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The lifeline interview technique: Its effectiveness in the exploration of processes

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Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section 2015 Conference

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Overview of the presentation

- ▶ Introduction to the present study
- ▶ Focus on the data collection method - the lifeline technique
- ▶ Usefulness of this method



The Psychological Contract

The **Psychological Contract** is the employee's perceived beliefs, shaped by the organisation, of the employment relationship agreement (Rousseau, 1989, 1995).

Three main aspects have been identified to enable understanding of this construct:

Content, Form and Process

Content: Promises made between employee and employer

Form: Transactional / Relational

Process: From formation to maintenance to breach/violation to termination

Why study the psychological contract?

- ▶ Research has focussed mainly on the negative consequences of psychological contract breach - particularly unfulfilled or broken promises by the organization(Conway & Briner, 2005).
- ▶ A positive psychological contract promotes desirable employee attitudes and behaviours such as organizational commitment and intention to stay (de Vos, Buyens & Schalk, 2005).
- ▶ Psychological contract formation is shaped by the following factors:
 1. Personal characteristics such as personality and cognitive biases.
 2. External messages such as explicit contract terms, corporate identity and personal recommendations.



Research Question

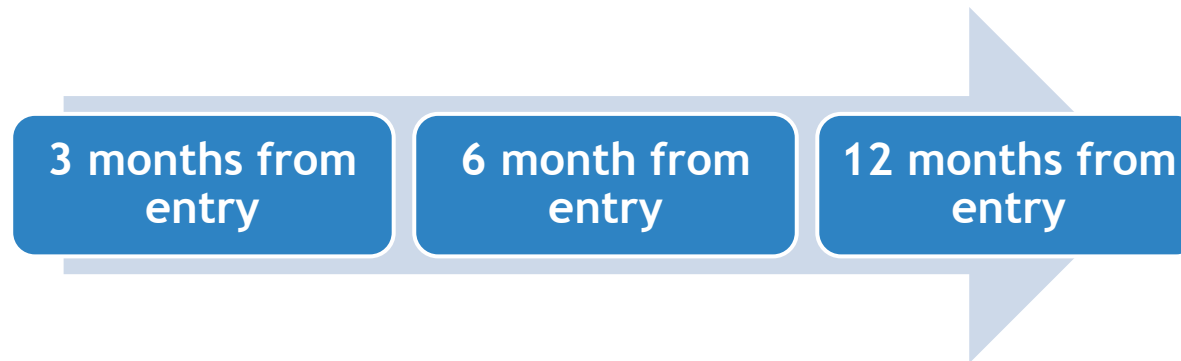
What factors influence the formation, development and maintenance of the psychological contract?



Method

Longitudinal design:

In-depth semi-structured interviews lasting an average of 45 minutes



Interview participants: 30 white collar employees (reducing to 26 at 2nd and 3rd time point)

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the interview transcripts

The nature of processes

Langley (1999) defines processes as having four main characteristics:

1. Processes are composed of *sequences of events*, where happenings demand an affective, cognitive, and/or behavioural reaction.
2. Processes involve a *multiple level of analysis*, such as individual or group level.
3. Processes have a *temporal element* and this varies between the different events that form part of it.
4. Processes are *composed of events* that can take different forms such as expectations, objectives and relationships.

Individuals continuously engage in a process of sensemaking, placing encountered stimuli into some kind of structure, a framework that is then used to 'comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict' (Starbuck and Milliken, 1988, p. 51).

Narrative interviews

- ▶ Provide the ‘whats’, ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ within participants’ experiences (Sarbin, 1986).
- ▶ Acknowledge participants as vital experts of the investigated phenomena/experiences.
- ▶ Allow participants to define the nature, structure and presentation of the content in the interview - “impose order on the flow of experience” (Reismann, 1993, p.2).
- ▶ Take a constructivist perspective, a storied approach to inquiry
- ▶ Recounting stories is a natural basic activity people engage in (MacIntyre, 1984).
- ▶ Narratives have a beginning, middle and end which connects the different elements included in the recounted story within time and space.

The lifeline interview technique

- ▶ Used largely in career counselling, exploring the client's story of past, present and expected future experiences (Brott, 2001).
- ▶ In clinical settings, the lifeline interview technique provides a canvas on which the 'graphic synthesis of the major events' (Phaneuf, 2007, p.2) of her patients' experience occurs, resulting in more than merely an autobiography.
- ▶ Participants narrate their story to the interviewer, in an objective and non-judgemental environment (Phaneuf, 2007).

Introduction to lifeline activity

“In this interview we are going to be focussing on those experiences which stood out since you joined this organization. They don’t necessarily need to be life-changing experiences but ones that have come up as a surprise or that you can recall to have remained printed in your mind or perhaps have had impact on your life. These experiences do not necessarily need to be work related but anything that occurred during this time period.

Can you recall any peak experiences that you can map across this timeline? These experiences can be both positive or negative or contain both positive and negative elements. I would like you to mark a key word or two across the line for each event that comes to mind. If it is positive, you can place it above the line while if it is negative, you can put it below the line, or in the middle if it has both negative and positive aspects to it. Take your time to do this and when you’re ready, I would appreciate if you can talk me through them.”

Further explanation...

“What I mean by surprises are things that you have experienced during this time which were unexpected or unanticipated and which made you reflect on them. This is common for people joining any new job as they come to experience the actual job environment.”

May/June
Interview
X

INSET
X

1st
Week 9
sep
X (preparation)

1st Day
(form)
X

1st day
X

6th form
X

Good Y10
X
Wed 29th
Sep
Fries

X
1st week
without
headaches

ME on
application

before
starting -
X nervous/
fear.

Sunday night
before 1st day
X upset.
Bar or
unknown.

X
Year 10
(1st day).

Weekends
X depressed.

X
Year 10

ME
now

Nov
2013

(a)

Prompts

Why was it so surprising?

Why did this instance stand out?

What were you doing at the time?

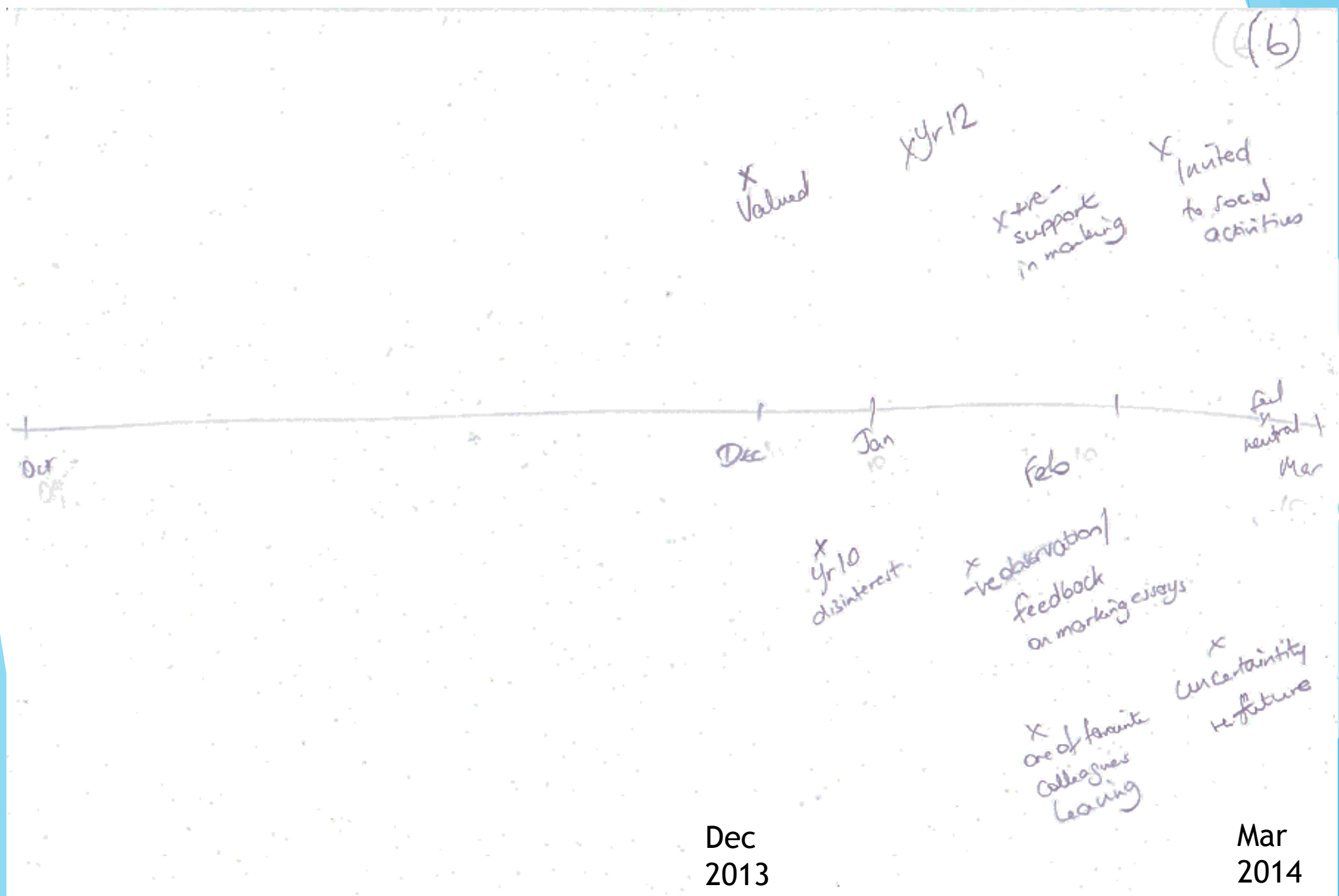
What were you feeling?

How did you deal with this?

How do you feel about it now?

What influence has it had on you?

What are the consequences/results of this experience?



(6)

X Yr 9 classes
are lovely

X Moderation -
rte feedback

X Getting involved
in a lot of
things

X Involved
in Netball

X Control on year
Yr 10 class

X Support

X Sports day
acknowledged against
peer kids



March
2014

X poor
communication
with agent/
Head teacher

X Unclear
Career
development

X low turnover
So no
opportunities

X burst crying
in Staff Room
because of Yr 10
action taken

X observation/
feedback
on teaching

July
2014

Why is this technique useful?

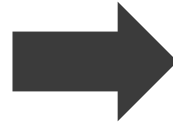
- ▶ The lifeline technique provides a framework in which the interviewees' account can be captured in-depth.
- ▶ Participants' engagement is enhanced through active involvement in marking and classifying key events as positive/negative and then building their stories around these markings.
- ▶ Markings on the lifeline guide the narration of the various aspects within their lived experiences.
- ▶ In longitudinal studies, it serves as a reference point to initiate further exploration of the participants' experience in subsequent interviews.

The Psychological Contracting process:

A shift in the balance of the exchange

“What can I offer to the organization?”

(Employee focuses on enhancing self-efficacy)



“What is this organization offering me?”

(Employee focuses on continuity of self-expression)



Thank you

Any questions or comments?

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