

Impact of Psychological Contract Breach on the Counterproductive Work Behavior among Nurses: Moderating Role of Emotional Intelligence and Forgiveness

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Abstract

Interest in counterproductive work behavior is increasing due to the extreme harm it causes to organizations. This study extended past studies on counterproductive work behavior by exploring the impact of psychological contract breaches on counterproductive work behavior among nurses. Furthermore, the current study investigated the moderating role of emotional intelligence and forgiveness in the relationship between psychological contract breach and counterproductive work behavior. Data were collected from 200 nurses working in private and public hospitals in Multan city. Based on findings, psychological contract breach perception resulted in nurses' involvement in counterproductive work behavior. Moreover, results revealed that emotional intelligence does not moderate the relationship between psychological contract breach and counterproductive work behavior. Still, forgiveness moderated this relationship. This study's results demonstrate how a psychological contract breach shapes an employee's negative behavior. In addition, human resource departments are advised to avoid psychological contract breach cases by making realistic promises to employees when hiring. This study also recommends adopting a forgiveness culture in organizations, which will increase the quality of workplace relationships and aid employees in managing their emotions.

Keywords: *psychological contract breach, counterproductive work behavior, emotional intelligence, forgiveness, nurses.*

Introduction and Literature Review

Employees' negative behavior can impact organizations' goals related to achieving effectiveness, and these behaviors can be detrimental to the well-being of shareholders (Nurmaya, 2012). There are various types of negative behaviors that employees exhibit in their workplace. Still, practitioners and researchers have gained much attention for counterproductive work behavior (CWB) (Cohen & Diamant, 2017). Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) is a deliberate act that harms the organization and individuals (Spector, 2014). Employees who exhibit counterproductive work behavior (CWB) are aware they are violating the basic moral and ethical codes by causing harm to the organization or/its employees to

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fulfill their interests. These acts put the well-being of employees and the organization in danger. Yao (2019) observed that activities harming the organization and its employees in the healthcare setting could lead to problems, low employee and patient satisfaction, higher hospital expenditures, and higher turnover. Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) has been divided into two types of actions: CWBs directed toward the individuals inside the organization are called CWB-I, whereas those directed toward the organization itself are called CWB-O. CWB-I includes behaviors (e.g., insulting, yelling, behaving rudely, or playing pranks) aimed at coworkers or others (for example — clients, supervisors, subordinates, and suppliers). And CWB-O includes impersonal or task-based behaviors, e.g., sloppy work, violating organizational rules, neglecting orders, and unnecessary absences (Oh et al., 2014).

Tian et al. (2014) stated that the main cause of inefficiency at work is counterproductive behavior, which may result in significant financial loss for businesses. For instance, in the USA (United States), 33-75% of employees exhibit different forms of CWB, resulting in annual losses of \$1 trillion. These behaviors incorporate workplace violence (\$4.2 billion), fraud (\$900 billion), and theft (\$120 billion). Considering these enormous expenditures, several scholars tried to determine the organizational and personal factors affecting the CWB of employees. Some organizational factors that trigger CWB are organizational power (Sims, 2010), abusive management (Wei & Si, 2013), perception related to organizational politics, organizational constraints, and interpersonal conflict (Spector & Zhou, 2014). And some personal factors are personality characteristics (Spector & Zhou, 2014), locus of control (Wei & Si, 2013), ethical ideology (Henle et al., 2005), and belief in materialism (Deckop et al., 2015). However, there is a lack of consideration of situational factors affecting CWB, and in this regard, psychological contract breach has recently received a lot of attention (Cassar & Briner, 2011). A psychological contract is a mutual and unwritten employee-employer contract wherein one person provides services and earns certain benefits in return (Sebastian & George, 2015). Based on the psychological contract, employees assume that their organization is obligated to deliver whatever they consider a promise. So, when employees perceive that their organization did not fulfill the promise, a psychological contract breach (PCB) occurs. This perception causes employees to seek revenge and exhibit negative behaviors. Since the employer holds more power (such as the ability to make decisions), they can impose laws to compel the workers to fulfill their commitments; as a result, the employer hardly perceives a psychological contract breach. Therefore, we focus solely on the consequences of PCB that employees perceive. Employees may perceive PCB more easily than ever due to organizational changes, including downsizing, redundancy, and delay (Sturges et al., 2005).

Prior research has revealed that psychological contract breach affects attitudes and behaviors related to the job, including reduced job satisfaction (Wang & Hsieh, 2014), organizational commitment (Schmidt, 2016), citizenship behavior, or increased turnover intention (Quratulain et al., 2016). However, it is vital to note that most research on the association between PCB and CWB has been conducted in western cultures. Furthermore, few researchers have investigated the association between PCB and CWB in the healthcare industry, particularly in the nurses' profession (Ghislieri et al., 2019). This study aimed to examine the effect of psychological contract breaches on counterproductive work behavior in an eastern culture among nurses. Furthermore, it also aimed to study emotional intelligence and forgiveness as a moderator to examine how these personal resources (emotional intelligence and forgiveness) combine with PCB to influence CWB. In line with CWB literature, these variables have not been studied in the relationship between PCB-CWB. And according to Wang et al. (2014), personal resources assist in dealing with challenging situations or stress. Hobfoll et al. (2003) also reported that personal resources are coping strategies that improve one's ability to manage and influence their surroundings successfully.

Social exchange theory (SET) accounts for employees' engagement in counterproductive behaviors as a response to psychological contract breaches. This theory contends that employee and employer relationships are formed and upheld by the exchange process (Blau, 1964). When employees feel that they keep their part of the deal, but their organization has not held their obligation/promise, then disparity occurs in the exchange process. Because of this disparity, employees perceive a breach. They feel negative emotions (e.g., anger and resentment) which further result in negative behaviors, e.g., property destruction, abusing people, and antagonism (Sturges et al., 2005).

Previous research reported that employees respond to psychological contract breaches with negative workplace attitudes, which could increase their probability of exhibiting counterproductive work behaviors, e.g., withdrawal behavior, absenteeism, and deviant behavior. (Law & Zhou, 2014; Daouk-Oyry et al., 2014). When the employees perceive a psychological contract breach, they behave unethically. An Iranian study revealed that the PCB enhanced employees' tendency to engage in CWB (Fayyazi & Aslani, 2015). Hussain (2014) observed that PCB perception provokes negative behaviors in the workplace, such as CWB. Ahmed et al. (2013) studied Pakistani nurses and physicians and revealed that PCB significantly increases CWB.

Maulana and Pujotomo (2016) believe that emotional intelligence (EI) is necessary for organizations for human resources. Individuals can recognize and manage emotions. Emotional regulation enables employees to maintain a "positive effect" or an optimistic attitude that has an advantageous effect on job tasks. Dixit and Singh (2019) observed that emotional intelligence significantly affects organization-related stress and counterproductive work behavior. A recent study indicated that higher emotional intelligent employees respond less towards PCB and have a less tendency to engage in counterproductive behaviors (Miao et al., 2017). Balogun et al. (2018) reported that employees who perceive psychological contract breaches tend to develop a feeling of frustration, hatred, and betrayal, which contribute to deviant behaviors in the workplace. He also found that employees with high EI respond less to PCB and are less prone to exhibit deviant behaviors. Deshpande et al. (2005) revealed that highly emotionally intelligent employees consider CWB unethical behavior. It implies high emotionally intelligent individuals tend to be better citizens and engage in highly ethical behaviors related to their job. Martin et al. (1998) stated that employees' emotional intelligence (EI) is important in preventing negative or harmful behaviors.

Individuals who perceive breach can get over their negative feelings by using forgiveness as a coping strategy, thereby preventing themselves from involving in counterproductive behaviors. Forgiveness at workplaces allows employees to control their negative emotions against the alleged perpetrator and hold themselves back from harming the offender, even if it seems morally acceptable (Aquino et al., 2006). Chen et al. (2001) revealed that when the level of forgiveness is low, the perception of PCB contributes to negative feelings and leads to counterproductive behaviors. When forgiveness is high, employees become resilient and can regulate and manage their environment effectively. Forgiveness enhances physical and mental health, thus reducing absenteeism and turnover. It is a stress reduction tactic employee adopt in response to workplace offenses (Cox et al., 2012).

Hypotheses of the Study

1. Psychological contract breach will positively predict counterproductive work behavior among nurses.
2. Emotional intelligence will moderate the psychological contract breach and counterproductive work behavior relationship among nurses.
3. Forgiveness will moderate the relationship between psychological contract breach and counterproductive work behavior among nurses.

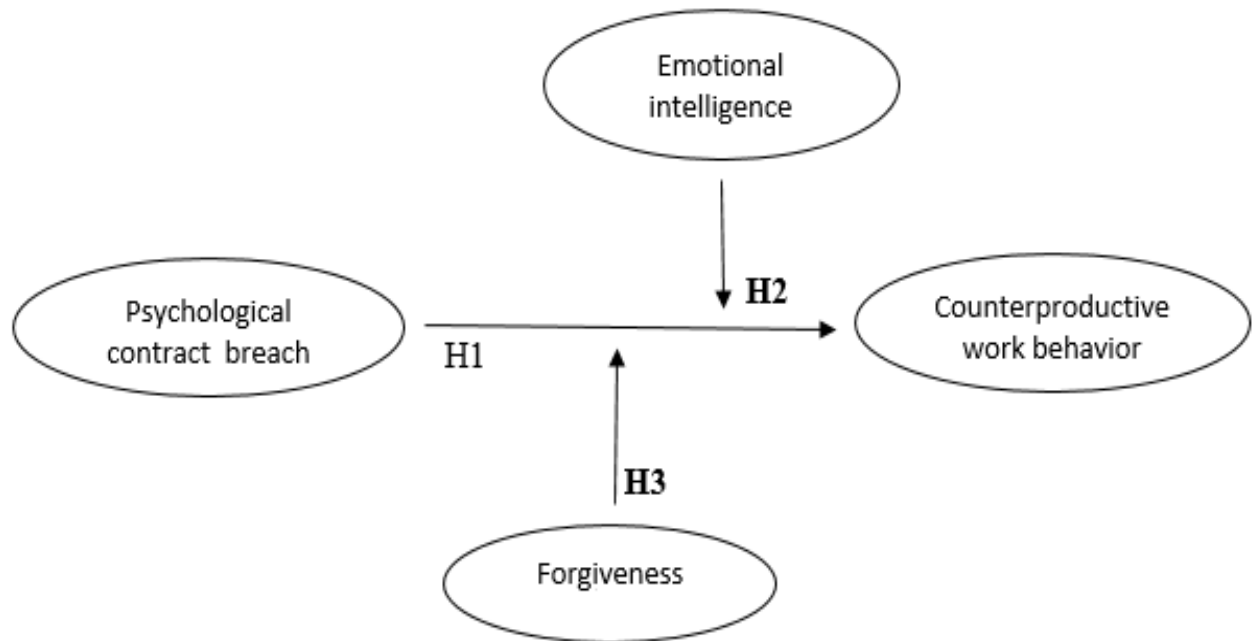
Conceptual framework of study

Figure 1: Conceptual Diagram

Materials and Methods

Research design

The research design used in the current study was cross-sectional.

Sampling technique

Participants were chosen by purposive sampling method. This sampling method is used when the researcher wants to target a specific group of individuals who fit a particular profile.

Participants

A total of 200 nurses (80 female and 20 male) from hospitals (private and public) of Multan participated in the study, and 18 years to 47 years were their age range ($M = 24.73$, $SD = 6.26$). Nurses who were unwilling to participate and those who were not available at the research time were excluded from the study.

Instruments

Psychological Contract Breach (Robison and Morrison, 2000) is a 5-items measure used to assess PCB among nurses. The first three items of the scale assessed employees' perception about fulfilling obligations/promises by the organization and were reverse coded. The other two items assessed perceptions about mutual fulfillment. The scale has five possible ratings for each item, with one indicating "strongly disagree" and five indicating "strongly agree." In the present study, the scale had a good reliability coefficient with α value of 0.71. High scores indicated a high level of breach perception.

The Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (Spector et al., 2010) is a 10-items measure used to assess counterproductive work behavior among nurses. The first five items on this scale target the organization, while the latter target the people. Every item was given a 5-point rating (1-Never, 5- Daily). In the current study, the scale had a good reliability coefficient

with α value of 0.89. High scores indicated that employees frequently exhibit CWB, whereas low scores indicated less engagement of employees in CWB.

Wong & Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (Wong & Law, 2002) is a 16 items scale used to assess nurses' emotional intelligence. This scale has four subscales, each consisting of four items, giving a 5-point rating (1-strongly disagree, 5-strongly agree). However, we decided to use the overall summed scores as an indicator of emotional intelligence, ranging from 16-112 (16-47 indicate low EI, 48-80 indicate moderate EI level, and 81-112 indicate high EI). In the current study, the scale had a good reliability coefficient with α value of 0.90.

Forgiveness Scale (Aquino et al., 2006) is a 4-items scale used to measure forgiveness in the workplace. Every item was given a 5-point rating (1-inaccurate, 5-very accurate). A high score indicated a high level of forgiveness. In the current study, this scale had a Cronbach alpha reliability of .89.

Procedure

Firstly, approval for the study was taken from the Research Ethics Committee at Bahauddin Zakariya University of Multan, Pakistan. Then, data was collected by distributing the questionnaires among the workplace participants. They were also informed that their participation is voluntary and information will be kept confidential. Participants filled out the self-report questionnaires after signing the form of informed consent

Statistical Analysis

First, standard regression was conducted to determine the strength and character of the relationship between PCB and CWB. Second, Hayes' Process Macro was utilized to test this study's moderation hypothesis. The 23rd edition of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze all the data.

Results

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics of the scales (N=200)

Scales	No. of Items	A	M	SD	Range		Skewness	Kurtosis
					Potential	Actual		
PCB	5	.71	12.26	3.67	5-25	5-21	-0.22	-0.21
CWB	10	.89	17.80	9.01	10-50	10-49	1.48	1.55
EI	16	.90	64.61	9.77	16-80	37-80	-0.31	-0.01
FORG	4	.89	11.82	4.83	4-20	4-20	.097	-0.91

Note. PCB=Psychological contract breach, CWB= Counterproductive work behaviour, EI=Emotional Intelligence, FORG=Forgiveness

Concerning the normal distribution of data in the study, Skewness and Kurtosis values fall within the range of ± 2 , which is the acceptable threshold range (George & Mallery, 2010). Also, the mean, SD (standard deviation), range, and reliability statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 2.

Standard Regression model explaining the impact of psychological contract breach on counterproductive work behavior (N=200)

Predictors	B	S. E	B	T	P
PCB	1.077	.157	.439	6.870	.000***

Note. *** $p < .001$. PCB=Psychological contract breach.

Table 2 presents the regression of the independent variable (PCB) and dependent variable (CWB). As expected, psychological contract breach positively predicted counterproductive work behavior, $b = 1.077$ $p = .000$ ($p < 0.001$).

Table 3.

Moderation by Emotional Intelligence for Psychological Contract Breach and Counterproductive work behavior (N=200)

Variables	B	Positive Youth Development 95% CI	
		LL	UL
Constant	15.6422	-10.37	41.65
PCB	1.59	-.36	3.54
EI	-.13	-.49	.23
PCB × EI	-.01	-.04	.02
R ²	.265		
ΔR ²	.003		
F	23.64		

Note. UL=Upper Limit, LL=Lower Limit. PCB=Psychological contract breach, CWB=Counterproductive work behavior, EI=Emotional Intelligence.

Table 3 presents the moderating effect of emotional intelligence on the path relationship between psychological contract breach and counterproductive work behavior. Results indicate no moderation effect on this path ($p > .05$).

Table 4.

Moderation by Forgiveness for Psychological Contract Breach and counterproductive work behavior (N=200)

Variables	B	Positive Youth Development 95% CI	
		LL	UL
Constant	37.87***	19.23	56.51
PCB	-1.13*	-2.27	.01
FORG	-2.07**	-3.72	-.41
PCB × FORG	.12*	.02	.22
R ²	.032		
ΔR ²	.027		
F	2.20		

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. UL=Upper Limit, LL=Lower Limit. PCB=Psychological contract breach, CWB= Counterproductive work behavior, FORG=Forgiveness.

Table 4 presents the moderating effect of forgiveness on the path relationship between psychological contract breach and counterproductive work behavior. Results show that forgiveness moderates the link between psychological contract breach and counterproductive work behavior ($p < .05$).

Discussion

The current study examines the effect of psychological contract breach on counterproductive work behavior. Furthermore, the study explored the moderating role of emotional intelligence and forgiveness between the psychological contract breach and counterproductive work behavior relationship. Our study findings revealed that the psychological contract breach significantly positively affects counterproductive work behavior. It means that nurses whose perception was highly related to psychological contract breach exhibited more counterproductive work behaviors. This finding is congruent with previous studies (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2013; Fayyazi & Aslani, 2015) that a positive relationship

exists between PCB and CWB. When an employer breaches their promises/obligations, employees perceive PCB and thus exhibit negative behaviors. A Pakistani study revealed that the perception of PCB automatically lowers the loyalty and commitment of employees toward their organizations, and they exhibit CWBs (Hussain, 2014). Kim et al. (2012) reported that employers are not fair with employees regarding keeping commitments and promises, and employees frequently exhibit unethical and negative acts towards organizations. Another explanation for this result could have relied on the fact that the profession of nurses is demanding (physically and emotionally), and healthcare organizations expect nurses to be fully involved in their jobs. Nurses often expect something in return from their organizations. So, when organizations did not return anything in exchange, nurses perceived a breach and exhibited CWBs.

The results also revealed that emotional intelligence did not moderate the PCB-CWB relationship. This result contradicts the findings of previous studies reporting that emotional intelligence and occupational stress are negatively correlated (Lalitha & Kumar, 2017; Mousa et al., 2017; Miao et al., 2017). Colbert et al. (2004) also revealed that employees with high emotional intelligence are more likely to refrain from behaviors indicative of counterproductive work behavior. One possible reason for this finding could be the higher percentage of female nurses participating in the survey. Ahmad et al. (2009) stated that females are less emotionally intelligent than males, and females exhibit fewer CWBs than males.

Regarding the forgiveness role in mitigating the link between psychological contract breach and counterproductive work behavior, results revealed that forgiveness had a moderation effect on the PCB-CWB relationship. This finding supports the results of previous studies (Costa & Neves, 2017; Aquino et al., 2006), reporting that forgiveness helps buffer the psychological contract breach effect, which further helps employees in coping with stressful situations and prevents them from exhibiting negative behaviors. Likewise, Toussaint et al. (2018) stated that forgiveness aids in mitigating stress which is caused by job offenses. Another study (Aquino et al., 2006) reported that forgiveness is a way of coping with situations by attempting to change one's feelings and behavior. So, whenever nurses perceived PCB, forgiveness (as a personal resource) helped them alter their feelings and restrained them from demonstrating negative behavior.

Conclusion

It is concluded that psychological contract breach perception resulted in nurses' involvement in counterproductive work behavior. Moreover, emotional intelligence does not moderate the relationship between psychological contract breach and counterproductive work behavior. Still, forgiveness moderated this relationship.

Limitations and Suggestions

Similar to other studies, this study had some limitations. Since our participants were majority females, the research findings in gender-biased samples could be different. Data were collected only from Multan city, so it is impossible to generalize findings because results may vary from region to region. Nurses were hesitant due to the fear of authorities and gave impartial views. Therefore, this element may affect the result. In future studies, other moderators such as procedural justice, optimism, empowerment practices, and regular feedback can be considered while studying the link between psychological contract breach and counterproductive work behavior. Moreover, future studies can examine the direct and indirect relationship between these variables while incorporating the male nurses in the sample to assess whether sample composition will affect the findings. Lastly, this study must be replicated in different cities in Pakistan to generalize the results.

Theoretical and practical Implications

Theoretically, by establishing a causal relationship between perception, attitude, and behaviors, this study validates the SET (social exchange theory), which holds that perception

influences attitudes, which drive behaviors (Blau, 1964). Employees often exhibit negative behaviors (e.g., work alienation and organizational cynicism) in response to feeling that they are not being treated equally by the employer. This causes them to exhibit counterproductive work behaviors to revive the reciprocity.

The industry must focus on preventing CWBs because PCBs can lead to various harmful work-related attitudes and behaviors (e.g., organizational cynicism and work alienation). To achieve this, organizations have to make realistic promises during recruitment, work-related interactions, and socialization and try to uphold the employees' psychological contracts that are reasonable. However, it seems unrealistic to keep every promise made to employees (Bordia et al., 2008). In that situation, organizations can intervene and provide solutions. For instance, by incorporating resource-based programs and interventions that enhance employees' psychological capital and positive personality traits (e.g., forgiveness), employees' engagement at work can be improved. This will also help build a strong relationship between employers and employees (Costantini et al., 2017). Furthermore, organizations can gain an understanding of employees by providing them with information about the breach and offering them various ways of compensation (Morrison & Robinson, 1997).

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