

Article

Psychological Contracts and Organizational Commitment: The Positive Impact of Relational Contracts on Call Center Operators

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Abstract: With the increasing complexity and dynamism of the modern work experience, the importance of the psychological contract has become increasingly clear. Organizations and researchers alike have recognized the implications of this contract for employee performance, satisfaction and well-being. However, certain work contexts can increase psychosocial risks, making it crucial to investigate the individual and contextual characteristics that can promote well-being and mitigate risks. In this study, we examined the impact of psychological contract types and task repetitiveness on organizational commitment among call center employees. By conducting a cross-sectional study involving 201 call center employees working in-person and administering an ad hoc questionnaire, we aimed to enrich the scientific literature on the psychological contract and its implications for the call center work environment. Our findings revealed that a transactional psychological contract has a negative impact on affective and normative commitment, potentially undermining employees' sense of obligation and responsibility towards these organizations. To promote healthy work relationships and well-being among call center employees, we suggest the importance of a relational psychological contract. By highlighting the role of psychological contract types in organizational commitment, our study offers valuable insights for both researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: psychological contracts; commitment; call center; healthy relationships; exhausting work environment; relational capital



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1. Introduction

The call center industry has become an increasingly prominent sector in the service economy, with millions of people employed in this line of work worldwide (*Global Call Center Industry 2023*). Call center employees are often considered to be the backbone of the service industry, as they play a critical role in delivering quality customer service and ensuring customer satisfaction. However, call center work is often associated with high levels of stress, job insecurity and turnover. During recent years, the complexity and the dynamism of work experience have grown enough to attract the attention of both organizations and researchers to the implications of psychological contracts in terms of performance, satisfaction and well-being (*Davidescu et al. 2020*). Even before the coronavirus pandemic, the flexibility of work was investigated as a central dimension in fostering workers' job satisfaction (*Davidescu et al. 2020*). It is evident that some work contexts significantly increase the psychosocial risks associated with the nature of workplace and to specific tasks; moreover, research about psychological contracts could underline both

contextual and individual characteristics that are able to mitigate risks and promote well-being (Chambel and Alcover 2011). The psychological contract, which refers to the implicit expectations and obligations that exist between employees and employers, was proposed as a key factor in influencing employees' attitudes and behaviors towards their organization. In particular, the psychological contract is linked to organizational commitment, which is a crucial predictor of employee turnover and performance. Despite the importance of these constructs, relatively little research has examined the relationship between psychological contracts and organizational commitment in the call center context. The aim of this study was to investigate the nature of the psychological contract and its impact on organizational commitment in the call center industry. This study was intended to start a constructive reflection on the importance of relationship capital in organizations (Benevene and Cortini 2010; Buonomo et al. 2020), especially in those work contexts characterized by merely economic and result-oriented logic, as is the call center work environment. Starting from the identification of a close relationship between psychological contracts and organizational commitment, this study attempts to provide some insight on both contextual and individual actions able to build workplaces by pursuing not only economic targets, but also satisfaction, engagement and well-being goals. In the following section, although in a non-exhaustive way, a literature review of the main investigated variable is presented.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Psychological Contract

The psychological contract can be defined the individual's conviction regarding the reciprocal duties between management and workers, or a sort of implicit contract among parties (Rousseau 2001, 2004). Despite its unwritten and essentially implicit nature, the psychological contract has important consequences in terms of organizational behavior, individual choice and motivational implications at work. Several studies have shown the positive effects of the psychological contract on both role and extra role behaviors (Zhao et al. 2007; Ahmad et al. 2019; Soares and Mosquera 2019). Therefore, organizations and, even more so, human resource management should be particularly interested in understanding if and how it is possible to establish this reciprocal deal or pact of reciprocity between employee and employer and how it could be sustained over time.

However, sudden changes in the world of work require new contractual models that are able to be read with greater sensitivity to address emerging phenomena in employment relations. Processes of deregulation and contractual flexibility marked by economic exchange have gradually substituted the once-long-term contractual and psychological relationship based on relational aspects, concrete recognition, and opportunities for satisfactory work identity development. In this vein, the flexibility of work contracts represents a risk factor in terms of employees' job satisfaction and well-being (Manuti et al. 2016).

In fact, when employees are hired under a flexible work contract, they may experience uncertainty regarding the duration and conditions of their employment, leading to a sense of insecurity and lack of stability. This can have negative impacts on their mental health, as they may experience higher levels of stress and anxiety. Additionally, employees with flexible contracts may face challenges in planning and balancing their personal and professional lives, as they may have unpredictable work schedules or a lack of benefits and protections that are typically afforded to full-time employees. This can further impact their well-being and satisfaction with their work, potentially leading to lower levels of motivation and productivity. According to Manuti et al. (2016), the psychological contract can play an important role in managing the risks associated with work contract flexibility. A well-managed psychological contract can help ensure that both employees and the organization have clear expectations about what is required in terms of performance and support, which can help reduce the potential for misunderstandings or conflicts that may arise due to the nature of flexible work arrangements. The literature differentiates three types of psychological contract: transactional, relational and balanced (Rousseau 2004). The first type refers to those work relations based mainly upon economic exchange, which are

limited in time or in the quality of the activities. There could be short-term contracts or very specific and narrow tasks for the workers. According to [Aggarwal and Bhargava \(2010\)](#), a transactional psychological contract is often characterized by an emphasis on the exchange of specific, tangible benefits between an employee and their employer. Examples of this type of contract include a short-term or fixed-term employment agreement, in which the employee's work is tied to a specific project or timeline, or a contract that only guarantees a certain number of hours per week or a certain wage without any promises of job security or benefits beyond what is required by law. Another example could be a commission-based agreement, in which the employee's compensation is directly tied to their sales or performance, thereby creating a purely economic exchange. Overall, in a transactional psychological contract, the relationship between the employee and employer is often seen as more temporary and transactional rather than long-term and based on mutual commitment and trust ([Grimmer and Oddy 2007](#)). The relational psychological contract is focused on loyalty and stability in a reciprocal view: both the worker and the employer feel committed and obligated to support each other according to needs, interests and well-being. This type of psychological contract is less defined than transactional contracts, which implies the establishment of trust-based and durable relationships in various HR management practices. There are several HR management practices that promote a relational psychological contract, including empowerment, which allows employees to make decisions and have control over their work, which can help build trust and foster a sense of loyalty towards the organization; communication between management and employees, which can help build mutual trust and respect; training and development, which provides employees with opportunities to learn and grow within the organization and can signal a long-term commitment to their career development, which can increase their sense of loyalty; finally, recognition and rewards to employees for their contributions in order to reinforce a positive relationship between employees and the organization. Overall, the relational psychological contract emphasizes the importance of building positive relationships between employees and the organization through HR practices that foster trust, respect and mutual benefit.

The last type of psychological contract is the balanced type, which is characterized by an open-ended form of relationship, and it depends on learning and development opportunities that both employer and worker carry out for each other's success. Indeed, nowadays, it is difficult to find this typology of contract, which requires an accurate individual and collective negotiation process ([De Cuyper and De Witte 2006](#); [Grimmer and Oddy 2007](#); [Aggarwal and Bhargava 2010](#); [Handy et al. 2020](#)). More recent studies have confirmed that a mismatch between employees and organizations in terms of psychological contracts can lead to counterproductive work behavior ([Ma et al. 2019](#)); both dispositional and contextual characteristics—such as management procedures and labor market conditions—represent a mediating variable between psychological contract violations and employee behavior ([Peng 2022](#)).

2.2. Call Center Work Environment

The literature on call centers as work environments identifies some concerning characteristics that can be sources of stress for employees. For instance, workers are often asked to perform repetitive tasks ([Jain et al. 2013](#)), and there is a high level of control and rigid standardization of processes ([Chambel and Alcover 2011](#)). Additionally, call center workers are frequently employed with atypical contracts ([Eurofound 2017](#)) such as flexible forms of work ([Costa and Costa 2017](#)) which can lead to job insecurity. The literature on atypical contract work has also focused on the effects that this type of employment can have on workers' psychological contracts, with some studies suggesting a more transactional than relational dimension ([De Cuyper and De Witte 2006](#)). Employment conditions and psychological contract orientations can have a potentially negative impact on employees' attitudes and behaviors, as highlighted in empirical studies (e.g., [Chambel and Alcover 2011](#)). Moreover, research shows that work-related stress is an organization-dependent rather than a role-specific condition, as no differences in the level of exhaustion were found between

back-office and front-office employees in a study by [Gonçalves-Candeias et al. \(2021\)](#). The characteristics of the call center context and the atypical contracts implemented make it a challenging environment, especially in terms of flexibility. Research shows that work flexibility can negatively affect individual well-being ([Isaksson and Bellagh 2002](#); [Manuti et al. 2016](#)). Furthermore, poor worker well-being can be associated with low rewards that are typical of repetitive and simple tasks, such as those performed by call center operators ([De Jonge et al. 2000](#)). [Manuti et al. \(2016\)](#) examined some psychological dimensions of temporary workers and their socialization in a call center, finding that well-socialized temporary newcomers generate positive organizational commitment. Additionally, their results showed a correlation between the relational contract dimension and their effective commitment.

2.3. Organizational Commitment

The psychological contract can have a significant impact on organizational commitment, which is defined as the employee's psychological attachment toward the organization and the personal internalization of corporate values and objectives ([Cohen 2007](#)). [Allen and Meyer \(1990\)](#) described the three components of organizational commitment, which are affective, continuance and normative commitment. They are different components rather than different kinds of commitment; thus, they can all be experienced by workers, even if to varying intensities. The affective commitment is defined as the emotional attachment to the organization, personal identification and joyful integration with the organization. The continuance commitment is the willingness of a worker to stay in the organization because of the costs associated with leaving it. The normative commitment refers to the individual's responsibility toward the organization, which is comparable to an obligation. Each of these components is affected by several individuals and contextual variables, resulting in different experiences and attitudes for employees in the same organization ([Allen and Meyer 1990](#)). Although past studies have already highlighted the relations between psychological contract and organizational commitment ([Behery et al. 2012](#); [Manuti et al. 2016](#)), it is important to depict this relation in-depth because there is a lack of studies that specifically consider each dimension and component of the two constructs. Even if there is research investigating those specific relations in atypical work environments, such as the call center context (i.e., [Manuti et al. 2016](#); [Chambel and Alcover 2011](#)), there is not yet a specific link among each single component, nor have there been examinations of their specific impacts on each other. Thus, we hypothesized that some typical characteristics of call centers, such as flexible forms of contract and the presence of simple and repetitive tasks, would stimulate a transactional psychological contract, and this, in turn, would negatively impact affective organizational commitment. According to the literature cited previously, in call centers, employees are often hired on a temporary or part-time basis, which can lead to a greater emphasis on the economic exchange aspect of the employment relationship. Additionally, the nature of the work in call centers tends to be highly routinized and focused on completing simple and repetitive tasks, which may further reinforce the transactional nature of the psychological contract. These factors, in turn, can contribute to a weaker sense of affective commitment to the organization, as employees may feel less connected to the organization and their coworkers, and they may view their work as a temporary means to an end rather than as a meaningful and fulfilling job.

In the following sections, we will present our methodological choices and a discussion of our results as well as implications for both practice and research.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Sample and Procedure

A cross-sectional design was adopted to collect data through an online questionnaire implemented in the Qualtrics platform. From October 2019 to January 2020, the authors sent the questionnaire to the entire working population of a call center service organization, who were working in-person at the time of completion. The participants were informed about the processing of personal data and the anonymity of the participants in accordance with EU

regulation 2016/679. The study adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki of 1995 (and following revisions), and all ethical guidelines were followed for conducting human research, including adherence to legal requirements where the study was conducted. Participants provided their informed consent prior to completing the anonymous questionnaire. No medical treatments, invasive diagnostics, or procedures that cause psychological or social discomfort were administered to the participants. Therefore, no additional ethical approval was required. A total of 201 participants (91 men and 110 women) completed the questionnaire, resulting in a well-balanced sample in terms of gender. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 60 years, with a mean age of 28.71 (8.12 SD). All participants were contact operators, and nearly all of the sample (N = 199) had a project contract, increasing the study's validity in terms of statistical significance due to their homogeneous working conditions. The questionnaire had two sections: the first collected sociodemographic data such as gender, age, work role, experience in the organization, tenure, type of contract and educational qualification, whereas the second part focused on the variables covered by the study. Table 1 displays the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants and other sample information.

Table 1. Sociodemographic and other relevant characteristics of the participants.

Variables	Categories	Numbers	Percentage	Average	SD
1. Gender	M	91	45.3		
	F	110	54.7		
	Other	0	0		
	Total	201	100		
2. Average age of employees				28.71	8.12
3. Work role	Contact operator	201	100		
	Team leader	0	0		
	Total	201	100		
4. Experience in the present organization				14.24	
5. Tenure	Below 1 years	66	32.8		
	1–5 years	117	58.2		
	Above 5 years	16	8		
	Total	199			
6. Type of contract	Full-time fixed-term contract	0	0		
	Part-time fixed-term contract	1	0.5		
	Full-time permanent	0	0		
	Part-time permanent	0	0		
	Apprenticeship	0	0		
	Project contract	199	99.5		
7. Educational qualification	Total	200	100		
	Primary school	0	0		
	Middle school	15	7.5		
	High school graduation	151	75.1		
	Degree	35	17.4		
Total	201	100			

3.2. Measures

All scales used have been validated in national and international scientific studies.

3.2.1. Psychological Contract

The Psychological Contract Inventory Scale (28 items) was used to assess the psychological contract in place (Rousseau 2008), which consists of three dimensions. The first dimension (7 items) assesses the transactional contract, and it is composed of two sub-dimensions, narrow (4 items, e.g., "I just do what is required of me") and short-term (3 items, e.g., "I can resign at any time"). It refers to the range of obligations that must be respected and is mainly based on economic exchange without internal organizational involvement. The second dimension assesses the relational contract, which has two sub-dimensions: loyalty (4 items, e.g., "I make personal sacrifices for my company") and stability (5 items, e.g., "I plan to stay here for a very long time"). It concerns long-term work agreements based on mutual trust and loyalty, where rewards are conditioned by performance only in part and focus more on belonging and participation in the organization.

The last dimension assesses the balanced contract, and it is divided into three components: external employability (4 items, e.g., “I am looking for contacts outside the company to increase my career opportunities”), internal advancement (4 items, e.g., “I acquire skills to be more necessary to my company”) and dynamic performance (4 items, e.g., “I accept increasingly demanding work standards”). This dimension focuses on the mutual learning and development of both the worker and the company.

The Psychological Contract Inventory (PCI) scale developed by Rousseau (2008) has been widely used in previous studies to measure different dimensions of the psychological contract, including transactional, relational and balanced contract dimensions (Gardner et al. 2021; Soares and Mosquera 2019). Moreover, the PCI scale was found to have good reliability and validity in various settings, including the workplace.

3.2.2. Organizational Commitment

The Italian version of the Allen and Meyer organizational commitment scale (1990) was used to measure organizational commitment (Pierro et al. 1992). The scale consists of three dimensions. The first dimension assesses affective commitment (5 items, e.g., “I do not feel ‘emotionally attached’ to this organization”), and it focuses on the emotional bond that the worker develops thanks to positive work experiences. The second dimension assesses normative commitment (5 items, e.g., “If I got another offer for a better job elsewhere I would not feel it was right to leave my organization”), and it focuses on the perception of obligations towards the company, such as compliance with the rules of reciprocity. The last dimension appraises continuance commitment (5 items, e.g., “Right now, staying with my organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire), and it is based on the perception of costs, both economic and social, that would result from leaving the organization. This scale has been extensively used in previous research, and it was found to be a reliable and valid measure of different types of organizational commitment, such as affective, normative and continuance commitment (Sudjarwo 2019; Gabay-Mariani and Adam 2020; Galanti et al. 2021).

Thus, by using these established scales, we can ensure that our study is consistent with previous research and can provide meaningful insights into the relationship between psychological contracts and organizational commitment.

4. Statistical Analyses

Data analyses were performed using IBM SPSS, Version 26.

After descriptive (mean (M) and standard deviation (SD)) analysis of each synthetic index, hierarchical multiple regression models were used to evaluate which types of psychological contract influenced call center operators’ organizational commitment. We specified three separate regression models for the three dependent variables: affective, continuance and normative commitment. Predictor variables were added in successive steps (enter method) in the hierarchical regression process based on their theoretical status. In the final phase, control variables were inserted (e.g., gender, age, educational qualifications and type of contract). This model estimation process allowed us to evaluate if, after adding new predictive variables, the predictors inserted in the later steps explained a significant portion of the variance over and above the variables inserted at the previous steps. Then, at each stage, the holistic fit index, which is helpful for evaluating the model’s solution quality (R^2 coefficient), can increase (ΔR^2), showing the marginal utility of the most recently added variables.

5. Results

In order to understand which relevant control variables to insert in the analysis, ANOVA was run to analyze if differences occurred between relevant sociodemographic variables such as gender or educational qualification levels. Significant differences in the study variables occurred between men and women regarding levels of affective commitment, which were significantly higher for women ($F = 4.64, p < 0.05$). Continuance commitment was significantly lower among those with a degree ($F = 4.5, p < 0.5$) compared

with other educational qualification levels, and affective commitment was significantly lower among those who had been employed for less than one year.

Table 2 shows the results of the correlation analysis between all variables considered for the present study, followed by means, standard deviations and Cronbach's alphas. The scales and subscales had adequate internal consistency, all of the variables correlated in the expected direction, and the transactional dimension of psychological contract correlated negatively with both affective and normative commitment, but no significant correlation emerged with continuance commitment. No serious violations of the normal distribution were found (all skewness and kurtosis values of the variables considered were within $+/-1$).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Relational	1	0.364 **	-0.112	0.693 **	0.661 **	0.224 **	0.207 **
2. Balance		1	0.055	0.309 **	0.264 **	0.103	0.012
3. Transactional			1	-0.347 **	-0.185 *	-0.03	0.048
4. Affective				1	0.644 **	0.125	0.159 *
5. Normative					1	0.09	0.167 *
6. Continuance						1	0.126
7. Age							1
Mean (SD)	8.6 (2.1)	14.5 (3.2)	8.7 (2.2)	4 (1.4)	3.5 (1.2)	4.6 (1.2)	28.7 (8.1)
Cronbach's α	0.70	0.76	0.89	0.72	0.72	0.73	

** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 3 shows the results of the multiple regression analysis. Four principal assumptions were used to justify a linear regression model in this study to predict the relation between commitment and psychological contract: normality, heteroscedasticity, multicollinearity and autocorrelation. Tests revealed that the regression model in this study had a normal distribution value, free from heteroscedasticity, no correlation within independent variables and without autocorrelation. In the first model, relational and transactional psychological contracts had a positive and negative relationship, respectively, with affective and normative commitment.

Table 3. Regression parameters: standardized coefficients and overall changes in R^2 for emotional exhaustion and cynicism.

Model		Affective Commitment		Normative Commitment		Continuance Commitment	
		Beta	SE	Beta	SE	Beta	SE
1	Rel	0.62 ***	0.039	0.59 ***	0.03	0.16	0.05
	Bal	0.16 *	0.027	0.08	0.02	0.02	0.04
	Trans	-0.29 ***	0.036	-0.16 ***	0.03	-0.07	0.05
	Adj R^2	0.57		0.44		0.02	
	R^2	0.58 ***		0.44 ***		0.04	
2	Rel	0.60 ***	0.04	0.61 ***	0.04	0.16	0.05
	Bal	0.10	0.02	0.10	0.02	0.08	0.03
	Trans	-0.26 ***	0.03	-0.19 ***	0.03	-0.10	0.04
	Gender (1 = female)	0.16 ***	0.15	0.04	0.15	-0.02	0.09
	Age	0.01	0.01	0.05	0.01	0.05	0.01
	Tenure (less 1 year)	-0.16	0.30	0.13	0.30	0.17	0.39
	Tenure (1–5 years)	-0.10	0.027	0.02	0.27	0.14	0.35
	Edu (middle school)	0.05	0.18	-0.04	0.35	0.25 **	0.46
	Edu (high school degree)	0.09	0.34	-0.03	0.19	0.16	0.24
	Adj R^2	0.60		0.43		0.06	
	R^2	0.04 **		0.01		0.08	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Gender: 0, M; 1, F. Rel, Relational Psychological Contract; Bal, Balanced Psychological Contract; Trans, Transactional Psychological Contract. Note: SE, Standard error.

Concerning control variables, only gender was significant, showing a positive relationship with affective commitment; women were higher in affective commitment. On the other side, no significant relationship emerged regarding continuance commitment. In this model, only educational level was significantly associated with continuance commitment, and specifically, those with a middle school-level education were significantly higher in this outcome variable.

6. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the relationship between psychological contracts and organizational commitment in an atypical working context, such as that of a real call center. Indeed, call center work environment is a challenging reality that could potentially induce workers to experience higher levels of stress. Low rewards, repetitive and simple tasks, and poor relations are only a few clear examples of the call center workers' "conditions which may hurt employees" attitudes and behaviors. As we expected, all of the participants of this study, except one, have signed an atypical, unstable, and flexible contract with their organization (project contract). In the same way, we expected that a transactional psychological contract would have been more diffuse than a balanced or relational. According to the literature, the transactional psychological contract is based on a short-term or limited relationship, often with a focus on specific tasks or duties (Grimmer and Oddy 2007). This type of contract can lead to lower levels of emotional attachment and identification with the organization, which can result in decreased affective and normative commitment. When employees feel disconnected from the organization or lack a sense of obligation, they may be less likely to put forth their best effort or engage in positive behaviors that benefit the organization. This negative attitude toward the organization could lead over time, if not managed, to a reduction in the quality and quantity of employees' performance (Panda et al. 2022; Philippaers et al. 2019; Bakker et al. 2003). In addition to affecting employee performance, the transactional psychological contract can also have negative effects on employee well-being, which can lead to mental and physical health problems over time (Oh et al. 2017; Parzefall and Hakanen 2010). Therefore, it is important for organizations to manage employee contracts and ensure that employees feel valued and supported and that they are committed to the organization. According to our analysis, the transactional psychological contract has a negative impact on both affective and normative organizational commitment; this means that work characterized by a short-term relationship or the presence of very narrow tasks results in workers who are less emotionally committed and did not identify strongly with the organization. Furthermore, this kind of psychological mindset can threaten the employees' feelings of obligation and responsibility toward the organization. Moreover, as expected, the relational dimension of psychological contract, which refers to the social and interpersonal aspects of the employment relationship, has a positive impact on affective and normative organizational commitment, which is in line with the literature related to perceived organizational support (Andrade and Neves 2022; Neves and Paixão 2014) and positive organizational citizenship behaviors (Galanti et al. 2021). According to the literature, when employees feel supported and valued by their organization, they are more likely to feel emotionally connected and committed to the organization and to engage in positive behaviors that benefit the organization.

Another result that deserves attention is certainly the gender differences found in terms of affective commitment, as it appears that women tend to experience higher levels of affective commitment compared with men. One possible explanation is that women may place more importance on interpersonal relationships and social connections, which are key aspects of affective commitment (Jeon et al. 2022). Women may also be more likely to value the emotional aspects of their work and feel a sense of connection and loyalty to their organization, which can contribute to higher levels of affective commitment.

Another possible explanation is that women may face unique challenges in the workplace that make affective commitment more important to them. For example, women may experience more discrimination and bias, which can create a sense of isolation and a need

to find support and belonging within their organization. Alternatively, women may also face greater work–family conflict, which can lead them to seek a greater sense of meaning and purpose from their work, leading to higher levels of affective commitment (Geraldes et al. 2019; Lestari and Yuwono 2020).

It is also important to note that this gender difference may be influenced by cultural and societal factors as well as by organizational policies and practices. For example, organizations that prioritize work–life balance, diversity and inclusion and employee well-being may be more likely to foster a sense of emotional connection and commitment among all employees, regardless of gender. If we look to the call center work environment, this could have several implications. First, it may be beneficial for call center managers to recognize and leverage this gender difference to improve overall employee engagement and performance. For example, they could consider implementing policies and practices that emphasize the importance of social connections and interpersonal relationships in the workplace, which may be particularly effective for female employees. Additionally, it may be useful for managers to examine the factors that contribute to affective commitment in the call center context and identify any barriers that may be preventing male employees from experiencing higher levels of affective commitment. For example, male employees may feel disconnected or undervalued due to a lack of social support or recognition for their contributions, which could be addressed through targeted interventions such as team-building activities or performance recognition programs. Finally, it is important for call center managers to ensure that policies and practices are gender-inclusive and do not inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes or biases that may contribute to gender differences in affective commitment. This could involve promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace (Domingo-Cabarrubias 2012; Fantinelli et al. 2022), providing equal opportunities for professional development and advancement and ensuring that all employees feel valued and supported regardless of gender. Overall, the gender difference in affective commitment in a call center highlights the importance of understanding and addressing the unique needs and experiences of different employee groups to promote a positive and supportive work environment for all.

7. Theoretical and Practical Implications

There are very few studies that highlight a specific relationship between the different dimensions of psychological contracts and organizational commitment, specifically those in a call center. Manuti et al. (2016) focused only on the relational psychological contract, finding an association with affective commitment. In a study by Chambel and Alcover (2011), there was an interest in the psychological contract; they measured general orientations and organization obligations, finding that temporary workers defined the organization as more transactional. Our study filled this literature gap, providing evidence about the negative link between transactional psychological contracts and organizational commitment, especially in terms of low levels of identification, performance and well-being.

Our results, which are in line with the literature (Vantilborgh et al. 2014; Manuti et al. 2016; Wang et al. 2017), also suggest that the relational psychological contract represents a resource; when employees are emotionally engaged and their expectations are also reciprocated by the organization, they experience higher job satisfaction (Chambel and Castanheira 2007). However, our study also suggests the need to identify a series of preventive actions for both individuals and organizations that enables avoiding negative consequences, such as decreases in performance, satisfaction and well-being. From a collective perspective, it is urgent and mandatory that organizations constantly monitor workers' well-being, tracking sentinel events and defusing negative loops. Moreover, organizations should prioritize the development of positive relationships with their employees by fostering a sense of trust, fairness and reciprocity. This could involve providing opportunities for open communication, recognizing and rewarding employee contributions and implementing policies and practices that prioritize employee well-being. At the same time, it could be important that organizations offer their employees with sports services (e.g., agreements with gyms

or swimming pools) and recreational spaces to build relationships with colleagues. It is evident that one of the most negative aspects of the call center work environment is the lack of relationships and opportunities to meet each other and share their work experience. Thus, we want to underline again the relational nature of work and the close correlation existing between work satisfaction and positive relations at work. From the individual's point of view, it could be useful that employees follow mindfulness courses. Current research suggests the importance of promoting mindfulness in workplace settings (Allen and Kiburz 2012; Malarkey et al. 2013; Manocha et al. 2011), and various initiatives have been implemented by organizations to improve levels of work-related well-being via the cultivation and enhancement of healthy working environments. In this perspective, in recent years, several researchers underlined the impact of smartphone-based interventions in the workplace as able to promote mindfulness (Bartlett et al. 2022) as well as self-compassion (Bégin et al. 2022) and well-being (Paganin and Simbula 2020). In fact, mindfulness and self-compassion interventions can help reduce burnout and work stress, but professionals sometimes have trouble learning and practicing these interventions. Digital technologies could make these interventions more accessible to workers.

Moreover, it is important for organizations to recognize that the relational psychological contract is a two-way street and that employees also have a role to play in maintaining positive relationships. Employees can contribute to the development of positive relationships by being proactive in communicating their expectations and needs, demonstrating a willingness to collaborate and contribute to team goals and actively seeking out opportunities for growth and development. It is also important for organizations to recognize the potential negative consequences of a transactional psychological contract and take steps to avoid these negative outcomes. This could involve being transparent about job expectations and responsibilities, providing opportunities for skill development and career growth and implementing policies and practices that prioritize work-life balance and employee well-being. Finally, individuals can take steps to protect themselves from the negative consequences of a transactional psychological contract by being proactive in seeking out information about job expectations and responsibilities, communicating their needs and expectations to their employer and actively seeking out opportunities for growth and development both inside and outside the organization. More recent trends involve digital gamified tools designed to foster employees' engagement with the organization and improve work-related well-being (Hammedi et al. 2021); it is possible to hypothesize a gamified workplace digital experience playing the role of a driving force for a kind of relational psychological contract.

Overall, the practical implications of these results suggest the importance of fostering positive relationships between employees and organizations and being proactive in addressing the potential negative consequences of a transactional psychological contract.

8. Limits and Future Perspective

This study has some limitations that reduce the possibility of generalizing its results to other contexts. The first limitation concerns the cross-sectional design of the study. It describes only associations between variables and does not account for cause-and-effect relationships. Future studies might examine these same relationships using a cross-lagged or longitudinal design. Second, the selection of participants for this study did not follow specific criteria ensuring the sample's representativeness. On the contrary, we used a convenience sample whose characteristics were, in some cases, measured through ordinal variables, as was the case for age. Another limitation of the study is the reliance on self-reported data, which can be subject to bias and may not accurately reflect actual behaviors or experiences. Additionally, the study focused specifically on call center workers, and therefore, caution should be taken when generalizing the findings to other industries or occupations. Despite these open points, we believe that this study enhances knowledge about psychological constructs in atypical contracts.

Future studies could also explore the potential moderating effects of individual and contextual factors on the relationships between psychological contracts, affective commitment and job satisfaction. For example, research could examine how factors such as job tenure, work–life balance and organizational culture may influence the strength of these relationships. It would also be interesting to explore the relational sphere, not only in horizontal relationships with colleagues but also in vertical relationships with superiors. According to recent studies (Bonaiuto et al. 2022; Toscano et al. 2022), supervisors can establish different types of relationships with subordinates, but the higher the relationship quality, the stronger the experience of trust, mutual bonding and respect. Moreover, future studies could investigate the individual differences in call center operators and the existence of typical psychological traits in this atypical work environment. Finally, future studies could also examine how interventions aimed at strengthening relational psychological contracts can positively impact employee well-being, job satisfaction and performance in call center settings as well as in other types of atypical work environments. Such interventions could include training programs for managers to improve their communication and relationship-building skills as well as initiatives aimed at improving employee well-being and work–life balance.

9. Conclusions

This paper discusses the impact of the transactional psychological contract on affective and normative organizational commitment as well as its potential negative consequences for employees and organizations. This study provides further useful insight related to the characteristics of the call center work context, which may have a potential negative impact on employees' sense of obligation and work engagement. In fact, the call center context and the atypical contracts usually implemented make it a challenging environment, especially in terms of flexibility and openness to change.

This study highlights the importance of understanding the complex relationship between psychological contracts, organizational commitment and employee well-being in call center settings. From this perspective, our results suggest that practitioners involved in the call center context should invest in the promotion and care of a relational psychological contract to stimulate affective commitment and other positive outcomes, such as satisfaction and employees' health. The first step should be to recognize the negative impact of a transactional psychological contract and the positive impact of a relational psychological contract on workers' engagement and commitment. Starting from this realization, organizations and practitioners are called upon to take proactive steps to promote positive employee outcomes and organizational success. Moreover, this study underscores the need for organizations to recognize the intrinsic relational nature of work and the importance of positive horizontal and vertical work relationships in promoting employee satisfaction, engagement and well-being. By prioritizing the development of positive relationships between employees and their colleagues and supervisors, organizations can foster a culture of trust, mutual respect and support that benefits both employees and the organization as a whole.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights for organizations and practitioners involved in call center settings as well as for those interested in promoting positive employee outcomes and organizational success more broadly. By taking into account the complex interplay between psychological contracts, organizational commitment and employee well-being, organizations can create a work environment that supports the success and well-being of both employees and the organization. Finally, this study highlights the importance of positive working relationships on various aspects of employee well-being, such as satisfaction and engagement. Additionally, it acknowledges the relational nature of work, emphasizing that social connections with colleagues and superiors can have a significant impact on an individual's experience in the workplace.

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