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Exceeded expectations: building stable psychological contracts among newly recruited social workers in a Swedish context

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**ABSTRACT**

There is a need for a stable competence provision in the Swedish public sector in order to ensure the continuity, quality and stability of the social services that are provided to citizens. As the turnover rate of newcomers generally reaches a peak between three and six months after entry, it is important to understand how organisations can retain their newly recruited social workers. From a psychological contract theory standpoint, the aim of this exploratory qualitative case study is to describe the process that leads to relatively stable psychological contracts amongst newly recruited social workers. Three focus group interviews (consisting of four new social worker recruits, six co-workers and two supervisors from the same department) were conducted to retrospectively capture the exchange relationship between these agents during the newcomers’ first year of employment. The analysis identified two themes in the exchange process that shaped the employment relationship: pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences. The results showed that the organisational promises that were kept over time, mostly by supervisors and also due to co-worker influences, ultimately resulted in fulfilled and stabilized psychological contracts amongst the newcomers. An important conclusion is that a co-worker-organisation relationship of a good quality needs to have been established in order to enable a successful qualitative newcomer-organisation relationship. High organisational investment is thus required by an employing organisation that wants to build a trustworthy long-term relationship with all its employees.

**KEYWORDS**

Social workers; newcomers; expectations; psychological contracts; HSO

The initial stages of employment are critical for the formation of newcomers’ attitudes to and beliefs about an organisation (Ashforth and Saks 1996; Chatman 1992). Reducing any potential reality shock amongst newcomers in the public sector in Sweden is important, especially where there are serious shortages of staff due to changes in organisational policies that have resulted in increased work demands and less professional control (Burström et al. 2012; European Agency 2009; Höckertin and Härenstam 2006; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). There is a need for a stable competence provision in the Swedish public sector in order to ensure the continuity, quality and stability of services provided to citizens. Newly recruited social workers, that are new to multidisciplinary settings, often face difficulties relating to all aspects of their role: clinical, professional, and bureaucratic (Jaskyte 2005). Socializing employees into settings that prioritize administrative work rather than social work also means orienting them in the broader system and taking issues like role definition and professional autonomy into account (Abramson 1993). Failure to address these issues could lead to role ambiguity and conflict, both which are major stress factors in human service.
organisations (Jaskyte 2005). As the turnover rate amongst newcomers’ generally reaches a peak between three and six months after entry (Farber 1994), Swedish public organisations in general, and the social services in particular, need to actively manage the employment relationship during the first months of employment in order to avoid voluntary turnover and absences from work; both of which can be extremely costly to an employer (Welander 2017).

When entering a new organisation, the initial socialization period is generally considered to be an important stage in the formation of employees’ psychological contracts (Rousseau 1995; Shore and Tetrick 1994; Thomas and Anderson 1998). Socialization research has shown that during the induction period, sense-making plays an important role in adjusting the newcomer to the organisation, and especially so during the first months after entry (Morrison 1993; Saks and Ashforth 1997) when the differences between expectations and experiences often become apparent and can contribute to a ‘reality shock’ (Louis 1980; Schein 1978). Reducing the possibility of such a shock amongst newcomers in the public sector in Sweden can be argued to be crucial, especially as there is a serious staff shortage in that sector.

From a psychological contract theory standpoint, this paper aims to increase the understanding of the transition from education to work by using a positive single case to highlight the critical features of this process, i.e. what is required by the employing organisation in order to build a long-term relationship. As the decision to stay is often the outcome of a positive interaction between the employee and various organisational agents, the focus is on the exchange relationship between the newly recruited social workers, their supervisors (as representatives of the organisation) and their co-workers. To our knowledge, no study has qualitatively examined the process that leads to a relatively stable psychological contract for newly recruited social workers from the following three perspectives: (1) how the supervisors and (2) co-workers perceive their role towards the newcomers and (3) how the newcomers have perceived their pre-entry employment and their first year of employment in retrospect.

**Pre-entry expectations and psychological contract creation**

A psychological contract refers to an individual’s understanding of the terms and conditions of the exchange agreement between themselves and their employing organisation (Rousseau 1995). This exchange agreement includes both employer inducements (e.g. job content, career advancement, training, work-life balance and rewards) and employee contributions (e.g. performance, flexibility, extra role behaviour and commitment) (De Vos, Buyens, and Schalk 2003; Freese and Schalk 2008; Robinson and Rousseau 1994). By definition, a psychological contract is subjective and means that the content of psychological contracts varies between individuals depending on their age, power and position in the organisation (Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998). The majority of the research on psychological contracts uses data about employees that is quantitative and focuses on contract breach and violation and the attitudinal and behavioural implications of this (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler 2000; Edwards et al. 2003; Lo and Aryee 2003; Robinson and Morrison 2000). Further, Guest (1998) has argued that studies of the psychological contract should include an employer perspective in order to fully assess the notion of mutual and reciprocal obligations.

Thus, in order to analyse the employment relationship, the analysis must recognise that the employment relationship is, at the very least, a two-way exchange, with an equal focus upon the perceptions of reciprocal promises and obligations of both parties (Guest 2004). In large organisations, like public organisations, employees are also likely to come into contact with a wide range of organisational agents, creating what Setton, Bennett, and Liden (1996) have referred to as ‘multiple exchanges’. This means that it would seem unlikely that each of these agents will provide the employees with exactly the same expectations. In this exploratory qualitative case study, we examine how organisational inducements from supervisors and co-worker influences (i.e. two separate groups of organisational agents) can shape and stabilize newcomers’ psychological contracts.
According to Tomprou and Nikolaus theoretical contribution (2011, 343), psychological contract creation refers to a ‘…sensemaking process including an amalgam of promises exchanged by the newcomer and the organisational insiders, as experienced by the focal individual during her first days at work’. This definition incorporates the term ‘sense-making which can be defined as ‘… a social process that acts as a constant substrate shaping interpretations and interpreting’ (Weick 1995, 39). The creation of a psychological contract starts with pre-entry expectations. According to Louis (1980), pre-entry expectations are created during the anticipatory stage of socialization, where the recruits, as organisational outsiders, anticipate their experiences of the organisation they are about to enter. According to Tomprou and Nikolaou (2011), pre-entry expectations are strongly influenced by the newcomers’ previous work experiences and pre-entry information about the future employer, all of which are typically gathered by means of organisational and recruitment images during the job-seeking and recruitment process, as well as through educational courses and informal channels such as social networks. In particular, previous work experience accounts for the extent to which some newly recruited employees develop stable psychological contracts (Rousseau 2001). New recruits with a long previous work experience have a different cognitive schema that guides the way in which new information is organised (Weick 1995). In contrast, new recruits with a limited previous work experience mainly have to rely on a schemata that is evolves in relation to similar, yet different contexts, such as a college or university. This means that there is a greater risk of newcomers with a limited previous work experience developing unrealistic expectations, or expectations that simply are inconsistent with the organisational reality (Wanous 1977) – all of which can contribute to so-called reality shock. Since in this exploratory qualitative case study the focus is on newly recruited social workers with limited work experience, the above clarification is important. Regarding pre-entry information, Rousseau and Greller (1994) suggest that promises prosper in various descriptions of the work, pay system, career progression and working conditions, and that selection procedures (such as employment interviews) and realistic job previews shape the newcomers’ expectations.

**Post-entry experiences and psychological contract development**

When entering the organisation, the newcomer – and particularly the newly graduated (Hurst and Good 2009) – relies on a number of social inputs to understand and interpret the new employment relationship. Organisational insiders (e.g. supervisors and co-workers) are vital social exchange agents for the newcomers in terms of making sense of their new working reality, where promises and information are intensively exchanged and expectations are being revised (Louis 1980). However, there is a lack of empirical evidence that qualitatively clarifies the kind of influence that these organisational insiders or agents actually have on the newcomers’ psychological contract development. A critical prerequisite for a psychological contract formation is the building of trust by showing that promises that are made are kept and that employees are treated fairly (Guest 2004). Earlier research has shown that the keeping of promises is more important for the well-being of employees than the content of the psychological contract (Guest, Isaksson, and De Witte 2010). This is also a critical part of the process also during the first year of employment.

In line with Tomprou and Nikolaou (2011) theoretical conceptualization of different organisational insiders shaping the psychological contract, supervisors can be categorized as contract makers, and co-workers as facilitators. Contract makers are people who convey a future commitment to another person and that have the power and authority to fulfil this obligation (Tomprou and Nikolaou 2011). Previous research has mainly identified managers and supervisors as contract makers and the people with whom the employee has the most contact (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler 2002). It is the supervisors as individuals and representatives of the organisation who hold the psychological contracts, not the organisation per se. Organisations cannot ‘perceive’ a psychological contract, but their representatives can and can act accordingly (e.g. send organisational messages).
Co-workers, on the other hand, can theoretically be categorized as facilitators (Tomprou and Nikolaou 2011), in that they also influence the newcomers’ sense-making process of the psychological contract and its development, even though they do not have any power or authority to make any promises about the employer’s obligations. These relationships are instead often characterized as informal, collegial and cooperative and pave the way for the provision of information about the employer’s obligations. This information can reveal the employer’s intentions to fulfil a perceived obligation, from the newcomers’ perspective (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler 2000). In fact, De Vos and Freese (2011) longitudinally show that co-workers are the most important information sources in the first year of employment, despite the fact that they are not ‘official’ organisational agents. Thus, the newcomer could arguably use facilitators as informal socialization agents to confirm, clarify or completely revise the contract maker’s promises.

To sum up, socialization research has shown that in the first months after entry sense-making plays an important role in adjusting the newcomer to the organisation (Morrison 1993; Saks and Ashforth 1997). In other words, this is the period during which perceived promises are most likely to change as a consequence of newcomers’ interpretations of their experiences (De Vos, Buyens, and Schalk 2003).

In the sixth to twelfth month after entry, the individual’s adjustment to the organisation increases (i.e. the acquisition stage of socialization) (Louis 1980; Schein 1978). During this period, newcomers become better acquainted with their new employment and the employment relationship, which means that the frequency of newcomers’ psychological contract-related information seeking decreases (De Vos and Freese 2011). As a more stable cognitive schema about the employment relationship develops, uncertainties about the new employment relationship are reduced and active sense-making processes decrease (Rousseau 1995, 2001). For example, De Vos, Buyens, and Schalk (2003) longitudinally show that newcomers’ perceived employer promises in relation to the perception of employer inducements received are stronger during in the encounter stage than in the acquisition stage of socialization. However, the same study shows that perceived employee promises in relation to perceived employee contributions continue in both socialization stages, which suggests that newcomers allow themselves more time to adapt their promises about their own contributions.

**Aim and scope**

From a psychological contract theory standpoint and how psychological contracts could develop during organisational entry, the aim of this exploratory qualitative case study is to shed light on the process leading to a relatively stable psychological contract amongst newly recruited social workers and what is required by an employing organisation that wants to build a trustworthy long-term relationship. Specifically, the focus is on the exchange relationship between the newly recruited social workers and their co-workers and supervisors (i.e. organisational agents): how the new recruits perceive this interaction and how the exchange affects the formation of their psychological contracts.

**Method**

**Sample and data collection**

For participant recruitment, a statutory social service department working with children and adolescents in a medium-sized Swedish municipal organisation that had reported low turnover rates agreed to participate in the study. Before the interviews took place, information about the study and the invitations to participate were sent to team supervisors via e-mail. The participants in the study consisted of 12 employees (age range 25–55 years) whom, after receiving the written information about the study, voluntarily agreed to participate. The main function of the studied
department was to make sure that vulnerable children (i.e. those who have been abused and neglected, or face other significant challenges such as a disability) could have a safe, dependable footing. This was achieved by supporting parents to provide the best possible care for their children or, where this was not possible, by giving them a stable alternative home. The employees were interviewed in three separate groups in the spring of 2017. The first group, ‘supervisors’, consisted of two supervisors who had equal responsibility for the recruitment and well-being of staff in the chosen social service department. The second group, ‘co-workers’, consisted of six employees (the majority of whom had more than 10 years’ experience of social work). The third group, ‘newcomers’, consisted of four newly graduated social workers (who had been involved in social work for more than one year, but less than 18 months). All of the newcomers had a university degree in social work (at least a bachelor’s degree) and had no previous work experience, apart from a six-month internship as part of their educational programme. These four newly graduated social workers were the only ones matching the study’s inclusion criteria in the studied department.

The data was collected using standard approaches to interviewing (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). The interviews lasted for about one hour and were conducted by a research team member. Following a semi-structured open-ended interview guide, the respondents were asked questions that, from a research perspective, sought to identify experiences that could be related to the creation and development of the newcomers’ psychological contract. The questions were slightly modified depending on which of the three groups was being interviewed. When the supervisor and co-worker groups were interviewed, the respondents were asked to reflect on how they perceived their role with the newcomers and which obligations and inducements they conveyed to them. Examples of specific questions asked in the supervisor and co-worker group interviews were: ‘Describe the newly recruited social workers’ induction from the perspective of your role as a supervisor/co-worker’ and ‘What do you expect from the newly recruited social workers and how do you convey these expectations in the first year of employment?’ When the newcomers were interviewed, they were asked to reflect on how they, in retrospect, had perceived their pre-entry employment (e.g. the education and the recruitment processes) and their first year of employment. Examples of specific questions asked when interviewing the newcomers were: ‘What expectations did you originally have for the job you applied for and were eventually recruited for?’ and ‘What kind of promises did you receive from your supervisors/co-workers during the first year of employment?’ All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Analysis

The data was analysed in order to identify emerging themes (Williams 2008) and patterns (Creswell 2009). The thematic vertical analysis was complemented with a narrative analysis of each group interview. For each group interview, the researchers wrote a contextual summary that isolated recurring themes. Further, the data was coded until all the contradictions, similarities and differences had been explained, thereby increasing the dependability and consistency of the conclusions. The data was then translated into the general categories of pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences (in which consisted of the two sub-dimensions of psychological contract development and psychological contract stabilization). To increase the validity of the study, two (or occasionally three) researchers, independent of each other and in dialogue, carried out all the coding, groupings and categorizations. This way of establishing validity is frequently recommended in qualitative research and is described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) as dialogical intersubjectivity. This refers to a reciprocal negotiation and interpretation of meaning during all the study phases.
Limitations

The first limitation with this study is the small sample size and the fact that the findings are not generalizable. In fact, the studied department should not be seen as representing how employees in the social services in Sweden as a whole are treated or how newcomers are generally introduced, especially as it was selected purposefully based on low turnover rates. On the contrary, social workers in Sweden describe themselves as a particularly exposed occupational group, where a conflict between organizational conditions (e.g. high workloads, management by objectives and results) and the social workers’ own professional expectations often results in employees responding to work demands at the expense of their own health (Astvik, Melin, and Allvin 2014; Höjer and Forkby 2011, Tham and Meagher 2009; Welander, Astvik, and Isaksson 2017). A second limitation is that the respondents reported retrospectively on their experiences. Although retrospection over lengthy periods does not necessarily lead to biased reports, there is evidence to suggest that retrospective reports are prone to various problems (Reis and Gable 2000). A third limitation concerns the group interview as a methodology. In group interviews there is sometimes a tendency for certain types of socially acceptable opinions to emerge and for certain types of participants to dominate the research process (see Smithson 2000). However, in this study an active moderation of the group interviews was conducted in an attempt to address these issues and enable the participants to develop their ideas collectively and highlight their own priorities and perspectives. Finally, a comparative multiple-case design could have enabled a broader understanding of the studied phenomena, because that type of study generally provides the opportunity to discern patterns in the interview material that could add or extend the theory application or enrich and refine the theoretical framework (Yin 2009).

Results

This section presents a contextual account of why newly recruited social workers decide to stay with their employer after one year of employment from the perspectives of psychological contract creation and development. Here, the focus is on the exchange relationship between the newly recruited social workers and their supervisors and co-workers. The perspectives of the three group’s are described separately (supervisors, co-workers and newcomers), so that the process leading to a relatively stable psychological contract among the newcomers can be more easily followed and understood. The results are structured around the categories of pre-entry expectations and post-entry experiences.

Pre-entry expectations – the first encounter with the organisation as an outsider

Supervisors

During the recruitment process, the supervisors emphasized that an active communication about what potential future employees could expect, and what was expected of them, was essential. They therefore strategized the job interviews themselves, instead of fully outsourcing them to the organisation’s human resources (HR). From the interviews, it was evident that the supervisors actively tried to manage their potential future employees’ pre-entry expectations by conveying pre-entry information that was in line with the organisational objectives. As one of the supervisors put it, some of the pre-entry information also included the type of leadership the newcomers could expect:

One conscious choice that we made was that we would recruit here in the office. We have a HR department that should actually help with the recruitments, but we’ve chosen to do it ourselves. HR helps us with advertisements and practical things like that, we do all the interviews and collect all the references ourselves. It’s also an opportunity for us, in that we’ve been able to refine certain aspects during the interviews in order to be very clear about the kind of managers we are, what we expect of people and also that we want to offer a balanced working life. We’ve seen that this has made a difference when people choose us, in that they know what kind of leadership we have. (Supervisor 1)
According to the supervisors, most of the new recruits have limited previous work experience and their pre-entry expectations of the future employment are therefore sometimes unrealistic. The supervisors’ experiences of unrealistic pre-entry expectations seem to have influenced their decision to take control of the recruitment process in order to realistically influence newcomers’ expectations about the future employment relationship. Both supervisors clearly expressed that they did not rely on organisational advertisements and campaigns for outsiders to create accurate impressions about their specific department, but that detailed promises about the work, pay system, career progression and working conditions had to be communicated by them during the job interviews in order to appear credible.

**Co-workers**

Several of the co-workers commented that experienced social workers consciously sought to maintain an internal coherence regarding how to introduce the newcomers to the everyday work. This meant that they expressly shared the responsibility of fostering the newcomers’ mind-sets about their professional roles through their interactions – regardless of whether someone in the workgroup had a formal role as a mentor or not. This pronounced strategy amongst the co-workers was arguably not as vulnerable as a traditional mentor programme, in that the newcomers were able to turn to several co-workers when needed. Building close relationships within the workgroup and working collaboratively with the newcomers thus seemed to be a tactic that was used to ensure a smooth transition from education to working life that was ultimately more effective. One respondent stated:

> We have a receptivity in the team and agree that if someone new comes into the team it doesn’t matter who is mentor, but that we’re all there, that we do our best and are receptive. In any case, that’s the dialogue we have in the team and with our newcomers. (Co-worker 1)

Another respondent emphasized that the supervisors often tried to match a newcomer to a specific team of co-workers depending on their pre-entry expectations and experiences (i.e. a type of strategic person-environment fit):

> I think that our managers, they put people where they think they’ll fit best when they recruit someone, so it might not be to a specific job, but they check which office will fit the person best. I think that makes things very much easier too. (Co-worker 3)

Here, the previous respondent suggests that the supervisors have a greater ambition to create and maintain a good overall working environment than simply introducing the newcomers as quickly as possible. The above type strategy of the supervisors trying to fit a newcomer into a more customized role and area of practice within the department may also facilitate the newcomers’ sense-making process in their new employment. In the interviews, the co-workers (as informal socializations agents) seem to confirm the supervisors’ promises to the newcomers of a balanced and supportive working environment and that both parties (newcomers and co-workers) will benefit from this.

**Newcomers**

According to Weick (1995), as all the newcomer respondents had limited previous work experiences, it could be suggested that they mainly had to rely on the cognitive schemata that evolved in relation to their social work education at university. The newcomers had different experiences of how the education prepared them for the profession. Some of the newcomers reported that certain specific educational features (e.g. courses on unaccompanied refugees and domestic violence) were aligned with the tasks that they now encountered, although the majority expressed that they were somewhat disappointed with their education due to the emphasis on scientific theory at the expense of practical insights into professional social work. One respondent stated:

> Yes, I’ve been disappointed with the education. It’s clear that we need to have a scientific grounding, but even in that there needs to be a connection to working life. The best lectures were those given by social workers who made a direct connection by talking about their work. It made you see, aha, this is what it’s all about. (Newcomer 2)
The above respondent also conveys that some of the education did provide accurate information about a social worker’s working life. However, this pre-entry information primarily given from established professionals invited by the university. According to the respondents, their pre-entry expectations were predominantly defined by the professional associations they had encountered during their six-month internships as part of their education:

In the internship I became aware that it was social work. That you could be part of the team and help, that was partly why I chose that line of study, because I wanted to be involved and make a difference. I didn’t have that picture before, until I started to practice here. (Newcomer 4)

Together, these excerpts show that the pre-entry expectations were mainly shaped through the newcomers’ time-restricted participation in the professional reality, and not by the participation within their educational programme. As social work is predominantly a client-directed professional service, all the respondents agreed that internship was a crucial part of the education and contributed to them having reasonable pre-entry expectations about their future working life, which helped to facilitate the transition from student to professional worker.

**Post-entry experiences – the shaping of the psychological contract**

**Supervisors**

Both the supervisors expressed an awareness that they were important organisational agents that had to continuously pay a great deal of attention to newcomers’ post-entry experiences within their new employment relationship – not only at the beginning of the employment, but throughout it. They reported having witnessed several misunderstandings in the past between social worker defined practices with clients and organisational policies that sometimes conflicted with the social worker identity (i.e. the social workers’ cognitive expectations of themselves as a social worker). Therefore, the supervisors decided to extend the newcomers’ induction period to a full year and provide resources in the form of structured, systematic social support and professional development training with the ambition of building a long-term relationship with the newcomers. One respondent said:

We have very long inductions, here we talk years. The basis is that everyone introduces new colleagues, then some have special assignments. They are assigned a mentor who is a social support for routines at the workplace. They are also introduced to a solution-focus method, how to do visits and such. But we also have a function called experienced colleagues, which means someone who is an experienced colleague who has what you could call special teaching supervision, for the newcomers. These experienced colleagues work part-time with that. (Supervisor 2)

It became evident from the interviews with the supervisors that the relational entitlements were added to show the organisation’s intention to establish a different kind of employment relationship with a wider content. From the perspectives of psychological contract theory, the supervisors actively steered away from the transactional dimension of the psychological contract, because the relationships with their employees were not mainly characterized by economic, short-term and specific exchanges, such as only pay and performance. For instance, one of the supervisors spoke about a learning process, thereby conveying an understanding of the newcomers’ task-oriented self-doubts at the beginning, where the whole department was involved in bringing the relational elements to the fore:

Later on, we see it as a kind of learning process, when you’ve been doing the job for a while. At first you get a bit panicky as a newcomer. How will I manage that, there’s just loads and loads of paper, that kind of hysteria. It subsides after a few months. We practise giving feedback – that’s a really big thing. Practise, practise, practise. We’re in these difficulties, I mean, we need to be a good and big team in order to cope with them. We can be there for people in another way, kind of, than just sinking into the mire. That’s how we think. (Supervisor 1)
The supervisors seemed to value the continued learning in the work force as a whole in order to expand the knowledge base and to promote a positive organisational climate. At the same time, they *acknowledged* the social workers’ tough reality that could have considerable impact on social workers’ perceived well-being (see Welander, Astvik, and Isaksson 2017). Practising giving feedback could therefore be seen as an example of an organisation-initiated collective strategy for coping with the conflicting roles that social workers often have in their everyday work. It is also assumed to send signals to newcomers that the organisation intends to live up to the promises made during the recruitment process about a balanced work situation and a conducive work climate.

**Co-workers**

As stated previously, the co-workers played an important role in helping the newcomers to make sense of the psychological contract’s development and stabilization (Tomprou and Nikolaou 2011). Based on the interviews, the co-workers indeed confirmed that the organisation, represented by the supervisors, was constantly trying to create a sound working environment for the newcomers (and for the co-workers) by recruiting staff and enabling the co-workers to help out with the inductions as part of their actual job assignments. One respondent stated:

> The managers have made changes during the year. We’ve now got more staff, so things are much easier. That’s why it’s been so important for us, that those who come in actually get a good induction, you know what it’s like to be new. (Co-worker 4)

Most of the respondents in the co-worker group stated that clients’ and their dependants’ expectations of the role of social workers sometimes conflicted with policy, ethical and professional considerations. Also, in the interviews it was emphasized that the roles that social workers were responsible for were continuously *evolving* and were frequently contested by other agents, such as government policymakers and members of the public. It was therefore important for experienced social workers to help to interpret the ever-changing work reality that the newcomers encountered and acclimatized to during their first year of employment. In order to do this, as one co-worker puts it, experienced social workers had to be more pro-active about following up conversations with the newcomers in order to customize any future support and guidance:

> We also have team leaders who are responsible for newcomers to the team in their first year of employment. The mentors don’t actually have the main responsibility, I think. I think that the team leaders also have a responsibility to make sure that they follow up the newcomers. And see how things go, that there are follow-up discussions in order to constantly see whether they need more support and help. (Co-worker 2)

Many of the co-workers emphasized that they tried to reassure the newcomers that not achieving the intended outcomes with clients was part of the daily reality. As mentioned earlier, the sharing of responsibility between the co-workers reflected a constructive social climate that the supervisors had developed over time. Collective reflections together with the newcomers were considered an important tactic to help to address possible issues of stress and strain that might otherwise develop by not achieving the intended results.

**Newcomers**

In retrospect, the interviewed newcomers expressed that what the organisation expected from them as newly graduated social workers were very clear from the start. Further, the newcomers agreed that the organisation had kept the promises given in their induction period, namely a supportive organisational climate, continuous professional development and job security. One respondent also expressed that the organisation respected and valued its employees and paid attention to the status of the relations, which have instilled a perception of an organisational responsiveness that in turn could have prevented a potential psychological contract breach:
That’s what I think anyway, I think that everyone has been clear about what they expect from me and I have for example had follow-up with our team leader too, where we’ve gone through what we need to think about. I feel that the managers are very considerate. Last summer when I was really stressed I talked to one of the managers and I felt that she was very concerned about me. “I see that you think that this is tough, what kind of help do you need, what kind of support do you need?” – so I felt that I got a response. That you have this all the time, that there’s support from different directions. (Newcomer 2)

Another respondent reflected on the future of the employment relationship:

I’ve actually been surprised, because I will be on maternity leave in the autumn, and I’ve said that I’ll be coming back, because it’s been much better than I thought, even though I was happy here last summer. So I think that it’ll be possible to stay here for a few more years, because it’s so stimulating, safe and you meet so many wonderful people. (Newcomer 1)

The previous respondent’s statement implies that a stable cognitive schema of the employment relationship has been developed, where the respondent also displays a willingness to stay within the organisation for several years. After one year of employment, the uncertainty about the new employment relationship clearly seems to have been reduced. All the newcomers expressed similar perceptions, mainly because their post-entry experiences were characterized by an organisation that had contributed as originally promised during the recruitment process (i.e. the psychological contract was now fulfilled and relatively stable), in combination with the continuous support from experienced co-workers who had verified that the organisation was trustworthy. Lastly, the fulfilled relational dimensions of the psychological contract indicated in both the above excerpts could explain why these newcomers ultimately wanted to make a long-term commitment to their new employer.

Discussion

The aim of this exploratory qualitative case study has been to describe the process leading to a relatively stable psychological contract among newly hired social workers as a group. Here, the focus is on the exchange relationship between the newly recruited social workers and their supervisors and co-workers and how the exchange with these agents affects the formation and potential stabilization of the newcomers’ psychological contracts. The results are in line with previous research findings that organisational insiders (e.g. supervisors and co-workers) are important social exchange agents for the newcomers in the sense-making process of their new working lives (Hurst and Good 2009; Louis 1980). The newcomers’ decisions to stay after one year of employment can in this context be interpreted as a result of kept organisational promises over time and positive co-worker influences, which ultimately result in fulfilled and stabilized psychological contracts among the newcomers. First, as the supervisors actively take control over the essential parts of the recruitment process, they are able to help the newcomers to adjust their pre-entry expectations by providing well-defined pre-entry information that is in line with the organisational objectives. This pre-entry information also includes the organisation’s obligations and entitlements. The strategy seems to be crucial, since the newcomers in the study express that their education had not provided them with the wherewithal to shape grounded pre-entry expectations. Further, the articulated co-workers’ sharing of responsibility for the newcomers’ inductions are collectively agreed upon before the new recruits start work. As the organisation provides the co-workers with resources (e.g. more staff and professional development opportunities) to guard against any potential imbalance between their everyday job demands and resources, they are able to provide an induction that is quality assured and sustainable and that aligns with what the supervisors communicate during the recruitment process.

Moreover, the importance of the relational dimension of psychological contracts is salient in the results. Even though the relational dimensions of any psychological contract are understood to be layered on the transactional dimensions (Isaksson et al. 2010), it seems that meeting the relational expectations is vital from the organisation’s perspective, in that this eventually stabilizes
the newcomers’ psychological contracts after one year of employment. The results further suggest that in order to meet relational expectations, the organisation must have the co-workers on board, especially as they play such an important role in helping the newcomers to interpret the organisation’s general intentions towards its employees. Even though it is the supervisors who create the structure and convey their visions for a supportive climate, it is still the co-workers who are the everyday providers of the promised social support that helps to fulfi l parts of the psychological contract’s relational dimension. One main conclusion of this study is therefore that in order to achieve a promised supportive climate for newcomers, a qualitative co-worker-organisation relationship must already be in place in order to enable a successful qualitative newcomer-organisation relationship that leads to a stabilized psychological contract and organisational commitment.

The ways in which an organisation manages the employee-organisation relationship (EOR) has different consequences for the employees’ performances and attitudinal responses (Welander 2017). For example, Tsui et al.’s (1997) EOR approach differentiates four EOR types: (1) a mutual investment, (2) over-investment (where organisations offer plentiful inducements to employees for minimal contributions), (3) under-investment (where organisations demand high and broad contributions for subpar investments in employees) and (4) quasi spot-contracts (where organisations distribute low or narrow inducements for low or narrow contributions from employees). In general, Tsui et al.’s (1997) study shows that employees performed better in core tasks, demonstrate more citizenship behaviour and express a higher level of affective commitment to an organisation when they work in an over-investment or mutual investment relationship than in a quasi-spot contract or under-investment relationship. In this exploratory qualitative case study, it is evident that the co-workers and the newcomers reported working in an over-investment or mutual investment relationship, thus confi rming the supervisors’ expressed ambitions. Even though the employee-organisation relationship is not the same as a psychological contract, which includes expectations about the nature of the exchange held by both the organisation and the employee (Hom et al. 2012; Rousseau 1995; Tsui et al. 1997), it can be argued that high organisational investments via psychological contract fulfi lment do influence the newcomers’ decisions to stay. It is evident that the ongoing exchanges within an organisation could in themselves reinforce and build trust that leads to positive outcomes (e.g. job satisfaction and commitment).

**Future research**

In this study we have chosen to focus mainly on the organisation’s perspective (represented by supervisors), because it is usually is the employing organisation that defines the terms or content of the employment contracts (Tsui et al. 1997). This becomes especially clear in the process of recruiting new employees. Future research could further study how the balance (or imbalance) between the inducements offered by an organisation and the contributions expected from its new recruits as defined from the organisation’s perspective are perceived. Integrating the EOR perspective that emphasizes organisation/employer actions and strategies with psychological contract theory could also be a fruitful way of achieving an extended understanding of employees’ retention. Further, the importance of co-worker influence on newcomers’ sense-making processes, and finally, psychological contract stabilization, is another area that warrants more attention. It is worth noting how the psychological contract literature has missed out on potentially powerful sources of influence that could serve in constructing an employees’ psychological exchange with greater clarity and precision. Also, and in line with Guest (2004), future psychological contract literature should seek to incorporate not only the context as done in qualitative studies, but also central work issues such as trust and fairness in order to make the psychological contract a part of a wider analytical framework for the employment relationship. Finally, a comparative multiple-case study of two or more sites, would facilitate a wider discovery of theoretical evolution and research questions.
Practical implications

The results contribute to a deeper understanding of how kept organisational promises and investments in employees are linked to a psychological contract stabilization amongst newly graduated social workers and are in turn connected to their retention after one year of employment. The supervisors’ decision to actively engage in the recruitment processes enabled them to communicate clearly what potential newcomers could expect from the employment relationship (i.e. the content of the psychological contract). Even though recruitment processes can be time-consuming, it is recommended that supervisors prioritize these events in order to modify certain unrealistic pre-entry expectations on the part of the applicants. Further, as the supervisors took full responsibility for creating a sustainable and healthy working environment, with a focus on the relational elements for all employees, they eliminated possible contradictory signals from the co-workers to the newcomers about the organisation’s intentions to keep its promises. Thus, it would seem important to invest in all employees, so that experienced social workers also feel fairly treated – otherwise there is a risk of psychological contract violation due to age discrimination and, eventually, a turnover of more experienced staff. One conclusion in this regard is that arrangements relating to promotion, professional development, departmental relationships and links within the organisation have to be fair in relation to work experience. Finally, there seems to be a misalignment between the direct practice realities and the development of a professional role identity within the social work programmes and courses. These issues need to be addressed by both the educating universities and the employing organisations in order to prepare future social workers for this working life in the best way as possible.

References


