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Ethical Concerns of Remote Working: Insights of UK Academics' Psychological Contracts

Dr Gulzhan Rysbekova

ISCAL EST. 1759



**POLITÉCNICO
DE LISBOA** | POLYTECHNIC
UNIVERSITY
OF LISBON

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed a rapid and widespread shift to remote working (RW) in higher education. While operationally necessary, this transformation brought with it profound ethical implications that have not been adequately examined. This paper investigates how crisis-prompted RW affected the psychological contracts (PCs) of academic staff in the UK, particularly in relation to ethical aspects. Drawing on thirty in-depth interviews conducted with academic staff across a range of UK universities, and grounded in Psychological Contract Theory, the research highlights a landscape of ambiguity regarding expectations, which are a central element of the PC. In addition to the prevalent confusion over institutional expectations, participants have also reported a perceived erosion of the mission-driven values that underpins academic labour, i.e. it is not the shift to remote working per se that leads to disengagement, but perceived abandonment of core ethical values during this transition. As hybrid and flexible work models become enduring features of academic life, universities must revisit their ethical commitments and clarify their responsibilities to staff, not just in formal terms, but in ways that restore and sustain high PC standards. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how ethical aspects operate within and shape the psychological contracts in knowledge-based institutions, particularly under conditions of change. It advances PC theory by positioning ethics as central to employment relations in digitally mediated work.

Key words: psychological contract, ethics, ethical dimensions, ethical aspects of remote working, UK academic labour, higher education, employer-employee relationships, ideological psychological contract, relational psychological contract, transactional psychological contract, psychological contract breach, COVID-19 crisis

JEL classification: M54 Labor Management

1. Introduction

The global pandemic not only disrupted teaching and research in universities but also fundamentally challenged the ways in which academic work is experienced. In the United Kingdom, institutions rapidly shifted to online modes of delivery, requiring staff to perform their academic duties from home or otherwise remotely, often with limited preparation or support. Initially framed as a health-focused necessity, the transition to RW soon became a moral terrain, exposing previously unexamined assumptions about professional obligations, institutional support, and the ethical infrastructure of the academic workplace.

This paper explores how remote working, implemented during the COVID-19 crisis, impacted the psychological contract between academic staff and their institutions. The psychological contract (PC), as defined by Rousseau (1989), represents the implicit set of expectations and perceived obligations that govern the employer-employee relationships. While much has been written about digital transformation and online pedagogy, there remains limited research into how RW has affected the ethical dimensions of academic labour. This study addresses that gap. Specifically, it asks: how did remote working affect the ethical underpinnings of psychological contracts for academic staff during the pandemic? And what does this reveal about the changing nature of institutional responsibility in the post-pandemic university?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Psychological contract

The psychological contract, as theorised by Rousseau (1989), refers to the informal and implied set of mutual expectations that shape employment relationships. While traditional PC research has largely concentrated on transactional and relational dimensions in corporate contexts (Conway & Briner, 2005), recent scholarship has expanded to include ideological contracts, which involve moral or mission-driven alignment with organisational values (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003).

When institutions fail to honour these transactional, relational or ideological expectations - explicitly or tacitly - employees may experience a PC breach (PCB), with potential consequences including emotional withdrawal, reduced trust, and decreased organisational commitment (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994).

2.2 Psychological Contracts in Academic Work

In the context of higher education, the PCs are often bound up with deeply held values such as autonomy, collegiality, and alignment with the university's social mission implying prominence of the ideological dimensions (Winter & Sarros, 2002). Accordingly, it can be assumed that the breach of ideological PCs in academic settings may produce disillusionment and as a result lead to more severe negative attitudinal and behavioural outcomes such as disengagement (Ahmed et al., 2016).

Studies exploring PC breach in academia have also identified growing tensions around managerialism, metric-driven performance controls, eroding autonomy, fragile professional identities (Deem, 2004; Knights & Clarke, 2014; Winter & Sarros, 2002). These dynamics, existent before the pandemic-prompted RW acceleration, have intensified due to the nature of RW (Watermeyer et al., 2021), especially with digital tools facilitating surveillance to enforce productivity (Ajunwa, 2023; Ball, 2010). Yet, the ethical implications of such changes, particularly in terms of central elements of a PC - trust, expectations, and emotional impact (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003; Morrison & Robinson, 1997) - remain under-theorised in the literature.

2.3 Ethical Dimensions of Remote Work

The pandemic did not create the conditions for remote work, but it accelerated its normalisation. As Felstead & Reuschke (2020) note, RW had already begun to reshape expectations about location and flexibility. However, for academics, the transition was abrupt and often undertaken without proper consultation or ethical foresight.

While the benefits of RW, such as flexibility and reduced commuting, are well documented (Felstead & Reuschke, 2020) and the area of online pedagogy has been given considerable attention (Rapanta et al., 2020), the ethical costs of the shift remain underexplored. Kelliher et al. (2019) caution that RW can blur boundaries, leading to self-surveillance, intensification of work, and reduced visibility. Tavares (2017) argues, this lack of visibility may lead to health deterioration due to pressure to overdeliver in telework

setups. In academia, this dynamic is particularly acute, given that much of academic labour is already invisible or hard to quantify (Winter & Sarros, 2002; Gill, 2009). Literature emerging during the pandemic reflects increased concerns about work-life balance, blurred boundaries, and emotional exhaustion (Chong et al., 2020).

Liu & Zhang (2025) further advance the notion of “ethical HRM” in digital contexts, asserting that RW arrangements must be evaluated not merely in terms of efficiency but through the lens of justice, trust, and wellbeing. Academics found themselves navigating a system where PC i.e. expectations shifted but upholding core ethical values during the RW - were not clearly reaffirmed. This study aligns with this call, seeking to uncover how RW affects the ethical aspects of UK academics’ PCs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sampling

This study adopts a qualitative, inductive design underpinned by interpretivist epistemology. Its primary objective was to explore how UK-based academics experienced, interpreted, and navigated ethical dilemmas related to RW through the psychological contract lens. Rather than seeking generalisability, the focus was on depth and insight of the lived RW experiences.

Thirty participants were recruited using purposive sampling. All were academic staff based in UK higher education institutions who had experienced RW since 2020. Participants ranged from lecturers to senior professors and represented a variety of disciplines and institutional types. Ethical approval was granted by Brunel University London, with all participants providing informed consent; anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom and Microsoft Teams between June 2021 and August 2022. Interviews ranged from 50 to 90 minutes which were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonymised.

The analysis was guided by Psychological Contract Theory, using Rousseau’s (1989) typology of relational and transactional contracts, alongside Thompson and Bunderson’s (2003) work on ideological contracts. The data were analysed using phenomenological content analysis which supports the uncovering meanings within lived experiences while allowing for a nuanced exploration of participants’ perceptions (Hycner, 1985). Transcripts were first read repeatedly to identify emerging patterns. Codes were generated inductively, focusing on key dimensions of the psychological contract such as expectations, beliefs, promises and obligations accompanied by emotional responses.

4. Findings

The central element of the psychological contract – expectation - was found to be rendered ambiguous within the reconfigured landscape of remote working. This ambiguity gave rise to two dominant themes: overcompensation and heightened ethical anxiety.

4.1 Overcompensation

Participants described a heightened sense of invisible labour that was intensified under remote working conditions. Academics reported feeling pressured to prove their productivity in the absence of physical presence. This was not merely a question of performance but a deeper concern about moral rights - participants feared they might appear disengaged or insufficiently committed to their students, colleagues, or institutions.

Participant 29 noted:

“If I had a more firm directive from the employer... There was so many competing priorities on me, I felt so pulled in hundreds of different directions. You know, it was hard, it was really hard.”

Such sentiments reflect the phenomenon of overcompensation, where workers take on more responsibility than formally expected, particularly when organisational cues are ambiguous. This aligns with Kelliher et al. (2019), who found that remote employees frequently engage in self-disciplining behaviours to compensate for reduced visibility which may lead to deteriorating mental health (Tavares, 2017). Watermeyer et al. (2021) reveal that RW during the pandemic produced significant affective turbulence among academics, ranging from guilt to fatigue to moral conflict. The findings of this study adds depth to these discourses by framing responses as ethically aligned reactions to PC ambiguity i.e. where institutional guidance was inconsistent or unclear.

A balance between guidance and autonomy is essential in sustaining effective employment relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2000). While autonomy remains a core aspect of academic identity (Knights & Clarke, 2014), it proved insufficient to uphold psychological contract standards under new RW conditions. In the absence of ethical scaffolding, such as transparent communication, inclusive dialogue, institutional care, RW generated uncertainty and contributed to a perceived erosion of the PC (Rousseau, 1995; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). This reveals a critical oversight: in transitioning to remote modalities, it is crucial to clearly revise and communicate the ethical norms upon which relational trust, a cornerstone of a healthy PC, depends.

4.2 Ethical Anxiety

The second dominant theme, arising from shifting psychological contract expectations and institutional ambiguity, is best described as ethical anxiety - a feeling of uncertainty as to what is ethically required or permitted (Scher, 2010) - participants reported experiencing discomfort and uncertainty regarding fundamental working parameters, such as the definition of ‘working hours’, criteria for productivity assessment, the availability of colleagues, and their own right to disconnect.

Participant 19 articulated this internal struggle:

“I feel like I need permission to stick it out, almost as if I’m being deceitful.”

This sense of ethical anxiety rooted in vagueness and confusion about how to sustain professional identity and workplace relationships was due to the shifted employment arrangement. Given that psychological contracts are based on reciprocal exchange (Conway & Briner, 2005), shifts in working arrangements require mutual adaptation. Yet, while employees adapted to remote work, many perceived a lack of organisational reciprocity, particularly in the form of clear guidance and support. Such lack of reciprocity is what invokes anxiety and risks PCB. Chong et al. (2020) report similar findings, noting that employees in remote settings often psychologically withdraw when institutional guidance is inconsistent or ambiguous.

In the current study, the emergence of ethical anxiety was closely linked to the nature of remote working, which is characterised by the blurred boundaries between professional and personal domains. Such overlap makes it easier for an employee to shift between personal and professional tasks during working hours, a dynamic that introduced moral ambiguity regarding what constituted appropriate work behaviour within the home environment (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). In the absence of explicitly communicated expectations, staff found themselves navigating this collapsed context without clarity, thereby feeling anxious about contributing to breaches in the PC.

4.3 Ethical Values in Remote Academic Work

Another salient ethical dimension emerging from the study concerns the role of ethical values in sustaining academics’ psychological contracts, in this case ideological PCs. Throughout the interviews, participants consistently underscored the significance of trust, autonomy, fairness, professional integrity, and alignment with the institutional mission. While many acknowledged the increased flexibility that remote working enabled, they emphasised that such flexibility must not come at the expense of these foundational values.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to Psychological Contract Theory by revealing how ethical aspects function as core dimensions of the psychological contract, particularly in knowledge-intensive, mission-driven professions like academia. While psychological contract theory has long acknowledged the centrality of subjective interpretation in shaping contract perceptions (Rousseau, 1989), this study introduces an ethical inflection. It demonstrates that, in remote working contexts, psychological contracts are vulnerable to breach when institutions fail to clearly articulate emerging ethical expectations.

It has also reaffirmed the enduring importance of alignment with institutional mission, which require explicit reinforcement and transparent communication to be sustained.

Thus, this study extends existing theory by:

- Pronouncing risks of PC breach due to ethical reasons in remote settings;
- Demonstrating how ambiguity from institutions regarding ethical norms provoke overcompensation and ethical anxiety;
- Highlighting that psychological contracts evolve in a different setting and therefore require active, reciprocal adaptation in hybrid or digitally mediated workplaces.

5.2 Practical Implications

This study highlights that flexibility, while central to remote working, is insufficient without a parallel commitment to ethical clarity. Ambiguity surrounding expectations e.g. working hours, availability, performance - risks inducing ethical anxiety, overcompensation and, as a result, PCB. Moreover, academic labour is intrinsically mission-driven; misalignment with institutional purpose can also erode positive behaviours.

Practical measures reflecting these considerations might include co-designing RW policies with staff, explicitly communicating ethical expectations, and visibly acknowledging contributions beyond measurable outputs. Human Resources and institutional managers should actively foster high PC standards and mutual accountability in hybrid work environments. By addressing the moral dimensions of the PC and embedding ethical governance into RW frameworks, institutions can reinforce trust, reduce burnout, and build more resilient, values-aligned academic communities in the evolving landscape of higher education.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its focus on UK-based academics, which may constrain the generalisability of findings to other national or institutional contexts. Additionally, as a qualitative study, it focuses on capturing depth rather than breadth, and future research could complement these insights with larger-scale quantitative data.

Future research should explore how psychological contracts evolve over time in hybrid academic environments, with particular attention to cross-cultural, disciplinary, and career-stage differences. Longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into how ethical expectations are renegotiated in digitally mediated academic work.

6. Conclusions

This study has illuminated the ethical complexities embedded in the psychological contracts of academic staff navigating remote and hybrid work environments. While flexibility has been celebrated as a core benefit of remote working, this research demonstrates that, without ethical scaffolding - clear expectations, transparent communication, and institutional care - such flexibility can generate ambiguity, moral discomfort, and perceived PCBs. Participants' accounts revealed that ethical values are not ancillary to PC fulfilment, but central to sustainability of the digitally mediated settings.

Crucially, the findings suggest that institutions must actively reaffirm ethical commitments and provide clarity around expectations. As hybrid models become

embedded in university operations, this study calls for close attention to the ethical dimensions of evolving work arrangements and their impact on employment relationships. As sustaining PC fulfilment in remote and hybrid settings via ethically grounded practices will be central to organisational resilience in the digital era.

7. References

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