Relations industrielles
Industrial Relations

What's Next after Psychological Contract Violation?
La violation du contrat psychologique : que survient-t-il après ?
¿Qué sucede después de la violación del contrato sicológico?

Sylvie Guerrero et Mickael Naulleau

Citer cet article

Guerrero, S. & Naulleau, M. (2016). What's Next after Psychological Contract Violation? *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, *71*(4), 639–659. https://doi.org/10.7202/1038526ar

Résumé de l'article

Cet article adopte une perspective clinique fondée sur le cadre théorique du deuil afin de d'examiner les réactions à la violation du contrat psychologique au cours d'une période de 12 mois. En se centrant sur les phénomènes émotionnels propres à l'individu, notre étude apporte des éléments d'observation des effets durables que peut engendrer la violation du contrat psychologique chez les personnes concernées, et de la manière dont ces effets altèrent leur relation d'emploi avec l'entreprise.

Nous avons mené, au total, 60 entretiens auprès de 11 gestionnaires d'une agence de travail temporaire qui a mis en place une série de changements organisationnels importants, portant essentiellement sur des restructurations et coupures de poste. Les 11 gestionnaires interrogés furent sélectionnés après avoir vérifié, au préalable lors d'une enquête brève, qu'ils avaient bien vécu un sentiment de violation du contrat psychologique.

Nos résultats montrent que la violation du contrat psychologique ne pousse le sujet à effectuer un travail de deuil que lorsque cette violation prive l'individu d'un objet fortement investi au travail. Dans ces circonstances, le deuil est un processus plus long que nous l'avions anticipé, puisqu'à l'issue de la période de collecte (soit 12 mois), nous n'avons pas été en mesure d'observer l'ensemble du processus chez les participants. Nos résultats indiquent aussi que le processus de deuil peut être accéléré ou ralenti selon la capacité de l'organisation et de l'individu à offrir ou trouver de nouveaux objets qui satisfont les besoins de l'individu et l'aident à accepter la perte vécue lors de la violation. Finalement, nos résultats montrent que le processus de deuil conduit à une modification importante de la relation d'emploi et qu'il change tant le contenu que l'intensité de l'énergie que les participants consacrent à leur travail.

What's Next after Psychological Contract Violation?

Sylvie Guerrero and Mickael Naulleau

This article adopts a clinical perspective based on the theoretical framework of grief in order to examine individuals' reactions following psychological contract violation. By focusing on emotional intra-psychic phenomena, the study provides evidence of the enduring effects of psychological contract violation on individuals and the employment relationship. Sixty interviews conducted among eleven managers of a temporary employment agency experiencing major organizational changes show that psychological contract violation triggers a grief process within the individual when violation deprives that individual from achieving a highly-invested object at work. In these circumstances, individuals enter into a long grief process that deeply alters the employment relationship and modifies the amount and intensity of energy that they devote to their work.

KEYWORDS: psychological contract violation, grief process, clinical psychology, longitudinal studies.

Introduction

In a context of continual organizational change, psychological contract violation (PCV) is a regular part of organizational life (Morrison and Robinson, 1997; Rousseau and Robinson, 1994). PCV captures emotional responses following the breach of a psychological contract (Morrison and Robinson, 1997). Employees are likely to perceive a psychological contract (PC) breach when they consider that they honoured their part of the contract, but that their contributions to the organization have not been reciprocated. When the broken promise exceeds an individual's cognitive ability and comprehension, PCV occurs. The emotional and affective aspect of the subjective experience is dominant in such cases and is characterized by multiple affects like feelings of betrayal, disappointment, frustration, resentment, profound psychological distress, anger, and injustice (Morrison and Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1989).

Many studies show the negative impacts of PCV for the individual and the organization, including decreased organizational commitment, job satisfaction,

Sylvie Guerrero, Professor, École des sciences de la gestion, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montreal, Quebec (guerrero.sylvie@uqam.ca).

Mickael Naulleau, Associate Professor in Human Ressources Management, AUDENCIA Business School, Nantes, France (mnaulleau@audencia.com).

performance (e.g. Dulac *et al.*, 2008; Raja *et al.*, 2004; Zhao *et al.*, 2007), and increased intentions to quit, cynicism, burnout, and workplace deviance (Bordia *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, several studies have explored the processes employees use to repair the relationship with the employer following PCV (Bankins, 2015; Conway and Briner, 2002; Tomprou *et al.*, 2015). However, these studies have concentrated on the coping strategies and self-regulation processes used to repair trust and justice with the organization, and have neglected the more sustainable effects of emotions of betrayal or anger on the individual's well-being.

This article addresses this gap and examines the intra-individual processes that occur after PCV until the individual finds a new psychological equilibrium and can pursue an employment relationship without resentment. To address this issue, we rely on a clinical psychology approach that is well adapted to the examination of unconscious and emotional processes at the individual level. This approach complements the traditional cognitive perspective used in most studies of PCV by highlighting intra-psychic phenomenon related to the PCV process. More specifically, we rely on the theoretical lens of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969) to examine the effects of PCV. We believe grief may be relevant to understand some reactions to PCV because it refers to the process through which the individual responds emotionally (e.g. anxiety, restlessness, guilt, anger, depression) to an irremediable narcissistic loss (of an 'object' strongly invested in at work). This process demonstrates the psychic struggle that individuals experience as they break away from the lost object. Blau (2006, 2008) suggests that some emotions displayed during PCV may signal the need to mourn a loss, similar to the case of other losses studied in the organizational setting such as the death of a leader, or job loss during company shutdowns (Amundson and Borgen, 1982; Bell and Taylor, 2011; Blau, 2006, 2007, 2008; Hirschhorn and Barnett, 1993; Hyde and Thomas, 2003; Marris, 1975; Milligan, 2003; Shepherd, 2009; Zell, 2003).

From this perspective, the present article shows how 'extreme' PCV can involve the loss of narcissistic objects (organizational values, an ideal of recognition or success, etc.) that were so valent at work that, to accept their loss, the individual is compelled to mourn them. In these circumstances, the individual enters a long grief process that profoundly alters the link to the company (departure from the organization, beginning of new projects, re-evaluation of expectations, etc.) and lasts more than one year for all the subjects we examined. These results were obtained thanks to 60 interviews conducted with 11 managers working in a temporary agency undergoing restructuring over a 12-month period.

Literature Review

Psychological contract and invested objects at work

Psychological contract (PC) refers to employees' perceptions of the exchange agreement that regulates the reciprocal obligations between organizations and their employees (Rousseau, 1989, 1998). As Levinson (1976; Levinson *et al.*, 1962) explains, PC involves deep and complex psychological processes. Accordingly, PC, or at least some of its constituent parts, remains largely unperceived because the link between employees and their work is profoundly psychological. Drawing on Levinson's pioneer work (1962), Meckler *et al.* (2003) argued that a more in-depth approach to the PC concept would allow us to transcend the 'conscious' expectations that mark the employment relationship and thus reveal the needs that constitute the true sources of individual attitudes and behaviours.

These arguments bolster the approach adopted in the present study. The workplace represents a location in which the subject's search for recognition and ideals plays out more or less consciously (Guinchard and Arnaud, 2011: 33). PCV, through the intensity of emotional reactions that follow it, may thus reflect the psychological threat the individual feels deep inside at the idea of losing something (real, imaginary or symbolic) that the employer promised to offer (Rousseau, 1995) and that is an important need. Emotions of anger, depreciation and devaluation represent symptoms expressing that "this something" is missing. In that context, if we go beyond PCV, which is something that regularly accompanies organizational changes, individuals may experience a deregulation of the mental pattern around which they gave meaning to the employment relationship (Rousseau, 2003). Feelings pertaining to the loss of ideals and defensive individual reactions are likely to arise that may require the individual to "mourn" certain "organizational losses" (Meckler *et al.*, 2003: 227).

> All of us become attached to people, places, things, ideas, aspirations, roles, activities, functions, and even dreams. We may detach ourselves from many of those attachments as we grow and develop and acquire new attachments. But when we are ripped away from those attachments, we experience that as loss […] and all loss must be mourned. (Meckler *et al.*, 2003: 227)

The grief process

Grief is conceptualized as a *process* through which emotional bonds are removed from the lost object that no longer exists or that changed. This psychic work allows the ego to become autonomous again, this is to say, to be able to live with the absence of the beloved object and redirect the individual's investments to new objects. The grief process, which can last 2 to 24 months in the organizational context (Bell and Taylor, 2011; Hazen, 2008; Maciejewski

et al., 2007; Prigerson *et al.*, 1997; Zell, 2003) ends when the individual understands that the libidinal bond with the lost object is gone (Bell and Taylor, 2011). Alternatively, the individual suffers from a psychological state in which the loss of the beloved object changes into an obsessive and aggressive attack against the ego, which can prevent forgiveness, and maintain resentment and willingness to take revenge.

Among the different grief models suggested in the literature, Kubler-Ross's (1969) model has been used to study organizational change situations and phenomena of "organizational death". Kubler-Ross specifies five distinct phases: *denial*, which results from a shock from the lost object ("I can't believe it...", "It can't be true..."); *anger*, characterized by feelings and frustrations likely to be directed towards other people, often with a feeling of betrayal; *bargaining* and *depression/disorganization*, when individuals try to negotiate or even reverse the finality of the process to avoid the irremediability of the loss; and acceptance, where individuals accept the inevitability of the loss and can then find inner peace (despite the loss of the beloved object) allowing them, at this moment, to explore new types of opportunities.

Research questions

We acknowledge that not all individuals undergo a grief process when recovering from a PCV. However, our aim is to show that when PCV deprives the individual of a highly invested—or valent—object, the individual may need to mourn this loss. We consequently structured our empirical study to answer the two following questions:

- Why and how does the loss of some 'objects' generate a grief process following a PCV in a context of continual organizational changes?
- How does the temporal psychic dynamic of the grief process operate, and what are the effects of PCV at the end of the process?

Data and methodology

Sample and study design

We conducted our study in an international temporary employment company. The second author had worked in the company and was in contact with several directors before we started the research. He was aware that over years of growth, various acquisitions and mergers had transformed the firm's identity from a French SME into a multinational corporation. These developments had oriented the company's management principles toward a focus on profitability and management indicators. Procedures and practices had been normalized to rationalize the placement of temporary workers, and mid-level managers bore the

impact of these changes. He thus believed that these organizational changes were conducive to the observation of PCV among these managers, and introduced the research project (entitled *Effects of Organizational Changes on Employees*) to the executive management who decided to launch the project with three business units. Because these organizational changes had mainly impacted the unit in south-eastern France, the following discussion focuses on the middle managers who had to implement the organizational changes within this unit.

We sent a questionnaire by email to the 189 mid-level managers working in the business unit where we conducted the study. In total, 128 managers participated in the survey (response rate of 68%), and 51.6% reported high levels of PCV. We sent these respondents (51.6%) an invitation to participate in a longitudinal study. Scholars (e.g. Zell, 2003) evaluate the length of the grief process in the organizational setting at three to 24 months. A period of 12 months seemed a reasonable average time to explore some or all aspects of the grief process. Given that we expected to find five stages in this process, we interviewed managers five to six times, with a two-month interval between two interviews. A total of 16 individuals agreed to participate. Our final sample includes 11 respondents, because not all managers experienced a PCV that reflected symptoms of grief (Table 1).

Each participant was interviewed individually. The first interview was semi-structured around an interview guide focused on the description of major

TABLE 1
Participants' characteristics

Name	Age	Education	Years with company	Years in position	Position	Number of interviews
Aurélie	38	Postgraduate	18	2	Agency director	6
Béatrice	50	Postgraduate	22	4	Agency director	4
Corinne	28	Graduate	3	3	Recruitment manager	6
Delphine	31	Graduate	5	5	Recruitment manager	5
Géraldine	45	Postgraduate	7	2	Agency director	6
Guillaume	40	Postgraduate	11	2	Agency director	7
Lionel	28	Graduate	3	2	Recruitment manager	5
Louise	36	Postgraduate	9	2	Head of finance and management	6
Magalie	39	Postgraduate	16	3	Head of finance and management	5
Pascal	44	Postgraduate	17	8	District manager	5
Rébecca	44	Postgraduate	22	5	Agency director	5

events experienced at work in the last few months. We included at the end of the interview two scales measuring the intensity of PCV, as well as two open questions asking participants to describe the events associated with these PCVs. The other interviews began with a question on participants' present state of mind and emotional state. Individuals were then asked to describe the events they considered significant (their perception of violation, their personal interpretations, etc.) that had occurred since the previous interview, and how they currently feel about these events.

Data analyses

We conducted a total of 60 interviews with the participants, producing an average of 5.4 interviews per participant. We analyzed the data according to the recommendations provided for in-depth interviews (Arnaud, 2012; Gabriel, 2000; Gould, 1991; Kenny, 2012; Parker, 2004, 2005). All interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed in full. The coding was organized around three main topics in line with our research questions (see the columns of Table 2): 1- the events that might trigger PCV due to a change in participants' emotions; 2- the emotions felt following such events, to help us analyze the stages of grief; and 3- the explanations provided by participants for these emotions, to identify the nature of the lost objects. For example, we searched for expressions of excessive comparisons between the self and highly-invested professional elements (quotes like "They took away my personal assistant" or "It is not the company that raised me") to identify object losses. We also sought quotes, some reflecting the denial stage (e.g. "I can't believe they did it"), and others reflecting enduring emotions of anger, betrayal or injustice (e.g. "They treat me like a number" or "I felt humiliated") that could indicate the stage of anger. To examine the dynamics and changes in the successive phases of grief (including recurrences of earlier stages), we identified contradictions, moments of rupture, changes in language, and emotions during and between interviews. This second phase consisted of multiple readings of the interviews of each participant.

We witnessed the entrance into the grief process during the study of six participants (Aurélie, Béatrice, Delphine, Géraldine, Magalie and Rébecca), and used their testimonies to better understand why some individuals may need to follow a grief process to recover from PCV. The other five participants (Corinne, Louise, Guillaume, Lionel, and Pascal) provided, in the first interview, testimonies reflecting the stages of denial and anger, and, in some cases, efforts to keep the lost object (e.g. asking for the supervisor's support, or negotiating training to change careers) that could signal the bargaining stage of grief. We used their testimonies to analyze the last phases of grief.

Results

Psychological contract violation and object loss

As mentioned, we interviewed 16 managers who had all completed a questionnaire in which they claimed to have experienced a PCV at work. During the following year, five of them did not need to mourn the loss due to violation. What happened to the six participants who entered a grief process? Table 2 shows that organizational decisions are perceived as triggering events of PCV that directly affect the professional ego-ideal (or the ideal object) pursued by the employee at work.

Delphine needs to be valued at work and wants to prove that she can make a difference in her agency (see Table 2, column 3, interviews 1 and 6). When offered a lower salary during a job change, she interpreted this as a lack of recognition of her competencies (column 1, interview 3), and felt disappointed and hurt. She sinks into impassiveness, expressed by phrases like "I can't believe it," and still hopes that things can change (grief denial phase). When her job change is accepted, not only was the salary decrease confirmed, but she was also informed that her previous manager criticized her work behind her back (column 1, interview 6). In response to this new wound, Delphine exploded in anger using harsh and bitter words when speaking about her company, in which she saw herself as a mere 'serial number' (column 2, interview 6).

Professional challenges provided Géraldine with feelings of being alive (column 1, interviews 1, 4 and 5). When we first met her, she spoke of numerous 'details' she considered bothersome because they constituted obstacles to her capacity for action and self-improvement (column 1, interview 1). Géraldine's anger exploded during interview 2. Feeling ignored and increasingly smothered by the directedness of higher management, she chose to circumvent existing rules in order to claim some leeway for action. Upper management addressed her misconduct publicly, by requesting that her subordinate draft an e-mail message describing the infraction (column 1, interview 2). Emotions of anger and humiliation, typical of the anger stage of grief, surface in Géraldine's testimony at that time and affected Geraldine's state of mind for the following months (column 2, interview 2 and 4).

These two examples illustrate why some violations must be mourned: they deprive employees of PC elements that are valent in their psychic identity. This pattern was also observed with the other four participants. Aurélie was animated by the desire to act as freely as she wishes within her agency: "I want to lead my agency the way I want to. For me the notion of an entrepreneur is something that motivates me. I like to be alone and to decide, to organize […] it is my own small business" (interview 1). She was frustrated by organizational changes that infringed on her capacity to think of herself as a company director, and felt that part of her

TABLE 2

Psychological contract violation and object loss

Subjects	Triggering events of PCV	Subsequent emotions	Professional ego ideal
AURÉLIE: **The entrepreneur**	**INTERVIEW 2** "There's a rupture between top management and the agencies. We feel like they're not considering our practical issues. There's a real rupture, we don't feel supported or properly managed... they're just policing us." **INTERVIEW 6** "(About top management refusing to renew her employee contract) Today, I'm compelled to tell them that it's over, that I won't hire anyone for this position, because 'they' decided for me." "When I have somebody who matches my spirit, well you don't want him/her to be taken away from me."	**INTERVIEW 6** "Over the last 7 months, it's been pretty much like that (doing a gesture of fluctuation). I'm suffering from this situation, I'm disappointed and I've broken away from my superior. People are not just numbers, this needs to stop. I find it hard to break away and so it upsets me and I don't find it easy to stay positive."	**INTERVIEW 1** "I need to believe in what I do and be positive for my team." **INTERVIEW 3** "I need autonomy, responsibilities and to make decisions. I want to manage my agency my way. For me, the notion of entrepreneur is something that stimulates me, I like being alone deciding, organizing things. I give work to 350 temps, so it's my own little company."
BÉATRICE: **The quest for support and backing**	**INTERVIEW 1** "When cheque books were taken away from the agency, 2/3 years ago, we ground our teeth... For me it's highly symbolic..." **INTERVIEW 3** "We don't have the impression our superior understands and supports us, which was the case before. I'm making this rupture because I have a boss who clearly doesn't meet my expectations (...), he doesn't reassure people, we don't feel he's into it."	**INTERVIEW 3** "I really feel left alone. There are phases when I feel either motivated or unmotivated... and currently I'm clearly in the bad phase." **INTERVIEW 5** "Today I know more than my boss, and this makes me angry. This company no longer resembles the one I was proud of 15 years ago."	**INTERVIEW 1** "Very quickly I became branch manager. So I was in charge of everything, which I liked. What matters is that I feel listened to, my expectations are met and I am supported as needed to help my clients. Bosses I have good memories of are the ones who would go the extra mile for me, not those who won't leave their desk. I need personalized support, someone who follows and backs me."

TABLE 2 (suite)

Psychological contract violation and object loss

Subjects	Triggering events of PCV	Subsequent emotions	Professional ego ideal
DELPHINE: **The thirst for recognition**	**IINTERVIEW 3** "The feeling that they're taking advantage of my request for transfer to renegotiate a lower salary... basically, the less we do the better we are!" **INTERVIEW 6** "I was given an interview as a mere formality, which was useless, because I was told that my area director had said I wasn't a good reference person for my position... Here you go... I was very naïve because he'd been doing it to everyone..."	**INTERVIEW 3 (Numbness)** "I'm disappointed... as I told you, I live with it so I accept it but... I don't find it fair." **INTERVIEW 6** "A bit fed up with AD... fed up being just a number. They don't care about what we think, what we are, what we want... I've always been aware of it, but it now drains me more than before. What they want is to make money, they don't care about us... I'm just a number to them..."	**INTERVIEW 1** "We were among the top 10 of the Group and we would get some gifts for it... we could win coupons and suddenly it all stopped. I'm here to think about everything. Surprisingly, I'm the reference person for all the annoying clients of the agency... My boss doesn't adapt to clients... so I'm here to pick up the pieces... since I got back, we've been back to our previous progression as I got the clients back." **INTERVIEW 6** "They tell us that we're the most important so we can give everything we have. They don't fool me any more... We get no recognition; the salary is a proof of it."
GÉRALDINE: **The fighter**	**INTERVIEW 1** "What I resent is to be nagged with 'that's the way it's done' and blah-blah-blah... So one thing after another, they're really starting to piss me off... and they will end up demoralizing me." **INTERVIEW 2** "I was told off for not having strictly followed a rule and I got a verbal warning for that. I was reproached for making a decision on my own without following the rule to the letter. Getting a vicious email from a colleague who has only 3 weeks more seniority than me. Basically what she did is openly criticize my work in front of the whole team... My mistake was broadcast to everybody."	**INTERVIEW 2** "It is very negative... things were ok 15 days ago but not now... Now I'm upset and it can be seen They don't even realize it, they don't care... the steamroller is operating on our heads." **INTERVIEW 4** "I felt humiliated as the content of the email made me look caught out in front of my team (...) as soon as I read that email I felt as if I was the cleaning lady of the agency..."	**INTERVIEW 1** "My problem is that I'm very passionate and so I do things thoroughly, but as soon as I feel unmotivated and have the impression of being put aside, I get very unhappy." **INTERVIEW 4** "I truly believe that from the moment we work in a firm we need to be deeply committed at all levels..." **INTERVIEW 5** "My dope consists of success, having an efficient team, feeling good, getting good results, and being told by my boss that the agency is well-managed... It's the fact of being a winner, at the top.... My dope is about being proud to be on top of the game otherwise I suffer."

TABLE 2 (suite)

Psychological contract violation and object loss

Subjects	Triggering events of PCV	Subsequent emotions	Professional ego ideal
MAGALIE: The humanist	**INTERVIEW 1** "We're given strict rules with consequences. It's not the company that raised me... not at all. The company that employs me no longer corresponds to the one that recruited me... We can't possibly be in HR and focus on profits. " **INTERVIEW 3** **(speaking of the new GM)** It's his state of mind that changed everything. I believe he's looting our company, I mean it, in a financial, spiritual and cultural way. He's just sacked X (...) He's cleaning up. At the head office, people call him Leon******"	**INTERVIEW 3** "I believe [the GM]'s behaviour is unspeakable and disrespectful, he wants us to be shop assistants and make money with no concern whatsoever for our everyday life (...) They even took away my eagerness. There were two weeks when I felt really down, struggling to get up in the morning like having two anvils on my shoulders."	**INTERVIEW 1** "I know a lot about organizational culture... people are a major concern within the company... the real value of a company is people above all... listening, having concern for others, well that's all I used to be told."
RÉBECCA: The super coach	**INTERVIEW 5** "We* move from a fixed + variable remuneration to one based on objectives with the risk of earning less for the same work. It's going too far. We are at told that 'we are at the centre of their attention' and off they go implementing the new remuneration system and behind this you know that something else is going on. I'm very suspicious. "	**INTERVIEW 5** **"(long hesitations)... on the whole it's ok. (about bonus changes)** It leaves us with a bitter taste... I feel I moved from having everything to nothing. At some stage I thought there'd be a bit of humanity, but I'm not so sure anymore. I hate what happened to our bonuses ... it drains everybody, it's tiring for me and it's exhausting for the team! It's useless energy."	**INTERVIEW 4** "We get good results but we got them because they let us control the situation. The team moves forward and forward.... thus good results follow. What I like is that I can count on the team behind me, I'm convinced and convincing."

* By "we" Rébecca means "the team"   ** Leon is the title of a French movie by Luc Besson about a hitman (Leon).

had been "taken away," signalling the loss of a "small part of herself." Béatrice, like Aurélie, enjoyed her autonomy and liked to behave as if she were a manager in her agency. She perceived this autonomy as a sign that her hierarchy trusted her, and associated delegation with hierarchical support (column 3, interview 1). In the case of Magalie, the decision to dismiss a director she liked because of his human values (column 2, interview 3) destroyed all her hopes of finding in her company the humanistic values she tried to uphold. Finally, Rébecca identified herself as a 'super-coach' who was appreciated by her employees for her team spirit (column 3, interview 4). When organizational decisions reduced her latitude to decide how to motivate her team, she started to become irritated. The remuneration change imposed by top management is the triggering event that made her believe she was moving from "everything to nothing" (column 2, interview 5).

Entering grief

When PCV leads the individual to be convinced that the invested object—or professional ideal—is irremediably lost, the individual sinks into a state of impassiveness caused by the shock, (e.g. "I can't believe it"), which is typical of the grief denial phase. Delphine remained speechless, paralysed throughout the negotiation process of the job change because of the way she was treated and the slowness of the decision making.

For most of the subjects, impassiveness is soon replaced by tenacious and intense emotions of resentment, anger, and injustice, which correspond to the grief anger stage, which tends to last several months. At this stage, the employees generally nurtured a kind of persecution fantasy directed at the company, which took the shape of a castrating 'monstrosity,' both deaf and blind to their needs. Their world is divided. On one side are "they", who represent the indistinct monstrosity expressed in Magalie's feeling that "they pillaged our company." On the opposing side are "we," the "little pawns" in the words of both Delphine and Béatrice. The function of this fantasmatic production is to explain the lack of the lost object by attributing an imagined meaning protecting the individual. This is the stage of the other's fault. The psychic activity exerted to defend the ego carries a high cost and translates into feelings of loneliness, isolation, fatigue, resignation, disillusionment, and sometimes injustice in relation to the obligation to separate oneself from objects on which one remains fixated.

Recovering from PC violation: completing the grief process

The temporality of grief

Grief is a long process that requires work on oneself that cannot be completed in a matter of weeks, or even months. None of the subjects experienced all

the stages of grief during the 12 months of our study, contrary to what we had expected to find. Only Géraldine (undoubtedly aided by her dynamic and combative qualities) and Magalie (who relativized the organization's position owing to her husband's cancer) quickly found detachment and began to re-examine their psychic investment at work. They started their grief work at interviews 2 and 3 respectively, and exhibited initial signs of bargaining at interviews 4 and 5 respectively. However, the other participants reached the bargaining stage six to eight months after grief had set in.

The length of the 'psychic time' of the phases of denial and anger is determined by the intensity of the fixation on the lost object and the psychic cost of untangling the multitude of psychic investments linked to the object. The subject then challenges the organizational figure perceived as responsible for the object's removal. For example, over a period of six months, Delphine repeatedly spoke of having "had it up to here with [organization's name], up to here with being a little pawn. […] I think that they [emphasis added] couldn't care less about what we think, about what we are, what we want… I always knew it, but now it bothers me more than before…." By emphasizing that she "always knew," Delphine demonstrates a fixation on the lack of meaning she perceives in the void of her desire for recognition.

Hindrances to grief work

For some subjects, the accomplishment of grief is cut short by new subsequent violations occurring after the initial onset of grief. Participants find themselves destabilized, "out of breath" and lacking energy following another object loss. The additional deprivation reinforces feelings of lethargy and anger. Guillaume illustrates this phenomenon. He expected to nourish his ideal for relationships with others, that is, with his clients, to whom he provided services, and colleagues and subordinates, with whom he maintained close working relationships. Following increasingly unilateral decisions that distanced him from clients (less time accorded for receptiveness of their singularity), Guillaume felt dispossessed of his invested object and sought a different object to fulfil: career development.

> [About clients he cannot serve as he wishes] I don't understand what they're doing up there! And there's very strong competition… so we find ourselves deprived of the means to act […] I feel anger, because I think to myself, when we need them, they're never there… the fact of being alone. And it's like total schizophrenia: they tell us to do this, do that, but then when we really need them [to serve clients], there's no one there and they tell us that we're accountable. I'm thinking about my personal development too, even if today I hold the company's values high. (interview 1)

However, by the end of our study he still had not received feedback on his career, so his resentment and frustration became more prominent than ever. The activation

of a new loss brought him back to the anger phase of grief, although the original onset of grief had begun six months earlier. As the new object became inaccessible, a fantasmatic scenario emerged in the form of organizational monstrosity, cruelty or terror that give the feelings of anger, resentment and frustration meaning.

> Our boss, at the introductory meeting, used words… I swear… it was torture, he said: "It's got to piss, it's bloody got to piss eh! …I'm telling you, it's going to piss, it'll bloody piss! We're going to piss money. And if it doesn't piss, things won't go very well!" That was his speech [some emotion in his voice]. We were all dumbfounded, because that isn't the kind of speech we're used to hearing. […] For me that speech was over the top, really too much and it doesn't stimulate us. (interview 5)

> I did everything: career committee, PAPI[1]-something test […] and after 3 months I've still got nothing, no training set up, I'm starting to feel like it's a put-on[…] And my district manager isn't helping me move up to district manager, on the contrary, I find it's like he keeps giving me extra weight to carry. (interview 5)

We observed a similar 'trough' in Aurélie's grief process. Towards the end of her participation in the study, she regressed into the lethargy and anger typical of the stage of denial and anger after experiencing new PC violations.

Accelerators of grief work

In the preceding section, we examined factors that delay the fulfilment of grief work (e.g. new PCV). We now turn to factors that, inversely, may accelerate the process. Lionel illustrates this situation. He struggled for an ideal of professionalism and rigour, and seemed unable to detach from a smouldering anger towards his superior, whom he perceived as incompetent. Lionel remained fixed in the stage of anger for a period of six months. He became able to detach from his anger after receiving an employment offer from another firm (interview 5). This event offered him liberation, because he identified with the new supervisor with whom he would begin to work, providing him with the beloved object he lost: professionalism and good work.

> [Speaking of his present manager] We're suffering… she goes through 15 cigarettes a day, she stays there all day… and nothing's changed […] Yesterday afternoon she just left, we didn't know where to… Yes, it's tiring, I'm worn down… (Lionel, interview 1)

> For me, the situation with my supervisor, it's to do with a lack of rigour, of professionalism […] that really gets at the image I have of my work, of serious work that stays on the straight and narrow, and that's why I have to keep these things to myself… It's not serious, it's not professional, it's rubbish! (Lionel, interview 3)

> I feel free, because I know where I'm at… I'm leaving. Yes, I feel liberated because I'll be close to management. And when we're close to management, we can be heard more easily […] When you're in a relationship of mutual trust, when you can be heard… that's great. (Lionel, interview 5)

Why and how do subjects emerge from grief?

The importance of new objects

The accomplishment of grief requires the intermediacy of a specific factor within the professional environment. This factor is the introduction of new objects that the subject seeks through the construction of new 'scenes' or the occurrence of an event that allows recovery from the loss of the object.

After 17 years with the company, Pascal could no longer find in his work the opportunity to "help people find work" as a result of the focus on organizational procedures and profitability. His helping need had "to be fulfilled… to fulfil deep aspirations […] something deep inside of me", and would allow him to "make a mark" (interview 5) that he could not accomplish in his present work. As the company's situation deteriorated, Pascal decided to launch a company operating in the sports market, saying "I was ready to explode, to collapse, without really knowing why" (interview 4). This new scene allowed him to capture within a new activity a reality conforming to his values, that is, new objects that match his ego ideal of social utility. As he describes it, "I would have in front of me people who can benefit from my work, to whom my work can bring some happiness and, if I do my work well, who would leave my agency satisfied" (interview 6).

Corinne's situation was different from those of Lionel and Pascal. When we began our interviews with her, she spoke of her struggle to find her place in her new agency. In her new work environment, her colleagues offered neither the support, the encouragement, nor the attention and recognition she craved.

> It took me some time to feel I was comfortable in the agency… I would even say that I wasn't happy to be coming in to work. [Q: Did you feel abandoned?] Yeah, even more than that, I didn't feel on the level or credible… […] and they were operational right away. I felt I was at rock bottom… (Corinne, interview 1).

Over time, Corinne realized that her frustrations could be explained by a need for excessive recognition, which made her dependent on her boss's consideration, through which she sought her father's love within her imaginary. Because her father valued school results highly, her grades became a way to symbolically maintain her father's love. In her imaginary, work is another place, like school, where she could preserve her parents' recognition. By understanding that her professional ideal (her search for father's recognition) could not be realized within a professional environment, Corinne came to rely less on the perception of others in accomplishing her work and gained more confidence in her own abilities and talents.

> It was important for me to be good for someone else. That's kind of the thing. And what's more, my parents put a lot of importance on schooling, for them, that was more important than everything else, it was school above all […]. I think that my teachers' opinions of me were very important, the fact of feeling I was better than the others,

too, to be first in my class, to feel there was this place where I was valued. […] When I asked my director for someone to assist me, he really tore into me and that really shook me up. That evening I didn't feel well, it played on my nerves, and at the same time I didn't find the words to say so. (Corinne, interview 6).

Yet for Louise, in the absence of psychic reinvestment, we observed stagnation in the stages of anger and bargaining throughout the duration of our study. When we first encountered her, Louise was 'digesting' two promotion refusals that had been justified by a lack of skills necessary to occupy the positions she sought. In all six of her interviews, Louise remained fixated on this lack of progression and reiterated that "unfortunately, I don't have long-term perspectives", while attempting to convince herself that she must leave the company in order to progress in the manner she wants ("that's my greatest frustration, not to have any opportunities for promotion less than 30 km away… so I know that my relationship with the company will come to an end"). Unable to find other objects (projects, missions, responsibilities, relationships, etc.) that might nourish her psychic activity, Louise remained trapped in the decoupling stage for six months.

Consequences for individuals and organizations

Notwithstanding its length, lows, highs and stagnations, the grief process enables recovery from a lost object through psychic investment in a new object, or in a new scene where the lost object is present. However, the subject's link to the company is forever altered. Louise gradually formed (resigned herself to) the idea that she must pursue her career elsewhere, although she could not yet accept this state of affairs. For Pascal and Lionel, the lost object was revived when they left the company for another that offered conditions of support for this object. Other participants maintained their investment in the company, but also protected themselves and re-evaluated their expectations: Géraldine took a step back from her need for self-achievement; Magalie focused on her investment to meet the set objectives through management indicators; Béatrice and Delphine reassessed their investments at work and prioritized their private lives. Invariably, their discourses contained positive elements toward the end of the study. It is the overall attitude of detachment towards the organization and what it could offer the individual that sustained the employment relationship.

Before, I would always put in extra hours, all the time. I don't anymore. There's no benefit to it […] I don't work evenings, at lunch time – ok, but not evenings, I don't work Saturdays (they asked me once, but I said no). (Delphine, interview 4).

My involvement and my perspective aren't the same anymore. I do what I'm asked to do, but before I was really proud to say I work for [organization's name], even to

people close to me, my friends. […] Today… really, I don't feel any particular pride. (Béatrice, interview 5)

Me, it's been a long time now that I don't dream anymore, life is work, and that's that. (Géraldine, interview 6).

Concluding discussion

Studies on PC have widely established the range and variety of emotional, attitudinal and behavioral reactions to PCV (e.g. Zhao *et al.*, 2007), along with the processes employees use to repair the experienced damages (e.g. Bankins, 2015). However, these studies focused on how employees interact with the employer to restore a balanced situation, using social exchange theory as a backdrop. We consequently still know little about the steps required to reach a new intra-psychic balance following PCV. In line with the grief model proposed by Kübler-Ross (1969), we studied 'extreme' situations of violations, that is situations in which PCV deprives employees of an object at work that has such high valence that they need to mourn it.

In line with the grief perspective, our results illustrate how some organizational life events may signify the loss of objects or ideals that form the foundation of the employment relationship (Rousseau, 2003). When individuals understand that their ideal is irrevocably lost following PCV, they are forced to relinquish this heavily-invested object, and must disinvest in it so that the "libido can find new objects." The notion of 'recognition' is fundamental here, because behind the real or imagined loss of the object we observe a refusal by the organization to recognize or to respond to the individual's ideal.

The narcissistic attack that underpins these 'extreme' violations engenders a long, iterative and sometimes complex work of grief, whose effects remain largely unacknowledged in the organizational sphere. Yet grief is important because it allows the individual to protect the 'ego' by harnessing defence mechanisms. In the present study, these mechanisms included withdrawal through the redefinition and magnitude of one's investments (Corinne, Géraldine, Magalie), reinvestment in new objects outside the organizational field (Lionel, Pascal), and detachment from initial expectations (Corinne, Louise). Notwithstanding the specific defence strategy each subject adopts, grief is fulfilled only when the subject is fully liberated from the lost object (Pascal). At this point, the ego's survival struggle has no cause to continue; the loss is accepted so the relationship is disinvested. The subject establishes a new model of thought enabling the emergence of positive emotional states: it is a time of forgiveness and new work plans. However, for all subjects participating in our study, the consequences of PCV translated over the longer term into a downward reassessment of their investment in the organization.

The data we compiled from participating employees did not allow us to observe both the onset of grief and its completion. A longer period of investigation may yield more complete results, allowing a fuller understanding of the temporal dynamic of the grief process. However, this limitation in itself represents an original finding: the narcissistic wound resulting from some PCVs is such that individuals require more than one full year to find the resources necessary for psychic reinvestment in other organizational scenes or other objects that nourish the individual ideal. This finding underscores the dangers of organizational changes implemented with excessive haste (Kenny, 2009; Zell, 2003), not allowing subjects to mourn the invested objects that have been lost and, worse yet, opening the possibility of losing yet other objects, which consequently keeps subjects in phases of anger, as the case of Guillaume exemplifies.

In terms of practical implications, our results show that organizational change events constitute an important source of narcissistic attacks that weaken employment relationships. In our study, the company's search for profitability through stricter rules and increased process rationalization acquired a castrating dimension in the eyes of the employees. The relapses and 'troughs' observed at the outset of mourning illustrate that each new PCV attacks the subject at the very foundations of the self, nourishing a state of anger and lethargy (stages of denial and anger) that, in the long term, are deleterious to the individual's well-being (Levinson *et al.*, 1962; Meckler *et al.*, 2003).

Our results also show that organizations have the resources necessary to assist individuals in accomplishing the work of mourning more rapidly. Factors such as the appearance of a new superior who shares a subject's values (Delphine), the possibility of career development (Guillaume), and a change in discourse with the arrival of a new company director (Aurélie) reinvigorated the subjects by helping them psychically renegotiate or seek new objects within new organizational scenes.

Note

1 PAPI is the name of a personality test widely used in France for selecting employees.

References

Arnaud, Gilles. 2012. "The Contribution of Psychoanalysis to Organization Studies and Management: An Overview." *Organization Studies*, 33, 1121-1135.

Bankins, Sarah. 2015. "A Process Perspective on Psychological Contract Change: Making Sense of, and Repairing Psychological Contract Breach and Violation through Employee Coping Actions." *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 36 (8), 1071-1095.

Bell, Emma and Scott Taylor. 2011. "Beyond Letting Go and Moving On: New Perspectives on Organizational Death, Loss and Grief." *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 27, 1-10.

Blau, Gary. 2006. "A Process Model for Understanding Victim Responses to Worksite/Function Closure." *Human Resource Management Review*, 16, 12-28.

Blau, Gary. 2008. "Exploring Antecedents of Individual Grieving Stages during an Anticipated Worksite Closure." *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 81, 529-550.

Bordia, Prashant, Simon Lloyd Restubog, and Robert Tang. 2008. "When Employees Strike Back: Investigating Mediating Mechanisms between Psychological Contract Breach and Workplace Deviance." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93, 1104-1117.

Chiaburu, Dan, Ann Chunyan Peng, In-Sue Oh, George Banks, and Laura Lomeli. 2013. "Antecedents and Consequences of Employee Organizational Cynicism: A Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 83 (2), 181-197.

Conway, Neil and Robert Briner. 2002. "A Daily Diary Study of Affective Responses to Psychological Contract Breach and Exceeded Promises." *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 23 (3), 287-302.

Dulac, Tanguy, Jacqueline Coyle-Shapiro, Dan Henderson, and Susan Wayne. 2008. "Not All Responses to Breach Are the Same: The Interconnection of Social Exchange and Psychological Contract Processes in Organizations." *Academy of Management Journal*, 51 (6), 1079-1098.

Gould, Laurence. 1991. "Using Psychoanalytic Frameworks for Organizational Analysis." *Organisations on the Couch: Clinical Perspectives on Organisational Behaviour and Change*. M. Kets de Vries, dir. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 25-44.

Guinchard, Roland and Gilles Arnaud. 2011. *Psychanalyse du lien au travail: le désir de travail*. Paris: Elsevier Masson.

Kahn, Susan and Andreas Liefooghe. 2014. "Thanatos: Freudian Manifestations of Death at Work." *Culture and Organization*, 20, 53-67.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. 1969. *On Death and Dying*. New York: Harper & Row.

Levinson, Harry. 1976. *Psychological Man*. Cambridge: Levinson Institute.

Levinson, Harry, Charlton Price, Keuneth Munden, Harold Mandl and Charles Solley. 1962. *Men, Management and Mental Health*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Maciejewski, Paul, Baohui Zhang, Susan Block, and Holly Prigerson. 2007. "An Empirical Examination of the Stage Theory of Grief." *Jama*, 297, 716-723.

Meckler, Mark, Bruce Drake, and Harry Levinson. 2003. "Putting Psychology into Psychological Contracts." *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 12, 217-228.

Morrison, Elisabeth and Susan Robinson. 1997. "When Employees Feel Betrayed: A Model of How Psychological Contract Violation Develops." *Academy of Management Review*, 22, 226-256.

Parker, Ian. 2004. *Qualitative Psychology: Introducing Radical Research*. McGraw-Hill International.

Raja, Usman, Gary Johns, and Filotheos Ntalianis. 2004. "The Impact of Personality on Psychological Contracts." *Academy of Management Journal*, 47 (3), 350-367.

Robinson, Susan and Elisabeth Morrison. 2000. "The Development of Psychological Contract Breach and Violation: A Longitudinal Study." *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 21, 525-546.

Rousseau, Denise. 1989. "Psychological and Implied Contracts in Organizations." *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 2, 121-139.

Rousseau, Denise. 1995. *Psychological Contracts in Organizations: Understanding Written and Unwritten Agreements*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rousseau, Denise. 2003. "Extending the Psychology of the Psychological Contract: A Reply to 'Putting Psychology Back into Psychological Contracts'." *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 12, 229-238.

Rousseau, Denise and Sandra Robinson. 1994. "Violating the Psychological Contract: Not the Exception but the Norm." *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15, 245-259.

Shepherd, Dean. 2009. "Grief Recovery from the Loss of a Family Business: A Multi-and Meso-Level Theory." *Journal of Business Venturing*, 24, 81-97.

Tomprou, Maria, Denise Rousseau, and Samantha Hansen. 2015. "The Psychological Contracts of Violation Victims: A Post-Violation Model." *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 36 (4), 561-581.

Zell, Deone. 2003. "Organizational Change as a Process of Death, Dying, and Rebirth." *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 39, 73-96.

Zhao, Hao, Sandy Wayne, Brian Glibkowski, and Jesus Bravo. 2007. "The Impact of Psychological Contract Breach on Work-Related Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis." *Personnel Psychology*, 60 (3), 647-680.

SUMMARY

What's Next after Psychological Contract Violation?

This article adopts an in-depth clinical perspective based on the theoretical framework of grief in order to examine individuals' reactions following psychological contract violation over a period of 12 months. By focusing on emotional intrapsychic phenomena our study provides evidence of the enduring effects of psychological contract violation on individuals and the employment relationship.

We conducted a total of 60 interviews among 11 managers of a temporary employment agency that has implemented a series of organizational changes, mainly related to restructuring and downsizing decisions. The 11 managers interviewed have been chosen after having reported in a short survey that they experienced a psychological contract violation at work.

Our results indicate that psychological contract violation triggers the subject into a grief process only when violation deprives the individual from a highly invested object at work. In these circumstances, the grief process lasts longer than we originally expected since, over 12 months, we were unable to observe the grief process in its entirety among our participants. We also find that the grief process may be accelerated or stopped according to the capacity of the organization and the individual to offer new objects that satisfy the individual's needs and thus may help the person mourn the loss experienced as a result of the violation. Finally, our results show that the grief process deeply alters the employment relationship and

modifies the amount and intensity of energy that the participants of our study devote to their work.

RÉSUMÉ

La violation du contrat psychologique : que survient-t-il après ?

Cet article adopte une perspective clinique fondée sur le cadre théorique du deuil afin de d'examiner les réactions à la violation du contrat psychologique au cours d'une période de 12 mois. En se centrant sur les phénomènes émotionnels propres à l'individu, notre étude apporte des éléments d'observation des effets durables que peut engendrer la violation du contrat psychologique chez les personnes concernées, et de la manière dont ces effets altèrent leur relation d'emploi avec l'entreprise.

Nous avons mené, au total, 60 entretiens auprès de 11 gestionnaires d'une agence de travail temporaire qui a mis en place une série de changements organisationnels importants, portant essentiellement sur des restructurations et coupures de poste. Les 11 gestionnaires interrogés furent sélectionnés après avoir vérifié, au préalable lors d'une enquête brève, qu'ils avaient bien vécu un sentiment de violation du contrat psychologique.

Nos résultats montrent que la violation du contrat psychologique ne pousse le sujet à effectuer un travail de deuil que lorsque cette violation prive l'individu d'un objet fortement investi au travail. Dans ces circonstances, le deuil est un processus plus long que nous l'avions anticipé, puisqu'à l'issue de la période de collecte (soit 12 mois), nous n'avons pas été en mesure d'observer l'ensemble du processus chez les participants. Nos résultats indiquent aussi que le processus de deuil peut être accéléré ou ralenti selon la capacité de l'organisation et de l'individu à offrir ou trouver de nouveaux objets qui satisfont les besoins de l'individu et l'aident à accepter la perte vécue lors de la violation. Finalement, nos résultats montrent que le processus de deuil conduit à une modification importante de la relation d'emploi et qu'il change tant le contenu que l'intensité de l'énergie que les participants consacrent à leur travail.

MOTS-CLÉS : violation du contrat psychologique, processus de deuil, psychologie clinique, étude longitudinale.

RESUMEN

¿Qué sucede después de la violación del contrato sicológico?

Este artículo adopta una perspectiva clínica fundada en el marco teórico del duelo con el fin de examinar las reacciones a la violación del contrato sicológico durante un periodo de doce meses. Focalizando los fenómenos emocionales intrapsíquicos,

nuestro estudio aporta elementos de observación de los efectos durables engendrados por la violación del contrato psicológico sobre las personas afectadas, y de la manera cómo esto afecta la relación de empleo.

Se llevó a cabo un total de 60 entrevistas con 11 directivos de una agencia de trabajo temporario que ha implementado una serie de cambios organizacionales importantes, incluyendo restructuraciones y reducción de puestos. Los once directivos entrevistados fueron seleccionados después de haber verificado, durante una breve encuesta previa, que ellos habían experimentado una violación de contrato sicológico.

Nuestros resultados muestran que la violación del contrato sicológico lleva al sujeto a efectuar un trabajo de duelo solamente cuando esta violación priva al individuo de un objeto que ha suscitado una fuerte implicación en el trabajo. En estas circunstancias, el proceso de duelo es más largo de lo que habíamos anticipado, puesto que al final del periodo de colecta de datos (es decir 12 meses), no fuimos capaces de observar el proceso en su totalidad tal que vivido por los participantes. Nuestros resultados indican también que le proceso de duelo puede ser acelerado o frenado según la capacidad de la organización y del individuo a ofrecer o encontrar nuevos objetos que satisfarán las necesidades del individuo y le ayudaran a aceptar la perdida vivida con la violación. Finalmente, nuestros resultados muestran que le proceso de duelo conduce a una modificación importante de la relación de empleo y que él cambia tanto el contenido como la intensidad de la energía que los participantes consagran a su trabajo.

PALABRAS CLAVES: violación del contrato sicológico, proceso de duelo, sicología clínica, estudio longitudinal.