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RESILIENCE: HOW ACADEMICS STAY AFTER MULTIPLE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT BREACHES

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Abstract: This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of academics who have encountered multiple breaches in their psychological contracts within academic institutions. Through in-depth interviews with participants from diverse disciplines and career stages, the study investigates the coping mechanisms and adaptations in daily work activities employed by academics to navigate the emotional aftermath of psychological contract breaches. The findings reveal a multifaceted landscape of resilience, encompassing strategies such as seeking social support, engaging in professional development, utilizing creative outlets, and intentionally cultivating autonomy. Furthermore, adaptations in daily work activities include reorienting research focus, innovating teaching methodologies, embracing interdisciplinary collaborations, and committing to continuous learning. Comparisons with existing literature underscore both consistent themes and novel dimensions, contributing to a nuanced understanding of academic resilience. The study concludes with actionable recommendations for institutions to support the well-being and resilience of academics, emphasizing the importance of autonomy, interdisciplinary collaboration, and reflective practices. Future research directions are also proposed to deepen our understanding of academic resilience in the face of evolving challenges within the contemporary academic landscape.

Keywords: Resilience, Psychological Contract Breach, Multiple Breach, Academics

1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving and dynamic landscape of academia, where the pursuit of knowledge intertwines with institutional expectations, scholars find themselves navigating a complex web of psychological contracts that underpin their relationships with academic institutions (Griep et al., 2016; Moser et al., 2017; Vantilborgh et al., 2014). While existing scholarship has delved deeply into the subjective experiences of academics during instances of breaches in these psychological contracts, an emerging and compelling area of inquiry invites us to explore the aftermath of such breaches comprehensively. This exploration seeks to unravel the multifaceted mechanisms that empower academics to resiliently persevere and remain unwavering in their commitment to scholarly pursuits, even in the face of repeated breaches.

The academic journey is a nuanced interplay of intellectual pursuits and intricate relationships, encompassing unspoken agreements, expectations, and reciprocal understandings between scholars and their respective institutions (Alcover et al., 2017; Griep et al., 2016; Krivokapic-skoko & O'Neill, 2008; Sewpersad et al., 2019). As these psychologi-

cal contracts encounter breaches, the repercussions extend far beyond the immediate emotional and professional domains, intricately weaving into the very fabric of scholars' daily lives and interpersonal relationships (Firmansah et al., 2023). The profound complexity of this interplay between personal and professional spheres in the aftermath of multiple breaches forms the crux of this exploration.

This study embarks on a journey into uncharted territory, aiming to understand the tenacity exhibited by academics as they grapple with the multifaceted repercussions of enduring multiple psychological contract breaches. Beyond merely acknowledging the challenges posed by these breaches, our endeavor is to cast a penetrating spotlight on the remarkable resilience, unveiling the coping mechanisms and profound psychological fortitude that enable academics to navigate the complexities of the aftermath and persist resolutely in their scholarly endeavors.

Through a nuanced lens, we aspire to provide the rich narratives and experiences of academics who have weathered the storm of multiple breaches, recognizing the diversity and uniqueness of their individual journeys. These stories serve as invaluable threads weaving a tapestry of collective wisdom, offering profound insights into how individuals, despite facing adversity, summon the strength not only to endure but to thrive within the academic arena. By unraveling the intricacies of these journeys, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted mechanisms that underpin academic resilience.

This comprehensive exploration does not only seek to document individual narratives but also aims to foster a broader dialogue within the academic community. It endeavors to transcend the confines of singular experiences and resonate within the broader scholarly discourse. In doing so, we acknowledge not only the challenges posed by psychological contract breaches but also celebrate the indomitable spirit and resilience that propel academics forward, allowing them to remain steadfast in their pursuit of knowledge and meaningful scholarly contributions. As we embark on this expansive journey of exploration and reflection, our commitment lies in shedding light on the myriad facets of resilience, ensuring that the collective voice of academia resonates and inspires a community united in its pursuit of intellectual growth and enduring commitment to scholarly excellence.

2. Literature Review

The landscape of psychological contracts in academia has been a subject of substantial scholarly inquiry, with researchers examining the intricate dynamics that govern the relationships between academics and their institutions (Deas & Coetzee, 2020; Mousa, 2020; O'Driscoll, 2013; Yesufu, 2016). While much attention has been given to understanding the nature of psychological contracts and the impact of breaches, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the aftermath of multiple breaches and the resilience exhibited by academics in the face of such challenges.

The concept of psychological contracts in academia revolves around the unwritten expectations, obligations, and mutual understandings between academics and their institutions (Rousseau, 1989). These contracts, often implicit, play a pivotal role in shaping the academic experience, influencing job satisfaction, commitment, and overall well-being (J. A.-M. Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005; Morrison & Robinson, 1997).

Psychological contract breaches occur when there is a perceived violation of these implicit agreements (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). While prior research has delved into the experiences of academics during breaches, limited attention has been given to understanding the enduring effects and the cumulative impact of multiple breaches on the academic environment.

The existing body of literature has extensively explored the immediate consequences of psychological contract breaches. Scholars have investigated how such breaches affect job satisfaction, commitment, and the overall well-being of academics (J. A.-M. Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005; J. Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). However, the exploration of

the effects and the resilience exhibited by academics following repeated breaches remains an underexplored avenue.

Resilience, in the context of academia, refers to the ability of individuals to bounce back from adversity, adapting to challenging circumstances and persisting in their scholarly pursuits (Meneghel et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2022). Research has highlighted the importance of resilience in mitigating the negative effects of workplace stressors (Ross et al., 2022). However, the specific mechanisms through which academics exhibit resilience after facing multiple psychological contract breaches are yet to be comprehensively understood.

Prior studies employing phenomenological approaches have shed light on the experiences of academics during stressful events (e.g., Aydin et al., 2021; Creely et al., 2022; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021). However, the application of such methodologies to understand the nuanced nature of resilience in the aftermath of multiple psychological contract breaches remains relatively scarce.

This article seeks to address the aforementioned gaps in the literature by adopting a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of academics who have weathered multiple breaches. By unraveling the narratives of resilience, coping mechanisms, and adaptive strategies employed by academics, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the long-term impact of psychological contract breaches and the tenacity exhibited by academics in persisting with their scholarly endeavors.

To conclude, while the literature has provided valuable insights into the nature and immediate effects of psychological contract breaches in academia, a comprehensive understanding of the aftermath and the resilience displayed by academics facing repeated breaches remains an essential area for further exploration. This study endeavors to fill this gap by employing a nuanced methodology to illuminate the complex tapestry of academic resilience in the face of multiple psychological contract breaches.

3. Research Methods

The study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of academics who have faced multiple breaches in their psychological contracts. Phenomenology is particularly well-suited for this research, as it seeks to understand and interpret the essence of human experiences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the intricate nuances surrounding resilience in the aftermath of psychological contract breaches.

3.1 Participant Selection

The participants for this study were purposefully selected to ensure a diverse representation of academics from various disciplines and career stages. Inclusion criteria encompassed individuals who have explicitly experienced multiple breaches in their psychological contracts with their academic institution.

3.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method for data collection. The interviews were conducted in-person or virtually, based on participant preferences. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allows for flexibility, enabling participants to articulate their experiences freely while ensuring that key themes related to resilience and the aftermath of psychological contract breaches are explored.

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), was employed to analyze the qualitative data. This iterative process involves familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Rigorous attention was given to the identification of patterns and variations in participants' accounts to ensure the depth and richness of the analysis.

3.4 Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, various strategies were employed. These include prolonged engagement with the data, member checking to verify interpretations

with participants, and reflexivity to acknowledge and minimize potential biases. Additionally, triangulation was applied by comparing and contrasting data from multiple participants and employing peer debriefing for external validation of findings.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical guidelines, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without consequences. The research was carried out with integrity, respecting the autonomy and dignity of participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board.

Through this qualitative phenomenological approach, the study aims to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of how academics navigate the aftermath of multiple psychological contract breaches, shedding light on the resilient strategies employed in the face of adversity.

4. Results and Discussion

Participants recounted a range of psychological contract breaches, with common themes emerging. Transactional breaches, such as unmet promises related to workload distribution and resource allocation, were prevalent. Additionally, relational breaches, including a perceived lack of support during challenging periods and strained interpersonal dynamics, were recurrent in participants' narratives.

The emotional toll of these breaches was profound. Participants expressed feelings of disappointment, frustration, and, in some cases, betrayal. The emotional impact extended beyond the professional realm, seeping into their personal lives, affecting relationships and overall well-being.

4.1 Coping Mechanisms

Participants demonstrated a diverse array of coping mechanisms in response to the emotional upheaval triggered by psychological contract breaches. A predominant theme was the seeking of social support both within and outside academic circles. Engaging in candid conversations with trusted colleagues provided a valuable outlet for expressing frustrations and sharing experiences. Additionally, some participants sought mentorship from senior faculty members or external mentors, finding solace in guidance that extended beyond the confines of their immediate academic environment.

Another noteworthy coping strategy involved active participation in professional development opportunities outside the institution. Participants described attending conferences, workshops, and seminars that offered fresh perspectives and alternative approaches to academic work. This proactive engagement served as a means of empowerment, allowing participants to reclaim a sense of agency in shaping their academic trajectories.

Interestingly, several participants highlighted the therapeutic nature of creative outlets as coping mechanisms. Engaging in artistic endeavors, writing, or even physical activities emerged as powerful channels for emotional release and personal rejuvenation. Such activities not only provided an escape from the academic pressures but also fostered a renewed sense of purpose and creativity.

Furthermore, a recurring theme in coping mechanisms was the intentional cultivation of a sense of autonomy within their work. Participants sought ways to regain control over aspects of their academic lives, whether by negotiating more flexible work arrangements, diversifying their research agendas, or spearheading collaborative initiatives that aligned

with their personal values. This active pursuit of autonomy emerged as a resilience strategy, allowing academics to redefine their professional narratives in the aftermath of breaches.

The identified coping mechanisms align with existing literature on academic stress and coping. Seeking social support has been recognized as a key strategy (Hobfoll et al., 2003), with this study reinforcing the importance of both intra and inter-institutional networks. Similarly, the engagement in professional development opportunities resonates with studies highlighting the positive impact of continuous learning on academic well-being (Zou, 2019). The innovative use of creative outlets as coping mechanisms expands upon existing research, emphasizing the role of holistic approaches in maintaining emotional balance (Bankins, 2015).

Additionally, the deliberate cultivation of autonomy emerged as a significant coping mechanism in response to psychological contract breaches. This resonates with research emphasizing the role of autonomy in academic job satisfaction and well-being (Krivokapic-skoko & O'Neill, 2008; Sewpersad et al., 2019; Shen, 2010). However, our findings add a layer by showcasing how autonomy serves as a resilience-driven response to breaches, allowing academics not only to cope but to proactively shape their professional narratives.

4.2. Adaptations in Daily Work Activities

Participants articulated adaptive changes in their daily work activities, driven by a desire to realign their professional pursuits with intrinsic values and goals. A prevalent adaptation was a shift in research focus, with academics exploring avenues that resonated more closely with their passions and intellectual curiosity. This recalibration not only rejuvenated their scholarly pursuits but also reignited a sense of purpose in their academic journey.

Some participants reported innovative adaptations in their teaching methodologies. Experimenting with new pedagogical approaches and incorporating experiential learning opportunities became a means of injecting renewed enthusiasm into their roles as educators. Collaborative teaching initiatives, both within and outside their institutions, emerged as a powerful strategy to foster a sense of community and shared purpose.

Additionally, participants detailed a deliberate reorientation of their research focus as a strategic adaptation to psychological contract breaches. Academics explored interdisciplinary collaborations and community engagement projects that transcended the traditional boundaries of their disciplines. These adaptations not only broadened the scope of their work but also created opportunities for meaningful connections with diverse communities, offering a sense of fulfillment beyond the confines of the university.

The adaptations in daily work activities were not merely reactive measures but strategic responses aimed at reclaiming a sense of fulfillment, autonomy, and alignment with personal values. These changes reflected a resilience-driven process of self-discovery, where academics transformed challenges into opportunities for professional growth and innovation.

The adaptations in daily work activities align with previous studies on academic flexibility and innovation. Reorienting research focus as a response to challenges echoes research on academic identity and the importance of aligning scholarly pursuits with personal values (Ooms et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2023). Innovations in teaching methodologies and interdisciplinary collaborations correspond with literature emphasizing the dynamic nature of academia and the need for innovative teaching practices. Additionally, community engagement projects as adaptive strategies resonate with the increasing emphasis on societal impact in academic endeavors.

The emphasis on reflexive practice and continuous learning as adaptive strategies aligns with recent calls for a more reflexive academia (Barnes et al., 2022). This finding contributes to the discourse on academic identity and highlights the role of self-awareness in navigating challenges (Ching, 2021). Moreover, the commitment to continuous learning reflects a proactive response to the ever-evolving academic landscape, aligning with literature on the importance of lifelong learning for academic resilience (Barnes et al., 2022; Hussein et al., 2016).

While some coping mechanisms align with existing research, the study introduces novel dimensions, such as the therapeutic use of creative outlets and the intentional cultivation of autonomy. These nuanced aspects enrich the existing discourse on academic coping, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how academics not only endure but actively thrive in the face of repeated psychological contract breaches.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological study delved into the lived experiences of academics who faced multiple breaches in their psychological contracts, uncovering a rich tapestry of coping mechanisms and adaptations in daily work activities. The findings not only resonate with existing literature on academic stress and coping but also contribute novel dimensions to our understanding of academic resilience.

The coping mechanisms identified, including seeking social support, engaging in professional development, utilizing creative outlets, and deliberately cultivating autonomy, highlight the intricate ways in which academics navigate the emotional aftermath of psychological contract breaches. These strategies not only serve as coping mechanisms but also reflect a resilience-driven response, allowing academics not merely to endure challenges but to proactively shape their professional narratives.

Adaptations in daily work activities, such as reorienting research focus, innovating teaching methodologies, embracing interdisciplinary collaborations, and committing to continuous learning, showcase the dynamic nature of academic work. These adaptations, driven by a desire to align with personal values and foster a sense of fulfillment, underscore the transformative potential inherent in challenges.

5.2 Recommendations

Future studies in the realm of academic resilience and psychological contract breaches could explore several avenues to deepen our understanding and provide actionable insights for both scholars and institutions. Thus, it is needed to conduct longitudinal studies to track

the trajectories of academic resilience over an extended period. Examining how coping mechanisms and adaptations evolve over time and their sustained impact on well-being can provide valuable insights into the long-term dynamics of academic resilience.

Furthermore, future studies could also complement qualitative findings with quantitative research to establish broader patterns and correlations. Surveys and standardized scales could quantify the prevalence of specific coping mechanisms, allowing for statistical analyses of their effectiveness and generalizability across diverse academic settings. It is also recommended to compare the experiences of psychological contract breaches and resilience in academia with those in other professions. Drawing parallels and distinctions can provide insights into whether the challenges faced by academics are unique to the academic environment or reflective of broader societal trends.

Practically, recognizing the pivotal role of autonomy in academic resilience, institutions should proactively support policies that foster autonomy in academic work. This includes flexible work arrangements, transparent communication about expectations, and avenues for academics to have a meaningful voice in decision-making processes. Institutions should also encourage and facilitate interdisciplinary collaborations, recognizing the potential for such initiatives to not only enhance the academic experience but also serve as adaptive strategies in the face of challenges. Creating interdisciplinary spaces, funding opportunities, and recognition for collaborative efforts can contribute to a more dynamic and resilient academic environment. Furthermore, acknowledging the therapeutic role of creative outlets, institutions can integrate these avenues into their culture. Establishing spaces for artistic expression, wellness programs that include creative activities, and recognizing the value of such outlets in academic well-being can contribute to a more holistic and resilient academic community. Overall, by acknowledging the multifaceted nature of challenges and embracing adaptive strategies, institutions can contribute to the cultivation of a resilient academic community that thrives amidst the complexities of the modern academic landscape.

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