

Covid-19 furlough on employee organisational citizenship behaviour: The role of psychological contract breach, job insecurity, and personal attributes

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Abstract

This study examined psychological contract breach, job insecurity and personal attributes influences on organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB). Three hundred and twenty-two (n =322) purposively selected furloughed employees (females = 36.6%; Mean age = 33.21; SD = 6.51) were surveyed. They completed a self-applied questionnaire that measured scales of psychological contract breach, job insecurity, and organisational citizenship behaviour. Participants' provided their socio-demographic information. Results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis indicated that psychological contract breach significantly and negatively predicted OCB, explaining 4% of the variance in OCB. Job insecurity significantly and negatively predicted OCB. It explained 25% of the variance in OCB. Personal attributes (gender, marital status, education and organisational tenure) did not contribute to the variance in OCB. This study demonstrated that placing employees on furlough would reduce their level of OCB. It recommends managing employee expectations and deliberately addressing their fears about job loss during uncertain times (such as the COVID-19 pandemic era) to encourage their participation in organisational citizenship behaviour.

Keywords: Psychological contract breach, job insecurity, organisational citizenship behaviour, COVID-19

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Introduction

Organisational objectives may be quickly attained when employees commit to contribute beyond the formal requirements of their job (Organ, 2018). Organisational citizenship behaviour positively rubs off on organisational functionality, and is associated with reduction in turnover intention (Feather & Rauter, 2004; Organ, 1988; Shanker, 2018). Organisational decisions yielding unfavourable outcomes (e.g. furlough) influence work attitudes and may affect employees' performance of organisational citizenship behaviour. Perceived psychological contract breach may adversely impact employees' performance of organisational citizenship behaviour. Employees who self-perceive unfulfilled promises implicitly made by the organisation may reciprocate by nonparticipation in organisational citizenship behaviours. Job insecurity is another factor that may impact negatively on OCB. When employees believe that there is a high probability of involuntary job loss, they may respond by becoming less committed to the organisation (Ashford et al. 1989), which significantly reduces the likelihood that they would engage in extra-role behaviours that enhance organisational effectiveness. Examining this relationship might give insight into how psychological contract breach and job insecurity influence performance of OCB by furloughed employees in a post COVID-19 pandemic era, especially from the perspective of a non-western setting.

Furloughed employees: Their organisational citizenship behaviour

Many work organisations had to review their operational processes to adapt to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In many organisations, employees were placed on furlough in response to the economic, labour and financial crisis created by the pandemic. Furlough is a staff management tool used by organisations to save jobs (Lee & Sanders, 2013). It entails an organisation placing a worker on a temporary leave during challenging periods such as labour, financial, or economic crisis they are unlikely to efficiently manage with current level of staffing. Studies provide evidence to suggest that although furlough enable organisations to adapt to changing dynamics, the losses associated with it such as loss of income can negatively impact employee attitudes (Bellairs et al. 2014; Carlson et al. 2011; Chartered Institute of Personnel Management, 2020a; Feldheim, 2007; Halbesleben et al. 2013).

Psychological contract breach and organisational citizenship behaviour

Employer-employee relationship involves mutual expectation from both parties known as the psychological contract. Psychological contract is the idea that there is an unwritten set of expectations concerning what the employer and employee expect from each other in the course of the employment relationship (Huy & Takahashi, 2018). The employer may expect the employees to do their best on behalf of the organisation (e.g. by being loyal and compliant, to defend the organisation's image and protect its reputation with the customers). The employee's expectation from their employer may include; to be treated fairly, to be involved in decision making, to be rewarded equitably, and promise of long term job security. Psychological contracts become salient when employees evaluate whether it has been met or breached by the organisation (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Depending on an individual's anticipation, psychological contract fulfillment is said to have occurred when an employee believes that the organisation has honored or fulfilled all or most of the promises or obligations it made to its workers. But a psychological contract breach has occurred if an employee feels otherwise - that the organisation has failed to deliver on the expected obligations/promises entered into with the employees (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Studies

have established psychological contract breach to associate with work outcomes including job satisfaction, organisational commitment, turnover intention, and deviant behaviours (Alev & Bozbayindir, 2021; Aliyu, 2022; Bari et al. 2021; Opoku & Koomson, 2021). These previous studies suggest that an employee would be less likely to make meaningful contributions if it is perceived that the organisation has failed to fulfill promises it made to the workers.

Several studies have established psychological contract breach to be negatively related to organisational citizenship behaviour (Batra & Kaur, 2021; Chao-Hsing & Chien-Wen, 2021; Koomson, 2021). The social exchange theory, and in particular the norm of reciprocity provide a robust theoretical basis for understanding employees' reactions as it concerns their work attitude to perceived psychological contract breach. The social exchange theory postulates that the worker and the organisation engage in an exchange relationship in which both mutually reciprocate the contributions of each other (Blau, 1964). As the reciprocal exchanges continue, over time, a strong bond is assumed to develop between both parties. The norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) posits that when the organisation fulfills the promises and obligations that were implicitly made, employees feel motivated to reciprocate the gesture, e.g. through increased effort and by exhibiting citizenship behaviours (Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Turnley et al., 2003). However, aggrieved employees may be motivated by perceived psychological contract breach resulting from unfulfilled promises to reduce their effort and their contributions to the organisation by not performing OCBs.

Job insecurity and organisational citizenship behaviour

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about disruptions in the workplace as many organisations adopted different survival strategies including increased use of smart technology, salary cuts, restructuring, mergers, divestment, and downsizing (e.g. Voorhees et al. 2020). These cutback strategies have been linked to a heightened feeling of helplessness in employees about their ability to retain their job (Frone, 2018). Job insecurity has been defined as employees' perceptions regarding the probability of losing their job in a time of crisis (Mohr, 2000). Job insecurity has been demonstrated to have significant negative consequences for employees and the organisation (e.g. Aguiar-Quintana et al. 2021; Jiang et al. 2021; Long et al. 2022; Onuoha & Idemudia, 2018; Weipeng et al. 2021). Job insecurity has been shown to predict key employee outcomes including poor mental health, decreases in job satisfaction, self-esteem and organisational commitment, and increases in burnout and turnover intention (Abbas et al. 2021; Anne & Schuller, 2021; Cemile & Colak, 2020; Emberland & Rundmo, 2010; Ganson et al. 2020; Hui-Hsien & Kuo-Yang, 2022; Sarwar et al. 2021).

Previous research suggests that job insecurity may impact employees' level of OCB. The studies showed that when employees perceived high job security, the likelihood that they would perform extra-role behaviours outside their job requirements such as OCBs significantly increased (e.g. Liu et al. 2019; Mahmoud et al. 2020). The OCBs exhibited may include helping a co-worker complete a work assignment, closing late to avoid carrying over a task to the next day, loading paper into the communal printer, or even giving a lift to a co-worker. The social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) provide further insight that helps to clarify this cause-effect relationship by explaining that the feeling of job security induces in employees a sense of reciprocity and perception of obligation to cooperate. Increasing their involvement in OCBs is one way they may reciprocate.

In contrast, when employees are unsure about the future of their jobs (i.e. high job insecurity), they may react to this perception by becoming emotionally and behaviorally withdrawn from work and the organisation (Schumacher et al. 2016; Probst, 2005; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). Emotionally detached employees may be expected to be less willing to

undertake additional workplace assignments since they may appraise this as being outside their primary job responsibility. Therefore, it is expected that high job insecure employees would be less likely to engage in OCB.

Goals of the study

This study aimed to examine whether COVID-19 pandemic influenced organisational citizenship behaviour among furloughed private sector employees in Nigeria. The following research questions guided the study: What influences do perceived psychological contract breach and job insecurity have on organisational citizenship behaviour among furloughed employees? Do personal attributes (gender, marital status, education and tenure) influence OCB among furloughed employees? From the research questions, these hypotheses were tested:

- i. Personal attributes (gender, marital status, education and tenure) will significantly and negatively predict OCB
- ii. Psychological contract breach will significantly and negatively predict OCB
- iii. Job insecurity will significantly and negatively predict OCB

Method

Participants and setting

The sample for the present study comprised 322 employees (females = 36.6%) drawn from a relatively large private organisation with interests in education, publishing, construction and manufacture of household goods. The sample size of 322 was considered adequate as it met the requirements of the guideline suggested by Sekaran (2003). Participants were purposively sampled because of the focus of the study. Participants differed in demographic characteristics including gender, marital status, education, and organisational tenure. Their socio-demographics were analysed using appropriate descriptive statistics. It revealed that majority (64.6%) were married, while the remainder (35.4%) were single at the time of participating in the study. With respect to education, majority (95.7%) possessed post-secondary school certificate, while the remainder (4.3%) reported not being educated beyond the senior secondary school level. The majority (69.9%) reported they have been working for less than 10 years, while the remainder (30.1%) had job duration longer than 10 years.

Measures

The participants completed the Psychological Contract Breach Scale (PCBS: Robinson & Morrison, 2000), Job Insecurity Scale (JIS: De Witte, 2000), and Organisational Citizenship Behaviour Checklist (OCBC: Spector, Bauer & Fox, 2010).

Psychological Contract Breach

The 10 items in the PCBS is designed to measure employees perception regarding the extent to which they belief the organisation has kept or fulfilled promises implicitly made to its workers. Respondents were asked to rate each statement using a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Two examples of items in the scale are: ‘Almost all the promises made by my employer during recruitment have been kept so far’, and ‘I have not received everything promised to me in exchange for my contributions’. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the PCB with the study participants is .73. Higher scores indicate perception of psychological contract breach.

Job Insecurity

The Job Insecurity Scale is an 8 items scale that assesses a worker's cognitive and affective job insecurity levels (Pienaar et al., 2013). However, in line with the objectives of the present study, the composite score of the scale was calculated. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from '1 = strongly disagree' to '5 = strongly agree'. Sample items in the scale are: 'I am very sure that I will be able to keep my job', and 'I feel unsure about the future of my job'. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the JIS in this present study is .85. Higher score shows higher perception of job insecurity.

Organisational Citizenship Behaviour Checklist

The OCB Checklist has 10 items that capture a wide variety of citizenship behaviours that can be responded to in a short time. Respondents indicated how often they had engaged in each of the ten statements. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from '1 = Never' to '5 = Everyday'. Two sample items in the scale include: 'Offered suggestions to improve how work is done', and 'Helped new employees get oriented to the job'. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the scale with the study sample is .68.

The scores are interpreted so that high scores indicated high OCB.

Procedure

This study is an extract from a larger research approved by the Department of Pure and Applied Psychology, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, Nigeria. Participation was solely voluntary and all respondents gave verbal consent. The researcher maintained anonymity by requesting that participants do not indicate any personal information (e.g. name, ID no.) on the questionnaire. Participants were informed of their right to quit the study at any stage without any penalty. Lastly, there was no monetary or any other form of compensation for participation.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS version 26. Pearson's correlation was performed on the data to establish the relationships among the variables. Hierarchical regression analysis was performed to establish the contributions of psychological contract breach, job insecurity, and personal attributes to organisational citizenship behaviour. An inspection of the probability plots to test for normality showed a reasonably straight line which imply that scores on the variables are normally distributed.

Results

Table 1: Distribution of participants' biographical characteristics

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Frequency (n)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Gender	Male	204	63.4
	Female	118	36.6
Marital Status	Married	208	64.6
	Married at one time or the other	114	35.4
Education	Up to Senior Secondary School Certificate	308	95.7
	Above senior secondary school certificate	14	4.3
Organisational Tenure	<10 years	225	69.9
	>10 years	97	30.1

Correlation analysis

Table 2: Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of the study variables

SN	Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Gender	-	-	1						
2	Marital Status	-	-	.23*	1					
3	Education	-	-	.04	.01	1				
4	Organisational Tenure	8.87	5.45	.92	.42**	-.11*	1			
5	PCB	25.68	3.52	.00	-.12*	.04	-.11*	1		
6	JI	42.85	10.58	.05	.74	-.02	.01	-.07	1	
7	OCB	28.60	14.24	.19**	.46**	-.10	.72**	-.15**	-.14*	1

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 2 is a summary of the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of the study variables. As predicted, psychological contract breach and job insecurity were both negatively associated with OCB ($r = -.15$, $p < .01$) and ($r = -.14$, $p < .05$) respectively. In contrast, gender, marital status, and tenure were positively correlated with OCB with correlation coefficients of .19, .46 and .72 respectively. Education was not associated with OCB.

Table 3: Hierarchical multiple regression predicting OCB by PCB, Job Insecurity, and Personal Attributes

	B	SE	β	T	$R^2 \Delta$
Step 1					.01
Gender	7.89	5.32	.09	1.49	
Marital Status	1.42	5.89	.12	.24	
Education	.34	11.22	.00	.03	
Organisational Tenure	.18	.51	.02	.34	
Step 2					.04
PCB	-2.53	.71	-.20	-3.60*	
Step 3					.25
JI	-2.16	.20	-.51	-10.80*	

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; Total $R^2 = .30$.

Predicting OCB from personal attributes, PCB and JI

Hypothesis one expected that personal attributes (gender, marital status, education and organisational tenure) will be negatively related to OCB. These variables were entered in the step 1 of the hierarchical regression analysis, and the result showed that as a block they contributed 1% to the variance in OCB. Hypothesis one was not supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that perceived psychological contract breach would be negatively related to OCB. Psychological contract breach was entered in step 2 and the result showed a statistically significant negative prediction of OCB ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .05$). Psychological contract breach contributed 4% to the variance in OCB. The data supported hypothesis two.

Hypothesis 3 posited that job insecurity would have a negative influence on OCB. Job insecurity was entered in step 3 of the model and the result showed it significantly and

negatively predicted OCB ($\beta = -.51, p < .05$). Job insecurity contributed 25% of the variance in OCB. Hypothesis 3 was confirmed.

Discussion

The present study investigated psychological contract breach and job insecurity influences on organisational citizenship behaviour in a sample of employees of a fairly large privately owned business who were involuntarily placed on furlough amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that both psychological contract breach and job insecurity contributed significantly to the variance in OCB, but job insecurity explained significantly more variance in OCB.

The hypothesis that predicted significant negative influence of psychological contract breach on OCB was confirmed in the direction stated. The finding showed psychological contract breach to significantly and negatively predict OCB. This suggests that higher levels of psychological contract breach among the study participants resulted in lower levels of OCB. The finding is congruent with previous studies (e.g. Batra & Kaur, 2021; Chao-Hsing & Chien-Wen, 2021; Koomson, 2021) which established psychological contract breach to negatively associate with discretionary work outcomes, particularly those that can improve organisational functioning such as OCB. One explanation for the finding is that furloughed employees may have felt a breach of the contract they implicitly believed they had with the organisation, in this instance, regarding their participation in decisions that affect them as stakeholders in the organisation. They may have felt that the decision to send them on furlough was a betrayal of trust, which they may have reciprocated by reducing their participation in extra-role behaviours including OCB. The hypothesis which assumed that job insecurity would negatively predict OCB was supported.

This suggests that perception of higher levels of job insecurity could have resulted in lower levels of OCB. The finding is supported by previous studies which suggest that perceived uncertainty about the future of their jobs increased withdrawal behaviours among employees (Schumacher et al. 2016; Probst, 2005; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). The findings may be described as reflecting that employees possibly may have perceived furlough as indicating an increase in job insecurity levels. Such employees may no longer feel as obligated to reciprocate positively, resulting in less involvement in OCBs.

Conclusions/Implication

The study indicates that psychological contract breach and job insecurity are important factors associated with organisational citizenship behaviour. Also, the findings showed high job insecurity and perceived psychological contract breach to significantly result in lower levels of OCB among furloughed employees. There are several policy implications of these findings which can be used to develop managerial practices to offset the negative impacts of furloughs when implemented. For instance, human resource experts should be particularly aware that the extent to which employee expectations are met may influence how much they are willing to exhibit extra-role behaviours that contribute to organisational growth. Clarifying these expectations therefore may help mitigate the development of unrealistic expectations particularly during a crisis period such as the COVID-19 pandemic era. In managing expectations, employers should take caution to not accidentally give employees the wrong perception of action which eventually doesn't materialize. In the same vein, the findings suggest that there is a benefit to firms from carefully managing their employees' perceptions of job insecurity if they are to sustain their performance of OCB.

Limitations of the study

This study's contributions should be looked at in light of some limitations. First, while the study examined demographically diverse employees, they were, however, selected from the private sector, thus the findings may not be generalizable to workers in non-private work organisations. Extending the study beyond private sector organisations will afford scholars, practitioners and other stakeholders to discover whether psychological contract breach and job insecurity had a similar impact on OCB performance among furloughed non-public sector workers. Second, the cross-sectional design adopted in the study was another limitation as it measured only OCB level at one point in time. Further research that measures changes in OCB over time (e.g. in a longitudinal research design) is needed to deepen our understanding of the relations among the variables investigated.

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Conflict of Interest

The author reports no conflict of interest with respect to this study.

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