It Takes Two to Tango: Unlocking the Psychological Contract of Volunteer Coaches and Their Club

Alanna Harman, St. John’s University
Patti Millar, Niagara University
Shannon Kerwin, Brock University

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Youth sport coaches are a vital component of the production and leadership of youth sport programs. Thus, it is important to understand the context in which coaches operate and the factors that impact coaches’ attitudes and retention (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006). For coaches, the psychological contract and its fulfillment have been purported to impact one’s attitude and behaviour (Ali, Haz, Ramay, & Azeem, 2010; Kingshott & Pecotich, 2007; Turnley & Feldman, 1999). While the foundation of psychological contract theory extends from the context of the paid workforce, it has received increased interest from the volunteer sector (e.g., Kim, Trail, Lim, & Kim, 2009; Liao-Troth, 2001, 2005; Nichols & Ojala, 2009; Taylor, Darcy, Hoye, & Cuskelly, 2006). Specifically, volunteers (and youth sport coaches in particular) typically do not have a written contract and therefore rely solely on a psychological contract to manage their expectations.

The psychological contract has been defined as “the perceptions of both parties to the employment relationship – organization and individual – of the reciprocal promises and obligations implied in that relationship” (Guest & Conway, 2002, p. 22). While the psychological contract has been characterized as two parties to the agreement, the significant amount of research on psychological contracts has been employee or volunteer centric, focusing almost exclusively on one side of the contract (Conway & Briner, 2005). Of the few scholars who have examined the organization’s perspective, they suggest that a full understanding of the exchange relationship cannot occur unless both parties to the agreement are considered (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000, 2002; McFarlane Shore & Tetrick, 1994; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003). Capturing the psychological contract of volunteers and their respective organizations will allow for a deeper understanding of the contract in terms of incongruence (expectations unknown to the other) and reneging of expectations (not fulfilling known expectations; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000).

Further, while empirical evidence indicates that the psychological contract can be categorized into transactional (economic) and/or relational (socio-emotional) elements (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Millward & Hopkins, 1998; Rousseau, 1990, 2001), the ideological contract (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003) may also play an important role in understanding the phenomenon of psychological contracts in the volunteer youth sport context. Thompson and Bunderson (2003) define the ideological contract as “credible commitments to pursue a valued cause or principle that are implicitly exchanged at the nexus of the individual-organization relationship” (p. 574). It has been proposed that ideological contracts may assist in explaining why one may view their contract as being breached in the absence of mistreatment, or why one may continue with an organization despite a breach of their transactional or relational contract (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). Nichols (2012) also highlighted the ideological dimension as one that may be particularly salient to volunteers because their “engagement reflects an alignment of their values and motivation with those of the organization” (p. 997).

Building on the extant literature that advocates for the inclusion of the organization in developing a comprehensive picture of the exchange relationship, and the importance of an ideological contract to volunteers in particular, the purpose of this study was two-fold. First, the purpose was to identify the content of the psychological contracts of volunteer youth sport coaches and their respective clubs, inclusive of an ideological contract. The secondary purpose was to further report on the (in)congruency of their contracts. A multiple case study approach was used to allow for in-depth study and comparison of different sport clubs and their respective volunteer coaches to create a profile of the exchange between sport clubs and their volunteer coaches (Patton, 2002). A purposeful sample of two nonprofit community-based sport clubs that offer both recreational and competitive youth sport programs, and rely on volunteer coaches for program delivery were included. Volunteer coaches and representatives of the sport clubs...
completed a survey pertaining to their transactional and relational expectations of one another and themselves (Harman & Doherty, 2014).

As a measure of ideological contracts does not exist, semi-structured focus groups were also conducted with the volunteer coaches and representatives of the sport clubs separately to further uncover the ideological contract and the congruency of it amongst volunteer coaches and their respective sport club. Following data collection a priori coding according to broad themes of transactional, relational, and ideological expectations allowed data to be grouped by a given set of standards consistent with the literature (O’Neil, Krivokapic-Skoko & Dowell, 2010). Subsequently, emergent coding was performed to identify the specific content of the transactional, relational, and ideological contracts.

The survey results revealed that the administrators of sport clubs had both transactional and relational expectations of themselves and their coaches. Commonalities were found between what the coaches expected of themselves and what the club administrators expected of the coaches, which included professionalism, team leadership, technical expertise, and team administration. Further, several common expectations of what the sport club administrators were expected to provide to coaches were identified coach support, positive coaching environment, and coach development. Interestingly, the club administrators and coaches placed varying degrees of importance on these expectations. Club administrators also indicated that they perceived coaches to expect some degree of recognition, while the coaches themselves did not indicate this as a priority. The focus group findings revealed that coaches possess values-based expectations around creating a positive experience for participants, and the progression of youth through the sport and recreation system. Administrators echoed these expectations; however, the coaches and administrators’ discussion of the ability to meet these expectations differed to some degree.

The combined findings from this study extend our understanding of psychological contract theory in the volunteer context, specifically addressing a gap in understanding of ideological contract expectations in this context. The findings suggest that coaches and sport club administrators do possess transactional, relational, and ideological expectations that appear to be unique in the context of volunteer sport and recreation organizations. In investigating all three types of psychological contracts, a greater understanding of the interdependencies and conditions between these factors is understood. Further, the findings point to the degree of incongruence between volunteer coaches and their club administrators’ expectations. This has important implications as previous research indicates that unfulfilled psychological contracts have a significant impact on volunteers’ attitude and behaviour (Farmer & Fedor, 1999; Kim, Trail, Lim, & Kim, 2009; O’Donohue & Nelson, 2009; Starnes, 2007).