

# The Effects of Psychological Contract Breach on Employee Work Behaviors in the Airline Industry: Employee Cynicism as Mediator

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## Abstract

*To examine how the relationships among employees' perceptions of psychological contract breach, cynicism and individual employee behavior. Data from a survey of 377 matched data from airline gourd staffs and their supervisors of flag-carrier in Taiwan, this study conducting regression to test the associations hypothesized in the research model. The results showed that employees' cynicism partially mediated between psychological contract breach and organizational citizenship behavior, exit intention. To point out the airline staffs' cynicism toward organization as an important mechanism, this plays a mediator role in the psychological contract breach and employee work behaviors. Implications for theory and practice are discussed, and future research directions also offered.*

**Keywords:** Psychological Contract breach, Cynicism, Organizational Citizenship Behaviors, Intention to Exit, Airline Industry

## 1. Introduction

Many researches pointed out that psychological contract breaches will lead to employee cynicism (Andersson, 1996; Dean et al., 1998; Johnson & O`Leary-Kelly, 2003) and cynicism is prevalent among organizations. However, the academic discussion on cynicism still belongs to an emerging issue. Andersson (1996) explored the factor for employee cynicism formation with psychological contract breaches as the theoretical framework. When employees think that the organizations fail to fulfill their duties, they may tend to perceive that psychological contract is breached, which not only does harm to relationship between employers and employees, but also further leads to employees' disillusionment and mistrust towards their organizations and causes employees' negative attitudes and behaviors towards the organizations, including low job satisfaction, decreased organizational citizenship behaviors, as well as reduced work performance, etc. (Robison & Rousseau, 1994; Robison & Morrison, 1995; Turnley & Feldman, 2000). Therefore, employees' psychological contracts may play important roles, and any promises made by their organizations may become employees' psychological contract; any failure to deliver their promises by the organizations may lead to the collapse of employees' psychological contract and cause negative impact on their employees' commitment, trust, fairness and other cognitions. With the rapid spread of cynicism, employees' cynicism is viewed as an important attitude that influences workplace and should be a concern among researchers and practitioners

There are many factors leading to employee cynicism in modern society. When organizations are indulged in pursuits of economic success and are more emphasized on maximized efficiency and effectiveness, there will be an increasing lack of trust and respect. They attach more importance to transactional contract rather than relational contract, and such transactional contract will lead to cynicism (Andersson, 1996). Cynical employees hold the view that the organizations lack integrity and fairness and decisions made by their organizations are not imbued with integrity, having negative emotions towards the organizations (Davis & Gardner, 2004). Especially when employees discover ubiquitous greed, nearsightedness, highly competition and unethical leadership behaviors in the organizations, cynicism will spread in the workplace (Rogers, 1995). Therefore, the impact of the spread of cynicism on business should not be overlooked; rather, it needs to be understood through researches.

## 2. Theory and Hypothesis

### 2.1. Psychological contract breaches

Psychological contract are becoming increasingly important in describing the relationship between employees and the organizations as well as employees performance, while psychological contract is built on the basis of trust and represents that employees believe that the organizations can fulfill their obligations and commitments.

Psychological contract is a reflection of individual expectations of the obligations between employees and organizations (Rousseau, 1995), containing both aspects of individuals and organizations. Psychological contract means that there is an exchange relationship between organizations and employees and needs to consider the expectations and obligations of both parties (Schein, 1980), while psychological contract not only has the nature of expectation, but also contains commitment and reciprocity towards obligations. To break the expectations will generate disappointment, while to break the obligation will induce anger, thus making people re-evaluate the relationship between the individuals and the organizations.

Mostly, the psychological contract is informal and implicit, rather than open and public. Therefore, it is essentially subjective. For example, awards for long-term service rarely become a part of a formal contract, but people have expectations on this. So most scholars agree that psychological contract is the faith possessed only by employees.

Psychological contract breaches refer to employees' perceptions towards organizations' failure to the delivery of the obligations in psychological contract (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Turnley & Feldman, 2000). Rousseau (1989) deemed that when one party of the organizations and employees can't fulfill their obligations, psychological contract will be breached. Although both employers and employees will perceive psychological contract breach, this study discusses the definition of psychological contract breach as most scholars have proposed, that is, psychological contract breach is employees' unilaterally perception that organizations are unable to fulfill their obligations. Such perception is individual and subjective, which reflects employees' psychological calculation towards their fulfilled commitments. In other words, psychological contract breach is determined subjectively rather than factually.

## **2.2. Cynicism**

Cynical employees doubt the truth the management team has told them and even that the management team is making use of them when having the opportunity, and therefore their trust in business is not as good as before. In addition, leadership, power distribution, organizational changes, or procedure fairness may result in employees' cynical attitudes towards the organizations (Bommer, et al., 2004). Especially when employees discover presence of ubiquitous greed, nearsightedness, highly competition and unethical leadership behaviors in the organizations, cynicism will spread in the workplace (Rogers, 1995).

Dean, et al. (1998) pointed out that the previous research on cynicism was divided into the following aspects: personality approaches, social/institutional focus, occupational cynicism focus, and organizational change focus. They also thought that the organizational cynicism represented the negative attitudes towards organizations and defined it as follows: (a). Cynicism is a state, different from personality traits, so it will change along with experience and time. (b). It is not limited to certain vocations like the police, rather it exists among the various professions or organizations. (c). Based on tripartite attitude theory, cynicism is not just about a belief, but also contains effect and behaviors.

Consequently, the definition of cynicism in this study refers to the views of Dean et al. (1998), namely it includes three aspects of cynicism: (a). Beliefs - the organizations lack integrity. (b). Affect - the negative affect towards the organizations. (c). Behavioral tendencies - behavioral tendencies caused by the above beliefs and affect. However, the potential target of employees' cynicism may be business organizations, or business management classes or other subjects within the company (Andersson, 1996; Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly 2003).

## **2.3. Psychological contract breaches and cynicism**

Many studies have pointed out that employees' cynicism is caused by breaches psychological contracts (Andersson, 1996; Dean, et al., 1998; Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003). Andersson (1996) explored the factor attributed to employee cynicism formation with psychological contract breaches as the theoretical framework. When employees think that the organizations fail to fulfill their duties, they may perceive that psychological contract is breached, which not only does harm to relationship between employers and employees, but also further leads to employees' disillusionment and mistrust towards the organizations and causes employees' negative attitudes and behavior towards the organizations.

The effect of psychological contract breach is more far-reaching than the contractual parties concerned have expected, and individuals within and outside organizations also suffer. Employees begin to show contempt, frustration, disappointment and other negative emotions (Dean et al., 1998) towards anything in the organizations, including directors, or the workplace, so the breach of contract has a considerable impact on both individuals and organizations. Psychological contract breach will generate lower trust and job satisfaction, and those who experience breach are more inclined to quit their jobs (Robison & Rousseau, 1994; Robison & Morrison, 1995). Based on the above literature, this study proposes that employees' perception that the psychological contract is breached will have an impact on the organizational cynical attitudes. Hypothesis 1 is put forward accordingly.

Hypothesis 1: the degree of employees' perception of breaches of psychological contracts is positively related to organizational cynicism.

## **2.4. Employee Work Behaviors**

Shore & Tetrick (1994) suggested that psychological contract had three functions: (a) it could reduce insecurity concerns between employees and organizations; (b) it can make employees feel his influence in the organizations, namely, employees understand their roles expected by the organizations; (c) it can shape employee behaviors. Since employees will weigh their responsibilities and obligations towards the organizations and make adjustments on their behaviors in response to the difference between their responsibilities and obligations expected by their organizations, as the basis of output standard. Thus, employees' perception of breaches of psychological contracts will also have an impact on employee behaviors. The research will discuss this from the perspective of organizational citizenship behaviors and exit intentions respectively.

### **2.4.1. Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB)**

The OCB is considered to be employees' unconditional and voluntary performance of extra-role behaviors without being rewarded with formal organizational incentives (Organ, 1988; Konovsky & Pugh, 1994); when employees make organizational citizenship behaviors, they can effectively promote the achievement of organizational goals (Organ, 1988). In conclusion, organizational citizenship behavior defined in this study is based on the employees' performance proposed by William & Anderson (1991) which is helpful for others or organization beyond their specified duties, including toward fellow employees (OCBI) and directed towards the organization (OCBO).

### **2.4.2. Intentions to exit**

When psychological contracts between employees and organizations maintain balanced, employees will finish work as expected and show expected behaviors. But once the balance is destroyed, for example, the condition of the organization becomes unsatisfactory or psychological contract is destroyed due to some reasons, employees will seek some ways to restore a balanced state; under this circumstance, behaviors such as quitting jobs, proposing recommendations, keeping loyal and idling (Farrell, 1983) come to be seen. Psychological contract breaches will generate lower trust and job satisfaction, and those who experience breaches are more likely to have turnovers (Robison & Rousseau, 1994; Robison & Morrison, 1995).

## **2.5. Psychological contract breaches, cynicism and employee work behaviors**

### **2.5.1. Psychological contract breaches and employee work behaviors**

Viewing from the theory of social exchanges, people tend to seek a fair and balanced exchange relationship with organizations. Therefore, for employees, when psychological contract is breached and this exchange relationship becomes unbalanced, they will take actions to seek a rebalance between the two parties, such as decreased commitment, contributions or performances, etc.

It has been shown in many empirical researches that psychological contract breach influences employees' attitude and behavior. For instance, Robison & Rousseau (1994) conducted a survey on those who have MBA degrees and found that 54.8% of the respondents once encountered psychological contract breaches. Meanwhile, psychological contract breach showed a negative correlation with employees' satisfaction, trust and retaining intentions towards organizations and a positive correlation with turnover rate in the organizations (Robison & Rousseau, 1994; Robison & Morrison, 1995). In addition, the impact of psychological contract breach on the negative behaviors of employees also includes lowered employees contribution to the organizations or degraded employment relationship (Robison & Rousseau, 1994); Robison & Morrison (1995) further pointed out that psychological contract breach will affect extra-role behaviors and organizational citizenship behaviors.

That is to say, when employees experience psychological contract breaches, they will not trust employers or do not want to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors.

Turnley & Feldman (2000), with 804 U.S. management staffs as samples, explored the impact of psychological contract breaches on employee behaviors. It was found that psychological contract breach would indeed affect employees' turnover intentions, the neglect of duties within the role, as well as reduced organizational civil behaviors. Gupta & Jenkins (1991) once pointed out that organizational withdrawal behavior is the voluntary reaction by individuals to increase the physical or psychological distances with the organizations when they perceive the situation of the organizations is unsatisfactory. As for the measurement, therefore, psychological contract breach indeed has a considerable impact on individuals and organizations. Based on the above theoretical and empirical researches, this research suggests that psychological contract breach will have a negative impact on employees' behaviors, including reducing beneficial behaviors towards the OCB and increasing exit intentions. Accordingly, hypothesis 2 and 3 are proposed as follows:

Hypothesis 2: the higher the degree of employees' perceiving psychological contract breach, the smaller the possibility of showing OCB by employees.

Hypothesis 3: the higher the degree of employees' perception of psychological contract breach, the bigger the possibility of employees' exit intention.

### **2.5.2. Cynicism and employee work behaviors**

Many studies have shown that cynicism of employees will be reflected in some important behavioral results (Bommer, et al., 2004). Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly (2003) once took 103 bank employees as sample and verified that the destructions of different social exchange relationships may have different impacts. Research shows that employees' perception of psychological contract breach has a direct impact on employees' behaviors (such as job performance, OCB and absenteeism) and has an indirect effect on work attitude (such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction); and employees have a mediated effect on organizational cynicism and between psychological contract breach and work attitude. To sum up, since cynical employees do not trust or respect the organizations, behaviors that are harmful and not beneficial for the organization will be produced when they perceive that the organization fails to fulfill its commitments. Therefore, we propose hypotheses 4 and 5 as follows:

Hypothesis 4: organizational cynicism of employees has a mediated effect on psychological contract breach and OCB.

Hypothesis 5: organizational cynicism of employees has a mediated effect on psychological contract breach and exit intention.

## **3. Research Method**

### **3.1. Measures**

This research conducted an empirical study with airline industry as subjects on the basis of views of psychological contract breach and cynicism to understand the cynical attitude by employees towards the organization when they perceived psychological contract breach and to understand their performance on the OCB and exit. And quantitative data was collected through structural questionnaire. According to the proposal of Podsakoff et al. (2003), when the data of outcome variables and its antecedents are derived from the same objects, we should manage to minimize the possible common method variances. Therefore, this research adopted paired questionnaire, the contents of which include into two parts; the first part is written by employees themselves, including the perceived psychological contract breaches, cynicism, exit intentions and personal background information; and the second part written by their supervisors, including employees' OCB and supervisors' personal background information.

#### **3.1.1. Psychological contract breach**

As for psychological contract breaches, this research adopts a comprehensive view of Rousseau (1990), Robinson & Morrison (1995), Turnley & Feldman (2000) to understand the degree of individual employees' perception of organizational delivery on commitments.

The scale altogether contains 16 questions. Question 1 to 15 respectively inquire employees about the degree of organizational delivery on commitments in economic and non-economic aspects, such as wages, training, promotion, career development, welfare, health care, job challenges, work protection, etc. The so-called commitments include formal, informal, verbal or implied commitments; organizations include top executives, human resource department, department heads, and supervisors and so on. The questions are “My organization promised to raise my salary” and “My organization promised to my promotion”; question 16 is a comprehensive view, namely, “What do you think the degree of fulfill by your organization of your commitments as a whole?” The assessment scores with Likert 5 point dimension from 1 “fully achieved” to 5 “completely not achieved”. The higher the score, the higher the degree of employees’ perception of the organizational breaches of psychological contract.

### **3.1.2. Cynicism**

Based on the argument of Dean, et al. (1998), the research argues that cynicism has three dimensions: beliefs, affect and behavioral tendencies. And the scale is revised from the scale of Mirvis & Kanter (1991) with a total of 9 questions, such as “I always doubt what the company management have said”, “I think the company pays more attention to profits than to employees”, and so on. The questionnaire scores from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”. The higher score shows higher organizational cynicism.

### **3.1.3. OCB (organizational citizenship behavior)**

This scale mainly refers to the extra-role behaviors in the scale of organizational citizenship behavior by William & Anderson (1991), meaning that employees voluntarily take beneficial actions for others and the organization beyond the organizational regulations and requirements. There are a total of 14 questions in both OCBI and OCBO, including “taking initiative to assist new colleagues”, “taking good care of company property and equipment”, and so on. The assessment scores with Likert 5-point dimension from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree” by employees’ supervisors. The higher score shows higher OCB.

### **3.1.4. Intentions to exit**

This research adopts Davis-Blake et al. (2003) to measure exit intention, including transfer tendency, turnover intention, and other ways to exit. And it also uses Likert 5-point dimension from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree” by employees. The higher score shows higher exit intention.

### **3.1.5. Control variables**

The control variables in this research include employees’ seniority, age and gender.

## **3.2. Sample and Data Collection**

The questionnaire is designed to be written by both supervisors and staffs in a paired manner. Each unit is given 1 copy of supervisor questionnaire and 5 copies of staff questionnaires. Supervisors include direct supervisors, team leaders, section chiefs or station directors; respondents in each unit fill in questionnaires anonymously, and then questionnaires were sealed and collected by the researcher. A total of 500 staff questionnaires and 100 supervisor questionnaires were distributed and 413 staff questionnaires and 89 supervisor questionnaires were collected, and valid paired samples obtained were 377 staff and 80 supervisors with a valid ratio of about 75% after excluding non-paired or incomplete questionnaires.

The characteristics of employee samples are as follows. The average age is 33 years and average length of service is 8 years, with the majority of female employees of 239 (accounting for about 63.4%); most are unmarried in terms of marital status, with a majority number of 201 persons (accounting for about 53.3%); those with tertiary education level account for about 85.9%; those with average monthly salary of 30000-40000 New Taiwan dollars accounts for a majority percent of 35.0%; staff from international airlines and domestic airlines account for about 33.9% and 66.1% of the 6 airlines respectively.

## **3.3. Reliability and Validity of Measures**

To ensure the validity of the scale, we submitted our questionnaires to two experts (an airline supervisor and an academic expert) for finalized the terminology of the translated version before the survey was officially commenced, and then employ a pilot study before the main survey is conducted. In addition, to confirm the validity of each construct, the Goodness of Fit between each construct and the corresponding subject was tested through Confirmatory Factor Analysis, as showed in Table 1.

#### **4. Finding and Discussion**

Table 2 shows the average, standard deviation and related analysis results of each variable. And the value of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was greater than 0.7, representing that the reliability of the scale used is acceptable. In terms of the statistical analysis, the degree of psychological contract breach has significant positive correlation with cynicism and exit intention, and has significant negative correlation with organizational citizenship behavior. It is initially in accordance with the derivation direction of the hypothesis in this research, but the cause and effect and paths of each variable are still remained to be determined by regression analysis.

##### **4.1. Hypothesis Tests.**

The research hypothesis is conducted by the hierarchical regression analysis. And three control variables are introduced into the first step. The analysis results are listed in Table 3. Firstly, according to Table 3, employees perceive that the degree of organizational psychological contract breach has a positive predictive power for cynicism ( $\beta$  value of 0.62 \*\*\*), so hypothesis 1 is supported. In addition, employees perceive that the degree of organizational psychological contract breach has a negative predictive power for OCB ( $\beta$  value of -0.19 \*\*\*), so hypothesis 2 (the higher the degree of employees' perception of psychological contract breach, the smaller the possibility of employees' showing OCB), is also supported. As shown in Table 3, employees perceptual degree of organizational psychological contract breach has a positive predictive power for exit intentions ( $\beta = 0.45$  \*\*\*), so hypothesis 3 is verified. However, in the mediated effect analysis as shown in Step 4, cynicism has certain intermediary effect between psychological contract breach and OCB, exit intention (hypothesis 4 & 5 partially supported). Although the addition of mediator (cynicism) reduced the size of the direct effects, it did not reduce the effect to non-significance. The indirect effect was -3.33 and 8.05 respectively and sobel test was significant (P value <0.001).

#### **5. Implications and Conclusion**

##### **5.1. Summary**

1. It has been shown that when employees' perceptual psychological contract breach will have a direct impact on the performance of organizational citizenship behavior and individual exit intentions. This conclusion in support of the views of Robinson & Morrison (1995), Robinson & Rousseau (1994) and Turnley & Feldman (2000). In addition, this empirical conclusion – organizations' failure to achieve commitment will result in employees' distrust and cynical attitudes towards the organizations, which is also consistent with the views of Andersson (1996) with psychological contract breach as the theoretical framework to discuss the formation factors of employees' cynicism.

2. Employee cynicism has a mediated effect on psychological contract breach and work attitude. Although "cynicism" in this research achieved the highest self-assessment among employees (with the average of 3.27), much higher than psychological contract breach (with the average of 3.08), which is not fit with employees' OCB (with the average of 3.86) that supervisors assessed. This may be explained in two aspects. The first is the feature of employees in the airline industry, be it inborn or required by organizations; employees are certainly prone to helping others. Second, psychological contract means that an exchange relationship exists between the organizations and employees, which needs to consider the expectations and obligations of both parties (Schein, 1980). Therefore, employees show their discretionary, extra-role behaviors based on mutual reciprocity, but won't express organizational citizenship behavior by emotional cynicism.

##### **5.2. Practical Implications**

1. Implementation of psychological contract by organization. The research hypothesis showed that when the organizations fulfill psychological contract to a higher degree, employees tend to show better behavior - better OCB and lower exit intention, and the employees' perception towards the organization – cynicism is also influenced. Therefore, no matter organizational commitments made by for employees are written or oral, organizations should be cautious and be restrained from empty promises, otherwise there will be a wide range of impacts when employees perceive that organization fails to fulfill promises. Moreover, it's shown from this research that most employees from airline industry believe that organizations perform worst in career development. Perhaps this is related with the external environment the airlines face in recent years, such as layoffs, downsizing, and redirecting, which makes employees perceive that the organizations show no concerns about their long-term development.

Therefore, airlines should strengthen the commitment towards employees in this regard through the planning of Human Resources Department. That's mean that airlines should take organizational cynicism seriously as a warning sign, and to understand, contain and prevent cynicism where possible before it develops into something beyond repair (Naus et al., 2007).

**5.3. Direction for Future Research**

Employees who are more cynical are easier to hold cynicism towards the organization when psychological contract is breached; and that whether the degree of this cynical trait and psychological contract breach will interfere with organizational cynicism and employees' behavior can be studied in subsequent research.

**5.4. Limitations**

This research survey adopted paired method with two parts in the questionnaire. The first part is written by employees, and the second part is written by supervisors. However, due to the operating characteristics of airline services, many units are running with mode of shift rotating, so it is difficult to select samples with random sampling.

**Table 1** Confirmatory factor analysis

Variable	no	$\chi^2/df$	GFI	AGFI	RMSEA	SRMR	CR	AVE
Cynicism	9	73.58/26	0.96	0.93	0.070	0.032	0.89	0.49
OCBI	7	20/12	0.99	0.97	0.042	0.021	0.88	0.52
OCBO	5	4.28/4	1.00	0.98	0.014	0.012	0.80	0.42

Note: CR=construct reliability, AVE= average variance extracted

**Table 2** Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations of All Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Psychological Contract Breach	(0.95)			
2. Cynicism	0.62**	(0.89)		
3. OCB	-0.21**	-0.17**	(0.90)	
4. Intentions to Exit	0.51**	0.44**	-0.12**	(0.70)
Mean	3.08	3.27	3.86	3.04
S.D.	0.79	0.71	0.58	0.89

Note:1. \* <.05 \*\* <.01 2. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient appear on the diagonal

**Table 3** Results of the hierarchical regression analyses testing for mediation effecting

Step	IV	$\beta$	OCB		Sobel test	Intentions to exit			Sobel test
			$R^2$	F		$\beta$	$R^2$	F	
1	Gender	- 0.09	0.01	2.13	0.02	0.12	18.33***		
	Age	0.02		- 0.18*					
	Tenure	0.06		- 0.19*					
2	Gender	- 0.08	0.05	5.08**	- 0.03	0.31	42.97***		
	Age	- 0.00		- 0.13					
	Tenure	0.04		- 0.14					
	PCB	- 0.19***		0.45***					
3	PCB- CYN	0.62***	0.38	239.05***	-3.33***	0.62***	0.38	239.05***	8.05***
	CYN	- 0.17**	0.02	11.39**	0.44**	0.19	89.58**		
4	Gender	- 0.08	0.05	4.26**	- 0.03	0.33	37.91***		
	Age	- 0.02		- 0.10					
	Tenure	0.05		- 0.16*					
	PCB	- 0.16**		0.33***					
	CYN	- 0.06		0.19***					

Note:1. \* <.05 \*\* <.01 \*\*\* <.001, PCB= psychological contract breach; CYN=Cynicism

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