UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

As a leading Irish business school in a public university system, KBS is committed to excellence in teaching and to fostering knowledge and understanding of business and society within a diverse, research active and socially engaged environment.

Research at KBS serves this mission. Our goal is to cultivate excellence in research, underpinned by our core values including commitments to promote learning and discovery as well as social responsibility and ethical behaviour; to protect academic freedom and enhance knowledge; to maintain a future orientation and an international perspective; to promote inclusive and sustainable societies and facilitate the involvement of industry.

Our research finds a focus in the four academic departments of the School as well as in active research clusters and broad thematic descriptors. The current research clusters are: Accountability (ARC); Efficiency & Productivity Analysis; Emerging Risk Assessment & Underwriting; Human Rights & Development Practice; Interpretive Consumer Research; Psychological Science in Business; Privatisation & PPP; and Quality of Work. Research seminars are also regularly organised by the themes of Work, Knowledge & Employment and Public Policy, Enterprise, Governance & Sustainability.

See http://www.ul.ie/business/research for more information.

What do we measure and how do we elicit it? The case for the use of repertory grid technique in multi-party psychological contract research

Ultan P. Sherman and Michael J. Morley

Synopsis

The psychological contract is a multi-faceted construct and, with the rise of gig work, increasingly encompasses multi-party exchanges. Against this backdrop, the question of what should be measured when assessing the contract and how it should be elicited remains a significant issue for scholars. We argue that the explanatory power of psychological contract theory as a lens for understanding contemporary multi-party working relationships is constrained by two key limitations inherent in conventional measurement approaches, namely the favouring of singular rather than multiparty perspectives, and the according of equal weight and significance to the content dimensions unearthed, despite the fact that they may differ markedly in how they are understood by each party. In order to remedy these shortcomings, we make the case for adopting Repertory Grid Technique (RGT) as the measurement device of choice.

Introduction and Background

Scholars drawing on psychological contract theory have generated an array of insights into important organisational outcomes such as engagement, voluntary turnover and citizenship behaviour. While these and related studies have undeniably broadened our understanding of the contemporary evolving employment relationship, significant gaps remain in our knowledge of the building blocks of the psychological contract. This may, in part at least, be a consequence of how scholars have attempted to measure it. In this paper we propose an alternative way to more effectively elicit the content of the contract. Our proposal is timely given that research suggests a new psychological contract may be developing following the emergence of new organisational forms, atypical work arrangements, and employment relationships connecting multiple parties which are increasingly commonplace in the gig economy.

Issues and Questions Considered

Contemporary employment relationships are moving away from traditional employee/employer dyads into work arrangements connecting multiple parties. This is a development which merits deeper investigation. It is likely that distinct content dimensions will be exchanged as part of this agreement and measuring the content of the multi-party psychological contract can reveal how individuals construct their understanding of their employment relationship. We make the case for the use of RGT as a methodological approach to better capture more and richer data about the specificities of the content of the contract. This, we contend, may help uncover novel employee and employer obligations, along with the fundamental architecture of the relationship. Indeed, exploring this new form of psychological contract is fundamental to the development of the field but may also help all contributing parties address the enduring challenge of building and maintaining effective work relationships. We advance three lines of enquiry focused on:

AUTHORS

Dr Ultan Sherman, Cork University Business School, University College Cork

Professor Michael Morley, Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick

KEMMY BUSINESS SCHOOL
University of Limerick

1. Establishing the extent to which traditional measurement approaches fall short of assessing the contemporary multi-party psychological contract;

2. Determining the potential of RGT to uncover new insights into the content of the multi-party psychological contract; and

3. Proposing a heuristic model for measuring the multi-party psychological contract.

The benefits of these lines of enquiry to the field are threefold. First, they hold the prospect of tapping into the layered experiences of employees and other associated parties thus uncovering novel ties and connections between content dimensions within the exchange arrangement. Second, addressing them may help make better predictions about how each party is likely to behave in a triadic or tetradic psychological contract. Third, by offering a navigating template on how to effectively use RGT to measure psychological contract content in multi-party employment relationships, our paper provides a framework through which scholars and practitioners can better understand the increasingly idiosyncratic employment relationship.

Methodology

RGT is a cognitive mapping tool designed to elicit how people understand their interactions with the world. Based on Kelly's (1955) Theory of Personal Constructs, individuals as constructivists habitually reshape and revise how they 'make sense' of their everyday experiences. RGT revolves around a series of rating-scale procedures measuring the structure which governs how individuals develop a system of constructs to understand and guide them through their day to day interactions. The columns in the grid are known as 'elements'. An element is *"an example of, exemplar of, instance of, sampling of, or occurrence within, a particular topic"* (Jankowicz, 2003: 3). These elements constitute the focus or the subject of the grid. Within the grid, the rows represent the 'constructs' referring to the participant's understanding of the topic. They are the basic unit of description and analysis of the elements. Each row is poled by the opposite descriptor within each construct. A construct always represents a contrast and one needs to spell out the contrast before the meaning intended by the whole construct is understood. Each element is then rated along each bi-polar construct, to provide a thorough picture of what the subject wishes to express about each element within the topic.

Outcomes and Findings

Overcoming measurement challenges in psychological contract research is critical in order to ensure that it remains a valuable lens through which the contemporary multi-party employment relationship in a range of contextual and evolving settings can be understood. Our paper represents an initial step in advancing the discourse beyond traditional measurement approaches. In so doing, we seek not to negate formative psychological contract studies but rather supplement them by offering a more delineated account of some of the challenges of measuring this contemporary psychological contract and how to overcome them. Specifically, we highlight the potential of RGT as a viable methodology to allow scholars to uncover novel facets of the increasingly prevalent multi-party psychological contract. We contend that RGT is a particularly nuanced technique that can be useful to scholars seeking to explore and assess conceptually complex topics like the psychological contract.

A formative issue when using RGT concerns the origin of both the elements and the constructs. Scholars disagree over how these should be sourced in terms of whether they should be supplied to, or elicited from, the subject whose psychological contract is being assessed. Studies to date have seen many scholars provide the elements and elicit the constructs, others have elicited the elements and provided the constructs, while a small number have supplied both the elements and the constructs. Supplying elements and constructs can be an efficient means of gathering data and can be a useful approach for comparing grids across large samples. However, RGT is perhaps most effective when both the elements and constructs are elicited from the individual. Therefore, in the interests of uncovering novel aspects of the contemporary multi-party psychological contract we argue that the elicitation approach to identifying both the elements and constructs is a more appropriate use of RGT.

RGT has the capacity to capture new data on the complexity of the multi-party psychological contract. Utilising RGT, we suggest, would allow scholars to examine the psychological contract in a more filtered way. While eliciting content dimensions is an established methodology in the field, eliciting the underlying properties of these dimensions represents a novel approach. Assessing the obligations in this manner reveals how the individual differentially understands their agreement with the other contributing parties and allows scholars to explore composite issues such as mutuality and agreement amongst the parties. By surfacing the cognitive foundations of the psychological contract, RGT holds the prospect of offering fresh insights into emerging and increasingly complex employment relationships now ubiquitous among gig workers on digital platforms.

Authors:
Dr Ultan P. Sherman, Prof Michael Morley

For further information and comments, please contact:

Dr Deirdre O'Loughlin
Assistant Dean, Research
Kemmy Business School
University of Limerick, Ireland
T: +353 61 213375
E: Deirdre.OLoughlin@ul.ie

Forthcoming Research Bulletin

Title: 'The influence of executive compensation practices on distributions in the US technology sector'

Authors: Dr. Colette Grey, Dr. Antoinette Flynn, and Dr. Ray Donnelly

About the KBS Research Bulletin

The purpose of the KBS Research Bulletin series is to make our research more readily accessible to a wide range of interested stakeholders, and so to allow our work to have a useful impact on the society in which we operate. We regard this as an important part of our stakeholder engagement. The dissemination of these bulletins aligns with both the UL focus on excellence and impact in research, and on the KBS strategic goals of cultivating excellence in research while contributing to our community of stakeholders in a responsible and sustainable manner.

KEMMY BUSINESS SCHOOL
University of Limerick