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I didn't promise, I said inshallah¹: Saudi Arabian employees' perceptions of the importance of implicit promises within the psychological contract

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Abstract

The psychological contract was both conceptualised and has been investigated primarily in Western contexts. While research has demonstrated its utility for exploring the nature of the individual employment relationship in other cultures, the fundamental tenets of the psychological contract have never been challenged. In particular, there is an absence of empirical research on how the notion of implicit promises might be viewed in Eastern contexts, in spite of promises constituting a significant plank of employee interpretation of the psychological contract. Using two case studies in Saudi Arabia, this research investigates how different sources of information influence the construction of implicit promises in a culturally unique employment context. We propose a theoretical model that outlines key factors that shape employee beliefs of implicit promises in order to guide future research in the field of psychological contracts.

KEYWORDS

national culture, organisational culture, promises, psychological contract, Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

The psychological contract is defined as 'individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between the individual and their organization' (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). Beliefs, as an umbrella term, encompass both explicit and implicit promises that exist between an employer and an employee (Conway & Briner, 2009). Explicit promises are written or verbal forms of communication, such as employment contract terms, emails from senior management and spoken promises by a line manager (Conway & Pekcan, 2019). Implicit promises are subtle, taken-for-granted beliefs generated through inferences and observations (Rousseau, 1990) of 'patterns of past exchange' as well as 'vicarious learning' (e.g., by witnessing other

employees' experiences) (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994, p. 246). Despite implicit promises being a central tenet of the psychological contract construct, they remain 'conceptually and empirically underdeveloped' (Bankins, 2014, p. 545) and are only 'vaguely described' (Conway & Briner, 2009, p. 112) in extant literature. In fact, Conway & Pekcan's (2019) recent review highlights that one of the main challenges facing the psychological contract field is the study of subtle implicit phenomena.

Extending theorisation on implicit promises necessitates a move away from the popular conceptualisation of the psychological contract as an individual cognitive construct to consider contextual factors (Conway & Briner, 2009) both within and outside the organisation that might be drawn upon. Building on existing research, we define the external context as a constellation of 'national cultures, systems and institutions' (Sparrow, 1996, p. 483) that impact spoken and unspoken promises between the employer and the employee

¹ Inshallah is an Arabic phrase that means "if God wills" and is said when one is talking about something that will happen in the future. Practically, it means that I may or may not deliver what I have promised only if God wills it.

(Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). Extant work on the psychological contract and the external context has generated two streams of literature. The first is research that studies specific features of the psychological contract construct, such as the nature of obligations (Westwood, Sparrow, & Leung, 2001; Ravlin et al., 2012), or specific outcomes, such as psychological contract breach (Kickul, Lester, & Belgio, 2004; Zagenczyk et al., 2015), with cultural differences as the backdrop. We aim to contribute to the second stream that places contextual realities at the forefront by embedding psychological contracts within specific socio-institutional contexts (Aldossari & Robertson, 2016). We argue that differences in national culture can impact how promises are predominantly conveyed (explicitly or implicitly) and their meaning (Schalk & Soeters, 2008). For example, in 'high context' cultures (characteristic of a range of countries in the Middle East, China, Japan, India, France, Greece, etc.), there is a cultural preference for implicit rather than explicit communication. Employees in these cultures are more likely to have to rely on implicit, unspoken sources of information, contextual signalling and cues in order to understand the work-exchange relationship (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Levine, 1988; Hall & Hall, 1989; Zaharna, 1995).

Research has also highlighted how employees' interpretation of implicit promises is typically embedded in specific organisational contexts (Dick, 2006; Bordia, Bordia, & Restubog, 2015). We define the internal context as organisational cultural norms and practices, (e.g., around implementation of HR policies and legislation in practice) that impact individuals' beliefs (Dick, 2006). Drawing on empirical research conducted in two Saudi Arabian organisations, we aim to extend this area of research by pursuing the following research objective: How do cultural, institutional and communicative features of the external and internal context interact to shape employees' beliefs that implicit promises have been made by their employer. We contribute to knowledge in two ways. First, we develop a theoretical model that outlines features that shape beliefs that implicit promises have been made in order to guide future research. We specifically demonstrate that implicit promises play an important role in employees' understanding of the psychological contract in the absence of explicit promises. Second, we consider how interaction between co-existing features within internal and external contexts promote individual sensemaking processes that draw upon these various signals and cues, generating beliefs that implicit promises have been made. In the following section, we present an overview of the psychological contract literature, which has explored the meaning and influence of implicit promises in the employment relationship. We then consider literature on the socio-institutional and cultural context that exists in Saudi Arabia.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT AND IMPLICIT PROMISES

Early work on psychological contracts primarily focused on unconscious expectations (Levinson et al., 1962), and it is mainly Rousseau's (1989) influential reconceptualisation of the psychological contract construct that highlighted the central role played by promises therein. Initially, she broadly highlighted how both 'explicit' and 'implicit' promises of future returns impact the employment relationship (Rousseau, 1995). However, in subsequent promises schema she focused on implicit promises emphasising that 'implicit promises are communicated over actions' and individuals 'gather accurate information regarding another's intentions from an array of indirect as well as non-verbal sources (e.g. observation, history and interactions over time)' (Rousseau, 2001, p. 531). This, and later work, has helped identify some of the key features that impact the formation, interpretation and reinterpretation of implicit promises.

First, what an employee observes may impact their perception of whether implicit promises have or have not been made by the employer. These observations are particularly salient when they involve 'interpretations of critical incidents' (Rousseau, 2001, p. 532). More importantly, since these observations do not occur in a vacuum they are likely to be shared by others who work in the same organisational context (Rousseau, 2001), potentially resulting in a shared understanding of the constitution of implicit promises. Dick's (2006) work for example, in the UK, police force highlighted that the majority shared a belief that an implicit promise of transfer from full-time to part-time work had been made by their employer, based on their shared observations of colleagues' career transitions. This research emphasised the way in which observations rather than formal policies often play a crucial role in the development of implicit promises.

Second, the ways in which formal HR policies such as training, compensation, performance appraisal, recruitment and promotion are implemented in practice act as crucial 'structural signals' (Rousseau, 2001, p. 532) that shape the overall psychological contract and implicit promises by employers in particular (Rousseau & Greller, 1994). They serve as valuable cues that play a role in establishing and shaping employees' beliefs that implicit promises have been made (Rousseau, 1995; Sparrow, 1996). For example, a study by Westwood, Sparrow, & Leung (2001) demonstrated that HR policies and practices that indirectly (rather than formally) emphasised the need for heightened performance levels and flexibility signalled to employees that the organisation had implicitly promised a secure and rewarding job if employees behaved accordingly. Related to this is the role played by organisational agents such as recruiters, managers and mentors (Conway & Briner, 2009). Managers, as 'contract-makers' and implementors of HR

policy (Rousseau & Greller, 1994, p. 287), may convey important messages to the employees that they in turn perceive as implicit promises being made by their employer.

Third, employee beliefs that implicit promises have been made by their organisation can also be tied to pre-existing schema or pre-employment beliefs (Bordia, Bordia, & Restubog, 2015). Crucially, these pre-employment beliefs, while shaping understandings of implicit promises within the organisation, may actually originate from signalling outside the organisation by for instance, being tied to an individual's external profession identity, societal norms or cultural values. As Rousseau and Schalk (2000) highlight, 'societal norms play a major role in exactly what people believe a promise means: is it a promise to do something or simply to try?' (p. 6). This underscores the need to consider the dynamic interaction between features of the internal/organisational and external/socio-institutional contexts, which when combined act as structural signalling with respect to the ways in which implicit promises are constituted and understood.

Therefore, this body of research suggests that implicit promises are communicated through both the direct actions of others (e.g., managerial implementation of HR policies), as well as indirect sensemaking tied to employees' understandings of what they have observed within the organisation, and their pre-employment beliefs, which again are generated from signalling within the wider socio-institutional context (Rousseau, 2001).

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT AND THE EXTERNAL CONTEXT

Early work on the psychological contract emphasised the impact of national and social norms (cf. Levinson et al., 1963) or culture on the exchange relationship (Fiske, 1992). However, the importance of the external context in shaping the implicit exchange that forms the psychological contract was not examined in work that followed (Thomas, Au, & Ravlin, 2003). A review of work on the treatment of the external context highlights two key trends (see Table 1). First, exploration of cultural differences vis-à-vis the psychological contract which focuses on *individual* cultural profiles (e.g., Ravlin et al., 2012; Zagenczyk et al., 2015), rather than considering broader societal-level influences shaping population level behaviours. Second, the use of cross-sectional designs to examine national culture as a moderator of the exchange relationship (Arshad, 2016; Kickul, Lester, & Belgio, 2004). For example, Arshad's (2016) research highlighted that psychological contract violation was related to turnover intention, moderated by the subjugation and mastery cultural orientations embedded in the Malaysian context.

A critique of this research is that focusing on specific cultural dimensions at the individual level of analysis does not account for the *range* and *complexity* of responses inherent in distinctive socio-institutional contexts (Sparrow, 1996). Furthermore, this body of work fails to capture dynamism within the external context and changes in the nature of the psychological contract and reciprocal exchange between two parties over time (Conway & Pekcan, 2019). To date, with the exception of Thomas et al. (2010), no work has qualitatively examined the influence of features within the external context with respect to the way in which employees perceive and manage the exchange relationship with their employers.

The socio-institutional context of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's cultural values and social norms are grounded in Islamic and tribal history and impact many aspects of work and social life including the employment relationship, occupational choices, lifestyle, inheritance and succession rules. This has generated a strongly shared, distinctive culture (Banihani & Syed, 2017). In comparative work, Saudi Arabia scores high on group/family collectivism and power distance and very low on future orientation and gender egalitarianism (Hofstede, 1983; House et al., 2004). Early research by Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck (1961) highlights that in 'being' cultures such as Chinese, Japanese or Arab cultures, achievement and development are not as important as an individual's birth, family background, age, gender and class. Notably, Saudi Arabia is categorised as a high-context culture, signalling avoidance of direct conflict and reliance on implicit communication, whereby 'meaning is embedded more in the context ... (and) very little is a coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message' (Hall & Hall, 1989, p. 91). In this high-context culture, agents are far more likely to communicate indirectly, placing the burden on the listener to digest available information and unpack the contextual signals underlying or implied in the speaker's message.

Comparative work has also highlighted two important Arabic specificities with respect to communication styles. First, there are variations in the end goal(s) of communication. In high-context cultures, language is deployed not simply to transfer information but to produce a social experience while in Western (low-context cultures), communication is primarily aimed at transmitting explicit information (Zaharna, 1995). Second, the communication style in Arabic countries is more indirect, with an emphasis on emotion by 'alluding to shared experiences and sentiments' evoking a 'wealth of affective responses' (Levine, 1988, p. 32). Notably, this style favours ambiguity by omitting factual and/or technical aspects of a message (Levine, 1988).

These cross-comparative studies highlight distinctive socio-institutional arrangements and cultural orientations

TABLE 1 Key authors empirically investigate impact of national culture on the psychological contract

Author	Component of psychological contract	Culture	Conceptualisation of culture	Conceptualisation of promises	Implicit promise	Context	Design	Finding(s) related to culture
Agarwal and Bhargava (2014)	Psychological contract breach (PCB)	National cultural values (collectivism and high-power distance)	National culture value considered as moderating variable.	Promises were included in the measurement of PCB. In the survey employees specify the degree in which promises that was committed to them were received on a five-point Likert scale. Distinction between explicit and implicit promises is not reflected in the PCB measures.	Not considered	India	Cross-sectional survey	Collectivism and power distance contextual antecedents mediated psychological contract breach and work outcomes.
Arshad (2016)	Psychological contract violation (PCV)	National cultural value (Subjugation and mastery orientation)	National culture value of subjugation and mastery orientation considered as moderating variable.	Promises were not included in the psychological contract violation measure. The measurement in this study based on Morrison and Robinson's (1997) scale.	Not considered	Malaysia	Longitudinal survey	Psychological contract violation was related to turnover intention and the relationship moderated by subjugation and mastery cultural orientation.
Bao et al. (2011)	Psychological contracts violation (PCV)	National cultural value (collectivism)	Culture not the main emphasis of this study. National culture wasn't included in the analysis elements, but used to make sense of the findings.	Promises were not included in the PCV measure. The measurement in this study based on Robinson and Morrison's (2000) scale.	Not considered	China	Survey	The outcome of psychological contract violation was related to sense of anger, and interpreted in relation to Chinese high collectivism culture.
Bashir and Nasir (2013)	Psychological contract breach (PCB)	National cultural value (collectivism)	National culture value of collectivism considered as moderating variable	Promises were included in the PCB measurement. The measurement was adopted from Robinson and Morrison (2000) five item scale. Distinction between	Not considered	Pakistan	Cross-sectional survey	Breach of the psychological contract resulted in commitment to the union and this relationship was mediated by organisational cynicism.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Author	Component of psychological contract	Culture	Conceptualisation of culture	Conceptualisation of promises	Implicit promise	Context	Design	Finding(s) related to culture
Chao et al. (2011)	Psychological contract breach (PCB)	National cultural value (Power distance)	National culture value considered as moderating variable.	<p>explicit and implicit promises is not reflected in the PCB measures.</p> <p>Promises were included in the PCB measurement. The measurement was adopted from Lester et al. (2002) study. Distinction between explicit and implicit promises is not reflected in the PCB measures.</p>	Not considered	China	Cross-sectional	Power distance moderated the association between psychological contract breach and counterproductive workplace behaviours.
Kickul et al. (2004)	Psychological contract breach (PCB) and outcomes	National culture values (Confucian and individualistic)	National culture value considered as moderating variable.	<p>Promises were included in the PCB measurement. The measurement was adopted from Kickul and Lester (2001) set of 38 items. The set of 38 items include employer obligation that their organisation had promised them (both communicated to them explicitly or implicitly).</p>	Not considered	US and Hong Kong	Questionnaire	Hong Kong employees respond more negatively to breach of the psychological contract compared to US employees.
King and Bu (2005)	Perceived Obligations	National culture values (Collectivist national culture)	National culture value considered as moderating variable.	<p>Promises were not included in the measurement of obligations.</p>	Not considered	US and China	Questionnaire	Findings reveals similarities between IT recruits in the US and China in terms of perceptions about employer-employee

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Author	Component of psychological contract	Culture	Conceptualisation of culture	Conceptualisation of promises	Implicit promise	Context	Design	Finding(s) related to culture
Kingshott et al. (2020)	Breach outcomes (neglect, voice, loyalty)	National cultural values	Culture dimension is not available	Promises were included in the measurement of obligations., adopted from Rousseau (1990).	Not considered	Australia/China	Survey	The finding indicates that individuals from collectivist cultures tend to avoid conflict whereas Western organisations can rely upon voice to remedy breaches of the psychological contract.
Liu et al. (2012)	Psychological contract fulfilment (PCF).	National culture values (Traditional values)	National culture value considered as moderating variable.	Promises were included in the measurement of PCF. Rousseau's (2000) two-item scale used to evaluate employee-employer contract fulfilment. Distinction between explicit and implicit promises is not reflected in the PCF measures.	Not considered	China	Longitudinal study	Findings revealed that employees that hold traditional cultural values are more likely to leave the organisations if they fail to fulfil their obligations.
Ravlin et al. (2012)	Individual perceptions of employer obligations	Individual cultural profiles (Collectivist orientation)	National culture value considered as moderating variable.	Promises were not included in the study measurements.	Not considered	N/A	Survey	Individual-level cultural value of collectivist orientation influences the formation of a relational psychological contract.
Restubog and Bordia (2006)	Psychological contract breach (PCB)	National culture values (Collectivism)	National culture value considered as	Promises were included in the measurement of PCB. The set of	Not considered	Philip-pines	Survey	Impact of psychological contract breach was moderated by (Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Author	Component of psychological contract	Culture	Conceptualisation of culture	Conceptualisation of promises	Implicit promise	Context	Design	Finding(s) related to culture
Shih and Lin (2014)	Psychological contract fulfilment (PCF)	National culture values (guanxi)	moderating variable. National culture value of guanxi was one of the variables in the study.	item used in the measurement adopted from (Turnley & Feldman, 1999). Distinction between explicit and implicit promises is not reflected in the PCB measures. Promises were included in the measurement of PCF, adopted from Rousseau (2000). Distinction between explicit and implicit promises is not reflected in the PCF measures.	Not considered	Taiwan	Survey	workplace familism (an aspect of collectivism culture). Employee- employer guanxi lead to high organisation citizen behaviour and psychological contract fulfilment.
Thomas et al. (2016)	Forms of psychological contract	Individual cultural value (collectivism)	The study focusses on individual cultural profiles.	Promises were not included in the measurement adopted in this study.	Not considered	China, US, Canada	Cross-sectional	Individual collectivist orientation has an influence on fundamental beliefs about the exchange relationship.
Thomas et al. (2010)	Types of psychological contracts	National cultural values (Individualism and collectivism)	National cultural values impact employees' perceptions of psychological contracts.	Promises were included in the interview guide, questions include (1) what their employer promised them, (2) how they came to understand these promises and obligations. Findings of the study didn't reflect in neither in implicit or explicit promises in relation to the types of PC.	Not considered	France, Canada, Norway, China	Interviews	Dominant cultural value orientations influences how individuals perceive and manage the exchange relationship with their employers.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Author	Component of psychological contract	Culture	Conceptualisation of culture	Conceptualisation of promises	Implicit promise	Context	Design	Finding(s) related to culture
Westwood et al. (2001)	Perceived employee obligations	National-level cultural value (Confucianism)	National culture value considered as moderating variable.	Participant asked to indicate the extent to it seemed to them that their organisation had made an implicit or explicit promise to its employees (survey).	Implicit or explicit promise measurement	Hong Kong	Survey questionnaire	The Confucian cultural value influences unbalanced perception of the exchange relationship (organisation expected to offer limited commitments and in return members have high sense of obligations toward their organisations).
Zagenczyk et al. (2015)	Psychological contract breach (PCB)	Individual cultural profiles (Power distance orientation)	National culture value considered as moderating variable.	Promises were included in the PCB measurement. The measurement was adopted from Robinson and Morrison (2000) five-item scale. Distinction between explicit and implicit promises is not reflected in the PCB measures.	Not considered	N/A	Survey	Individual with higher power distance orientation are less likely to exit or withdraw when breach of the psychological contract occurs.

across the Arab world in general (Elbanna, 2012). This distinctiveness is further enhanced in Saudi Arabia given the importance of tribal relationships in the country. A broken promise is considered dishonourable and reflects poorly not only on an individual but also on his or her family members and ultimately the whole tribe (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Hence, in such a context, explicit promises are rare. Organisations do not exist in a cultural and institutional vacuum and internal practices and norms of behaviour are shaped to varying extents by the socio-institutional specificities of the external context. Thus, distinctive cultural values and communication styles in the Saudi Arabian context will inevitably influence organisational culture, behavioural norms and employment practices.

The limited available literature that considered psychological contracts in Saudi Arabia specifically focuses on the impact of human resource management practices on employees' perceptions of psychological contract fulfilment (Al-miman, 2017) and breach (Aldossari & Robertson, 2018). With the exception of Aldossari & Robertson's (2016) research, which examined the role of a highly collectivist culture in shaping the psychological contract, no work has examined the influence of culture on the nature of psychological contracts in Saudi Arabia. In fact, Kutaula et al.'s (2020) recent systematic review of existing psychological contract research conducted in Asia highlights the importance of unpacking and understanding the impact of promises on the evaluation and content of psychological contracts within the Asian context. Therefore, we aim to contribute to this contextual gap by investigating how different sources of information influence the construction of implicit promises in a culturally unique employment context. In particular, we explore individuals' interpretation and understanding of the interaction between the internal and external contexts using a sensemaking lens. Within organisational settings, individuals are likely to fall back on 'habits of mind' (Louis & Sutton, 1991, p. 57) in order to interpret the available information and make sense of their environment (Weick, 1995). This sensemaking process helps individuals to decrease uncertainty and make their work experiences more predictable (Shore & Tetrick, 1994). As Weick (1995, p.12) suggests, 'sensemaking is what it says it is, namely, making something sensible'. Some work has already examined the psychological contract from a sense-making perspective (De Vos et al., 2003; Chaudhry, Wayne, & Schalk, 2009). For example, Chaudhry et al.'s (2009) study demonstrated how employees engage in cognitive sense-making processes to evaluate the extent to which employers have fulfilled their obligations.

We know that psychological contracts are informal and highly subjective in nature (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). Therefore, it is likely that features of internal and external contexts, and their interaction, act as signalling that feeds into sensemaking processes. This process is likely to result in highly individual and

subjective interpretations of mutual obligations (Rousseau, 2001) and whether promises have been made or not by employers (Ho, Weingart, & Rousseau, 2004). We argue that where there is cultural reliance on indirect styles of communication employees rely heavily on their subjective interpretation of structural signals and cultural norms (interacting at the socio-institutional and organisational levels) in order to make sense of the content of implicit promises and, whether these promises have been kept or broken by their employer. Given the lack of theoretical exploration of implicit, unspoken promises specifically (Bankins, 2014; Conway & Pekcan, 2019) we aim to answer the following research question:

RQ: How do signals and cues from external (socio-institutional) and internal (organisational) contexts impact employee beliefs that implicit promises have been made by their employer?

METHODS

Psychological contract work is dominated by cross-sectional, self-reported research and consequently fails to capture indirect, implicit promises (Conway & Briner, 2009). Using the survey design to measure promises had been critiqued recently by Conway & Pekcan (2019) for not distinguishing between explicit and implicit promises. We took a qualitative, exploratory approach (Whitfield & Strauss, 1998) to identify key features of the socio-institutional and organisational contexts that signal to employees' that implicit promises have been made by their employer.

Context

A purposive sampling technique was applied in the initial selection of two-case studies: PetrolCo and EnergyCo.² These organisations were selected because they are two of largest energy organisations in the world and are important locally and internationally. Second, both organisations have vast international operations, increasing the likelihood that sophisticated HR management policies were being implemented. Third, the major shareholder in both organisations is the Saudi government necessitating strategic alignment with the government's Saudisation policy (a localisation programme introduced in the mid-1990s specifically aimed at developing qualified local labour force in a planned manner) (Banihani & Syed, 2017). To achieve this goal, the government puts explicit pressure on all large organisations to provide international education and training for national employees (Banihani & Syed, 2017). In response to this Saudisation policy both case study organisations were

²All names used in the article are pseudonyms.

sending Saudi employees on international training and educational opportunities or assignments. Given our exploration of implicit promises, we focused on how employees who had received these educational/developmental opportunities made sense of the interplay of features within socio-institutional and organisational contexts to develop beliefs that implicit promises had been made by their employer.

Research participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 74 participants (60 employees and 14 HR managers)—employees' profiles summarised in Table 2. Purposeful sampling centred on four principles. First, only employees, who had been sent on international assignments and then repatriated, were invited for an interview. The choice of repatriated employees was motivated by extant literature, which has suggested that (1) international assignments are often perceived by employees' as informal 'promises' of career progression (e.g., Haslberger & Brewster, 2009) and, therefore, the repatriation experience is valuable for investigating sense-making processes that employees go through during a shift in the employment environment/experience; and (2) repatriation is considered a 'triggering event' that may heighten the salience nature of psychological contract and prompts employees to reflect on their expectations and perceived obligations (Guzzo, Noonan, & Elron, 1994; O'Donohue, Hutchings, & Hansen, 2018). Second, participants sent on different types of international assignments were selected (36 had undertaken an educational assignment and 24 had undertaken a work assignment) to ensure adequate representation. Third, only those employees who had been repatriated within the previous 12 months were included to ensure that their experiences both before and after the assignment would be relatively easy to articulate given that the events and associated feelings/beliefs would be recent – thereby reducing post-hoc rationalisation and bias. Fourth, HR managers coordinating these assignments were interviewed to draw comparisons between employees' beliefs of what they had been promised versus what management perceived to be the organisation's key obligations. Crucially, management as organisational agents are in a position to convey promises or future commitments to employees on behalf of the organisation itself (Suazo, Martinez, & Sandoval, 2009). Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min were recorded and transcribed. Twenty-one interviews conducted in Arabic were translated into English. Parts of the English transcriptions were then translated back to Arabic by a third party and then reverse translated again to English to ensure that meanings had not changed.

Data were also derived from numerous company documents pertaining to the organisations' internationalisation strategy and HR policies, additionally supplemented with

TABLE 2 Employees' profile

Contextual background	N
Age	
26–29 years	19
30–35 years	27
36–40 years	14
Tenure years	
1–5	15
6–10	27
11–15	14
16–19	4
Job	
Engineers (petroleum/reservoir/simulation)	22
Geologist/geophysicist	9
Systems/computer analyst	6
Financial/economist analysis	4
Researcher/scientist	7
Management and development roles	12
Duration of the assignment	
Between 1 and 2 years	33
Between 3 and 5 years	24
Between 6 and 8 years	3
Type of the assignment	
Work assignment	22
Educational assignment	38

background material (e.g., annual reports, mission statements, reports for shareholders and transcripts of chief executives' speeches, press releases, advertisements and public relations material). These documents can be viewed as discourses that 'construct organizational reality in distinct ways' (Cederström & Spicer, 2014, p. 180). Additionally, non-participant observational data was collected within each organisation (one month in PetrolCo and two weeks EnergyCo). One of the authors arrived each day at 7 AM and left at 4 PM (the official working hours in Saudi Arabia). This schedule afforded the opportunity to talk informally to people, observe daily activities and note the work setting and interactions amongst staff. Such reflexive observation was utilised alongside other data in an effort to achieve greater insights into the context and culture of these organisations (Johnson & Turner, 2003).

Data analysis

We adopted a combination of cross-case variance (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and within-case process-tracing (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). By combining variance and process-oriented analysis, we were able to equally compare cases and trace their fundamental mechanisms (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as well as enhancing validity.

To combine process and variance analysis, we carried out a three-stage coding process. In the first stage, for each organisation we used both thematic coding and the *in-vivo* technique (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to code data from interviews, company documents, and background material (e.g., annual reports, mission statements and reports for shareholders). We began by identifying via open coding those data statements that addressed the participants' reasons for believing that implicit promises had been made. In line with the available literature, we coded employees' beliefs generated through (1) inferences and observations of patterns of past exchange (e.g., observation, history and interactions over time) and vicarious learning (e.g., by witnessing other employees' experiences) (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 2001), (2) structural signals such as HR policies and practices (Rousseau, 2001) and (3) indirect sensemaking tied to employees' pre-employment beliefs (e.g., pre-existing schema) (Dick, 2006; Bordia, Bordia, & Restubog, 2015) as implicit promises. In addition, given our research question, we then focused on statements pertaining to the institutional and organisational contexts that might have impacted those beliefs. Next, we organised comparable types of statements together to form provisional categories (first-order codes). In the second stage, we performed axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to incorporate the first-order categories into themes. For example, first-order codes relating to participants' perceptions of 'implied promises/not clearly expressed', 'indirect communication' and 'co-worker observations' were grouped together into the theme 'feature of high-context culture'. At this stage, similarities and differences between managers' and employees' perceptions and actions began to emerge and the central axes of analysis within each embedded case were identified. In the third stage of the analysis, we compared and contrasted the major themes that had been identified across the two case studies. This analysis led to the identification of three key interrelated themes that impacted employees' perceptions that implicit promises had been made by their employer across both organisations: (i) features of the external context; (ii) interaction of the internal and external contexts and (iii) employees' sensemaking processes.

FINDINGS

Our data highlighted several salient features of the socio-institutional context that were distinctive beyond what can be captured in single culture dimensions. The enactment of these socio-institutional features within our case study organisations led to distinctive styles of communication and information-sharing within each organisation around international assignments. Crucially, our analysis highlighted that this interaction between features of the external and internal contexts initiated employees' sensemaking processes.

The external context

The two salient socio-institutional features specific to the Saudi Arabian context were (1) the institutional level policy of Saudisation and (2) the culturally preferred style of communication. Saudisation is a national scheme introduced by the Saudi government (Banihani & Syed, 2017) that aims to increase employment of Saudi employees and improve their skills and subsequently reduce the country's high reliance on foreign skills. The impact of this national-level policy on organisational strategy and practices was evident in both organisations. Both CEOs underlined the importance of Saudisation and its intended objective of overcoming the crisis of low employment of locals:

The company is committed to employing a growing number of Saudi nationals in all its operations, we aim to achieve an even higher percentage than the one imposed in government circles. (PetrolCo CEO, Asharg Al-Awast newspaper on June 6, 2015)

Localising engineering expertise was a strategic decision made by the Saudi government. We encouraged Saudi engineers to work on important projects ... when they are deputed overseas ... I am proud to say that the Saudisation percentage at the Engineering & Project Management Department has now reached 71 per cent. (EnergyCo CEO, May 6, 2016, keynote speech at a Conference in Dubai)

This policy thus served as a structural signal in the wider socio-institutional context from which employees inferred the value attached to training and development and international assignments.

A second feature of the external context that led individuals to engage in sensemaking processes around implicit promises was the cultural preference for indirect, non-verbal styles of communication. This socially mandated approach to communication impacted decision-making, and reciprocal exchanges between employers and employees, even with respect to formal employment policies such as promotion, selection for training and development, career planning and so on:

The manager tries to avoid any promises in terms of career planning. This is because people here are always afraid to commit themselves. Your manager will never promise anything (Participant 12, PetrolCo, recalling pre-assignment experience)

There is no such thing as a promise for a position in Energy-Co ... there are no promises for a certain position or a transfer to a

different place. (Participant 4, EnergyCo, recalling pre-assignment experience)

No, there are no promises. Nothing is guaranteed ... employees get promoted (but) your manager will never promise anything because it is against the norms. (Participant 2, PetrolCo, recalling pre-assignment experience)

Explicit promises were therefore, eschewed in favour of unspoken, implied communication. This is in line with known differentials between 'Eastern' and 'Western' approaches to formal employment outcomes (such as performance appraisals, promotion and career development) (Mohammad et al., 2021). While direct communication and explicit promises are visible in Western contexts, in Eastern contexts even formal policies such as performance appraisals in practice are highly subjective processes where information exchange (e.g., performance-related criticisms) is subtle and implied (rather than made explicit in writing). The overall process is also significantly influenced by the individual's external reputation (tied to family, tribe, nationality, age, etc.) (Mohammad et al., 2021).

The interaction of internal and external contexts

Our analysis highlighted that the organisational enactment of HR policies was intrinsically tied to external, contextual features of Saudisation and implicit communication styles. First, Saudisation impacted employee development and promotion processes, whereby Saudi nationals were disproportionately more likely to be selected for international assignments, awarded substantial relocation packages, and offered assistance in transitioning from technical to more lucrative managerial career paths:

The main advantage of PetrolCo is that the educational package is great. They pay your tuition, and they still pay you a big percentage of your salary (75%). You will not find another company that will do that for you. Some organisations might pay your tuition, but they will not pay you your salary. (Participant 38, PetrolCo, recalling pre-assignment experience)

The experience you gain from overseas assignments is essential ... most of EnergyCo's senior executive managers went on international projects and worked outside the Kingdom. To excel on the managerial ladder, you need international experience. (Participant 9, EnergyCo, recalling pre-assignment experience)

The emphasis placed on international assignments as key to the training and development policy in both organisations highlighted the managerial importance placed on complying with the Saudisation policy. The significant allocation of resources to provide educational or developmental opportunities for local employees demonstrated each organisation's commitment to the Saudisation programme. Importantly, it appeared to signal the high value attached to those individuals who undertook these assignments. Organisational enactment of the Saudisation policy meant that selection for an international assignment also generated shared beliefs that implicit promises of career advancement and salary increase upon return had been made across both organisations.

Existing literature has highlighted how organisational information about employment policies is generated via communication with human agents such as managers, as well as via formal employment policies and practices (Suazo, Martínez, & Sandoval, 2009). However, in our empirical context, cultural preferences for implicit, unspoken cues immersed in contextual information meant that there was no explicit link between formal employment policies and organisational practices. Therefore, employees developed implicit understandings about the enactment of organisational policies via implicit signalling. For instance, international assignments were not explicitly tied to specific outcomes such as promotion. Nevertheless, information generated through patronage (from line/senior managers); vicarious learning/ observations of the experiences of peers, and the sense-making that occurred across participants around their selection for international assignments led them to make *inferences* about what would be on offer post assignment:

I kind of discussed my expectations with my manager in a different way, like in indirect way ... we discussed that an international assignment would sharpen my technical and leadership skills and open doors for me to get promoted (but) they weren't promises ... (so) I call them ambitions not expectations ... Never got promised anything (Participant 13, EnergyCo, recalling pre-assignment experience)

At first when I was nominated for an international assignment I hesitated, but I talked to one of my colleagues and he told me that you have a good opportunity. Try to think about your future; once you get the degree and come back you will get promoted; they even might move you onto the management track. (Participant 26, PetrolCo, recalling pre-assignment experience)

However, the ambiguity surrounding policy implementation in practice, and employees' necessary reliance

on implicit informational cues and vicarious learning, enabled organisations considerable scope in terms of the way in which developmental policies were enacted. In practice, what appeared to matter most in terms of career development was driven by cultural norms, that is, the degree and strength of connections within and outside the organisation. In the absence of explicit promises these served as implicit information signalling which fed into employee sensemaking as to what constituted mutual obligations upon their return (Rousseau, 2001):

If the management is satisfied with an employee, they will give him much more than he expects. I am optimistic because I have good relations with the managers, and we don't have problems, so I think my future will be bright in this company. (Participant 1, EnergyCo, post-assignment experience)

If your manager wants you to take an international assignment he can push and fight for it, as a result of that you will get the assignment. (Participant 7, EnergyCo, recalling pre-assignment experience)

Some people didn't meet the selection for international assignment criteria and have been sent on an international assignment. As an HR manager, I can't do anything about it, because we are simply dictated what to do. For example, there is a candidate, who has been in the company for less than two months. Obviously, I can't nominate him so soon. Then I was told you *have* to nominate him; his father is a manager. (HR manager, PetrolCo)

Individual sensemaking processes

Forming a psychological contract involves employees gleaning information from multiple sources and then processing it contingent on their existing schema (Rousseau, 1995; Dick, 2006). Major changes to employment conditions such as going on an international assignment and subsequent repatriation for example, are associated with considerable uncertainty and ambiguity. They trigger a shift from unconscious processing of habitual behaviour to more conscious engagement and sensemaking (Weick, 1995). We have highlighted the way in which features within the socio-institutional context interacted with organisational practices and norms, generating a backdrop of largely implicit signals from which employees derived meaning in the absence of explicit promises (Rousseau, 2001; Bankins, 2014; Bordia, Bordia, & Restubog, 2015).

Our analysis highlighted that the high-context national culture clearly shaped employees' acceptance of the fact that explicit promises would not be made either prior to joining an organisation or subsequently. However, the cultural norm of relying on indirect information from the external and internal organisational contexts did not preclude employees believing that implicit promises had been made by their employer. For instance, when participants returned to Saudi Arabia from international assignments, they made sense of a promotion (or lack thereof), by primarily drawing upon observations/vicarious learning/understandings (such as the experience of peers or being selected for an international assignment) that they believed constituted implicit promises. All participants emphasised that they had delivered their part of the (implicit) agreement, by taking on an international assignment.

We have been uprooted from our country to another country for the sake of the organisation. We worked in very tough operational conditions, so the least they could do is to promote me. (Participant 39, PetrolCo, post-assignment experience)

This common belief that the employee had honoured their part of the exchange, alongside informal organisational information regarding the value placed on these developmental opportunities, led them to re-evaluate the content of their psychological contract in order to assess whether fulfilment or violation had occurred upon their return. They attended to the indirect signals, observations and cues which had led to beliefs that implicit promises had been made. We argue that this self-awareness (resulting from experiencing violation or fulfilment of the psychological contract) highlights participants' proactive engagement with sensemaking processes in this context.

In PetrolCo, employees were very dissatisfied with organisational management of repatriation, principally the lack of development opportunities and promotion; being assigned only mundane tasks and inadequate remuneration. This sensemaking led employees to no longer perceive themselves to be valued and 80% of PetrolCo repatriates specifically expressed turnover intentions. An HR manager stated:

Unfortunately, many expats leave the company upon return, because it is so hard to offer them a good job that suits their needs and matches their new abilities. Very frequently, it is just not possible to find something for them. (HR manager, PetrolCo)

Conversely, at EnergyCo most of the respondents felt that the organisation had fulfilled implicit promises because they were promoted and assigned new,

challenging roles commensurate with the skills they had developed on assignment:

EnergyCo invests a lot in training courses whether inside the country or abroad, and you are also allowed to publish or participate in conferences. I don't think you will find (another) such company in the country. (Participant 8, EnergyCo, post-assignment experience)

Neither organisation had made any explicit promises, yet a shared belief that implicit promises had been made persisted despite differing outcomes. Unsurprisingly, unmet implicit promises (as in the case of PetrolCo) generated considerable frustration with regards to the process and outcomes of policy implementation and a breach of the psychological contract was considered to have occurred while fulfilment resulted in high levels of satisfaction and commitment (as in the case of EnergyCo).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our findings have demonstrated that implicit promises play an important role in employees' understanding of the psychological contract in Saudi Arabia. We demonstrated that ongoing interaction between features of the external and internal organisational contexts promoted

individual sensemaking processes that drew upon these various signals and cues, generating beliefs that implicit promises had been made. These constituted a significant part of the psychological contract in the absence of explicit promises. We believe our findings may be particularly generalisable across high context cultures and propose a theoretical model that aims to capture the generation of implicit promises (Figure 1).

Our findings demonstrated the way in which structural signals and cultural norms within the socio-institutional context had a significant influence on the implementation of formal and informal organisational practices and behavioural/communicative norms of both employees and managers. This in turn impacted employees' perceptions that implicit promises have been made by their employer. Our study demonstrated the importance placed on implicit promises in high-context environments such as Saudi Arabia. More importantly, it highlighted how employees derive an understanding of the content of implicit promises from signalling and cues emerging from the interaction of socio-institutional and organisational contexts. Specifically, we distinguish between signalling at the institutional and organisational levels. We refer to external structural signalling (cf. Rousseau, 2001) such as national policies, legislation etc. and external cultural norms. Both of these influence the development and enactment of formal and informal organisational policies and practices which in turn serve as important internal signalling to employees. Specifically, in relation to international assignments, employees

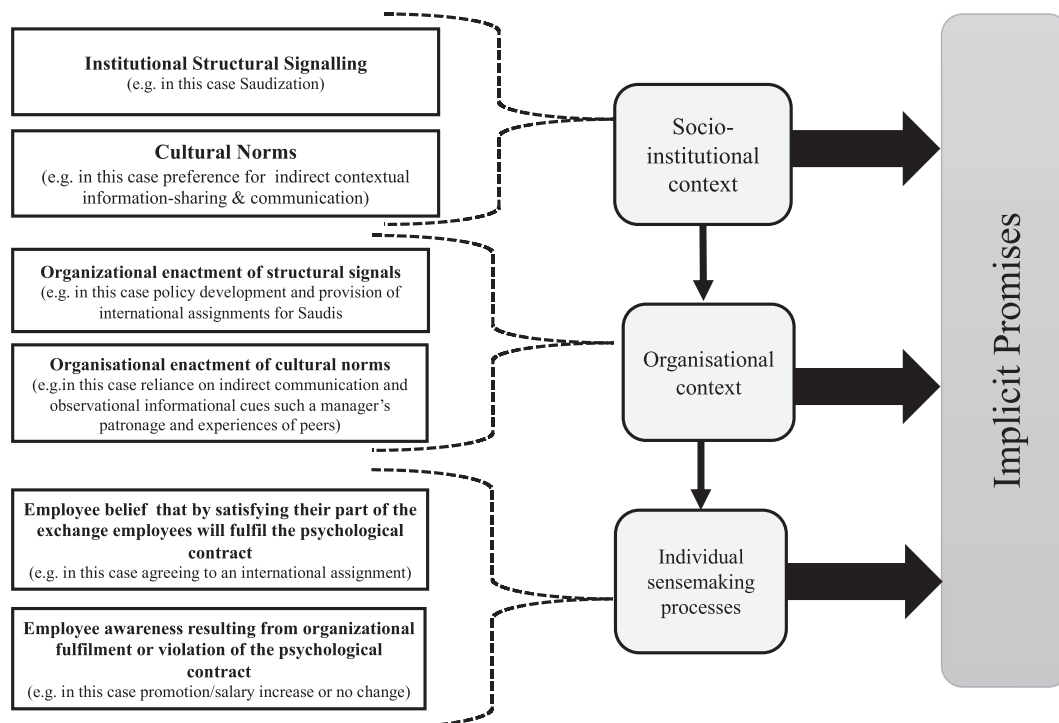


FIGURE 1 Key factors that shape employee beliefs of implicit promises

interpreted these signals in combination to infer that implicit promises had been made with regard to promotion and/or career development. Some studies have examined the role of organisational information on communicating promises (Kim & Moon, 2019). While these studies contribute to our broader understanding of the impact of organisational history and goals on the formation of the psychological contract, they do not consider the role of formal and informal behaviours and practices in the formation of implicit promises specifically. Moreover, these studies do not explore how in particular national contexts, employees' perceptions that implicit promises have been made by their employer develop.

External signalling and organisational cues serve as important inter-subjective frames of reference through which employees engage in sensemaking processes which generate beliefs that implicit promises have been made, fulfilled or violated in the absence of explicit promises. It was evident that the employees in both organisations shared an understanding of the broad content of these implicit promises in terms of career development, promotion and salary increases. Structural signals and cultural norms offered employees a number of cues through which a distinctive and shared understanding of the international assignments, repatriation processes and the nature of working relationships more generally in both organisations. These shaped perceptions of the implicit promises that had been made and the nature of the reciprocal exchange within the context of an international assignment, led to an awareness post-assignment of contract fulfilment or breach. According to Kim and Moon (2019, p.4) 'sensemaking is the process of understanding a situation by subjectively interpreting and endowing meaning to a new situation encountered by an individual'. The psychological contract is one of the spheres in which individuals continuously engage in sensemaking schemes to rationalise and give meaning to unanticipated situations (Chaudhry, Wayne, & Schalk, 2009). We argue that employees' awareness of violation or fulfilment resulted from a re-evaluation of the signalling that had confirmed their original perception that implicit promises had been made by the employer.

Saudi Arabia's socio-institutional preference for implicitly understood information-sharing and communication clearly shaped employees' acceptance that explicit promises would never be made. Previous research suggests that organisations with a 'top-down' culture of explicit signals often demonstrate strong situations and uniform interpretation of informational sources amongst employees (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Mischel, 2004). According to Mischel (2004), these 'strong situations' lead all individuals to construe particular situations similarly. In this study, all employees perceived that implicit promises had been made to them (with respect to career development upon their return) despite significant

differences in organisational culture and practices across the two organisations. What was common across both organisations was employees' perceptions of the importance of developmental opportunities like international assignments. This constituted a strong situation and led to similarly shared beliefs about career outcomes. However, psychological contract outcomes were different across the two organisations. Therefore, we suggest that in the Saudi Arabian high-context culture when employees are faced with ambiguous situations (e.g., career prospects post international assignments), they resort to making sense of the situation by drawing upon signalling and cues from both the wider institutional context and their employing organisation.

In line with previous work (Rousseau, 1995; Rousseau & Schalk, 2000), this research argues that employees' psychological contracts can develop a strongly normative or shared character when employees hold a common understanding of the obligations that comprise their work relationship. Salancik & Pfeffer (1978) also highlighted that shared understandings of the terms of employees' psychological contracts evolve through social information processing. Prior research in this field has tended to conceptualise the beliefs of promises at the individual level without taking into consideration the potential impact of both organisational practices and the broader national context on the development of employees' shared perceptual beliefs around the content of implicit promises (Rousseau, 2001). We argue that identifying the societal/institutional and organisational influences that shaped perceptions that implicit promises had been made is a significant contribution to the psychological contract theory, specifically in a cultural context where implicit promises matter. Crucially, our paper contributes to the available literature by highlighting that *shared perceptions* of the content of implicit promises can exist as they are socially constructed—which is a significant theoretical departure from the current conceptualisation of the psychological contract as an individual-level constructed tied to an individual's mental schema.

The primary theoretical contribution of this paper is therefore our consideration of how the interaction between the external and internal context generates individual sensemaking processes that result in the development of a *shared* understanding of implicit promises. Instead of viewing the promissory contract as individually constructed, this research argues that implicit promises are also *socially constructed* and shared by others in a particular social context and culture where explicit promises are simply not the norm. Adopting an exploratory/theory-building lens, we have proposed a theoretical model that outlines features that shape beliefs that implicit promises have been made in order to guide future research. Our framework seeks to extend theorising around how implicit promises develop. If implicit promises are actively construed in a context that relies far

more on the receiver of information to interpret the implied meaning via cues and signals rather than anything more explicit in the employment relationship, then it is more likely that these implicit promises will become entrenched in what Rousseau (2001) identifies as the employee's contract schema. Thus, if employees have to largely rely solely on implicit promises as constituting their psychological contract then a breach of their psychological contract will be considered to have occurred when those promises are not fulfilled.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is worth highlighting that we focused specifically on employee perceptions of implicit promises made by the employer and therefore future research could also consider external signalling from other extra-organisational stakeholders such as trade unions, works councils or sub-contractors in multi-employer arrangement and other organisational cues derived from the practices of co-workers.

We acknowledge that our study's context specificity means that our analysis is more likely to apply in high-context countries and further research is required to test whether the same, or similar, interactions lead to the development of implicit promises in other contexts. Nevertheless, the qualitative approach adopted in this study has offered a rich examination of role played by context which has been underplayed in current psychological contract research (Conway & Briner, 2009).

This study focuses on Saudi Arabia which, along with a diverse range of other countries (such as Egypt, Korea, Japan, France, Italy, and Russia) are categorised as higher-context cultures (Hall & Hall, 1989). While there may be expected some contextual similarities across some Arab and Asian countries (House et al., 2004), European countries that are also categorised as high-context are likely to be quite distinctive (House et al., 2004). Future research could usefully consider adopting a similar research approach, focused for example on international assignments across a range of high-context cultures in order to identify potentially distinctive structural signals and their organisational enactment that might shape the content of implicit promises.

This study has not taken into consideration the ways in which individual differences might come into play here. Future research could examine the extent to which individual's exchange ideology influences their perceptions of the importance of implicit promises and their reactions in the event of met/unmet implicit promises. Coyle-Shapiro and Neuman (2004) highlighted exchange ideology as an important moderator on the extent to which individuals react to unmet organisational obligations. Therefore, one possible direction for future

research would be to investigate the degree to which the strength or weakness of individual exchange ideology may affect how individuals respond to unmet implicit promises.

Despite these limitations our research provides an important contribution to the psychological contract field by explicitly considering the significant impact of external and internal contexts in relation to the development and content of implicit promises.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declared no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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