



# What's the Deal? The Making, Shaping and Negotiating of First-Year Students' Psychological Contract With Their Personal Tutor in Higher Education

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The psychological contract is widely used to study employer-employee relationships, but few studies have applied it to a higher education context. This research examines the usefulness of psychological contract theory to explore the student-personal tutor relationship from the student perspective. In-depth interviews with first-year undergraduates revealed new insights into the formation of the psychological contract and the dynamic nature of this relationship. When experiencing a conflict, discrepancy or breach to their perceived contract with their personal tutor, students undertake a complex sense-making attribution process and attempt to rebalance their psychological contract. The findings revealed the vital role the personal tutor has in the making, shaping and negotiating of the student's psychological contract which goes beyond the bounds of that specific relationship to the contract students have with the institution. The research highlights the potential uses of psychological contract theory to uncover and negotiate the "deal" students have with the university. The findings are useful for those working within the UK but offer insights that could be transferred to other international contexts in terms of understanding the psychological contracts of their students with the personal tutor and the institution.

**Keywords:** personal tutor, higher education, psychological contract, student expectations, personal tutoring, relationship

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## INTRODUCTION

In a competing UK mass higher education (HE) context there is much interest in the role of the personal tutor, given its potential to impact student outcomes, experiences, and measures of institutional success positively (Lochtie et al., 2018). In particular, the relationship between student and their personal tutor has been found to positively influence student retention (Thomas et al., 2017). The UK Office for Students introduced the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (Department for Education, 2017) as a measure of excellence of universities and continues to identify retention as a core metric. The personal tutor role also has links to many other positive student outcomes in HE, particularly during the transition to university. For example, research supports that having a positive student-personal tutor relationship can engender a sense of belonging and connectedness in students (Thomas et al., 2017; Yale, 2017). Given the importance

of the role, understanding more about this relationship is crucial in a changing HE context which, from its massification and increases to fees, is likely to mean a more diverse student body with more complex needs which have likely changed the nature of student expectations (Lochtie et al., 2018).

Approaches to personal tutoring vary across UK higher education institutions (HEI) from a purely academic support role to a pastoral model, providing both academic and personal support. How the role functions also varies, with some HEIs embedding the support within the curriculum and at others where the personal tutor will meet with their students outside of formal teaching, individually or in groups (Yale, 2019).

One way to explore the student- personal tutor relationship may be through applying a framework predominantly used to examine employer-employee relationships. This is referred to as the psychological contract (PC) and evidence from the small number of studies in this context suggests this may be a useful lens to examine HE relationships (Bordia et al., 2010; Koskina, 2013; O'Toole and Prince, 2015). For example, Bordia et al. (2010) used the PC effectively to study relationships between students and their research supervisors. Given the importance of the personal tutor role and the potential of the PC to offer a better understanding of the nature of this relationship and student expectations; this research will explore the student- personal tutor relationship through a PC theory lens.

## APPLYING PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT THEORY

Although the concept of the psychological contract has been much debated, for consistency, this research uses the definition outlined in O'Toole and Prince (2015), which draws on (Rousseau, 1989) reconceptualization, and applies it within a HE context. O'Toole and Prince (2015, p. 161) define the PC as, "... the subjective beliefs concerning rights and responsibilities that an individual holds with regard to an exchange agreement between themselves and an organization, which 'solidifies' into a mental model." The PC draws from social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and is described as compliance by both parties to the rules of exchange within the relationship, which then fosters a trusting relationship over time (Rousseau, 2001). Through a series of reciprocal exchanges, interdependency develops in reaching desired outcomes, which in turn generates perceptions of obligations and the expectation that they will receive the equivalent of their own contributions in return (Bordia et al., 2010).

Prior to Rousseau (1989) reconceptualization, social exchanges in the PC were seen as being more values based (e.g., Argyris, 1960). Rousseau refined the construct to a more subjective belief of individuals in a work context regarding mutual obligations of reciprocity which constitute the contract (Rousseau, 1989, 1995, 2001, 2011, 2012). "Obligations" are seen as different to "expectations," as expectations are general beliefs about what a job and organization will be like. As such, PC breaches involving obligations tend to be more serious than unmet expectations (Robinson, 1996).

The PC is held by the individual but can be shaped by the organization (Conway and Briner, 2005). Rousseau (2001) suggests that the PC starts to develop from actual or implied promises made by organizational agents during the recruitment and socialization process. For students, Bordia et al. (2010) suggest information is gathered from formal sources such as websites, university prospectuses and open days and also informally through word of mouth (other students, tutors, alumni, department). This information forms a mental framework of expectations and obligations and is the basis of the PC. They suggest that fulfillment of the PC obligations leads to positive outcomes such as increased motivation to learn, overall satisfaction with the educational process, and feelings of well-being (Bordia et al., 2010). The PC can also be shaped through direct experiences and the perceptions of interactions (Rousseau, 2012). The PC is then adapted throughout the duration of the relationship to take account of the extent to which each party fails or fulfills the perceived promises and obligations (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). When changes occur, the individual goes through a sense-making process to interpret the changes in terms of how they impact on the individual themselves (De Vos et al., 2003).

When students start university they will have existing understandings or "schema" relating to expectations of university. According to Rousseau (1995), this forms the basis of the PC, which will then be adapted and developed through observation and experience. In addition to the more general schema relating to university, students will also have a specific PC concerning the relationship with their PT. A schema is explained as a dynamic mental model of the subjective beliefs concerning the rights and responsibilities of an exchange agreement between themselves and an organization or agent of the organization (O'Toole and Prince, 2015). This forms the basis of the PC and this information is used when trying to find causal explanations for any perceived breach of contract and make attributions as to the causes (Weiner, 1985).

Consistent with schema theory, with any new experiences and information, whether explicit or implied, attempts will then be made to try and fit these into existing networks of knowledge. The result is that more elaborate schemas form or a new schema will be created (Rousseau, 1995, 2001). In some cases this is unsuccessful and this causes an internal conflict. Bordia et al. (2010) suggest that any such experience will add to an already stressful time for students trying to adapt to university life. It is likely that there will be many new experiences which do not fit with students' schemas, particularly as they seem to know little of what to expect of university at the start (Yale, 2017).

If an individual believes that promises in the contract are unfilled and that the other party has failed in their obligations in how they respond, this can result in a breach of the PC (Rousseau, 1989). Although dated, Robinson (1996) was seminal in finding that the reaction to breach depends on the level of trust the individual has in their employer, as this will affect their recognition and interpretation of the perceived breach. Individuals with low trust in the organization will respond less favorably than those with high trust and are more likely to remember the breach,

whereas high trust individuals would be more likely to overlook the breach or give it less importance (Robinson, 1996).

Emotional responses to a perceived breach can be strong and range from anger, betrayal, disappointment, psychological distress, frustration, to moral outrage. Individuals may also change their behavior toward the organization by reducing their performance, acting out in less honorable ways, or may even consider leaving (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). These responses serve to re-balance the PC and reduce internal conflict (De Vos et al., 2003).

Cassar and Briner (2011) outline the five characteristics or components of breach: delay, magnitude, type-form, inequity, and reciprocal imbalance. For example, breach can occur when there is a delay in the provision of perceived obligations (delay) or what is received is less than expected (magnitude) or it differs from what is expected (type-form). Inequity breach is experienced when the provision seems unfair compared to others and reciprocal imbalance when the individual perceives their contribution is greater than the other party. Cassar et al. (2013) believe that responses to breach will be influenced by these characteristics, and in trying to make sense of the behavior of others, causal attributions will be made, which may or may not be reliable (Rousseau and Tijoriwala, 1998).

Attribution theory posits the drive for individuals to try and understand and explain the behavior of others in order to provide a sense of security and predictability (Weiner, 1972). Explanations for the breach behavior are given either an internal or external cause and have been labeled as renegeing, disruption, and incongruence (Rousseau, 1995; Morrison and Robinson, 1997). Renegeing is an external attribution that attributes the blame to the organization and the breach is seen as intentional. Disruption is also an external attribution, but in this case the breach is viewed as beyond the organization's control. The experience of incongruence occurs when the breach is given an internal cause. In this case, divergence of beliefs around promises and obligations in the contract of both parties is identified and the other party is blamed. Behavioral responses will depend on the causal attributions made for the breach (e.g., Cassar et al., 2013) and the extent to which the breach is experienced is dependent on whether or not the organization is held responsible (Anderson and Schalk, 1998).

Rousseau (1995) identified and categorized the different responses to breach and these are referred to widely in the literature as: exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect. These behavioral responses vary from leaving the relationship (exit), to voicing concerns (aggressive or considerate voice), ignoring the breach (loyalty) or acting out negative behaviors (neglect). Irrespective of the cause of the breach, it appears that the recipient will feel less injustice if an explanation is provided (Rousseau and Anton, 1988). Turnley and Feldman (1999) examined the relationship between breach and response to breach and found that responses to breach were affected by situational factors and the availability of alternatives. For example, individuals may not have the option to leave the organization (exit) or there may not be anyone in the organization who would listen to the individual's concerns.

In both cases, responses to breach may then become an aggressive voice response and/or acting out neglect behaviors.

## The Psychological Contract in a Higher Education Context

Koskina (2013) suggests the psychological contract concept generalizes to a wide variety of exchange relationships between individuals, individuals and organizations, as well as between organizations. Using the PC in HE is an under-researched area in education studies and in the wider psychological contract literature. There are fewer studies still on the PC in a HE context from a student perspective (O'Toole and Prince, 2015). Bathmaker (1999) looked at the PC between the institution and academic staff, and Wilson et al. (2009) examined the PC between students and teachers. Bordia et al. (2010) explored the PC of students with their final research project supervisor and found that students felt that supervisors were obligated to provide both practical and emotional support. They highlighted that students are often not fully aware of supervisors' workloads and this can often lead to misunderstanding and breach through unrealistic expectations of availability. Hornby-Atkinson et al. (2008) is the only study so far to have explored first-year students' ideas of the PC and compared these to their Lecturers'. Their findings indicated that students often have unrealistic expectations relating to availability, academic support and support for future careers, and are confused about expectations of independence at university. Lochtie et al. (2018) suggest the centrality of understanding and managing student expectations to student success, particularly during the transition to HE and through certain challenges.

The traditional conceptualization of the PC as a framework for employee-employer relationships was extended by Rousseau (1989) to include agents of the organization as a third party in the relationship. McCulloch (2009) identified the three key actors involved in relationships in HE; the student, academics, and administrators, and highlights potential issues relating to different agendas and different levels of power. Koskina (2013) extended the PC in the HE context to include students' belief that the contract was between three parties, the institution, tutors, and themselves, and explored students' perceptions of the obligations and expectations of them. Koskina (2013) proposed that universities are now sites of exchange in the minds of both students and the university. Students are under obligation to pay fees and carry out certain actions, e.g., attend lectures and submit assignments on time, and in return tutors provide lecture material and mark assignments. Whether explicit or implicit, these promises constitute the contents of the exchange relationship (Conway and Briner, 2005). Koskina (2013) also asserts that the real student PC is formed in the specific student-tutor relationship and that the quality of this provision is part of the exchange.

This research therefore focuses on the student PC in relation to one specific relationship, that which exists between first-year students and their personal tutors. Through semi-structured interviews it explores student perceptions of what is owed and what is given in

return in this relationship and the consequences of a mismatch. The aim of this study therefore is to explore the usefulness of PC theory in a HE context to investigate expectations and experiences of the student-personal tutor relationship from the perspective of first-year undergraduate students.

## METHOD

A case study approach was adopted as it had the potential to provide an in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon and can also be used to understand other similar cases, situations or phenomena (Robson, 2002). Drawing on Thomas' (2011) identification of types, this study is both intrinsic (undertaken in order to understand the case) and instrumental (examining a case in order to gain insight into an issue or a theory). Silverman (2006) suggested that a case study is an instance of a broader phenomenon and though generalisability was not important, the single case study design has enabled the development of naturalistic generalizations, especially in relation to the meaning that participants attached to the PC. This approach therefore offered a more holistic understanding of subjective experiences and provided in-depth, multi-faceted detail into the phenomenon of the experience of personal tutoring. Whilst single case studies are often considered as a poor representation of a population, they are preferred when there is an attempt to modify existing theoretical notions (Stake, 2003). As such, this was the preferred method as the current study attempted to add to existing theoretical understandings of the PC of students in a HE context.

A purposive sample of six self-selected first-year undergraduate students came from the Psychology Department at a post-92 university in the North West of England. The case study university typically has over 70% of the student population coming from at least one underrepresented group and of specific relevance to this study, has 50% mature students. Support for the focus on psychology students comes from Yale (2017) who emphasizes the wide range of career outcomes for these students so they have the potential to offer insights into a diverse range of students. The research university operates a pastoral model of personal tutoring and students are offered both academic and pastoral support through one-to-one meetings. The personal tutor policy stipulates a minimum of four meetings in the first year of university and a further two meetings in years 2 and 3. A review of other similar post-92 universities in the North West suggests this minimum stipulation is fairly typical in those using a pastoral model of personal tutoring.

With permission of the institutional ethics committee and then the Head of Department, students were approached as a group ( $n = 145$  students) at the end of a lecture by the researcher to ask for volunteers to participate in interviews. No incentives were offered. This resulted in eight interested students emailing the researcher for more information and after receiving this, two participants decided not to participate; six female participants then went on to be interviewed. The participants had some homogeneity in terms of their degree programme allowing for

a more detailed examination of the psychological variability in the sample, as this fits with the individualized nature of the PC. Three of the participants were mature students (ages ranged from 38 to 49) who had come to university via the same access course at the case study university. All three mature students had children and two were single mothers. Revealed through the interviews, these participants were known to each other from the access course and after one had initially volunteered for this study, it had snowballed during their prior discussions, to the other two volunteering. The remaining three participants came directly to university from further education (ages ranged from 18 to 19). Two of these came from A-Level study and one from completing a BTEC at college. The rationale for the focus on students at the end of their first year was that the personal tutor is likely to play a greater role in their degree experience and they were also more likely to remember their first encounters with their personal tutor.

Semi-structured interviews were used with an open framework of questions regarding expectations and experiences of the personal tutor (Kvale, 2009). For example, *What kind of support should a personal tutor give?* and *How do your experiences compare?* (see **Appendix** for the full Interview Schedule). This framework was helpful in allowing students to identify particular interactions and events which were of importance to them and allows flexibility in following new lines of enquiry. In terms of the PC, Rousseau (1995) also suggests that interviews with individuals are important to capture the subjective nature of the contract and also the dynamic nature of contractual thinking. A limitation of this study is that it only looked at one side of the relationship but given that the construct is highly individualized this seemed a good place to start.

The interview data, once transcribed, was analyzed in two stages, firstly using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings from this were then subjected to the second stage analysis, using PC theory. The use of PC theory was exploratory in nature as only a few studies have used aspects of PC theory in HE and none so far exploring the student-personal tutor relationship. The aim therefore was to assess its usefulness in this context and to ascertain the relevance of using PC theory as a framework for understanding the students' PC with their personal tutor, leading to suggestions on how the PC can be used in a HE context.

In stage one, the initial IPA explored what the participants' experiences meant to them and how they understood their experiences through exploring their perceptions, beliefs, remembered events, feelings, judgements, evaluations, and behaviors (Larkin et al., 2006). By taking this inductive approach, IPA explored participants' perceptions of their own lived experience to provide a rich, holistic perspective and deep and meaningful insights, which can be drawn on in practice to inform thinking. The process involved exploring, describing, interpreting, and situating the means by which participants make sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The analysis started with a detailed examination of each case before moving on to more general claims. Following initial case familiarization, emergent themes were identified for each case which were then clustered across all cases on the basis of

similarity. Any differences and unique cases were also captured, in keeping with IPA's idiographic focus. The cluster themes were then interrogated against all data to identify and resolve non-confirmatory cases and finally super-ordinate themes were identified as overall representative themes of the data.

Stage two began by identifying potential frameworks through a literature review of the PC and identified two main research areas: contents of the PC and breach of the PC (Conway and Briner, 2005). The findings from the IPA were then interrogated by a systematic exploration and attempted application of each of the PC theories identified. Through this process, PC theory was used as a lens through which to explore their relationship with their personal tutor and to understand students' sense-making and responses to their experiences of their personal tutor. Conway and Briner (2005) highlight that PC theory is essentially about making sense of a phenomenon and suggest that forms of analysis which allow for subjective interpretations (such as IPA) are thus a good fit.

## FINDINGS

The main focus of this section will be the findings from the second stage analysis of the interview data, which used a PC theory lens but will start with a brief overview of the IPA findings to contextualize the latter. A more detailed analysis of the IPA findings has been published elsewhere (Yale, 2019).

The IPA identified super-ordinate themes which related to different phases in the development of the relationship between students and personal tutor; Antecedents and Decision to meet, Developing the Relationship, and Consequences of Interactions. These were identified on the basis of either being representative of the sample or to highlight a uniqueness. How the relationship developed was dependent on the nature and consequences of interactions and these were impacted by a number of factors including, conflict around notions of student independence and personal tutor availability, and the perceived power and authority of the personal tutor. It revealed new insights into the relationship between student and personal tutor and identified areas of confusion and conflict around the nature of the relationship. Students talked in terms of reciprocity and exchange, which was more complex than the initial focus on expectations, suggesting PC theory might prove useful for further analysis, to elicit a greater understanding of the dynamics of the relationship.

In the second stage analysis the findings from the IPA were then scrutinized through a PC theory lens to assess whether it had anything to offer in terms of exploring and understanding these new insights and complexities. The findings revealed two main themes of attributions and consequences of interactions. Sub themes within attributions also included; notions of independence, availability and power. The subthemes within consequences of interaction included social comparison and individual differences. Participant quotes have been chosen for inclusion in this section on the basis that they are either representative of the group and/or that they capture the essence of the phenomenon being explored (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008). A "p" followed by a number denotes the individual participant (e.g., p1 is participant number 1).

## Attributions

There are many examples throughout the interviews where students experienced conflict in trying to make sense of their experiences of their personal tutor and attempt to rebalance their PC and resolve any conflicts and discrepancies through different attributions (Bordia et al., 2010). These are given either an external attribution or an internal attribution (Weiner, 1985). This sense making process was found to be influenced in favor of the personal tutor by feelings of trust in their personal tutor (Robinson, 1996). For others, this attribution process resulted in a perceived breach of contract by their personal tutor which had consequences for the ongoing relationship and beyond. The main sources of conflict for students included notions of independence, with confusion around the nature of personal tutor support and availability, which were complicated with perceptions of the personal tutor power and authority. These experiences will be explored through the application of PC theory.

## Notions of Independence

All students had implicit notions of independence and this seems to have originated from previous educational experiences and rhetoric around university. How this translated to university life was a source of conflict for all students. Most felt that they were expected to be completely independent from the start. When the reality differed due to unfamiliar HE practices (such as academic referencing expectations) and help was needed to negotiate these new demands, students experienced uncertainty and strong negative emotions. According to Conway and Briner (2005) this discrepancy can be categorized as a breach in the type/form of support provided and also differed in terms of the magnitude of support, so that less support was given than the students expected. For students finding themselves in a position of having to ask for help, this has a number of consequences depending on the causal attribution made. For some this is attributed at the organizational level, referred to as renegeing (Cassar et al., 2013) and is seen as an intentional failure to provide the appropriate level of teaching and learning experiences,

"...we were kind of covering things that didn't really make any sense and didn't give any real reason as to why we would do it, it just seemed madness." (p6)

Three of the students made an internal attribution, blaming the personal tutor for intentionally withholding the means to become independent (referred to as incongruence by Cassar et al., 2013). For example,

"...a little bit of bone of contention this really cos we did have stuff to do, and then a couple of weeks later we were told how to do it... which seemed a little bit of a mickey take really, it was as if you were kind of being... I think the impression of a lot of people was that you were kind of being set up to fail." (p6)

This offers supports for Robinson's (1996) assertion that the positioning of blame to internal causes is more likely when there is a lack of trust, as none of these three students had developed a positive relationship with their personal tutors.

## Availability

Adding to the conflict around independence is confusion around the availability of the personal tutor which further complicates students negotiating support. The lack of availability of a personal tutor is interpreted in different ways and given negative or positive attributions, and students either internalized or externalized the reason (Rousseau, 1995; Morrison and Robinson, 1997). The source of the attributions made when trying to resolve the conflict differs depending on individual student differences and whether they feel they have developed a relationship with their personal tutor. Where trust existed in the relationship, a lack of availability, similar to the independence theme, is seen as renegeing and externalized to blame the institution. This is also similar to Robinson (1996) in that responses to breach are influenced by the presence of trust in a relationship. Using (Rousseau, 1995) categorization of breach responses, this can be described as a considerate voice response, where the behavior is explained favorably. It could also fit with a loyalty response where no further action is taken and the student remains loyal, thereby restoring and maintaining the relationship. Any lack of availability was attributed to the personal tutor being too busy with research and other students. This was either viewed positively as the personal tutor being well-rounded, caring and knowledgeable, or negatively, as a personal tutor who does not care and prioritizes their own research over students. Students also blamed the institution directly for this lack of availability, as they felt that insufficient time was given for the personal tutor role. This lack of resourcing was further interpreted as the institution not valuing student support (and therefore students).

"It's almost better if they're conducting research cause it makes them, I think it makes them a better tutor or... but then maybe I guess they'd be more available if they didn't have research or anything to conduct."(p1)

This quote demonstrates P1's efforts to make sense of her personal tutor's lack of availability, and the tension and conflict between the desire not to blame her personal tutor as they have a good relationship, and wanting her personal tutor to be more available.

The lack of personal tutor availability may also be perceived as an individual lack of interest and unwillingness by the personal tutor to help. This is explained as either a failing in the personal tutor or in the student themselves. When students perceived it as the personal tutor's fault, they adopted an exit response (Rousseau, 1995). Rather than leave the organization, as a disgruntled employee might, they exited the relationship and looked elsewhere for support, deciding not to engage further in the relationship with the personal tutor. This is consistent with (Turnley and Feldman, 1999) assertion that response to breach depends on situational factors and whether an alternative is available. For students who exit the relationship they had already identified other sources of potential support, such as another tutor. This is similar to Bordia et al. (2010) who suggest that not understanding a tutor's workload or the specific role expectations can often lead to an unrealistic PC so that breach becomes likely.

The following quote shows P5's struggle to try and resolve the conflict she feels around her personal tutor's lack of availability,

"... they could be teaching, or like, you know doing research or something. I wouldn't expect to just knock on, I mean I know lunch breaks and everything, but they have to have their own space, like I know they are a personal tutor but I respect that they have their own things to teach, they've got their own research to do...but it's just difficult when you need something to know what to do." (p5)

This suggests a lack of clarity of expectations around her personal tutor's availability when needed, is a source of confusion. P5 tries to make sense of this with positive attributions in an attempt to maintain the relationship's equilibrium and avoid a breach of contract.

## Power

An unseen yet strong influence on the attributions students make comes from the perception of power. There is an assumption and an acceptance from all students that personal tutors are in a position of authority and should be respected. This creates an imbalance and an inequity in the relationship where the personal tutor holds all of the power. There is a pronounced difference here between mature students and younger students in how they resolve this. Mature students seem aware of the power imbalance but are less affected, as age and experience seem to equalize it somewhat. Two of the three younger students adopted a teacher-pupil discourse, which served to reinforce the inequality and position themselves as the child with the tutor in a position of authority over them. When there is a perceived injustice in the relationship, they act out in child-like ways and talk of being "allowed" to ask questions,

"...nobody's ever complained about, well that sounds rude saying complained, but nobody's ever said anything... and I think someone said that they are allowed to go through your like essay plans with you." (p1)

In trying to resolve this conflict and make sense of this inequity, students wanted explicit evidence of equity in the form of personal tutors being available every week for them in the form of office hours, whether they are needed or not. Another form of acting out behavior came from subverting the personal tutor process. Students still attended the meetings if they felt they had to but chose not to engage or share any problems (exit/neglect response) (Rousseau, 1995) and instead sought support from another tutor.

"I only see her for essential stuff, I don't have the relationship with her, I'd rather go to ...as I feel a lot more comfortable with them, so I'd go to them."(p2)

This supports (Bordia et al., 2010) assertion that experiencing a breach can lead to a reduction in motivation and effort. They will also go to other tutors for support in a form of protest or to avoid future interactions with the personal tutor. Differences in social backgrounds may also contribute to the perceived inequity due to the absence of common frames of reference (Rousseau,

2001). Moreover, power differences affect willingness to share information regarding personal preferences which may act as a barrier to the relationship developing (Rousseau, 2003).

## Responses and Consequences of Interactions

Responses, consequences of experiences and perceptions of breach are influenced by social comparisons students make with other students, and individual differences between students (i.e., age, locus of control) and these will form subheadings in this section.

The range of emotions experienced by students in response to perceived breach varied in intensity. Impact ranged from feeling rejected and not feeling cared for, to resentment at having to ask for help; frustration at not knowing whether to ask for help, to anger and feeling of injustice when not getting the help when it was needed. These emotions serve to rebalance the contract (De Vos et al., 2003). What seems to be the case is that the stronger the negative emotion, the more likely a negative behavioral response (exit, aggressive voice, neglect), which is consistent with Cassar et al. (2013).

"I ended up asking \* and \* ended up helping me with it but first off, erm I ask (personal tutor) she was no help what so ever, she er emailed me back... she was like, 'I just don't have time to help you, I just don't have time', oh 'I'm not meeting up with people anymore', when I knew she was helping my friends!"(p3)

Responses to breach are also stronger when given an internal attribution and are viewed as the personal tutor's fault (as per the quote above), categorized as incongruence (Robinson and Morrison, 2000). One student (p5) seemed to experience a sense of moral outrage at the lack of apparent care through a lack of support and availability. This led her to question whether the degree was worth it and consider withdrawing. This is consistent with Koskina (2013) who found an interdependency between the three parties in the relationship, the student, personal tutor and the institution. Only when there is a breach of contract with the personal tutor is the PC with the institution called to mind and questioned.

### Social Comparison

Responses to breach are influenced by social comparisons and students' individual differences. A strong source of information which students use to interpret their own personal tutor experiences is other students' experiences and comparing these to their own. This process of social comparison can result in either dissatisfaction and feelings of injustice at the inequity of support, or a strengthening of the relationship with their personal tutor and feelings of satisfaction. The following quote from P3 exemplifies this process of social comparison, which in this case, results in her feeling more satisfied with her personal tutor and a strengthening of the relationship bond.

"Erm, I know some of my friends have come out of their initial tutor meeting and the (personal tutor) has basically said, if you've got a problem, go to counseling if you've got an academic problem, go to the person that is leading the module, any

other reason, don't come to me. Haha, like you know... So in comparison, I've had quite a receptive person." (p3)

The contents of the PC are the promises made by the organization (Rousseau, 1995) and these need to be fair and fulfilled in an ongoing way for both parties to feel satisfied with the relationship. Comparing experiences with others is one way for students to ascertain whether their deal is fair.

"I thought personal tutor meetings would be five ten minutes but each time for me it's been a good half hour proper half an hour."(p4)

"I know some people I've spoken to and they seem to, have quite long conv- and you know they're with their tutor for a while and I'm like five, ten minutes at most." (p1)

These quotes suggest that through social comparison of experiences of their personal tutor with other students, P4 is likely to feel more satisfied with her personal tutor, and P1 to be left with feelings of dissatisfaction with hers. P1, however, is also likely to feel a sense of injustice which could serve to undermine her relationship with her personal tutor and together with feelings of dissatisfaction, may result in a tendency to make more negative attributions of her personal tutor in the future.

### Individual Differences

Age was also a factor which affected interpretations and response to breach and tends to moderate emotional responses in older students (Ng and Feldman, 2009). This is explained by Löckenhoff and Carstensen (2004) that older people are able to regulate their emotions better than younger people. Mature students seemed more at ease with asking for help as they did not see this as a lack of independence. In the following quote P6 describes feeling on the same level as tutors due to her age, which may indicate a weaker effect in terms of the power differential.

"I don't know whether it's cos I'm older, I don't see you all as teachers kind of thing, and I respect you all I do, but I kind of feel like I'm on the same level in the sense that I can speak." (p6)

There are exceptions to this, however; when a mature student in the current study demonstrated an internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966) and low self-confidence, she internalized the need for help as a weakness in her,

"I don't like to bother people, unless I really, really need to, erm. And I have a fear that they will think I'm stupid."(p5)

It is likely, therefore, that for this student the effect will be somewhat reduced as she is less likely to see the organization as failing and is therefore less likely to perceive a breach. This is an example of the complex and confounding factors at play in determining an individual response to a breach event, e.g., implicit and explicit notions of independence and age, confounded by individual differences, such as the student's locus of control. As highlighted, earlier research supports that with age individuals have more tolerance for minor breaches due to a more flexible PC and are less likely to display exit or neglect behaviors (Ng and Feldman, 2009).

## DISCUSSION

### Key Findings

The present study aimed to understand the student-personal tutor relationship through a PC theory lens. The use of PC theory was exploratory in nature as only a few studies have used aspects of PC theory in HE and is novel in its application of PC theory to the student-personal tutor relationship. The aim therefore was to assess its usefulness in this context and to this specific relationship. The findings from this study provide strong support for the utility of the PC in a HE context; it also has much to offer in terms of understanding students' attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, this study offers insights into perceptions of the student PC and was able to uncover some of the more implicit aspects of the contract. It also illuminated some of the complexities of the attribution process and the ways in which students reason and attribute blame. Areas of potential conflict and breach were around notions of independence, personal tutor availability, with attributions influenced by perceptions of personal tutor power and social comparisons made with other students' experiences. Student interactions with their personal tutors were found to influence (both negatively and positively) shape, maintain and negotiate their relationships with both their personal tutor and the institution. The age and locus of control of the students was found to strongly influence the attribution process with older students being more resistant to the effects of breach.

An unexpected finding of this study is that all of the students have experienced breaches in their PC with their personal tutor, whether an actual breach or a perceived incongruence. The consequences of either can result in a variety of negative emotions, which in turn influence perceptions of the overall experience and satisfaction with the relationship. In all cases, students found different ways to attempt to rebalance their PCs with their personal tutors with more success and satisfaction experienced by students whose personal tutor had clearly articulated the role expectations early in the relationship. This meant that students could draw on this and experience less stress and uncertainty around the reasons for the breach. Those students with a more balanced and congruent PC were more able to adjust to any discrepancies and less likely to experience strong negative emotions. This effect was also stronger for mature students. Most importantly, having a well-developed relationship with the personal tutor was found to moderate any effects of breach, whether this related to the personal tutor relationship or wider experiences of the degree.

In relation to mature students, the findings indicate they are more resistant to the effects of breach and have a more flexible PCs than younger students. This may be due to mature students having more to cope with in everyday life than younger students, such as child care and financial stressors, which results in more determination to succeed as learners (Busher and James, 2019) and a stronger sense of resilience (Reay et al., 2009). Mature students were also found to be more at ease with asking for help and seemed less affected by the power imbalance between themselves and their personal tutor than younger students. It may be that a confidence gained from more life experiences

meant they did not see asking for help as a lack of independence or as reflective of any personal deficits, in the same way as younger students did (Rousseau, 2001). The exception to this was the mature student with an internal locus of control who equated the need for help with her being "stupid." This highlights the necessity for individual differences to also be considered in models of support, thereby avoiding any assumptions of mature students. Certainly, the mature students in this study seemed to provide more complex reasoning in response to minor breaches compared to younger students, suggesting that the PCs of mature students should be handled differently.

The findings suggest that if the personal tutor role expectations were made explicit in the first meeting with the personal tutor, the student will persist with the relationship through evidence to the contrary and persevere through inconsistencies in support provision. When a personal tutor does not respond to requests to help within a given timescale, for example, the student will persist and attribute the lack of response was an error and as unintentional. In Situations where both parties have a shared understanding regarding their relational obligations, benefits accrue to both parties (Dabos and Rousseau, 2013). Reactions to these breaches in contract are more extreme and more emotional than if there was no relationship, leading some students to question the worth of the degree and consider leaving university. Having to deal with these negative emotions can diminish student well-being (Bordia et al., 2010). This suggests therefore that such a PC breach incident requires intervention, as it is likely to influence other salient organizational outcomes such as the student experience and satisfaction (e.g., the National Student Satisfaction survey) (Cassar et al., 2013).

The findings offer further support for Bordia et al. (2010) who state the potential for a greater power imbalance in an educational context compared to a work environment, suggesting that students may be more vulnerable to negative consequences of breach because of this. One way to counter this effect is by a student developing a more relational PC with an agent of the organization, which can foster feelings of loyalty and security (Montes and Irving, 2008). Relational aspects include the development of trust and respect between student and personal tutor. This would in turn contribute to a stronger commitment to the organization (Rousseau, 2011) and greater well-being and satisfaction with the educational experience (Bordia et al., 2010) derived from a more fulfilling learning experience (Wade-Benzoni et al., 2006).

The kind of relationship may also moderate the relationship between breach (and component forms of breach) and attributions which may in turn influence the kind of elicited behavioral reactions. The distinction of stages in the PC development made by Herriot and Pemberton (1997) might provide a useful framework for approaching the personal tutor relationship through the mechanism of one-to-one meetings. First comes the *informing* stage where each party states their needs and what they offer in return, followed by *negotiation* and agreement of these, and then *monitoring* to check if each are happy with the other's contribution and then *renegotiation* of the contract to ensure both are satisfied on an ongoing basis. It is

likely that this would lead to more a more explicit contract with a closer match in expectations. As Herriot and Pemberton argue, this is also likely to lead to a more trusting relationship and the avoidance of breach. They refer to these stages as “psychological contracting” which infers more of a process and seems to provide a better fit and more flexibility with students’ changing and ongoing needs. This is an area for future research to consider using methods capable of capturing the ongoing and dynamic nature of the contract, such as a daily diary (Conway and Briner, 2005).

This study found many instances where the PC framework was useful for exploring and explaining students’ expectations and experiences of personal tutoring and provided some interesting insights into the relationship from the student perspective. As with previous studies which have identified that agents of the organization play a key role in the PC (e.g., Guest and Conway, 2002), this study found that the personal tutor plays a vital role in the making and shaping of the PC through communication of what is expected and negotiating terms of the agreement between the personal tutor and student. Importantly, there is scope for HEIs to utilize PC theory more broadly in exploring the student PC with the institution in terms of understanding student expectations but also in the prevention of breach occurrences.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This research has focused on student perceptions of the PC to provide insights into the student body. A key limitation of this is that it has only considered one side of the exchange relationship, however. The researcher acknowledges that the PC of the student with their personal tutor cannot be fully understood without considering the other party in the relationship, the personal tutor. Future studies should therefore aim to capture the personal tutor side of the contract to identify discrepancies with what students perceive to be the “deal” and to explore how the contract develops through reciprocal exchanges. In relation to the sample, half of the participants were mature students and whilst this is broadly representative of the case study university, it may not be representative of other HEIs. Therefore, any interpretation or application of these findings should be mindful of this. As a small sample was used for this study and given that the PC construct is highly individualized, a wider sample of interviews may identify some consistent features of the contract which could be used by personal tutors to enhance their practice and build positive relationships with students. As the interview questions were originally designed for the IPA in a previous study (Yale, 2019) and the introduction of the PC only came afterwards, *post-hoc* rationalization was undertaken to assess the relevance of the PC. Future studies should therefore include questions which build on the findings of this study (e.g., the theme of independence) to find out more about specific aspects of the PC construct (e.g., breach) in the student-personal tutor relationship. As this research relied on students’ retrospective recall of their experiences, future research might consider using diary methods to capture the dynamic nature of contractual thinking. The findings are useful for those working within the UK but offer insights that could be transferred to other international contexts

in terms of understanding the psychological contracts of their students with the personal tutor and the institution.

Given the potential for personal tutors to influence the PC the student holds with the institution, future research should focus on how the developing relationship contributes to shaping the PC. It would be interesting to further explore the salient events and the attributional mechanisms which underlie and lead to breach and the different factors which can influence responses to breach in students’ PCs. As the current study also highlights the impact of subjective perceptions and individual differences impacting on interpretations of events, future studies could therefore consider the use of qualitative measures to assess the role and relevance of individual factors (e.g., locus of control and personality). It is also important to study the quality of the relationship further as Luchak (2003) suggests that reactions to perceived breaches are a function of the relationship.

## Recommendations for Institutions

The findings support recommendations for an extended transition phase and structured curriculum contact with the personal tutor. The expectations of the personal tutor and of the degree could thus stand as a firm foundation for the relationship and the student experience. From this, further opportunities for discussion and negotiation of the PC and any perceived breaches should also be provided so that the relationship can be built on and the consequences of breach avoided. This would also help students through the uncertainties of the transition to university and go some way toward guiding expectations of independence. The importance and value of the personal tutor relationship could also be clearly highlighted during this time so that the role would be seen as meaningful to them and given value. Changing the discourse around student support to one of collaboration, actioned through a clear and consistent framework, would reduce the negative emotions associated with uncertainties around specific areas such as those identified in this study of independence, availability, power imbalance, and the need for student support.

As Rousseau (1995) acknowledges, the ability to compete effectively may depend on contracts consistent with the expectations of customers and the flexibility demanded by both the technological change and the marketplace (i.e., the out-of-date literature does not reflect the context). Having a relationship in which obligations are mutually understood and fulfilled means students are more likely to experience overall satisfaction with the learning experience and a balanced PC. This has never been more important than in the current HE context where competition between universities is high. It is important to build on these findings to better reflect the current UK HE context and elicit more insights into the current student body. It is not simply the case that institutions should always meet and satisfy student expectations, as this study highlights that often these are idiosyncratic and unrealistic. It is not the case that one simple unilateral view of students will suffice due to multiple subjective realities and interpretations. Identifying and negotiating the PCs of individuals becomes a fundamental part of a productive relationship. Understanding the sense-making process around PC breach will help to inform understanding of future events, prevention and responses to breach (Conway and Briner, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

The research supports the PC as a useful lens for examining perceptions of HE relationships between students and their personal tutor. Similar to O'Toole and Prince (2015), this study's findings question the perception of students as passive consumers of education and instead sees them as having active and social relationships. As the findings revealed, students are unclear what independence means and how to negotiate this and this can lead to a breach in PC arising from the conflict between needing support and believing that they should not need it. This points to a misunderstanding gap that is all too easy to fill with negative constructions of student as consumers, believing they are not prepared to work and want everything to be given to them. HEIs can therefore utilize the PC to understand more about students' expectations, attitudes and behaviors which should mean a move toward more positive constructions of students.

Crucial to a HEI's success, the research highlighted the centrality of preventing breach through its identification of some of the consequences of breach, not least of all the potential damage to the institution's reputation and an increase in student withdrawal. This research suggests that explicit articulation of expectations from the first meeting and ongoing negotiations would foster more positive relationships with students and help to mediate (and hopefully prevent) some of the effects of breach. Supported by this research and wider PC research (e.g., Conway and Briner, 2005) the application of PC theory is not limited to a

UK HE student-personal tutor relationship and could potentially be applied to any relationship.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets generated for this study are available on request to the corresponding author.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Edge Hill University Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Some of the content of this manuscript may overlap with the author's thesis but has not been published elsewhere and can be accessed online, in line with the author's university policy. Reference to the thesis is included in the References List.

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## APPENDIX INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### *Before coming to university*

1. What did you do before you came to University?
2. Can you tell me about any previous experiences of a personal tutor before you came to university?
3. Before coming to university -What did you expect a personal tutor to be like?
4. Did you have information regarding Personal Tutors before you came to university?

### *At University*

1. What have been your experiences of personal tutoring so far?
2. How often do you meet with your personal tutor? -how many meetings?
3. Why do you meet with your personal tutor?
4. Would you go and see your personal tutor outside a planned meeting if you needed something?-reasons?-method of asking?
5. What do you think a personal tutor is for?
6. What kind of support should a personal tutor give?- personal issues or academic?
7. How do your experiences compare?
8. What kind of things do you talk about in the meetings?

9. Do you think a personal tutor is needed?
10. Is your personal tutor approachable?
11. Do you think they are available as much as they should be?-would like to be?
12. Can anyone be a personal tutor?
13. Can you give me an example of a positive experience you have had with your personal tutor?
14. Can you give me an example of a negative experience you have had with your personal tutor?
15. Overall what have your experiences with your personal tutor been like?
16. In an ideal world what would you like from a personal tutor?-what could be improved? what would you change?
17. Is there anything you feel you would like more support with?
18. Do you get support from anywhere else?-support services/ other tutors/ other students/ family
19. What other support are you are aware of at the university?- have you accessed support?-what was your experience?
20. If you had a problem who would you go to?
21. What do you think your role in the personal tutor relationship is?
22. Do you think it is important to have a relationship with a personal tutor?-please explain
23. Is there anything else you would like to add?