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## Low-status expatriates in the United Arab Emirates: a psychological contract perspective

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### ABSTRACT



This study examines the psychological contracts held by expatriates with low socioeconomic status. We develop and test a moderated mediation model that examines the direct relationship between organisational support and intention to leave *via* the mediating role of psychological contract fulfilment. We also examine the moderating role of transactional psychological contracts on this indirect relationship in a sample of 108 low-status expatriates in the United Arab Emirates. Our results validate the assumptions made in psychological contract theory on the direct effect of organisational support and contract fulfilment. However, contrary to our expectations, the findings revealed a positive relationship between contract fulfilment and intention to leave. We discuss the implications of these mixed results for theory and practice.

### KEYWORDS

Low-status expatriates;  
socioeconomic status;  
psychological contract;  
UAE

## Introduction

To date, an estimated 272 million people globally reside in a country different from the one in which they were born (IOM, 2020). Around two-thirds of these people are labour migrants (ILO, 2019). More specifically, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that around 164 million individuals are migrant workers, an increase of 9% over the previous seven years (ILO, 2019). International relocation of these individuals is valuable to host countries because they are in their most productive life stage, and in many cases to their home countries, where they remit some of their earnings (World Bank, 2018). The Covid-19 pandemic showed how essential these workers are to societies. However, such workers always were essential, and, despite the talent management ‘industry’, it is their work that keeps societies functioning.

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The pandemic made apparent how much societies depends on the people who couldn't stay safe at home, even if they had wanted to. For example, workers in the agricultural field, delivery workers, cleaners and carers risked their own lives to ensure society continued to operate, albeit in a changed format. Many of these workers are foreigners: low-status immigrants and self-initiated expatriates. The management of low-status expatriates is a relevant issue, and we need a better understanding of the factors influencing their employment relations.

Much of the existing international human resource management (IHRM) literature on international mobility focuses on high-skilled assigned expatriates, despite the presence of a broad range of expatriates (Cooke et al., 2019; O'Donohue et al., 2018). Recent research on IHRM has begun to address the management challenges associated with wider heterogeneity among the international workforce (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; McNulty & Brewster, 2017). In this context, the literature on expatriation indicates that social status, related to nationality (Bader et al., 2017), gender (Haak-Saheem et al., 2021), or sexual orientation (McPhail et al., 2016), are salient and relevant categories of identification and distinction. Although status is a profound dimension of social life (Durkheim, 1802; Kohn, 1989; Manstead, 2018) little attention has been given to the factors shaping expatriates' status within the social hierarchy in the host country. Recent studies have begun to explore diversity (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Guo et al., 2020; Szkudlarek et al., 2019) and categories such as the low-status expatriates at the base of the pyramid (Haak-Saheem & Brewster, 2017; Holtbrügge, 2021; Özçelik et al., 2019).

As with other kinds of employment relationship, the potential explanatory power of psychological contracts provides a useful framework to further our understanding (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Sherman & Morley, 2018). For example, McNulty et al. (2013) use psychological contract theory to explain expatriate return on investment, and Aldossari and Robertson (2016) explore Saudi Arabian managers' perceptions of psychological contract breach during repatriation. However, the role of status in exchange relationships has received relatively little attention, despite the necessity of understanding both person and situation while examining psychological contract perceptions (Turnley & Feldman, 1999).

Factors affecting the formation of employee psychological contract beliefs (Rousseau, 1995) include education or income and organisational support. However, in the context of expatriation, there has been an implicit assumption that the entire population of expatriates exhibits uniform characteristics and responds to psychological contracts in similar ways. We challenge this perception by using the socio-economic status perspective to examine the psychological contracts of low-status

expatriates. Socio-economic status (hereafter, 'status') is defined in terms of individuals' economic position and educational attainment, relative to others, as well as their occupation (Kraus et al., 2012; Easterbrook et al., 2020).

Low-status expatriates are generally from developing countries. They are economically driven workers, seeking better incomes to support their families in their home countries, or looking for a better life (Haak-Saheem, 2016). In general, those individuals are only allowed to stay in the host country for a limited period of time and are employed in menial or manual jobs. They often occupy essential or life-sustaining professions, such as hospital cleaning personnel or care workers.

We focus on their psychological contract, defined as the employee's beliefs, shaped by the organisation, regarding the terms of engagement agreed between individual and the organisation (Karagonlar et al., 2016; Guest & Conway 1997; Rousseau, 1995). The psychological contracts of this group of workers have not hitherto been examined and, since their working conditions and contracts differ significantly from other expatriate groups, any assumption that evidence from higher status groups may apply to them requires testing. Stephens and colleagues highlighted the ways in which social status is shaped by the context of work. We argue that the perceptions of low-status expatriates might differ from other groups of employees and examine the effects of organisational support on psychological contracts, their fulfilment and intention to leave among low-status expatriates in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Given the enduring influence of distinctive historical, cultural and institutional factors on HRM in different societal contexts, further research that is sensitive to contextual settings would help us understand what types of (indigenous) HRM practices are implemented, how they are perceived by employees, and what effects they may have on employee well-being (Cooke et al., 2020).

We make three contributions to the psychological contract and expatriation literatures. First, we provide an assessment of the psychological contracts of low-status expatriates, balancing the explorations of expatriate psychological contracts for managers and other high-status individuals, following calls to examine expatriate psychological contracts in specific business and industry contexts, locations, and business and individual differences (Pate & Scullion, 2009). We identify reasons why low-status expatriates may differ in terms of their psychological contract experience and propose that these will explain differences in psychological contract fulfilment and intention to leave.

Second, we provide evidence of the importance of transactional psychological contracts for low-status expatriates. Whilst the relational psychological contract focuses on long-term employment relations with job

security in exchange for commitment (Rousseau, 1995), transactional psychological contracts emphasize economically driven short-term relationships between employers and employees (Millward & Brewerton, 2000; Coyle-Shapiro, 2002). Accordingly, monetary incentives are core elements of transactional psychological contracts (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2006). Given the nature of the employment contracts of low-status expatriates, in which obligations and benefits are clearly defined, we argue that transactional psychological contract provides a more adequate perspective to examine this relationship.

Third, we examine the role of organisational practices in low-status expatriate psychological contracts. Organisational support can impact perceived psychological contract fulfilment (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Bal et al., 2013), but this relationship has hitherto not been examined for low-status expatriates. Our study shows that organisational practices are important for psychological contracts and, subsequently shape low-status expatriates' intention to leave.

The paper takes the following form: we outline the relevant literatures on expatriation, psychological contracts, organisational support, and fulfilment of obligations and intention to leave. We note prior work in the field of expatriates and psychological contracts in the UAE and other Arab Gulf countries. From this literature we develop a set of hypotheses. We outline our methodology for testing these hypotheses, present the results and discuss how they both challenge and contribute to our understanding. Finally, we draw conclusions for practice, theory, and future research.

### **Socioeconomic status, expatriation and psychological contracts**

Social hierarchy is pervasive across societies and cultures (Fiske, 1992; Rai & Fiske, 2011), reflected in status, through which societies rank individuals based on their access to both symbolic and tangible resources such as wealth, education, and occupation (Manstead, 2018). Status is a system of stratification, in which individuals are ranked based on access to material and social resources (Durkheim, 1802; Manstead, 2018; Weber, 1968). Higher status individuals tend to be better educated, wealthier, occupy more prestigious jobs, and rate themselves higher on social status (Adler et al., 2000).

It seems likely being lower status impacts these expatriates' views and experiences (Shah et al., 2012), meaning that they developed specific mental schemas and expectations about the world they live and work in (Lub, Bal, Blomme & Schalk, 2016). These different mental schemas and expectations are likely to affect their psychological contracts.

### ***Low-status expatriates in the Arabian Gulf countries***

Low-status expatriates in the Arabian Gulf arrive in the host country with poor educational backgrounds, the lowest incomes among the entire workforce and are employed in manual and menial jobs (Holtbrügge, 2021). By contrast, the traditional, typically privileged white, male, highly educated expatriates are associated with high incomes, generous living standards and high status and employed as managers or technical specialists. In the Arab Gulf States, low-status, or 'hidden' expatriates (Haak-Saheem & Brewster, 2017) work, for example, as labourers in the construction industry, as security guards or as maids or nannies. It is estimated that 17.8 million low-status workers are employed in the Gulf States, many of them from countries such as India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Ethiopia, and Ghana (ILO, 2019). The six Gulf States host around 10% of the world's low-status expatriates: Saudi Arabia and the UAE host the 4th and 5th largest groups of low-status expatriates globally (ILO, 2019). Remittances from these countries by low-status expatriates back to their families at home rank second and third globally after remittances from the USA (World Bank, 2018). Many of these low-status expatriates are exposed to inferior or exploitative conditions of employment (Alberti et al., 2013). Often they are considered as vulnerable workers (Connell & Burgess, 2013) at the bottom of the pyramid (Simanis & Milstein, 2012), a reality highlighted by the pandemic (ILO, 2021).

Often, the relocation of low-status expatriates is coordinated by agencies, as individuals lack the knowledge to complete paperwork and health check-ups. Such agencies identify potential candidates in their home environment and offer them work. There is little or no room for contract negotiations due to the job seekers personal and financial situations. They accept whatever the agencies offer. Often, they are lied to in terms of the nature of the job or the amount of the wage. Once they arrive in the host country, an agency finalizes their work arrangements, and the individual can then start work. As the services of the agencies are not free of charge, expatriates often take on loans from family members or friends to pay the fees.

They are 'hidden' not just from academics; they are also out of the eyeline of policymakers and managers in the host and home countries. In the UAE, low-status expatriates are exposed to poorer working conditions than other groups of expatriates, which impacts on their work outcomes and personal well-being (Haak-Saheem & Brewster, 2017). Their employment relationship is mainly shaped by the fact that they 'do as they are told' and have limited possibilities for professional or personal development. Their ethnicity, and their low pay and skill level,



create segregation between these workers and expatriates in better jobs and the local population. Often, they live in accommodations assigned to them in segregated districts (labour camps). Overall, the distinctive characteristics and context of low-status expatriates raise many theoretical questions for psychological contract and IHRM scholars and specialists. Using a psychological contract perspective allows us to shed light on the nuances of the content and character of these employment relationships. Table 1 summarizes how educational attainment, income, and occupation is manifested in the differences between high-status and low-status expatriates in the context of the UAE.

### ***Psychological contract of expatriates***

An employee's psychological contract compares the inducements employees believe the organisation has promised to provide them with, such as pay and training, with the contributions and actions they are expected to offer in return (Ng & Feldman, 2012; Rousseau & Greller, 1994). The organisation provides structural signals that play a role in creating an employee's psychological contract, such as formal compensation systems, benefits, performance reviews and promotions, training opportunities and mission statements (Karagonlar et al., 2016; Rousseau, 1990). While the implementation of a particular organisational practice is an objective fact (e.g., training is offered or not), employee perceptions of the fulfilment (or breach) of the obligation are more subjective (Guzzo et al., 1994); *psychological* contracts consist of individuals' beliefs or perceptions rather than any objective reality (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). The discrepancy between promised and received inducements may lead to intense negative feelings (Caligiuri et al., 2001; Woodrow & Guest, 2020). Rousseau (1998) argued that an employee's perception of the extent to which the organisation fulfils its obligations has the most

**Table 1.** Socio-economic characteristics.

Socio-economic status characteristics:	High-Status expatriates	Low-status expatriates	Implications in the context of the UAE
Educational attainment	Often high: educated in Western countries	Often limited: educated in poor countries	Unlikely for low-status expatriates to obtain formal education in UAE
Economic position (income)	High/middle income	Low-income	Almost impossible for low-income individuals to move to middle income group; never to high income group
Occupational status	Managerial and technical specialists	Manual and menial roles	Occupation determines treatment, by institutions and individuals

profound effect on work-related attitudes and behaviour and Caligiuri and colleagues (2001) found evidence of that. Implicit agreements, conveyed through HRM practices or organisational statements (Rousseau & Parks, 1993), are particularly vulnerable to this construal process.

Thomas and colleagues (2016) note that cultural values shape a psychological contract and its fulfilment. Research on the psychological contracts of expatriates has focused on the high-status mobile workforce, such as assigned expatriates (Suutari et al., 2018). That literature highlights the importance of the psychological contract as a schema of the expatriate-employer relationship shaped by ambiguous or incomplete information (Haslberger & Brewster, 2009). For example, Faeth and Kittler (2020) review expatriates living and working in 'hostile environments' and suggest that organisations providing support are likely to achieve positive work attitudes among their workforce (Bader, 2015; De Ruiter et al., 2018). Although, our understanding has been advanced regarding psychological contracts of different types of business expatriates (see e.g. Pate & Scullion, 2018). Most of this literature, however, has focused on high-status expatriates and their global careers (Lazarova et al., 2021)

We provide empirical evidence on how individual factors, such as status, contextual factors, or social hierarchy, influence the psychological contract of low-status expatriates. Given their overwhelmingly economic drivers, we suggest that low-status expatriates are likely to emphasise the transactional element of psychological contracts, referring to arrangements that are based on short term and financial relationships. McLean Parks and colleagues (1998) argued that whether a psychological contract is seen in relational or transactional perspective is associated with the type of employee and this was confirmed by empirical studies, showing that short-term contract holders perceive their psychological contract as narrower (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Van Dyne & Ang, 1998) and more transactional (Millward & Brewerton, 2000) than permanent employees. Hence, low-status expatriates, who almost by definition have short-term contracts, may perceive their psychological contract as transactional rather than relational (Millward & Hopkins, 1998).

### ***Hypothesis development***

The extant literature (see e.g. Guzzo et al., 1994; Pate & Scullion, 2009; Sherman & Morley, 2018) does not form a coherent thematic body of research that HRM scholars and management practitioners can use to improve their expatriation management practices and policies (O'Donohue et al., 2015). We know that the expatriate psychological contract has undergone changes (Minssen & Wehling, 2011) but the literature remains

inconsistent (Guo & Al Ariss, 2015). Moreover, there is limited understanding of the ways in which status influences expatriates' psychological contracts and contract fulfilment.

Given the nature of the employment conditions of low-status expatriates, we argue that existing research on the psychological contract of expatriates requires a more nuanced approach if it is to capture their perspectives.

We expect that the views of individual employees on their employers' practices and policies shape their judgment on whether obligations have been delivered (Conway & Briner, 2005). The provision of organisational support, assessed at both organisational (Sonnenberg et al., 2011) and individual (Guest & Conway, 1997) level, is associated with individual level perceptions of psychological contract fulfilment. Given the characteristics of low-status expatriates in terms of their education, income, and occupation, they may rely on organisational support. This is because many workers of this type are employed with limited legal protection, as they are excluded from the scope of the Federal Labour Law (Ministry of Human Resources & Emiratization, 2020), work for excessively long hours with little pay or no pay and have limited access to health and social protection (Özçelik et al., 2019). They arrive in the host country with limited or no knowledge about the country, its culture or people, often coming from rural areas in their home countries. Life in a dynamic and busy modern city like Dubai can be overwhelming and a source of stress and anxiety. Unlike high-status expatriates with social support for themselves and their families, language training, and opportunities for socialization and career advancement (Kumarika Perera et al., 2017) low-status expatriates are often unaware even of the process of obtaining a resident visa or arranging transportation to and from work. In addition, most of them do not speak the local language and their levels of their English may not be so good (English is sufficient in the UAE, given that the majority of the population consists of foreigners). They depend almost entirely on assistance and support from their employers for basic necessities. Consequently, we argue that:

Hypothesis 1: Organisational support is positively related to psychological contract fulfilment

Where employees believe that the organisation has delivered upon its commitments, they are more likely to uphold their side of the deal (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000) and to develop feelings of trust in the relationship towards the employer (Conway & Briner, 2005). In such situations, employees exhibit increased levels of commitment and intention to stay with the employing organisation (Woodrow & Guest, 2020). We expect perceived psychological contract fulfilment to engender

intentions to stay with the current employer amongst low-status expatriates. Given the social hierarchy in the UAE (Haak-Saheem, 2016), low-status expatriates have little chance of moving between jobs or climbing the career ladder. They are bound to their employers. Therefore, they might be grateful if employers deliver on their expectations. We therefore posit the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Psychological contract fulfilment is negatively related to intention to leave

These hypotheses combine to form a mediation model. Although attention has been devoted to psychological contract breach (Kumarika Perera et al., 2017), psychological contract fulfilment remains a relatively under-research area in the literature on expatriation, particularly with regard to how it might affect the underlying process through which organisational support interacts with intention to leave. We hypothesise that it is more likely that organisational support is positively related to psychological contract fulfilment (H1), which in turn will be negatively related to intention to leave (H2) Thus, we expect an indirect relationship between organisational support and intention to leave *via* the mediating role of fulfilment. We therefore suggest:

Hypothesis 3: Psychological contract fulfilment mediates the relationship between organisational support and intention to leave.

As outlined above, low-status expatriates' international relocation is mainly driven by financial incentives. Unlike high-status expatriates, they do not expect career advancement as an outcome of their time in the UAE. Their main goal is to provide a better future for themselves and their families (Haak-Saheem et al., 2021). The focus on the transactional psychological contract might also affect the relationship between organisational practices and fulfilment. Consequently, we predict that organisational support will be most effective in engendering perceptions of fulfilment when the psychological contract terms are relatively simple and explicit, as in the case of transactional contracts (Connell & Burgess, 2013), and propose:

Hypothesis 4: The positive relationship between organisational support and psychological contract fulfilment is moderated by transactional psychological contracts, such that the relationship is stronger when contracts are highly transactional.

Since we hypothesise that transactional psychological contracts will moderate the relationship between organisational support and psychological contract fulfilment, we expect transactional psychological

contracts to conditionally influence the strength of the indirect relationship between organisational support and intention to leave *via* the mediating role of fulfilment. We therefore predict a moderated mediation model involving these variables, as shown in [figure 1](#), and make the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: The indirect effect of organisational support on intention to leave via the mediating role of psychological contract fulfilment is stronger when psychological contracts are highly transactional, indicating moderated mediation.

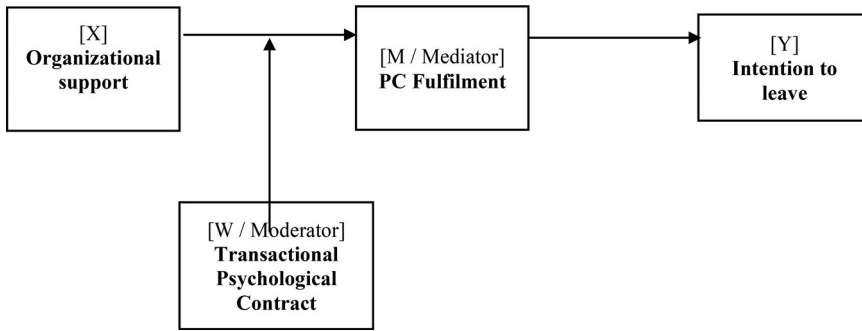
## Methodology

### *Research site and sample*

In the emerging economies, rapid economic growth has both increased their importance as a destination for expatriates whilst contributing to the changing nature of expatriation. Rapid economic growth the UAE, and other Gulf States, has led to heavy dependence on a supply of foreign expatriates (Connell & Burgess, 2013, Haak-Saheem, 2016; Haak-Saheem & Brewster, 2017). This dominance of the international workforce in the Arab Gulf countries constitutes a unique environment, with the most disproportionate ratio of ‘nationals’ to ‘expatriates’ anywhere in the world (Harry, 2007; Rees et al., 2007). The workforce across the Gulf countries mainly consists of foreign employees, ranging from a low of approximately 50% of the total population in Bahrain and Oman, to a high of more than 90% in the UAE and Qatar (Ewers, 2016). In the UAE nationals are a small minority in their home country (UAE, 2020). The disparity is even more significant in the private sector, where almost 99% of employees are expatriates (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014).

Given the nature of the workforce, the majority of employees have expatriate status with residence visas connected to their employment contracts and employers who act as sponsors. Unionism and collective bargaining do not exist. Loss or ending of the fixed-term employment or withdrawal of a residence permit means that the individual must leave the country.

Given our hypotheses, we approached low-status expatriates and respondents who agreed to participate and were able to read and understand the language of the survey instrument (English). English is common in many of the labour supplying countries, such as India or Uganda, due to their British colonial histories, and it being the *lingua franca* of the country. Nevertheless, we note that this language restriction may have limited the scope of our survey. Further, low-status expatriates often avoid participation in surveys because they are aware of their vulnerable and fragile situations and want to avoid upsetting their



**Figure 1.** Research model.

employers by disclosing employment and personal details that might lead to their jobs being placed at risk. To reduce any such concerns, we approached people outside their working hours and outside their workplaces. Snowball sampling, a respondent-driven method, was used to reach our target population. We used initial respondents as references to find other respondents. One of the authors has lived and worked in the UAE for many years and had ‘insider’ knowledge about this population (Adhikari & Bryant, 2018) and, to assist respondents to complete the survey (for example, clarifying questions), that author was present during questionnaire completion. The data collection process lasted for about 12 months.

The final sample included 108 respondents. These hidden expatriates work in positions such as housemaids, drivers, beauty technicians or construction workers. Their monthly income ranges from AED 600–AED 4000 (approximately from \$165–\$1100). Ages ranged from 18 to 54 years, with mean age of 29 years, and 57% identified as male. 40% of participants had been in their host country more than ten years, and 65% indicated that they planned to stay for a further ten years.

## **Measures**

### ***Organisational support***

All expatriates in the UAE, by law, must have an employment contract, and respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which management practices provided by their employing agency are valued. Organisational support was operationalized on a 5-point scale with 4 items (Festing & Müller, 2008). Example items on organisational support are ‘This company offers fair compensation packages for expatriates’ or ‘This company provides excellent services to its expatriates.’ The alpha reliabilities were .89 for the ‘organisational-support’ scale.

### *Transactional psychological contracts*

Transactional psychological contract elements were measured by the scales used by Raja et al. (2004), which represent a shortened version of the scale initially developed by Millward and Hopkins (1998). The contract assessment was based on 9 items. An example question was 'My commitment to this organisation is defined by my contract'. Alpha reliability was 0.71.

### *Psychological contract fulfilment*

Psychological contract fulfilment was measured by one item (Millward & Hopkins, 1998). On a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very poorly fulfilled) to 5 (fulfilled very well), respondents were asked to assess how well perceived organisational obligations had been fulfilled by their employer.

### *Intention to leave*

Intention to leave was measure using one item (Festing & Müller, 2008). Respondents were asked whether they were planning to change their employer. This item was coded dichotomously (0 = no; 1 = yes)

### *Analysis*

Descriptive statistics and correlations for study measures are shown in Table 2. Hypotheses were tested using the Process Macro for SPSS (version 3.5; Hayes, 2018). This method tests for the strength of the indirect effect of the predictor variable (organisational support) on the outcome variable (intention to leave) *via* the mediating variable (psychological contract fulfilment); it does not require that there is a direct effect of the predictor variable on the outcome variable as a prerequisite for mediation to be observed (see Preacher & Hayes, 2004, for a full explanation).

**Table 2.** Study variables, descriptives and intercorrelations.

Variable	Mean (SD)	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Organizational support	3.76 (0.97)	0.89						
2 Transactional PC	3.89 (0.50)	0.71	0.45**					
3 PC fulfilment	4.23 (0.78)	–	0.27**	0.40**				
4 Intention to leave	–	–	0.00	0.02	0.30**			
5 Age	29.10 (8.20)	–	0.03	0.13	0.01	0.13		
6 Gender	–	–	–0.02	0.19	0.18	0.07	0.17	
7 <5 years spent in host country	–	–	–0.75	0.14	0.04	–0.26**	–0.18	0.13

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

To test all hypotheses within the Process macro, we ran a series of models. First, in model one, psychological contract fulfilment was regressed on organisational support, to test Hypothesis 1. This model used an ordinarily least squares regression analysis. In model two, intention to leave was regressed on psychological contract fulfilment, to test Hypothesis 2. This model used a logistic regression analysis. A total indirect effect was measured by computing the product of the a and b paths. This was examined *via* an inferential test using 5000 bootstrap samples, to assess Hypothesis 3. We then ran the models again, this time including the moderating variable, in order to test Hypotheses 4 and 5. Hypothesis 4 was assessed by examining the relationship between organisational support and psychological contract fulfilment at three different levels of transactional psychological contract (the mean value, and one standard deviation above and below this). Hypothesis 5, concerning moderated mediation, was assessed by calculating the index of moderated mediation, which involves assessing the probability that the weight of the moderator in the indirect effect function is significantly different from zero (following Hayes, 2018). Predictor and moderator variables were centred prior to analysis. The findings for the OLS regression analysis used in model one are presented as standardised regression coefficients, whereas the findings for the logistic regression analysis used in model two are presented as log odds metrics.

In each model, the following control variables were used: age; gender; and years spent working in the host country. We controlled for age because it has been suggested that it may be significantly associated with the experience of psychological contract breach (Ng & Feldman, 2012). We controlled for gender because there is some evidence of gender difference in intentions to leave (e.g. Blomme et al., 2010). Years spent in the host country was included as a control variable because of its, *prima facie*, likely association with intention to leave. As Table 2 shows, this variable is significantly correlated with intention to leave in our dataset.

## Findings

Table 3 details the findings from the simple mediation analysis involving organisational support, fulfilment and intention to leave. As the findings for model one demonstrate, the analysis reveals that organisational support is positively associated with fulfilment ( $B=0.22$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Hypotheses 1 is therefore supported. Turning to model two, psychological contract fulfilment is significantly and positively associated with intention to leave ( $B=1.00$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). This relationship occurs in the opposite direction to that predicted by Hypothesis 2, which is therefore not supported.



**Table 3.** Results of simple mediation analysis.

	Model 1 PC fulfilment <i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Model 2 Intention to leave <i>Log odds</i> ( <i>SE</i> )
<b>Predictor</b>		
Independent variables		
Org. support	0.22 (0.08)**	-0.24 (0.25)
PC fulfilment	-	1.00 (0.31)**
Model statistics		
R <sup>2</sup>	0.11*	-
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	-	0.23

\* $p < 0.05$ .\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

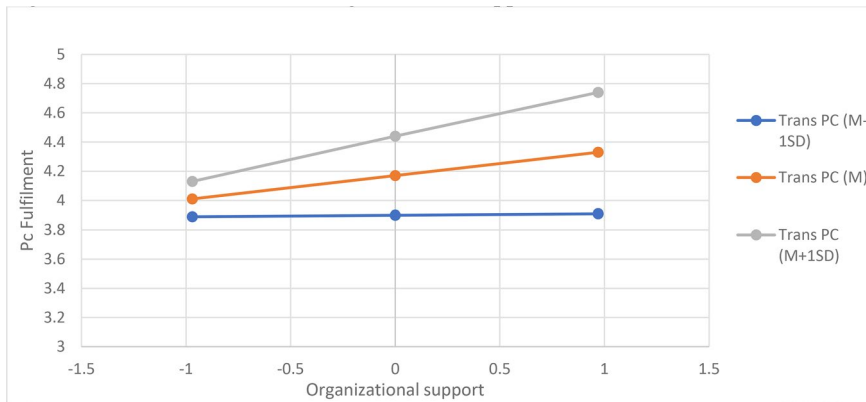
Bootstrapping techniques are suitable for small sample sizes (Sheather, 2009) and provide more accurate inferences in such cases than other methods (Fox, 2015). Bootstrapping analysis of the indirect effect between organisational support, fulfilment and intention to leave reveals that the strength of the effect is significantly different to 0 at the 95% confidence level ( $B = 0.22$ , 95% CI = 0.06, 0.53). Hypothesis 3, which predicted an indirect effect, is therefore supported. However, as noted above, the relationship in the *b* pathway of the mediation model was in the opposite direction to that which was expected: we hypothesised that fulfilment would be negatively related to intention to leave, whereas the analysis revealed a positive relationship.

Table 4 shows the findings from the moderated mediation analysis. This analysis involved repeating the mediation analysis with transactional psychological contracts (the moderator) and an interaction term added as predictors at step two. This interaction term emerged as a significant predictor of fulfilment in model one ( $B = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). We then examined the relationship between organisational support and psychological contract fulfilment at three levels of transactional psychological contracts (the mean and  $\pm 1$  SD). Organisational support was not a significant predictor of psychological contract fulfilment at low ( $B = -0.01$ , 95% CI = -0.17, 0.19) or mid ( $B = 0.16$ , 95% CI = -0.01, 0.34) levels of transactional psychological contract, but becomes highly significant at high levels ( $B = 0.32$ , 95% CI = 0.06, 0.57). Hypothesis 4, concerning the moderating role of transactional psychological contracts, is therefore supported. The relationships are plotted graphically in Figure 2.

To assess Hypothesis 5, concerning the overall moderated mediation model, we examined the index of moderated mediation ( $B = 0.30$ , 95% CI = 0.02, 0.91). This indicates that moderated mediation occurred, as the overall effect is significantly different from 0 at the 95% confidence level. To examine the moderated mediation more closely, we calculated the conditional indirect effect of organisational support on intention to leave at three levels of transactional psychological contract (the mean and  $\pm 1$  SD). There was no significant indirect relationship between

**Table 4.** Results of moderated mediation analysis.

	Model 1 PC fulfilment <i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Model 2 Intention to leave <i>log-odds</i> ( <i>SE</i> )
<b>Predictor</b>		
Independent variables		
Org. support	0.16 (0.09)	-0.24 (0.25)
PC fulfilment	-	1.00 (0.31)**
Transactional PC	0.54 (0.16)**	-
Org. support x Transactional PC	0.30 (0.14)*	-
Model statistics		
R <sup>2</sup>	0.22**	
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	-	0.23

\* $p < 0.05$ .\*\* $p < 0.01$ .**Figure 2.** Conditional effects of Organizational support on PC fulfilment at three levels of Transactional PC.

organisational support and intention to leave at low ( $B=0.01$ , 95% CI =  $-0.18$ ,  $0.27$ ) or mid ( $B=0.16$ , 95% CI =  $-0.02$ ,  $0.58$ ) levels of transactional psychological contract, but the indirect effect became significant at high levels ( $B=0.31$ , 95% CI =  $0.03$ ,  $0.99$ ). Taken together, these findings indicate that Hypothesis 5, concerning moderated mediation, is supported. Again, it must be noted here that the relationship between fulfilment and intention to leave occurred in the opposite direction to that predicted.

The only control variable that emerged as a significant predictor in the analysis was number of years already spent in the host country, where having spent less than five years in the country was significantly negatively associated with intention to leave ( $B = -1.35$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

## Discussion

The situation of the extensive number of expatriates with poor education, low income and low-status occupations, and their employment

relationships, remains under-researched. Our study is another contribution to the growing scholarly work on low-status expatriates, in this case aiming to advance our understanding of their psychological contracts and, in particular, to consider the role of organisational support, contract fulfilment and a perceived transactional contract in influencing intention to leave. Our findings reveal that, for these expatriates, organisational support leads to perceived psychological contract fulfilment, which in turn predicts intentions to leave. Additionally, this indirect relationship was strongest for those with highly transactional psychological contracts. Our empirical evidence advances our understanding on managing low-status expatriates in several ways.

First, this study confirms that organisational support is relevant to perceived contract fulfilment for low-status expatriates. As expected, low-status expatriates are in great need for assistance and support in the host country. Organisational support is of particular importance, because these individuals often arrive in a new country with limited or no international experience, limited English language skills, and an unfamiliarity with the cultural and institutional set-up. Other than their employer, they have few resources to turn to. Although this is a different population, our finding is in line with previous research (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005), confirming that organisational support is critical to psychological contract fulfilment. This is an important insight as it advances our understanding of the process of managing low-status expatriates. Given their circumstances, low-status expatriates value the help they can get from the organisations. It is perhaps something of a surprise to find that despite their often-poor working conditions, especially by comparison with the high-status expatriates or the local employees they see around them, they are in general satisfied with the fulfilment of their psychological contract. We think this can be explained by their socioeconomic status and their reference group: because they are focused on their families and on earning money to send, as remittances, back to their families, they compare their situation in the UAE not to local citizens or other expatriates but to their former situation in the developing countries they come from. They appreciate the opportunity to earn a salary considerably larger than they could have done back home.

Second, contrary to our expectations and previous studies (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson, 1996; Robinson et al., 1994), we found that amongst this group psychological contract fulfilment was positively related to intention to leave. This finding needs to be viewed in light of the unusual employment situation of these low-status expatriates. They are on fixed term contracts and their ability to stay in the country is linked to their employer. Their ability to seek out and move to another

job is strictly limited, and depends on their employers' agreeing; however, most of them want to stay on in the country even after the end of their current contract and that may require a change of employer. The fulfilment of psychological contracts that tend to be on transactional terms may provide this specific group of workers with the confidence to look for other employment and to build up the resources and support required to switch employers. Paradoxically, 'intent to leave' may in these cases be translated as intent to stay working in the same country.

Third, taking into account the context of low-status expatriates, the effects of years in the host country on intention to leave offers novel insights to our current understanding. As outlined above, low-status expatriates start working in the UAE with high degree of uncertainty: they have to adapt without necessarily being able to speak any of the spoken languages to a good level and they will experience discrimination and exclusion because of their status. Gradually, they may build social networks which, amongst other benefits, they can draw upon to get further employment. After years of working for their sponsoring employer, they may have built positive relationships, or either party may decide it is time for a change, and their employer will allow them to change jobs if they are asked.

Fourth, our study provides useful information about the way in which the psychological contract operates in low-status employment relations generally. The positive mediating effect of psychological contract fulfilment confirms previous studies on psychological contract of temporary employees (e.g. Thomas et al., 2016). Moreover, the positive moderating role of transactional psychological contracts confirms the importance of tangible contract elements for precarious employment relationships. Our findings are consistent with the outcomes of other studies on the psychological contracts of temporary employees (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2006; Thomas et al., 2016).

Fifth, our findings debunk any sweeping assumptions that low-status expatriates have the same psychological contract perspectives as other types of global mobile workers. While some of our results are consistent with existing literature on the role of organisational support and transactional psychological contract, and confirm these findings in low-status expatriates, our finding concerning the relationship between contract fulfilment and intention to leave is a novel contribution and emphasises the role of individual and contextual factors can further our understanding of HRM scholarship and practice.

Finally, our study provides a key practical implication for employers and HRM specialists in host countries, who may use it to develop and execute adequate HRM practices. As our research shows, perceived organisational and organisational support has a positive impact on the

perceived fulfilment of obligations for low-status expatriates. Hence, providing organisational support to these low-status expatriates is critical.

### ***Limitations and future research direction***

Although considerable effort was put into sampling, this research has some key limitations that indicate possibilities for further research. First, our research was conducted in the UAE. As we have indicated, the UAE is an unusual context, and it would be useful to spread the coverage of the research to a wider range of countries that host significant numbers of expatriate employees.

Second, whilst English is widely spoken amongst expatriates, some speak neither English nor Arabic. In addition to lack of English skills, low-status expatriates fear losing their jobs and being 'kicked out' of the country if they disclose information which disadvantages their employers. Low-status expatriates are not used to the fact that someone might be interested in their views and experiences. There is a general lack of confidence and self-esteem. Hence, it is difficult to recruit low-status expatriates into research studies of this type, and although the sample is adequate to examine the model presented and sufficient for performing robust analysis (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007), and there is no reason to believe that it is not representative of the population under investigation, the sample size used for the analysis was rather low. Further research might usefully investigate larger and more diverse samples of low-status expatriates. In the same vein, research projects using qualitative methodologies and conducted in the home language of these expatriates may uncover further issues. Our use of snowballing methods, which may in some circumstances be less likely to produce generalisable populations than random sampling, can be crucial for accessing hard to reach populations such as the deprived and socially stigmatised (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Research that is directly able to compare the psychological contracts of both high- and low-status expatriates in the same location might be particularly instructive.

Third, this study indicates the need for further research; it would be valuable, for example, to interview repatriates. Low-status expatriates who had been able to support their families and had then returned home would be able to provide much additional useful information about working experiences in richer countries. Although they may seem to be treated unkindly at best or harshly at worst, when low-status expatriates make comparisons to people in their home countries, they may surmise that they are earning good money, are able to live in the UAE (even if at a level that may seem uncomfortable for people from the developed societies), and can remit money back home to buy

property, have their children educated or to build up a nest-egg for when they return. A key research question remains how these individuals cope and integrate once repatriated.

In sum, the current research indicates that some of our learning about the psychological contracts of high-status expatriates can be replicated, at least in the highly atypical Arab Gulf region, by low-status expatriates. However, future research is needed to replicate and extend these findings. A key area of difference appears to be their propensity to move but that is explained by the specific situation that they are in, with their contracts, their residency permits and even their passports all dependent on their current employer.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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