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# Making a big deal out of it: Understanding volunteer management through applying psychological contract theory

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### **Abstract**

The demands on volunteer-involving organisations are increasing - volunteers are expecting to give the gift of time in new, exciting and diverse ways. Mainstream volunteer management (VM) no longer seems adequate in meeting the range of challenges this presents.

The focus of this research was to explore how psychological contract (PC) theory can be applied to UK VM to meet this need. The study was based on a review of the PC literature pertinent to both HRM and VM, coupled with collecting data from 25 senior volunteer management practitioners.

This study concludes that the assumptions underlying PC theory are useful in both understanding and managing volunteering relationships. The explorative approach identified key differences between PCs in paid workers and volunteers. This research indicates a need for further exploration of those differences - particularly the notions of investment and values. This study also identifies the potential for practical VM guidance.

# Making a big deal out of it: Understanding volunteer management through applying psychological contract theory

*Shaun Delaney*

“While volunteering has played a prominent role in most societies throughout history, the current weight of expectation about the contribution it can make to individual development, social cohesion and addressing social need has never been greater - at a global, European and national level.” (Rochester et al., 2010, cover)

Focusing on 21<sup>st</sup> century volunteering, this quote discards an outdated, single perspective of volunteering arguing that “one size does not fit all” (Rochester et al., 2010, p.150) when it comes to volunteer management. An increasing body of research agrees (Meijs and Hoogstad, 2001; Netting et al., 2004; do Paço, Agostinho, and Nave, 2013), with new concepts in volunteering continuing to challenge modern volunteer managers. Despite this, good practice in volunteer management lacks consensus (Locke et al., 2003), remains narrowly focused (Zimmeck, 2009), or is eschewed completely (Rochester et al., 2010). This is despite the fact that “one in five organisations feel that difficulties in the recruitment or retention of volunteers will hold them back over the next three years” (Kane et al., 2009, p.82)

It is clear that volunteer managers are in need of a fresh perspective. Howlett (2010) suggests, the solutions to *volunteer management* (VM) problems may rest with *human resource management* (HRM) scholars. There is a developing body of research in the field of work psychology examining the concept of the *psychological contract* (PC). In 2002, 36 per cent of UK HRM practitioners claimed to use PC frameworks, with 90 per cent describing it as a useful concept (Guest and Conway, 2002). Since Pearce’s (1993) early work analysing the behaviour of unpaid workers, a number of empirical studies and critiques have since been published, showing keen interest in applying this concept to volunteering (Nichols, 2013).

This paper builds on this body of research by examining volunteering through *the lens of the psychological contract* to further understand and develop the application of current PC theory to UK volunteer management. This begins with a review of the literature to clarify current wider thinking in PC theory and how that theory has been related to volunteering. This paper builds on current research findings by exploring the features of current UK volunteer management practice, assessing the extent which PC theory may impact on practice. This was achieved via the collection and analysis

of empirical data from a number of volunteer-involving organisations. This paper concludes with recommendations for how PC theory can further advance VM research and practice.

## The Psychological Contract

The PC is a theoretical concept, useful in understanding behaviour at work (Conway and Briner, 2005) as well as being of practical use in modern HRM settings (Guest and Conway, 2002), however despite numerous explorative and critical reviews of what has become known as the PC framework, (Roehling, 1997; Conway and Briner, 2005; Cullinane and Dundon, 2006) there is still no fixed definition.

Argyris was the first to apply the concept to a work setting in 1960, formally using the phrase *psychological work contract* for the first time, identifying the work relationship as much social as it was economical (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006). PC research in the 1960's and 1970's tended to focus on the work *relationship*, including employees and employers seeking to meet mutual needs (Levinson et al., 1962), or processes of mutual bargaining and mutual expectation (Schein, 1965, as cited in Conway and Briner, 2005). Schein (1965, as cited in Conway and Briner, 2005) later postulated that withdrawal of effort in work relationships may arise due to violations of the contract, that although the display of employee relations issues may be more explicit, for example pay negotiations, the basis of dispute comes from the perceived breach of the mutual PC.

In 1989, Rousseau produced her article *Psychological and Implied Contracts in Organisations*, which was "the marking of a transition" in conceptualising PC theory (Roehling, 1997, p.212). Rousseau (1989, p.129) emphasises that a PC is in the "eye of the beholder", arguing that the PC was a *subjective experience* based on a perceived promise. As Rousseau describes it, "it is the individual's belief in an obligation of reciprocity that constitutes the contract", as opposed to the *relationship* between the individual and the organisation (Rousseau, 1989, p.124).

*Is the PC only in the eye of the beholder?*

Rousseau stated quite categorically "Individuals have PCs, organisations do not" (1989, p.126). Guest (1998) criticises Rousseau's approach, suggesting that the concept does not go far enough to examine the role of multiple agents acting as the organisation. From an organisational perspective, addressing the *multi-agent issue* may go some way in understanding the impact of management practices.

Research examining the volunteering relationship seems based on the assumption that the PC can be influenced by VM (Farmer and Fedor, 1999) and indeed, it is the responsibility of volunteer managers to understand and influence a volunteer's perception (Taylor et al., 2006; Starnes, 2007; Kim et al., 2009). The socially constructed nature of the PC means that a volunteer's perception can be influenced from a variety of sources. It may not always be a local volunteer manager in an organisation who has sole influence over a volunteers perceptions, but also the actions of other managers or agents (Taylor et al., 2006; Nichols and Ojala, 2009) raising the question of how a volunteer reconciles conflicting messages about expectations.

#### *Expectation, obligation or promise?*

Historically, descriptions of the PC have been based on expectation (Levinson et al., 1962), however Rousseau argues that any individual can hold expectations on a number of things without it being part of the PC. Rousseau defines PC content as belief based on a *promise* rather than expectation or obligation. Morrison and Robinson (1997) agree that while individuals often bring expectations from previous roles, this does not form part of the PC until a promise has been perceived. Guest (1998) however maintains that these expectations form the *basis* of the mutual reciprocal agreement and will therefore impact on the development of the PC.

The view that prior held expectations do not constitute a PC (Rousseau, 1989) seems to be supported by Farmer and Fedor (1999), noting that volunteers with unmet expectations early on in the volunteering relationship did not seek to withdraw their efforts. Ralston et al. (2004, p.20), propose that previous expectations do play a part in the PC; that "the contract begins when the application form is accepted" and if prior held expectations are not challenged or reinforced accordingly, they will be incorporated in to a PC and create the volunteer's measure for satisfaction from then on.

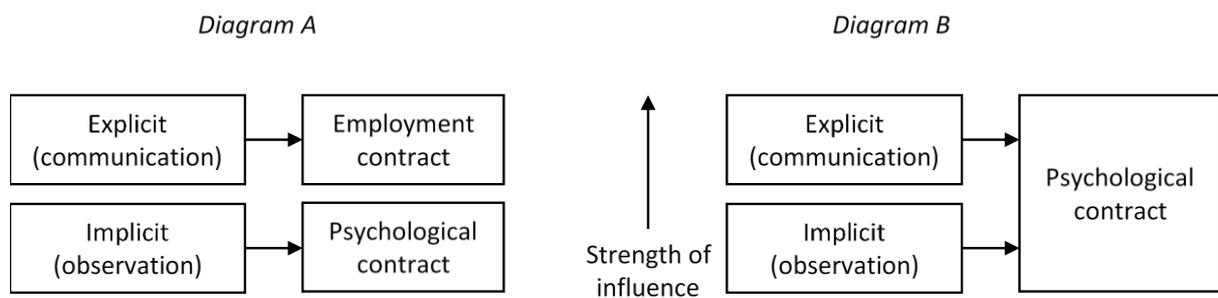
#### *Is the PC implicitly or explicitly developed?*

Assuming that a PC is based on perception of a promise (Rousseau, 1989), that perception may stem from either objective evidence such as a written document, or may be constructed by the individual interpreting their surroundings (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). Cullinane and Dundon (2006, p.121) identify that "trust and employer legitimacy" become problematic when interaction is based on unvoiced promises and expectation, indicating practical management of a PC is best achieved when moved in to an explicit realm (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995).

Studies examining management of the PC in volunteers appear to be fairly unanimous in that explicitness is an essential method in influencing a PC (Ralston et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2006; Starnes, 2007; Nichols and Ojala, 2009; O'Donohue and Nelson, 2009). Liao-Troth (2005, p.526) claims "it is the manager's responsibility to make sure that both parties are clear and in complete understanding".

A contrary view (e.g. Guest, 1998; Meckler, Drake and Levinson, 2003) however disagrees and assert that by making PCs explicit we are in fact managing a formal legal employment contract (see Figure 1. Diagram A). While this assertion may be applicable to employment relationships, there is no written legal contract in volunteering relationship (Restall, 2005). Research focusing on volunteering sees explicitness as essential to "clarify what the obligations of the organization and the entitlements of the volunteers are" (Liao-Troth, 2005, p.526) (see Figure 1. Diagram B).

Figure 1. Explicitness in managing psychological contracts.



*Is the PC based on transactions or relations?*

One area of research which has received a lot of attention is the *content* of the PC, meaning the units that are exchanged as part of the contact. MacNeil (1973) proposed the categorisation of transactional (tangible) and relational (socio-emotional) elements, which are now understood to be two different dimensions on which PC content can be assessed (Rousseau, 1995). Although there is still no universal agreement on how content should be measured (Freese and Schalk, 2008), content measures provide a useful way to articulate this otherwise abstract and potentially endless list of perceived promises (Herriot, Manning and Kidd, 1997).

The use of existing employment PC frameworks have been criticised as not reflective enough of the reality of the volunteering relationship (Nichols and Ojala, 2009). Specifically: that when compared to manager's perceptions, volunteers appear to identify more with relational PCs (Farmer and Fedor, 1999); that managers are more cognisant of transactional related obligations (Taylor et al., 2006;

Nichols and Ojala, 2009); and, there is a need to further explore a third dimension - that of a values or ideology-related PCs (O'Donohue and Nelson, 2009);

## Managing the Psychological Contract

The PC has been identified as a useful concept (Guest and Conway, 2002) in staff management, however the current literature offers little explanation as to how or why it is useful in a management setting. This researcher finds particular use in exploring Guest's (1998) suggested focus on investigating the *influences* on the PC; an employer's perspective "to assess the notion of mutual and reciprocal obligation" (*ibid.*, p.116). Only by assessing the organisations perspective can we understand the factors which may enhance or limit the organisation's ability to influence a PC.

Farmer and Fedor (1999) describe the PC concept as a *cross-cultural* and as such, justify its use in investigating VM. However, Nichols and Ojala (2009) highlight the difference between staff and volunteer management, including volunteers being freer to withdraw effort. Given this difference, they advocate a more sensitive exploration of PCs via qualitative methods, due to the individual, idiosyncratic nature of socially constructed PCs.

While recommended practice based on empirical findings is keenly sought and desperately needed by practitioners, it seems there is still some way to go before PC theory will provide a meaningful contribution to the field. This researcher is hopeful that, given the positive accolade that the concept was given by HRM practitioners (Guest and Conway, 2002), it will prove useful to volunteer managers too. In progressing this inquiry, a research agenda has been proposed (Nichols, 2013) which highlights the need for exploratory research based on qualitative methods.

## Research Methods

To further understand and develop the application of PC theory to VM, the empirical element of this study focused on the exploration and critical assessment of the features of a variety of UK VM practice against a PC framework.

Many previous approaches have focused on the measurement of PCs using an established *etic* framework which is believed to be independent of context (Rousseau and Tijoriwala, 1998). The research presented here adopts an *emic* approach through qualitative methodologies, essential for the 'exploration' of PC theory specific to a VM context and providing an opportunity for the collection of descriptive and explanatory data.

Data collection focused on a previously under-investigated group - those responsible for the management of volunteers. The study explores the *management* element of the PC, interpreting data alongside the participant in the context of their knowledge, qualification, experience, organisational culture and volunteer involvement context. In keeping with an interpretive, phenomenological approach, data was collected through qualitative interviews. The study utilised semi-structured interviews “to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspective. This kind of interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees’ lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.27).

The study sought participants via a purposive sampling strategy, targeting those who are more senior in position, bringing a wider organisational perspective covering governance and strategy as well as direct VM, and those who are cognisant of the many organisation’s agents who might impact on a volunteer’s PC. The primary group of participants were accessed via the National Network of Volunteer Involving Agencies (NNVIA), a network which brings together charitable organisations for whom volunteers are critical to the delivery of their missions and goals (CSV, 2014). To contrast with the primary group, a second sample was identified who had more focus on operational management of volunteers at a local level, with less specialised experience. This second sample was accessed through a single national volunteer involving organisation, Samaritans. This organisation has a replicated local VM model throughout the UK due to its federated structure (Samaritans, 2012). In total, 20 NNVIA participant and 5 Samaritans participants were interviewed.

Interviews were conducted over the telephone and interview notes were typed directly on to the interview guide during the interview. A copy of the notes was sent to the participant following the interview to view, amend or remove data they did not want to form part of the final report. As analysis in this study focuses on description and explanation and not a discourse or linguistic analysis, there was not a need to capture verbatim data. This researcher felt audio-recordings may also act as a barrier; that participants may not wish an audio record of their interview to exist, or may react against seeing a written interpretation of an oral discussion. 10 participants took the opportunity to make minor amendments to their reports.

Data collected through this study was analysed using a thematic analysis, with data collection and analysis themes set *a priori* across three cross-cutting elements: identification of an issue (PC content); how it is handled (management); and why (explanation). The interviewer also remained open to identifying emerging themes *post hoc*, introducing an element of inductive analysis. To aid

the participant, the interview was structured in the order of a volunteer journey from beginning, through ongoing management to ending the relationship.

While, methodologically speaking, the researcher will aim remove bias, as a qualitative piece of research generating socially constructed knowledge, reflexive objectivity is also key (Banister et al., 1997). As such, it is noted that the researcher is professionally known to many of the participants and works in the field of study.

## Survey Findings

The following section presents the findings of the research including background information on the participants and their organisations and the thematic analysis of the three stages of the volunteer journey (beginning, ongoing management and ending the relationship).

### *The organisations, volunteers and participants*

Of the 25 participants, five answered questions from the perspective of Samaritans. The remaining 20 participants in the general sample represented a wide variety of charitable organisations including; health; disability; social need; campaigning; animal welfare; conservation; and heritage. This sample provided a mix of organisations with single and multiple volunteering roles; long-term, short term and episodic roles; membership and non-membership roles; and, staff and volunteers managing volunteers. Volunteer headcount in participant's organisations ranged from 38 to 70,000 (n = 25, mean = 12,750, median = 6000). As five participants belonged to Samaritans and two further participants belonged to the same organisation, 19 distinct organisations were represented in the total sample. In total, this research draws on approximately 297 years of volunteer management experience with participant qualifications ranging from unqualified to studying volunteering at PhD level.

17 participants had not come across the PC concept before with three stating they had only come across it in passing. The five who were aware of the concept knew of it either from HRM training or staff management processes and find the concept useful in their work. There is no formal or consistent PC knowledge across the whole sample and the knowledge which does exist is almost exclusively HRM PC knowledge.

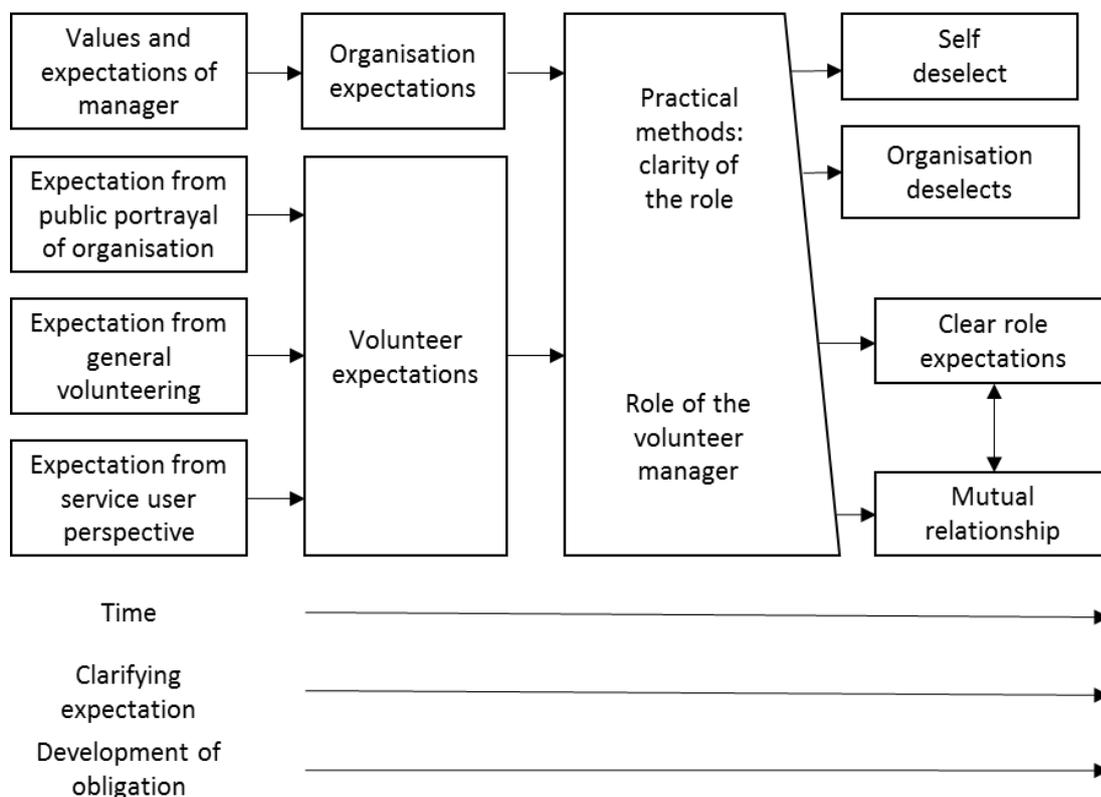
### *Beginning the volunteer journey*

Participants reflected on issues which stemmed from both organisational expectations and volunteer expectations. While organisational expectations came easily to participants, some

lamented that managers did not like saying no to volunteers; that it might go against their organisational ethos. This was particularly prevalent in organisations with membership structures or health-focused organisations where volunteers had prior personal experience of the condition. Participants described the sources of volunteer expectations as general trends in volunteering, the effect of the recruitment method, previous interactions with the organisation or the cause and the public image of the organisation.

Figure 2 summarises discussion with participants in the form of a recruitment flow. This has two underlying themes; actively *clarifying expectations* and *developing a sense of obligation*.

Figure 2. Graphical representation of recruitment flow as described by participants.



At the start of the journey, new volunteers bring pre-conceived expectations (Ralston et al., 2004) and early on, a decision is made by both parties on whether they feel these expectations can be met. If the answer is no, one party or another walks away (de-selection). Participants describe early de-selection as “kinder” and “easier”, supporting the idea that pre-conceived expectations do not form part of the PC (Morrison and Robinson, 1997; Kim et al., 2009). If both decide to continue the relationship, participants describe a process of aligning expectations. This is done by the volunteer manager in what Farmer and Fedor describe as “socialisation experiences” (1999, p.357). Liao-Troth (2005, p.526) describes this as creating a “particular type of psychological contract” which the

organisation prefers. Participants clearly advocate clarity and explicitness in embarking on this process, a view in keeping with the views of Herriot and Pemberton (1995). The closer this explicitness is aligned to the volunteer's personal expectation, the more fulfilled they are likely to be (Ralston et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2009). Participants describe that understanding the individual expectations or motivations of a volunteer as useful in trying to provide that fulfilment.

Participants also describe the "strength" of the relationship increasing, but many were not comfortable with the word "obligation" in a "heavy" or "contractual" sense. Instead, one participant described it as a sense of obligation "coming from within the volunteer" as opposed to being demanded from the organisation, discussing a metaphorical "deal" and that obligation only existed when the other party "kept their part of the bargain". Organisations felt they could encourage a deeper sense of commitment from volunteers not by requiring it, but by "investing" and it is that active *investment* that encourages active investment from the other party. A few participants noted "reward and recognition" as the alternative to the more legally contractual "obligation and intention" (Restall, 2005). This was articulated by one Samaritans participant: "we ask people to 'stay the course'"; as well as giving the organisation time to manage the volunteers' expectations, it invests further in the volunteer, developing a sense of reciprocal obligation. Whilst the role of *investment* has not been found in the literature, Ralston et al. describe the need to *build* a relationship by "validating trust that expectations will be fulfilled" (2004, p.24).

### *Ongoing management*

Participants observed four groups of issues regarding ongoing management: expectations change due to external factors; volunteer resists change; expectations grow in strength; and the volunteer develops undesirable expectations. The first two observed problems are no surprise. External factors are well documented as having an impact on an individual's ability to volunteer (Locke et al., 2003). Resistance to change is explained by a volunteer reacting negatively to a perceived breach of a promise - something which is discussed in PC literature (Conway and Briner, 2005). Participants generally felt that unless influenced, volunteers' expectations remain fairly fixed. Conversely, participants did feel the volunteers' expectations changed in strength, observed through a change in volunteers' behaviour. This was much more prevalent with longer serving volunteers. While participants noted the development of undesirable expectations, this wasn't due to a new expectation, but that a previously undetected (and therefore unmanaged) adverse expectation had "grown" to a level where it now caused problems.

Participants in the general sample felt these were due to management failures, either through not managing expectations early enough, or the “reinforcement” of behaviour. Although the word *reinforcement* was only used by one participant, most participants discussed impact of investment in reinforcing behaviour. Whilst investment was seen as positive in strengthening expectations and obligations, participants also described a darker side. This was when mutual investment encouraged volunteering to become a person’s “whole life”, or when investment from a volunteer manager (or peers in a membership structure) encourages extreme behaviour which the volunteer expects as OK. Figure 3 summarises how expectations may grow in strength.

Figure 3. Effect of ongoing investment over time.

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{Initial} & & \text{Ongoing} & & & & \text{Growth in strength of} \\ \text{expectation} & \times & \text{investment} & \times & \text{Time} & = & \text{perception of promise} \\ & & & & & & \text{to a potentially} \\ & & & & & & \text{unrealistic level} \end{array}$$

The initial expectation corresponds to certain promises which are interpreted by the volunteer (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). If we consider investment as a multiplier effect, and also take into account long service volunteers, the strength of the perceived promise grows.

This investment, however, may also reinforce undesirable behaviours, for example, the expectation to have ones voice heard at all times or the expectations that come with previously being a service user (O’Donohue and Nelson, 2009). Metaphorically, if an expectation is just two degrees off course at the start of a volunteer journey, reinforcing divergent expectations could add momentum to the volunteer developing irreconcilable expectations quite quickly. This perhaps relates back to a more pre-Rousseau (1989) discourse considering social exchange theory (Argyris, 1960) and investment as a coercive tool.

Participants generally agreed that the role of the volunteer manager was key in understanding the volunteer’s experience and managing that. Whereas the general sample identified “reluctance to manage” as a cause of divergent expectations, the Samaritans sample more noted the difficulties in having to implement organisational changes where volunteers “might not like it but we have to do it”. This highlights the difficult balance volunteer managers maintain in managing relationships and transactional exchanges.

### *The end of the journey*

Participants highlighted two key problems in their organisations which largely correspond to two of the factors described in the last section: either the strength of expectation grows to a point where the volunteer becomes unmanageable; or, the volunteer's and organisation's expectations of each other become so divergent, the relationship no longer functions.

Strength of expectation was a problem when volunteers became obsessive with the cause; that it had filled their whole life or they disagreed with a change in direction of the organisation. The feeling was that if it had got to this point, the problem had been allowed to escalate too far by the volunteer manager. Although a volunteer might not be upholding their end of the bargain, participants attribute this to the volunteer feeling as if "the rug is pulled out from under their feet" so no wonder they had become difficult to manage. Branch based organisations in particular note volunteers who transfer between branches struggle when the volunteer's strong expectations are not met by their new local branch.

When considering divergent expectations, participants summarised their desired management approach in three words: clear, early and consistent. For example, simply asking participants to receive or sign a document was not nearly enough to convey clarity and consistency of expectation. Participants also used phrases like "fair" relating to a consistent set of exchanges which both parties agreed to. This relates closely to equity theory, a precursor to social exchange theory which influenced early PC theory (Argyris, 1960).

Should volunteers choose to leave, participants felt they either left due to the volunteer manager, or the organisation. Most participants in the general sample felt that "[volunteers] don't leave organisations, they leave managers". This was explained either as managers not providing consistent, clear expectations from the start, or failing to meet those expectations once they had been established. Some participants, including more from the Samaritans sample, also described how volunteers expressed frustration with the wider organisation, and in particular, its approach to the cause. The role of values has also been suggested in PC literature as an area which needs further investigation (O'Donohue and Nelson, 2009). At present, there is no specific framework to explain why volunteers react so strongly to a violation of, what could be described as, the volunteer's expectation of how the organisation behaves towards service user. This can, however, be viewed as indicative of the multi-agent issue (Guest, 1998) and reminiscent of the model discussed by Taylor et al. (2006), identifying two key agents in an organisation.

## Conclusions

While there is no fixed definition of the PC, academic discussions provide a sound basis in understanding the issues around the theory. There are significant gaps in the understanding of PC theory relating to volunteering, providing a timely opportunity and a sturdy platform to investigate the application of the concept in this context. A variety of studies have examined the concept from different perspectives, as summarised by Nichols (2013) in his presentation of a new research agenda for this area.

This researcher agrees that there is enough of a difference between employment PCs and volunteering PCs to warrant a focus on qualitative or mixed research methods, seeking to *explore* the PC of volunteers further. In particular, this research focused on exploring four particularly stimulating areas of the concept: the role of the organisation in an otherwise subjective experience; the distinction between expectation, obligation and promise; the validity of explicitness; and, content measures.

Taking each of the four key elements of PC discourse in turn, firstly, the research participants comfortably engaged with the idea that expectations were in the eye of the beholder, however advocated mutual agreement through influencing that perception. The multi-agent issue was distilled across two influencers: the most important being the volunteer manager, with the second being the organisation perhaps making a more ideological influence. Secondly, participants provided clarification of the concept of *obligation* as being separate from UK employment law, however preferred to discuss *strengthened expectation* over *promise*, and noted the importance of parties choosing not to enter a relationship. The research proposed a model for how expectation could be strengthened through investment, with both positive and disastrous consequences. Thirdly, in the argument of explicitness, findings fully advocate open, explicit clarity in influencing PCs. Lastly, while thematic analysis of findings didn't draw out discussions on the dominant view of contract content, it did identify with the concept of values and ideology as a potential third dimension specific to volunteering involvement.

As a piece of explorative, qualitative research, this paper does not assume that its findings are representative of all UK VM practitioners. The efforts to draw on the knowledge and experience of a number of practitioners was to increase reliability findings. In doing so, this study has concluded that the PC is a useful concept in understanding and developing VM approaches. The true value of this research is that it has demonstrated the applicability of an underlying concept useful in aiding volunteer managers to develop meaningful solutions to their unique problems, in a time when

volunteering is changing and a single “best” practice may no longer be as relevant when dealing with volunteers.

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