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# A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LATE REACTIVATION OF IMPAIRED PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Supervisors play a key role in organizations. Previous research in management has shown that employees identify them as a specific source of support (Eisenberger et al., 2002) as well as a specific target of affective commitment (Meyer et al., 2002). Vandenberghe, Bentein and Stinglhamber (2004), in particular, have shown that commitment has a direct effect on intention to stay. Trust and the quality of the exchange with the supervisor contribute to employees' motivation to engage in organizational citizenship behavior (Deluga, 1994). However, such trust cannot be taken for granted. A word too many, an awkward speech, something unsaid, a postponed promotion: what at first seemed like a trivial or minor event can trigger a strong and long-lasting reaction of anger or sadness in employees. In the above case, the initial trigger was a reproach made during a meeting. The objective of this study is not to analyze who is right or wrong, whether supervisors deserve such reactions or if the latter are excessive. Drawing on a psychological contract approach (Rousseau, 1989), this study involves a one-sided immersion in the mental experience of employees who truly feel disappointed or betrayed. What matters to us is to understand the process from the inside and the extent to which something that may be viewed as a minor event from supervisors' point of view may be perceived by employees as a major offense with dramatic consequences. Supervisors sometimes feel lost and helpless in the face of sudden outbursts. This study may help them to better understand what is going on in employees' minds and determine how to deal with the situation.

The concept of psychological contract is defined as employees' beliefs about their relationship with their organization and supervisors regarding the terms of their exchange and the nature of their bonds (Rousseau, 1989; Scott et al., 2002). Paradoxically, the existence of a psychological contract is often revealed when an event is found to be at odds with its underlying beliefs and promises. The psychological contract literature concentrates on the perception of a breach, an emotional sense of

violation and behavioral responses, with the early literature initially focusing on the attitudes and behavioral consequences of violation (Zaho et al., 2007; Bal et al., 2008). This literature has provided a basis for a major advance in the field of organizational behavior by addressing work situations exclusively from employees' subjective point of view (Bencherchi, Bazin & Janand, 2018; Rousseau, 2010). In doing so, the concept of psychological contract has contributed to our understanding of sudden reactions that had previously been difficult to explain. Surprisingly, until recently, little research has explored what comes next or after, when intention to quit is not enacted, meaning that employees have to keep working with their supervisor.

A new stream of research has started to examine how employees “mentally” respond to, and cope with, contract violation over longer periods of time (Rousseau et al., 2018; Tomprou et al., 2015). From this perspective, self-regulation consists in reducing cognitive discrepancy and negative emotion (Lord et al., 2010) in order to reactivate the initial psychological contract (Rousseau et al., 2018). According to Tomprou et al. (2015), the effect of self-regulation on psychological contract reactivation depends on employees' perceived likelihood of resolution. psychological contract reactivation thus appears to be a race against time (Rousseau et al., 2018): while the transition phase is characterized by intense cognitive activity, the maintenance phase is characterized by resistance to change. Therefore, the previous literature argues that if employees are unable to rapidly reactivate the psychological contract, an impaired psychological contract, i.e. a new psychological contract comprising regrets and anger, will be durably maintained (Rousseau et al., 2018; Tomprou et al., 2015).

The present study extends the theoretical frameworks recently developed by Tomprou et al. (2015) and Rousseau et al. (2018) by examining the process that occurs in the aftermath of the above impairment phase. The paper explores the post-violation process over a longer period of time, that is, months and years rather than days and weeks. We examine the possibility of further self-regulation activities leading in the long term to the thriving of an impaired psychological contract. In doing so, we address the issue of late forgiveness. The main theoretical argument is that although the maintenance phase of the impaired psychological contract only allows for minor changes (Tomprou et al., 2015;

Rousseau et al., 2018), drawing on escalation commitment theory (Staw, 1976), minor changes are shown to allow for further changes. This slow-motion process may gradually result in a major positive discrepancy between the impaired psychological contract and employees' experience calling for psychological contract reactivation. Such a process leads to forgiveness, that is, a restoration of relationship-constructive motivations (McCullough et al., 2001; Tomlinson, Dineen & Lewicki, 2004).

Based on 42 in-depth interviews, the study makes three contributions. First, it refines the concept of impaired psychological contract both theoretically and empirically, arguing that the latter does not reduce negative emotion, but constitutes instead a form of status quo preventing, through avoiding behavior, confrontation with situations that recall the latter. Second, the study reassesses the importance of minor changes allowed during the maintenance phase of an impaired psychological contract by showing that the latter may constitute the beginning of a process that gradually leads to a major positive discrepancy. Third, we conclude that late reconciliation and forgiveness are still possible in the form of a late reactivation of the initial psychological contract despite previous impairment.

The paper is structured as follows: drawing on the recent literature, section one introduces the different phases of the processes following violation. Section two presents the research design. Section three details the results. In section four, the findings are discussed.

## **1. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1.1. From psychological contract maintenance to psychological contract disruption**

A psychological contract refers to an “*individual's belief(s) in reciprocal obligations*” between themselves and their organization (Rousseau, 1989, p. 128). A psychological contract is often referred to as a “*cognitive schema*” and is therefore deeply rooted in the field of cognitive psychology (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro; 2011; Rousseau, 2001; Shalk & Roe, 2007). The creation phase during early socialization is characterized by initial intense cognitive activity aimed at processing information from new experience (De Vos & Freese, 2011; Rousseau et al., 2018). The transition from the creation phase to the maintenance phase occurs when further experience is interpreted within an existing psychological contract framework (Rousseau, 2001; Rousseau et al., 2018). The maintenance phase is characterized

by an economy of cognitive effort allowing for only minor changes to the psychological contract (Rousseau et al., 2018; Schalk & Roe, 2007).

Paradoxically, the existence of a psychological contract is often revealed when an event is found to be at odds with its underlying beliefs and promises. A breach constitutes a discrepancy that crosses “*acceptance bands that determine the boundaries of what is considered as appropriate behavior with respect to the mutual obligations*” (Schalk & Roe, 2007, p. 171). The term violation refers to the immediate emotional response to a perceived breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson et al., 1994, Rousseau, 1989). Psychological contract violation is “*a feeling that is experienced at a deep visceral level*” (Morrison & Robinson, 1997, p. 230). The psychological contract literature initially focused its attention on the immediate consequences of violation in terms of secondary emotion and behavioral tendencies. The meta-analyses by Zaoh et al. (2007) and Bal et al. (2008) show a significant negative relationship with various attitudes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment and trust. Psychological contract violation is also associated with lower levels of in-role and extra-role behavior (Zaoh et al., 2007) and with higher revenge-seeking and deviant behavior (Mc Cullough et al., 2001; Bordia, Restubog, & Tang, 2008; Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018). A number of studies conducted in France (Guerrero, 2004; Mullenbach, 2009) show that psychological contract violation has a negative effect on trust and loyalty, and a positive effect on turnover intention.

However, this research also shows that behavioral intention and tendencies are often inhibited. The meta-analysis by Zaoh et al. (2008) indicates that feelings of violation lead to turnover intention, but not, in most cases, to actual turnover. Bordia et al. (2008) showed that self-control moderates the relationship between feelings of violation and deviant behavior. Breach and violation trigger a phase characterized by confusion resulting from different interpretations of the situation and tensions between opposite behavioral forces.

## **1.2. The repair phase**

A new stream of research has begun to examine how employees cope with the aftermath of a contract breach and violation when turnover intention is not enacted. Studies in this area analyze this moment of

tension and confusion as a phase located between the initial psychological contract maintenance and the new psychological contract maintenance (Bankins, 2015; Rousseau et al., 2018; Tomprou et al., 2015). Tomprou et al. (2015) name it the “resolution” phase, while Bankins (2015) and Rousseau et al. (2018) both refer to it as the “repair” phase. The main characteristic of this phase is a return to intense cognitive activity during which past and present events are further analyzed (Bankins, 2015; Rousseau et al., 2018; Tomprou et al., 2015). At the heart of this new approach is the notion of “*self-regulation*”, which corresponds to a mental activity series aiming to reduce both cognitive discrepancy and negative affect (Bankins, 2015; Rousseau et al., 2018; Tomprou et al., 2015). Introduced in psychological contract research by Shalk & Roe (2007), the term “*self-regulation*” is generally attributed to Bandura (1991). Self-regulation can be defined as a switch from an assimilation to an accommodation mode characterized by intense cognitive activity aiming to adapt a previous cognitive schema to the new reality revealed by the breach.

A first series of activities involved in self-regulation consists in acquiring complementary information and obtaining new promises to reactivate the initial psychological contract. Action can be taken by employees themselves: for instance, problem-focused strategies consist in speaking up to obtain an explanation (Tomprou et al., 2015) and actively renegotiating new promises (Tomprou et al., 2015), while showing signs of goodwill help to reset social exchanges (Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018). The literature has highlighted the role of perceived organizational responsiveness (Tomprou et al. 2015), including apologizing (Tomlinson et al. 2004). However, employees’ views of the breach and their organization’s views of the event are not necessarily aligned (Scott et al. 2002), with employees often tending to develop motivation to save the initial psychological contract (Dulac et al., 2008).

A second aspect of this self-regulation process concerns the interpretation of the perceived breach, which involves establishing the circumstances of the breach, evaluating the level of responsibility and intentionality of the organization and taking into account information, compensations and new promises further obtained (Bankins,2015; Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011). This sense-making activity leads employees to assess whether the perceived breach ultimately represents a minor

offense that can be tolerated within the boundaries of the initial psychological contract or a major discrepancy calling for a new psychological contract (Parzefale & Coyle Shapiro, 2011; Schalk & Roe, 2007). Tomprou et al. (2015) and Rousseau et al. (2018) both highlight a general tendency toward initial psychological contract conservation as employees naturally favor the use of an existing cognitive schema (Weick, 1995) and often develop a strong motivation to save high-quality relations (Dulac et al., 2008; Tomlinson et al., 2004). While Morrison and Robinson (1997) first considered that such sense-making activity occurs just after the breach before feelings of violation arise, Tomprou et al. (2015) and Rousseau et al. (2018) locate the repair phase in the aftermath of the violation, when the initial psychological contract is momentarily suspended. Employees thus have to assess, through self-regulation activities, whether the initial psychological contract can be reactivated.

Self-regulation based on new information and interpretation can lead to a reactivation of the initial psychological contract or even to a new reevaluated psychological contract (Rousseau et al., 2018), but can also result in what Tomprou et al. (2015) refer to as an impaired psychological contract. The repair phase thus constitutes a race against time (Rousseau et al., 2018; Tomprou et al., 2015). Despite employees' motivations to save their relationship with the organization (Tomlinson et al., 2004; Dulac et al., 2008), the importance of the breach they perceive and the intensity of emotion they feel can stop the reactivation process (Rousseau et al., 2018). A new psychological contract must then be renegotiated to cope with, and make sense of, the negative event (Rousseau et al., 2018). The term "impaired" introduced by Tomprou et al. (2015) is particularly meaningful since the new psychological contract implicitly refers to the initial psychological contract through regrets and disappointment. An impaired psychological contract constitutes a deteriorated version of the initial psychological contract through which employees mentally and behaviorally withdraw. When any hope of further resolution is lost, the impaired psychological contract is put into maintenance (Rousseau et al., 2018; Tomprou et al., 2015).

### **1.3. Toward subsequent psychological contract reactivation**

The aim of this study is to examine to what extent and under what conditions a psychological

contract previously impaired and put into maintenance can subsequently be reactivated. According to Tomprou et al. (2015) and Rousseau et al. (2018), the maintenance phase will continue unless a major discrepancy occurs. However, such a discrepancy seems unlikely. Rousseau et al. (2018) consider that stability and resistance to change characterize the maintenance phase. Furthermore, an impaired psychological contract comprises negative emotions such as anger, sadness or regret in the form of long-lasting ruminations (Mc Cullough et al., 2001; Pereira Costa & Neves, 2017) that undermine any cognitive and behavioral progress. An impaired psychological contract often involves a switch from a relational to a transactional approach limited to what needs to be done (Bankins, 2015) and often characterized by emotional distance and a lack of empathy. An impaired psychological contract consists in a stable status quo of unstable and contradictory feelings and motivations preventing any major progress.

Nevertheless, Schalk and Roe (2007) argue that passive change occurs as a result of minor discrepancies that are assimilated effortlessly into the psychological contract. In other words, maintenance allows minor changes in behavior so long as the latter remain below a certain threshold. The main assumption underlying this research is that minor steps can gradually bring about major changes. This assumption directly draws on escalating commitment theory (Staw, 1976; Salancik, 1977). This theoretical framework is two-fold: (1) a minor step leads to bigger steps and (2) bigger steps lead to further change in the mental schema. The gradual nature of small cumulative changes draws on the principle of habituation (Bateson, 1972), with individuals becoming progressively used to minor changes and not always realizing how far they gradually take them. The effect of behavioral changes on attitudes depends on the extent to which individuals feel psychologically linked to the latter: these behaviors must be voluntarily chosen among other alternatives, be irrevocable and be displayed in front of others (Kline & Peters 1991; Salancik, 1977). The repetition of certain behaviors can be seen as an escalation process progressively introducing a bias within individuals' rationality (Staw 1976). Drawing on the seminal work of Festinger (1957), it can be argued that new escalating behavior will require an adjustment in attitudes and the mental schema to reduce cognitive dissonance. Applying escalation



commitment to an impaired psychological contract, we argue that repeated minor changes can gradually constitute a major discrepancy. Escalating commitment leads to new experience, that is, new emotions and feelings, that eventually comes to be at odds with the impaired psychological contract. Like a breach within a breach, these events allow, or even call for, a reactivation of the initial psychological contract.

At the end of this process going from violation through impairment to reactivation is the issue of forgiving. The psychological contract literature often refers to this term (Pereira Costa & Neves, 2017), but has not completely integrated the concept. According to McCullough et al. (2001, p. 601), *“forgiving is a complex of motivational changes that occurs in the aftermath of a significant interpersonal offense. When an offended person forgives, his or her basic motivations to (a) seek revenge and (b) avoid contact with the offender are lessened, and other relationship-constructive motivations are restored”*. Our research is an attempt to go further in capturing this process when, in the aftermath of a violation, an impaired psychological contract has been put into maintenance.

## **2. METHOD**

Bender (2010), Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro (2009) and Rossano, Abord de Chatillon and Desmarais (2015) argue that qualitative methods allow a deeper understanding of psychological contract-related processes. In this study, qualitative methods are first used as a means of fine-tuning the findings of previous quantitative studies of violation and repair and, second, as a way of discovering new elements and aspects of late reactivation of an impaired psychological contract.

### **2.1. Participants**

The selection of respondents was based on chain-referral and self-recruitment methods (Robinson, 2014). We communicated among various professional networks that we were conducting a study on psychological contract and were looking for participants who had previously experienced a contract breach. We made it clear that only past relationships would be considered. Contract breach being the norm rather than the exception (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), the targeted respondents were found relatively easily. We conducted a two-stage data collection. A first series of 26 interviews was conducted with respondents working for organizations in the social work sector, since our first

informants came from this sector. A second series of 16 interviews was conducted with employees from a wider range of organizations (manufacturing, services, NPOs and public administration). As can be seen in Table 1, both series included a large variety of positions and occupations, from manual workers to engineers. The final sample comprised 42 respondents, with an average age of 40.85 (SD 10.45).

*Table 1 – Sample characteristics*

Interviews	Sectors	Occupations	Age	Education
1 <sup>st</sup> series N = 26	Social work sector	e.g. social workers, counselors, health educator, secretary, accountant.	Min. = 24, max. = 61  Mean = 40.9	From NVQ1  To Master's degree
2 <sup>nd</sup> series N = 16	Various sectors	e.g. teacher, accountant, seller, secretary.	Min. = 23, max. = 65  Mean = 40.7	From NVQ1  To Master's degree

## 2.2. Data collection

The interviews began with a presentation of the respondent and an overview of the organization with which the contract breach occurred. The interviews then followed a chronological sequence, starting with selection and early days when the psychological contract was formed, followed by a description of the breach event and a step-by-step discussion of the aftermath of the breach. Throughout the interviews, the leitmotiv consisted in acquiring as many details as possible of the events and emotions experienced by the respondents. The quality of the data obtained based on this retrospective approach to past experience is debatable. We argue that semi-structured interviews in the tradition of Roger (1961) is an adequate tool for obtaining such data. We also argue that, to a certain extent, it is easier to deal with such experience once it is in the past than when it is presently occurring. Inviting our respondents to unconditionally accept their past experience (Rogers, 1961), the questions and remarks were intended to help respondents to reconnect with how they felt at the time.

*Table 2 – Interview questions*

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Questions</i>
<i>Presentation</i>	<i>We are currently working on the concept of psychological contract and its breach, i.e. when employees think or feel that their supervisor has failed to keep his or her promise or</i>

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	<i>commitment. During your career, have you ever felt this way? Have you ever been disappointed or felt betrayed by one of your former supervisors?</i>
<i>Psychological formation</i>	<i>When did you start working for this company? What were your expectations regarding your new job? Can you tell us about your first meeting with this specific supervisor? What type of relationship did you initially develop? What kind of agreement did you make? Was the latter explicit or rather informal?</i>
<i>Breach and violation</i>	<i>What was the event that made you feel this way (angry or sad)? How did you feel at that precise moment? What was your first reaction? What did you do?</i>
<i>Days and weeks after</i>	<i>What happened after that, over the days and weeks that followed the event? How were you feeling? How was the relationship between the two of you?</i>
<i>Month and years after</i>	<i>What happened after that, over the course of the month that followed the event? How were you feeling? How was the relationship between the two of you?</i>
<i>Now</i>	<i>How do you feel about it now? Are you two still in contact?</i>

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### **2.3. Data analysis**

Qualitative studies and, specifically, semi-structured interviews allow for fine-tuned investigations of a non-linear process. By asking respondents to further comment on various scattered cues that they initially provide in the form of small comments and anecdotes that may at first seem meaningless, we were able to identify a series of minor and almost imperceptible stages of progression regarding behavioral commitment during the maintenance phase of the impaired psychological contract. Coding consists in transforming raw data into a theory that answers the questions raised at the end of the literature review (Langley, 1999).

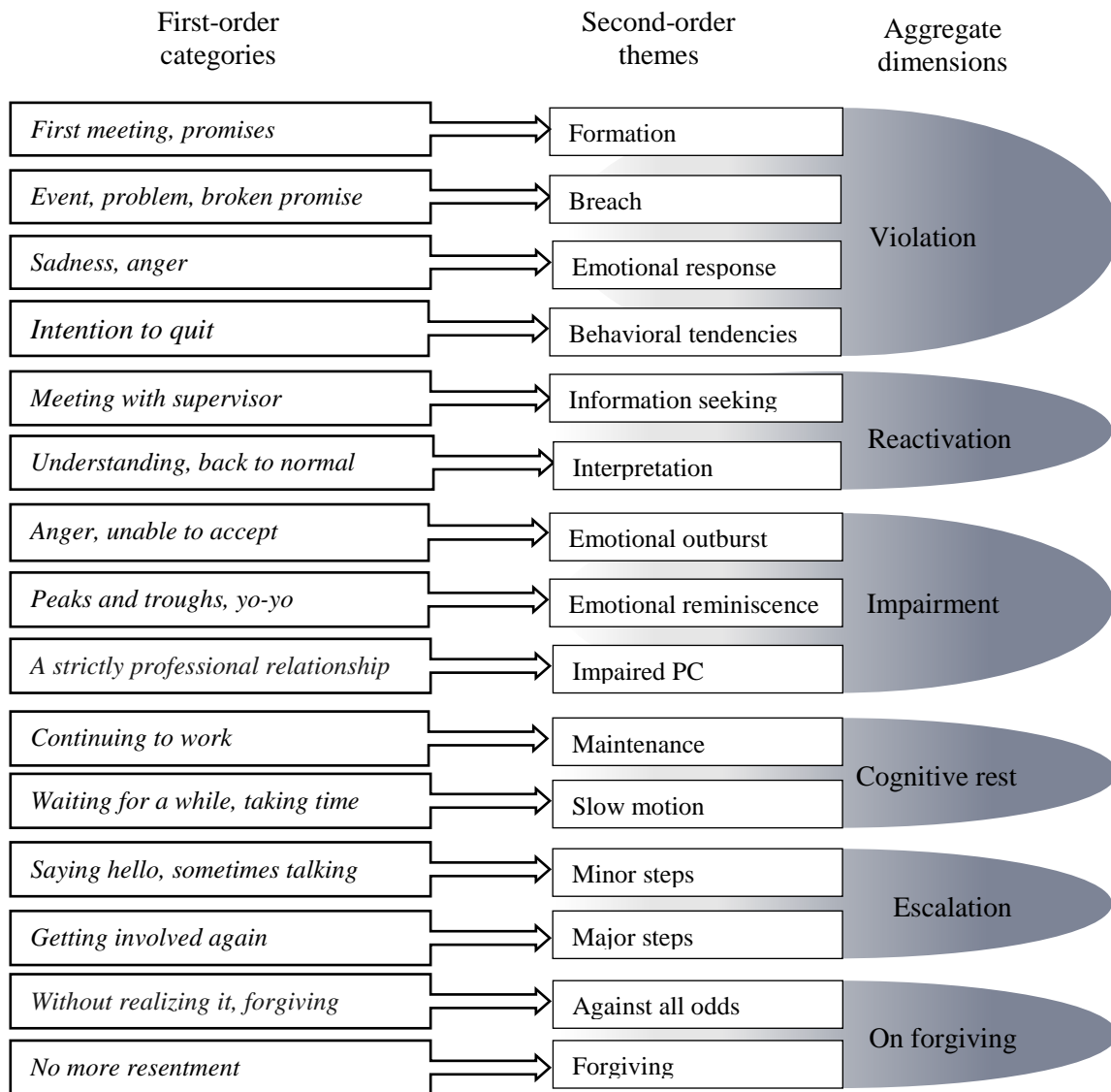


Figure 1. Coding grid

We first drew on codes based on the concepts provided by the recent literature (Tomprou et al., 2015; Rousseau et al., 2018), such as “*discrepancy*”, “*maintenance*”, “*impairment*” and “*reactivation*”. Because we were investigating respondents’ past experiences, we were able to explore a sometimes very long period of time between the breach events and the conduct of the interview. This is how and why we were able to identify the process and issues surrounding late reactivation of impaired psychological contracts. By asking respondents about how they felt at the time of the interview, we found that a large majority of them had been able to forgive. Through further analysis of the content of the interviews, new unexpected phenomena requiring new categories and codes were gradually discovered (Glaser and Strass, 1967), such as “*slow motion*” “*escalating commitment*”, “*post-*

*impairment reactivation*” and *“late forgiveness”*, with the latter being the main finding of this study. After analysis of the content of the first series of interviews from which these new categories and codes were obtained, we conducted a second series to confirm and further refine the latter. 42 interviews were necessary to reach the *“saturation”* threshold (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) of the categories and codes presented in figure 1. Following a traditional ethnographic recommendation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), a diary was kept throughout the coding process in order to monitor and neutralize any biases regarding the studied process.

### 3. RESULTS

The following presentation of the results draws on our final categories and codes (Figure 1). Higher-order categories are indicated in the titles, while second-order categories are shown in bold and illustrative quotes in italics are provided in the boxes situated at the beginning of each subsection. This presentation aims to introduce a series of common scenarios illustrated with quotes drawn from various interviews. The quotes were selected on the basis of their ability to express in a clear and straightforward manner the different aspects of the processes that we have discovered.

#### 3.1. Different pathways to post-violation repair

##### 3.1.1. The violation stage

<p><b>Breach:</b> <i>“One day, I had a problem with a client. I went to see my supervisor. She got angry, she just told me to get back to work. She rejected me. She yelled. She didn’t offer any support. (...) My organization has a duty to support me.”</i></p> <p><b>Emotional responses:</b> <i>“It was a shock!” – “it was like a slap in the face!” – “I was more than disappointed, I was angry!” – “It made me angry. I lost my mind!” – “I was very angry.” – “I was really angry.” – “I was sad. On the way home, I cried.”</i></p> <p><b>Behavioral tendencies:</b> <i>“I really wanted to quit, I wanted to give everything up.” – “I wanted to resign.” – “I didn’t want to see him ever again.” – “I wanted to hit him.” – “I wanted to break everything.”</i></p>
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Box 1. Examples of quotes illustrating the violation stage

The first quote (Box 1) provides an example of the fact that a breach is not an intrinsic characteristic of the event itself but refers to a discrepancy between the latter and promises and expectations underlying the psychological contract implicitly defined by employees (Rousseau, 1989). The event constituting the breach jeopardizes the achievement and, therefore, the maintenance of the

initial psychological contract. The second quote evokes the emotional responses to such events, that is, anger and loss of emotional control in most cases. It is important to emphasize the shortness of these quotes, which express primary emotions and unelaborated feelings. High emotions trigger an intention to take action. In the face of such stressful events, these actions mainly consist in fight-or-flight responses. Some respondents, often men, develop aggressive, even violent feelings toward their organization and their supervisor. Others initially feel like quitting. However, as illustrated by the next series of quotes, inhibition usually takes over.

### 3.1.2. The reactivation pathway

**Information seeking:** *“I went to see my boss. He told me he had completely forgotten that I had less than a year’s tenure.”*  
– *“He came to see me: “You’re very important to our company”, he told me. “Without you everything would fall apart. I want you to stay.”* – *“When there’s a conflict, I always try to find a solution or find a way to solve the problem.”*

**Interpretation:** *“I understand.”* – *“This was his way of apologizing. That’s how I see it.”* – *“He motivates me again. After that everything went back to normal.”* – *“I calmed down because the HR director explained to me that there was a specific law that had to be applied.”*

Box 2. Examples of quotes illustrating the reactivation pathway

These respondents (Box 2) were able to make contact and get information feeding into an alternative interpretation. This reactivation pathway involves respondents managing to rapidly rationalize and develop a representation of the event allowing them to perceive and interpret it as a minor breach, that is, a minor discrepancy combined with a milder emotion, the intensity of which allowed for a reactivation of the initial psychological contract. In line with Tomprou et al. (2015) and Rousseau, our data show that the speed of perceived organizational responsiveness plays an important part. However, the effect of the latter is largely moderated by respondents’ own determination to reactivate the initial psychological contract and move on. Many of them evoked intense cognitive activity at the end of which they concluded that an accident had occurred. The term ‘self-regulation’ makes perfect sense in this process: the respondents initially experience a violation but are able to contain it and bring it back into proportion.

### 3.1.3. The impairment pathway

**Emotional outburst:** “I got angry and told him I couldn’t accept the accusations ... we were summoned to the director’s office for a mediation meeting. I said everything I had on my mind. I’m honest and direct. She tried to explain to me what happened, but I told her to keep her explanations to herself. I couldn’t accept what she said before. I was still very angry.”

**Emotional reminiscence:** “In fact, there’ve been peaks and troughs, there were times when I thought it was great again and there were times when I was annoyed. I thought he didn’t really care about me, as he showed me once. It felt like a yo-yo. I often thought about it, I had a lot of resentment. In fact, I was resentful when he was annoying. I was starting to get angry with him again.”

**Impaired psychological contract:** “After that, we had a strictly professional relationship. I was able to work with him, but I was still hurting. I always had in mind what he did to me.” – “I was angry with him and I’m still angry with him today.” – “Sometimes I felt like our relationship was like it used to be and sometimes everything would just come flooding back. I thought of everything he said to me that day. (...) Ultimately, something had changed.” – “After a while, I didn’t expect anything more. Our relationship wasn’t the same. I kept working because I was paid to do... It was painful.”

Box 3. Example of quotes illustrating the impairment pathway

psychological contract reactivation is not always possible. Because of the significance of the breach and because of respondents’ personality, attempts to stop the emotional escalation are unsuccessful. The series of quotes provided in Box 3 illustrate a series of cases that follow almost the same steps based on the same factors as the reactivation pathway, that is, intense cognitive activity aiming to process information regarding organizational responsiveness. Respondents account for similar perceived organizational responsiveness (such as meetings with their supervisor), but their reactions differ as their anger takes over. Such employees are simply unable to reactivate the initial psychological contract. Despite their best intentions and efforts, they cannot help feeling resentful. In line with the 15<sup>th</sup> proposal of Rousseau et al. (2018, p. 1093), high emotion moderates the relationship between positive organizational responsiveness and reactivation, with high emotion jeopardizing the whole process. The next two series of quotes go one step further by pointing to an inner conflict between respondents’ own responsiveness, that is, their will to reactivate the initial psychological contract. Every attempt to do so simultaneously reactivates anger that prevents respondents from going any further in the reconciliation process. The third series of quotes refers strictly to the impaired psychological contract. This impaired psychological contract is not completely new since it carries an implicit

reference to the initial psychological contract, the breach and associated feelings of violation. The impaired psychological contract is often associated with an overall feeling of disappointment and regret.

### 3.2. Toward late reactivations

In this subsection, we further explore how aborted reactivation in the form of an impaired psychological contract can eventually get a second chance to thrive.

#### 3.2.1. A cognitive rest

*Maintenance:* “After that, our relationship was never the same again, but, professionally speaking, it was going quite well.” – “However, I stayed calm. I continued to work hard and get involved because I’m a good professional employee. Clients shouldn’t have to suffer because of all that.”

*Slow motion:* “In such cases, you have to wait a while. It takes time” – “It didn’t happen overnight, I wanted to see whether he would stick to his commitment. It was like a probationary period.”

Box 4. Example of quotes illustrating the need for a cognitive rest

Impairment turns from self-regulation repair to psychological contract maintenance when respondents definitively cease to believe that a reactivation is likely to happen. Any attempt by the organization or the respondents themselves to go further than the impaired threshold triggers an emotional peak (box 4). Many of the respondents referred to the need they felt to take a cognitive break and to have a moment without anything going on. In such moments, they look for a new quiet routine at work without any higher cognitive activity or emotional peaks, adopting simply “business-as-usual” behavior compatible with their new psychological contract. As shown by the second series of quotes (Box 4), emotional activity slowly decreases. A major step is achieved when, in the absence of direct contact with anything related the event, respondents’ succeed in momentarily stop ruminating about it. This phase allows respondents to momentarily forget about their regrets and revenge seeking (McCullough et al., 2001). At this stage, more than a specific duration, what matters is the fact that employees stop thinking for a while about the event and actually disconnect from their negative feelings.

#### 3.2.2. Escalation commitment

*Minor steps:* “Now, time has passed, (...) If I met them, I would be able to be polite, to say hello. To say hello and to say: “Well, the page is turned.” - “I met him recently, we’ve discussed “ – “I can say hello to people with whom



*I was in conflict, it's not hypocritical, it's a genuine hello." - "Sometimes when we meet we talk, we can have a good discussion ..."*

**Further steps:** *"To work again together? Why not. With a good clarification, it would be possible." – "Now, I would not mind renewing a professional relationship with him" – "This election was important, because it meant I was getting involved again in the organization. I stopped looking for another job somewhere else."*

#### Box 5. Example of quotes illustrating escalating commitment

The above quotes (box 5) illustrate a slow decrease in negative emotions allowing respondents to engage in minor behavioral progress. The respondents often begin by starting to greet their supervisor or other members of the organization involved in the breach and violation of the initial psychological contract. Respondents often emphasize the genuine nature of this behavioral step. These minor steps are crucial since they give respondents a certain sense of normality. Escalation to further steps, such as having a longer conversation, are usually not taken on purpose but often occur accidentally because of social norms and out of politeness. When respondents realize that these further steps do not hurt their feelings, they become more open to further behavioral engagement. In line with Kline and Peters (1991), it is crucial that respondents feel free to accept or refuse each step of the process. The slowness of such behavioral change allows respondents to become accustomed to new levels of commitment, such as moving from simply greeting people to having a conversation with them. Each step of the escalation process must remain within the margin of stability of the impaired psychological contract: in other words, it may go slightly beyond its normal threshold without threatening it. The repetition of this new behavior initially situated at the limit of the upper margin causes it to become the new norm, thereby paving the way for a new margin of safety allowing a new small escalating step. A key feature of this phase of the process toward psychological contract reactivation is therefore its very slow pace. Once again, the issue is not the duration of the phase, but the fact that employees are no longer seeking to fix the relationship. They simply carry on with their work without paying much attention to the latter.

#### 3.2.3. On forgiving

**Against all odds:** *"I found myself no longer feeling any anger or resentment toward him" – "One night, I was talking to my wife and I suddenly realized I was saying something positive about my supervisor. I said something*

*about him, something like I was starting to trust him again. What's sad is that he could have done this earlier.” – “I realized I didn't really care about him anymore. There wasn't any resentment left.” – “Without realizing it, I'd forgiven him. I felt good about the attention I was getting. I felt he had respect for me.”*

**Forgiving:** *“I'd forgiven him.” – “Today, I consider I've forgiven him. There's no more resentment” – “Today, I don't have anything against that person anymore... I no longer feel angry toward him.” – “So today, I've forgiven him, everything's back to normal.”*

Box 6. Example of quotes illustrating forgiveness

These final quotes (box 6) illustrate how escalation behavioral commitment can lead to positive emotions and forgiveness, the latter enabling a reactivation of the initial psychological contract. While behavioral progression is very slow, most respondents going through this process suddenly seem to realize that they have finally forgiven. This expression of surprise indicates that forgiveness is not a conscious, deliberate process. During this period, when nothing particular is going on – in other words, when everything remains within the margin of stability of the impaired psychological contract – cognitive activity remains focused on present activity and respondents appear to forget about anger and regret. Forgiveness not only consists in an absence of negative feelings, but also draws on empathy. The sudden realization of forgiveness constitutes a form of event breaching the impaired psychological contract. The discrepancy respondents then perceive between the impaired psychological contract and their present experience requires a thriving cognitive revision – in other words, a reactivation of the initial psychological contract.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

First, this study contributes to a further understanding of the nature and content of an impaired psychological contract. Rousseau et al. (2018) and Tomprou et al. (2015) argued that an impaired psychological contract provides a coherent cognitive framework taking into account the breach while helping to release emotional tensions by letting go of previous hopes and promises. However, our data show that, in many cases, an impaired psychological contract does not suppress negative emotion. We argue that the feeling of violation developed in the aftermath of the breach durably remains in the form of ruminations (Mc Cullough et al., 2001; Pereira Costa & Neves, 2017), during the transition to and

maintenance of the impaired psychological contract. An impaired psychological contract appears to be more of a status quo between, on the one hand, respondents' cognitive tendency to functionally carry on with their work in their own interest (Bordia et al., 2008; Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro; 2011) and uncontrollable primary emotions calling for a negative course of action on the other (Bal et al., 2008; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Zaho et al., 2007). As illustrated by the introductory case, impairment draws on an interaction between cognition and emotion, where, as shown by Tamprou et al. (2015), negative emotion tends to limit the effect of cognitive efforts on psychological contract reactivation, while rational cognition tends to inhibit the effect of negative emotion on fight-or-flight behavior. An impaired psychological contract thus leaves a narrow window for behavioral progress as each attempt to go further triggers an emotional blockage.

Second, one of this study's key findings is the very slow effect of time on emotion through an escalation of behavioral commitment occurring during the maintenance phase of the impaired psychological contract, that is, when, at first sight, nothing seems to be happening. From an objective point of view, in line with the previous literature (Rousseau et al., 2018; Tomprou et al., 2015), the respondents seemed to adopt a functional impaired psychological contract allowing them to engage in a "*business as usual*" type of commitment. From a subjective point of view, respondents evoked their need for a new quiet routine and tended to favor, as suggested by Rousseau (1989), a more transactional and less relational type of psychological contract. The data show that an impaired psychological contract comprises some negative emotions that self-sustain through rumination (Mc Cullough et al., 2001; Bordia et al., 2008; Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018), but that minor behavioral changes within the margins of stability of the impaired psychological contract (Rousseau et al., 2018; Schalk & Roe, 2007) can, through repetition, push the emotional boundaries, allowing for further small behavior changes. This slow-motion process eventually reaches a tipping-point when respondents start to focus more on their current routine and when any remaining emotions are gradually relegated to the background. The new routine provides respondents with a new experience and new emotions that momentarily distract them from their ruminations. When respondents suddenly realize that there is a major discrepancy between

their present experience and the impaired psychological contract, reactivation and forgiving, as defined by Mc Cullough et al. (2001) and Pereira Costa & Neves (2017), here partly driven by behavioral commitment, occur.

While the psychological contract literature has contributed to reevaluating the importance of subjective cognitive frameworks in understanding employees' organizational behavior (Bencherchi et al., 2018; Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro; 2011; Rousseau, 2001; Shalk & Roe, 2007), this study reassesses the importance of behavioral processes in explaining further cognitive change such as psychological contract reactivation. Escalating commitment theory (Kline & Peters, 1991; Staw, 1976) contributes to better understanding how respondents are ultimately able to bypass the cognitive limits of the impaired psychological contract. Unplanned behaviors lead them to engage in new experiences triggering new positive emotions beyond the threshold of the impaired psychological contract. At the end of this process, the data highlight a new type of emotion: surprise. The non-voluntary nature of this late reactivation of the initial psychological contract, after the impairment phase, contrasts with the proactive efforts and high cognitive activity found by the previous literature during the transition to the repair phase in the aftermath of the breach and feeling (Dulac et al., 2008; Tomlinson et al., 2004; Tomprou et al., 2015). In line with a recent study by Rousseau et al. (2018), we argue that, depending on the phase of the process, the configuration of the relationships among cognitive, emotional and behavioral variables changes. This study shows that, during the post-impairment phase leading to the late reactivation of the psychological contract, the behavioral process takes over.

On a practical level, previous research has emphasized the need to take action as quickly as possible in the aftermath of a breach and violation in order to repair the initial psychological contract before it is too late (Rousseau et al., 2018; Tomprou et al., 2015). However, this study confirms that this managerial technique is not always effective and may even be counterproductive and have the opposite effect to that intended since the emotional process often moderates the effect of organizational responsiveness on psychological contract reactivation (Tomprou et al., 2015). Based on the results of this research, our recommendations to supervisors paradoxically take the form of a "*not-to-do list*"

rather than a “*to-do list*”. Supervisors need to understand when employees are not yet ready to forgive; they must then know when to give them space, when not to insist, and when to give them a cognitive and emotional break by limiting their interactions with them. Our main recommendation consists in waiting and simply remaining focused on managing daily tasks. After a while, drawing on an escalating commitment process, supervisors may invite employees to take a small step further; the latter should be almost costless, on a voluntary basis and, if possible, involve other people. Supervisors should then ask for more, albeit very gradually and very slowly.

This research confirms the value of qualitative research designs for further exploring psychological contract development as a complement to quantitative studies (*Bender, 2010; Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Rossano et al., 2015*), but it also has some limitations. Qualitative studies and, specifically, semi-structured interviews allow for fine-tuned investigations of a non-linear process. By asking respondents to further comment on various scattered cues they initially gave in the form of small comments and anecdotes that may at first seem meaningless, we were able to identify a series of minor and almost imperceptible stages of progression regarding behavioral commitment during the maintenance phase of the impaired psychological contract. However, an investigation conducted over a long period of time through retrospective thoughts and memories is still an issue. Semi-structured interviews remain a form of cross-sectional data collection. Further research based on longitudinal data is needed to confirm the findings. The challenge for future research in this area will be to monitor respondents for months and even years along their idiosyncratic paths to psychological contract reactivation and forgiveness. Future research will also need to further examine how and why this process sometimes takes longer taking into account the nature and importance of the breach but also the personal characteristics of employees. Some individuals may be inclined to forgive almost immediately while others may be reluctant to do so even after an extended period of time.

## **CONCLUSION**

The aim of this study was to explore the post-violation self-regulatory process over a longer period of time, that is, months and years rather than days and weeks. The results show that it was still possible

for some of the respondents who first impaired their initial psychological contract to eventually reactivate it after a long period. In doing so, this study contributes to the psychological contract literature first by empirically confirming and refining some of the aspects of previous research by Rousseau et al. (2018) and Tomprou et al. (2018) on impairment and, second, by highlighting a brand-new post-impairment stage and pathway, that is, late reactivation of an impaired psychological contract and forgiveness.

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