specific content of the transactional and relational dimensions. The researcher and her supervisor compared, refined codes, and re-coded data until all emergent sub-themes were evolved and a consensus was achieved. They then analyzed the data for any patterns among these sub-themes across participants by gender, tenure, or level. Finally, influences on the development of participants’ psychological contract were subject to emergent coding to identify themes and sub-themes within each dimension. The interview data were managed by the computer-aided data analysis software NVivo 8.0 (Weitzman, 2003).

The findings revealed that volunteer youth sport coaches possess a balanced psychological contract with their CSO comprised of both transactional and relational components. The data revealed that the most frequently cited expectations of a CSO are to provide facilities and equipment, provide administrative support, organize uniforms, and assist in conflict resolution. While, the most frequently cited expectations of the coach are to provide technical expertise, be a positive role model, be a conduit for information, and complete administrative tasks. Both the expectations of the CSO and coach tended to be more transactional, with many of the elements related directly to the sporting context. These findings are similar to those that examine limited term employees in which their contracts are more transactional; and also supports the work of Liao-Troth (2001) in which his research indicated a similarity between volunteers and paid employees.