Raising the curtain: Exploring dancers' perceptions of obligation through the psychological contract lens

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Raising the curtain: Exploring dancers' perceptions of obligation through the psychological contract lens

Alicia R Stanway
Edith Cowan University, Australia

Sarbari Bordia
Australian National University, Australia

Erich C Fein
Central Queensland University, Australia

Abstract

The current study takes an exploratory approach to investigate which situational factors influence perceptions of psychological contracts, as well as the content that comprises psychological contracts in the dance training industry. Semi-structured interviews ($n = 10$) were conducted with students enrolled in a higher education institution in Australia. Results indicated that intending dancers take several factors into consideration when contemplating a professional dance career: natural progression of skill, employment opportunities, location, and peer recommendation. In addition, intending dancers have several perceived institutional obligations: skill development, quality of teachers and training, and networking opportunities. The current article adds novel insights to dance education literature by considering the trainee–institution relationship through the psychological contract lens. It is anticipated that the findings will assist future research that seeks to incorporate student perceptions into dance curriculum development.

Keywords

dance, higher education, performing arts, psychological contract, qualitative

Corresponding author:
Alicia R Stanway, Faculty of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, 270 Joondalup Drive, Joondalup, Perth, Western Australia 6027, Australia.
Email: a.stanway@ecu.edu.au

Over the last 50 years, a wealth of empirical studies has explored the concept of psychological contract, particularly in the employee–employer context (see Conway and Briner, 2009, for an overview) but also in other dyads such as volunteer–organization (Farmer and Fedor, 1999; Liao-Troth, 2001), consumer–service provider (Kingshott and Pecotich, 2007) or student–education provider (Bordia and Bordia, 2008; Wade-Benzoni et al., 2006). However, there is a paucity of research that has applied the concept of psychological contract in the creative arts sector, specifically in the professional dance training context. Given the dyadic relationships that exist within the dance training context, psychological contracts are inevitably part of the individual's mental schema when interacting with the dance institution. Moreover, intending dancers invest a great deal of time, money and effort into their training, so it may be that intending dancers also place a great deal of importance on their exchange relationship with their training institution. Fulfillment of psychological contracts has the potential to retain dancers within the dance training institution and foster positive organizational citizenship behavior.

The current article provides novel insights to the dance education literature by considering what contributes to perceptions of the trainee–institution relationship. It also contributes to psychological contract literature by including perspectives from the creative arts context in which the investment in training is much greater than for traditional jobs. Managing this psychological contract can be particularly important for new recruits to an institution with their motivation and commitment being strongly influenced by the conditions of the psychological contract and perceived fulfillment of these terms (De Vos et al., 2005; Robinson et al., 1994; Rousseau, 1990; Thomas and Anderson, 1998).

Dance in Australia

Dance is a dynamic part of the Australian performing arts culture (Australian Government, 2011) with more than $16.8 million being invested in Australian dance by the Australia Council for the Arts (2012). Dance is a highly specialized profession, which typically requires extensive training and a formal qualification. To highlight, in a national sample of professional dancers, 94% of dancers had undertaken formal training, 50% had undertaken private training, followed by learning on the job (47%) (Throsby and Hollister, 2003). Furthermore, formal training was found to be the most important indicator of career preparations (67%). Even though most dance qualifications in Australia typically take three years to complete, dancers tend to spend, on average, six years in formal training (Throsby and Hollister, 2003). Given the vigorous training regime and competitive nature of the industry, some dancers may take longer to pass the required practical and theoretical components of their study, or continue to gain skills in other areas, such as musical theatre, singing or acting, to become more attractive to employers.

Dancers are often faced with limited-income, short-term contracts and physical injuries (Coffey, 2007), yet the industry still attracts high numbers of intending

dancers (Bennett, 2009). This would suggest that dancers have a great sense of intrinsic motivation to pursue this career, rather than being motivated by external factors, such as pay. Given the long training period within the institution, it is important that institutions develop and communicate realistic notions of a career in the performing arts (Bennett, 2009). One way to facilitate these realistic notions is via managing the students' 'psychological contracts'.

Psychological contract in the dance training context

Rousseau (1995: 123) defines psychological contract as 'an individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the focal person and another party'. The formation of the psychological contract is typically a process, formed during early socialization with the organization (Anderson and Thomas, 1996; Dick, 2006) and evolving as individuals begin to identify attitudes and behaviors of others in order to make judgments about the type of organizational culture that exists (Turnley and Feldman, 1999). In the dance training context, when a dancer perceives that their institution has made an implied promise, it is considered a perceived obligation of the relationship, therefore comprising the psychological contract. There are two dominant types of psychological contract: *transactional* contracts are based on an economic exchange framework (Foa and Foa, 1980), whereas *relational* contracts are based on a social exchange framework (Blau, 1964). The essential element of a relational contract is the emotional investment in the exchange relationship (Rousseau, 1995). As intending dancers have an emotional investment in their exchange relationship, often intrinsically motivated, it is the relational psychological contract that is of particular importance in the dance training sector.

Numerous situational factors may shape perceptions of psychological contract, including previous experiences, interactions with members of the organization, media, advertising, work values, and social identities (Conway and Briner, 2009; De Vos et al., 2005; Hallier and Forbes, 2004; Rousseau, 2001). For example, photographs of dancers performing overseas with famous choreographers that appear on the institution's website, may signal to new recruits that they will also have such opportunities. Investigating the situational factors that may influence perceptions of psychological contract in the dance context would allow a better understanding of how these contracts are formed and, subsequently, how these contracts can be managed efficiently (Rousseau, 2001). In addition, as the concept of psychological contract has not been applied in the dance training context, insight into the content of perceived obligations that dancers form of their training institutions will enable a better understanding of how institutions can manage psychological contracts. Accordingly, the aim of the current study is to identify the situational factors that influence perceptions of psychological contract in the dance training context. This study uses a qualitative approach, which is 'useful in the early stages of research on unexplored topics' (Hill et al., 1997: 518).

Methodology

Within the Australian system for dance training, dance institutions may be privately owned or affiliated with a higher education provider. The current study involved conducting semi-structured interviews of full-time dancers ($n = 10$) enrolled in an accredited Bachelor of Dance Performance at a higher education institution in Australia. Participants were made up of first-year students ($n = 3$), second-year students ($n = 1$), third-year students ($n = 1$), graduates from the program ($n = 3$), and those who left the institution without completing their degree ($n = 2$). All participants were between the ages of 18 and 27 years old (30% male and 70% female). Experience in the dance industry varied from 3 to 21 years. Nine participants were from Australia, one was from South Africa. Participants were from a variety of dance genre backgrounds including jazz, classical ballet, tap and contemporary, which is representative of most dance training institutions in Australia. The sample size is accepted as a limitation.

The premise behind the use of semi-structured interviews is the assumption that the interviewees know a great deal about the topic and this can be expressed spontaneously in response to an open-ended question (Flick, 2002). Guided by a review of qualitative literature, eight interview questions were developed and clustered into three main areas: participant background (e.g. how long have you been dancing in general?), perspectives of the dance industry (e.g. why did you pursue a career in dance?), and insights into their psychological contracts (e.g. why did you choose this dance institution?). Interviews were approximately one hour long. The research project was approved by the institution's research ethics committee. In this article, quotations from participants are identified with the letter '$_{D}$'.

The raw data collected in this study were analyzed via Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR). The main components of CQR are the use of open-ended questions, reliance on words to describe the phenomena (rather than numbers), important consideration of the context, an inductive process, consensus of main themes reached by a team of researchers, and the use of an external auditor to reaffirm findings (Hill et al., 1997: 523). CQR is guided by the assumption that 'multiple perspectives increase our approximation of the 'truth' and are more likely to be free from researcher bias' (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, cited in Hill et al., 1997: 523).

Findings and discussion

Situational factors influencing perceptions

As psychological contracts 'develop through a phase as incomplete schemas, which people flesh out over time, it is expected that psychological contracts will develop in the first few months, depending on what information is available to them and how much they trust that information' (Rousseau, 2001: 510). In this sense, any

psychological contract would be consistent with connectionist models of memory (McClelland and Rumelhart, 1985). At the outset, dancers would have relatively limited or incomplete information regarding their relationship with their dance institution. Information can be influenced by multiple sources including prior beliefs, relationships formed with others, career stage, personal development and personal experience (Rousseau, 2001). All participants had between 3 and 21 years of dance experience and would therefore, based on their prior experience in dance schools, have some understanding of the way the Australian dance system operates. In the initial stages when dancers enquire about potential dance institutions, they gather information and form perceptions about institutional obligations through various sources such as 'word of mouth'$_{(D3)}$, 'the internet'$_{(D8)}$, 'researching through paperwork'$_{(D8)}$, initial interactions with members of the institution (e.g. during the 'interview process'$_{(D3)}$) and peers (e.g. 'I had a friend that did the course and was a brilliant dancer and I thought, if he can do that, I can too'$_{(D6)}$). Over time, as intending dancers come to understand the environment of their institution, they develop realistic psychological contracts because they have a clearer understanding of what is expected of them (Hiltrop, 1995; Shore and Tetrick, 1994). Knowing why dancers pursue this career may provide insight into how their psychological contracts could be shaped.

Theme 1: Natural progression of skill

In Australia, it is not uncommon to dance from an early age, as young as four. As a result, what begins as a hobby can lead to dance being closely connected with a person's self-identity. Stebbins (2008: 5) refers to the transition from hobby to a career as *serious leisure,* defined as 'systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or a volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting and fulfilling...they launch themselves on a career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience'. Several female participants reflected on growing up as a dancer, as highlighted here: 'it was something I had always done as a child, once I started it was a natural thing, it became an obsession'$_{(D1)}$; another participant selected a high school that had a dance curriculum because it appeared to be the next 'logical step'$_{(D9)}$. As talent developed and experience was gained, individuals explored the possibility that their natural talent could take them to a higher level, in some cases with a sense of modesty that they 'would not seriously get in'$_{(D8)}$ or 'never really thought I would make a career out of it but just kept thinking, I don't think I could do anything else'$_{(D6)}$ and 'I might try and see how far I can get...dance is a big passion of mine'$_{(D4)}$. Other participants, particularly the male dancers, considered pursuing a dance career later in life after being exposed to dance in high school or being inspired by a graduate performance, with one male commenting: 'it looked so much fun, the way they used their bodies. I thought "I want to do that"'$_{(D2)}$. Regardless of gender, there was a consistent indication that pursuing a career in dance is associated with a great sense of

intrinsic motivation and inner drive, but it is also an avenue for the highly skilled, and embracing that skill may lead to pursuing it as a career. A male participant summarizes this point:

> it is something that is hard to get into. More than half the population wouldn't even think to become a dancer and if I've got the opportunity, then why waste it? I'm still young, I can do whatever I want if it doesn't work out afterwards. Office jobs will be around forever, my knees won't!$_{(D3)}$

Theme 2: Employment opportunities

Post-training, there are typically two types of career that dancers aim for: a company dancer or a freelance dancer. The first and often desired choice is to be recruited by a dance company (e.g. the Sydney Dance Company). Only top performing dancers are recruited by a dance company, which is regarded as an impressive achievement. This pathway is not just desired for the performance aspect but also because dance companies often travel around the world, which becomes an attractive lure for intending dancers. One female participant highlights, 'if you're accepted into a company and that company tours, then you get to go wherever they go'$_{(D2)}$ and it is also useful 'to get your name out there to a lot of audiences'$_{(D6)}$. It is also considered a 'stable working environment'$_{(D7)}$ that makes it 'easier to hop from one company to another'$_{(D6)}$. However, dancers indicated that being recruited by a dance company 'straight out of an institution is rare'$_{(D5)}$. Despite the challenges trainees might face in terms of finding employment, it appears that the current sample are well aware that employment is not necessarily guaranteed. This suggests that the training institution in the current study has been able to foster realistic expectations about what intending dancers should expect post-training. One of the reasons that work is limited is because there are too many qualified artists for the work that is available (Bennett, 2009). This appears to result in an underlying sense of competition that exists in the dance industry: 'finding a job is a challenge because there are a lot of other dancers out there who want the same job as you'$_{(D4)}$, 'you're competing against all of Australia'$_{(D5)}$ and 'you have to be competitive because you're always faced with people who are better than you'$_{(D2)}$.

The second employment opportunity is to become a freelance artist. This is a common although challenging path for trained dancers because of the lack of government funding. Bennett (2009: 318) highlights that 'almost all Australian artists are sole traders and work on a freelance basis, necessitating a raft of small business skills and the ability to manage these requirements across a number of physical locations and contractual agreements'. Bennett (2009) found in her qualitative study of intending professional dancers that they would end up working in multiple dance-related roles, such as teaching, choreographing, and administrative roles with dance institutions. The intending dancers in the current study were also aware of this challenge: 'I've had a lot of friends apply for grants

and they have had these fantastic ideas for shows but there's not enough money from the government for these grants'(D6). The concern about a lack of work was echoed by a first-year student suggesting that 'in terms of getting work, there is a lot of competition and especially not much government funding'(D1). However, one participant was a recent graduate who had successfully launched her own dance company, which was created to improve the availability of dance in primary and secondary schools. This particular participant had reaped the rewards from her dance training and was now working full-time teaching dance in schools. Participants in the current study gave the impression that they were aware that gaining a dance contract post-training would be a challenge, suggesting that the dance institution is able to create realistic notions around employment.

Theme 3: Location

Convenience of location played a key role in why the dancers in the current study chose their particular training institution: 'it's local for me'(D5), 'there's nothing else in [state]'(D8), 'I was familiar with it'(D2) and 'I wasn't really prepared to move'(D4). Raja et al. (2004) suggest that employment alternatives (or in this case, the availability of dance institutions) may affect contract dynamics, therefore owing to a lack of alternatives it might be that dancers have weaker perceptions about institutional obligations. For example, a dancer who compares three institutions in terms of facilities, teachers, alumni, and pricing may form stronger perceptions of the institution they have chosen, in comparison to a dancer who only had one choice. In this case, if a dancer does not consider alternate locations to train, they may place less importance on the quality of services provided – particularly as, in the state where the current study was undertaken, there are limited dance training alternatives. In other states, the dance culture is more competitive and opportunistic, where dancers are 'camera ready'(D10) with hair and makeup done. This is because a producer of a dance production may walk in unexpectedly and select three dancers for an upcoming production. The idea that these opportunities are frequent may highlight that the location where these dancers are training would play a crucial role in shaping individuals' expectations about the training quality. In a more competitive location, dancers may have stronger perceptions about what their institution should provide.

Theme 4: Peer recommendation

Word of mouth promotion and peer recommendation can have a powerful effect on organizational success (Silverman, 2001). This notion is particularly evident in the dance industry in Australia because of the well-connected networks, which can have a subsequent effect on recruitment. One male participant joined the dance institution because his older sister undertook her dance training there and he felt a sense of support, commenting 'I had become quite good friends with everyone in her year level and they were so supportive'(D2). Other participants had been

strongly influenced by what their peers had to say. For example, one female participant comments that 'I know a number of people who have graduated from [institution] so after speaking to a few of my friends, I came and decided to audition here'$_{(D1)}$, while another comments 'it was a time that I was hearing so much about them and how good they were. . .after coming here, I don't think I would have been happier anywhere else'$_{(D3)}$. The emphasis here should be on the role that peer recommendation may play as a recruitment tool for dance institutions. The notion that peer recommendation is an essential recruitment tool in the dance industry highlights the importance of managing psychological contracts, which would result in current dancers positively promoting the dance institution to new recruits.

Furthermore, the experiences of other dancers can also lead them to believe that they too may achieve the same level of success. As one female participant comments, 'I had a friend that did the course and was a brilliant dancer and I thought, if he can do that, I can too'$_{(D6)}$. Social interaction with others may have a big impact in shaping psychological contracts (Conway and Briner, 2009). If dancers see graduates or senior intending dancers with a high level of skill, it may create a feeling that they too will achieve that level of performance and ability, and subsequently may shape perceptions about what the institution can provide. Understanding the motivations behind their pursuit of a dance career may provide some insight into whether they would contribute to perceptions about their subsequent dance training expectations. It may be that individuals training for highly specialized careers could generate stronger perceptions about what they are to receive or provide to the institution. The challenge, then, for dance training institutions is to understand the motivation behind students' career paths and to use that knowledge to manage appropriate and realistic notions about what they can expect during training.

Content of psychological contract

As alluded to previously, the content of such psychological contracts has not been investigated, yet knowledge of what dancers perceive to be important in an exchange relationship with their institution could have valuable benefits. In general, dancers who feel their institution has fulfilled these obligations towards them may be more satisfied with their training experience, which may lead to referrals to potential recruits. However, before that relationship can be examined, the current study sought to identify what content comprises a dancer's psychological contract.

Theme 1: Skill development

Dance is a highly specialized career, which requires significant training and skill development. Several dancers in the current study were aware of the importance of maintaining their physique and technique: 'you have to keep on yourself and you've got to work hard to get what you want out of it'$_{(D2)}$, 'you want to keep

training and you want to keep your skills up'(D6) and 'the biggest struggle is keeping in shape'(D3). Maintaining ability is very important in the dance training context, in which dancers may feel that their institution is obliged to 'push me to go that extra step'(D3), to be 'very on me'(D2), and provide them with the necessary training to facilitate this high level of ability so they can come out a 'good, polished dancer'(D6). However, these expectations are not always met; as one female participant comments, 'the teachers push you a lot but they don't always give you the corrections you need. They let you figure it out for yourself and then say it's the smarter ones who know what they're doing wrong'(D4). In this instance, it appears that dancers have the expectation of skill development, but the extent to which dance instructors provide feedback may vary. Given that dancers are reliant on their technique for career success, it is no surprise that dancers perceive this provision as an important obligation of the institution.

Theme 2: Quality teachers and training

Paying an institution to develop an individual in preparation for a career is naturally attached to the expectation that the institution will provide quality facilities and teaching (Bordia and Bordia, 2008). The importance of this perceived obligation is clearly summarized by one male student:

> I guess I expected to receive a quality standard of teachers. Everyone has had their run of average teachers in dance schools and I kind of think that now I'm at tertiary level and I'm dancing full-time, I expect to be taught by the best if I'm paying. If these people are going to be leading me into a dance career, then I expect them to have had one for themselves, that's for sure.(D3)

Therefore, as dance is such a specialized career, students have strong expectations that their training institution should provide them with quality teachers and training and thus the opportunity to succeed in the industry. It should be noted that the institution in the current study has a rule of thumb that all teaching staff must have a minimum of five years of professional dance experience. This would be one way of ensuring that current students are provided with expert training and that staff understand the complexities of being a professional dancer and can therefore ensure expectations are realistic and managed. Dancers may also come with the perception that their institution, which has been responsible for developing successful dancers in the past, has a reputation for maintaining a level of training that allows that success to be attained. One dancer highlights: 'because of their reputation, I would expect them to ensure I'm of quite a high standard'(D1).

Theme 3: Networking opportunities

As the Australian dance culture is well connected, networking may provide a useful tool for enhancing potential employment opportunities for dancers in training.

Given this culture, it may also lead to perceptions of institutional obligation, whereby the dancers expect the institution to provide such opportunities for networking, thus enabling them to enhance their potential for employment post-training. Dancers indicated that 'Australia has a really good dance community . . . it's easy to get to know everybody in the arts community and get word of mouth of different work'$_{(D1)}$. This potential is highlighted by previous research indicating that networking is positively linked with career success, salary, and career satisfaction (Wolff and Moder, 2009). Although the data from the current study on intending dancers did not involve specific questions about job seeking or networking behaviors, it is interesting to note that networking was a prevalent theme. One participant mentioned the opportunity for dancers to 'meet a lot of good people. . . you would be able to learn a lot from the people that you've met, and just dancing in general'$_{(D2),}$ and that this opportunity was relatively available in the industry. Although these comments mention the importance and significance of networking, they do not appear to highlight who is responsible to help facilitate those networking opportunities. A director of a dance training institution in Australia comments: 'you have to have good organizational skills yourself. Often they expect you to get a job for them and that's not realistic. You've got to network. It's really important.' This comment highlights the importance of networking from the dance-educator's perspective; however, it appears that networking is often left up to the dancer to undertake. Although both the dancers and dance-educator identify networking to be important in the training process, clearly identifying who is responsible for providing such an opportunity is an important component in the formation and interpretation of the psychological contract. Dance-educators may feel that it is the responsibility of the dancer and that they are therefore not obliged to provide such opportunities, whereas the dancers may perceive that the institution should facilitate such opportunities. This is an important distinction to make, although it has not been specifically explored in the current study. Not looking at the reciprocity of the dance trainee–institution relationship is accepted as a limitation, and it is suggested that future research distinguish between social norms of dance trainees' training, expectations of their experience, and explicit perceptions of what they expect the institution to provide them, and vice versa.

Conclusion

Psychological contract literature brings new knowledge to the field of dance education. As this research has been conducted in a relatively unexplored area, it was necessary to explore the situational factors that may influence perceptions of psychological contract, which include natural skill progression, the potential for an exciting career, location of the training institution, and peer recommendation by existing or alumni students of the dance institution. Previous literature suggests that situational factors may influence how psychological contracts develop and different environments allow for different perceptions to be formed (Conway and Briner, 2009; Rousseau, 2001). Understanding the intending dancer's motivations

for pursuing this career may add some insight into how perceptions of institutional obligation are formed and the intensity of such perceptions.

In terms of the content elicited from dancers, three core items were indicated: skill development (creating an environment that allows students to improve), quality teachers and training, and networking opportunities which enhance the potential for gaining employment post-training. Given the high level of commitment to a dance career, it is not surprising that intending dancers have high expectations that their dance institution provide them with a quality experience that will facilitate future employment in the dance industry. To help understand what intending dancers perceive as institutional obligations and to help manage these perceptual obligations, dance institutions are encouraged to have regular and open communication with dance trainees. For example, the dance institution in the current sample has an informal meeting with each dance trainee five weeks into their program and annually thereafter. This would be one strategy to ensure psychological contracts are understood, realistic, and well managed.

While the current study indicates that psychological contracts may be an alternative way of examining the trainee–institution relationship, the limitations – in the scope of the interviewee pool and the focus on only one dance institution – call for further research. There are several potential avenues to pursue. Firstly, there is the possibility of expanding the sample across several institutions, encompassing private and higher education institutions, as well as a breakdown across training levels, to explore dancers' perceptions of the trainee–institution relationship, which can then be more securely generalized. Secondly, further items which comprise a dancer's psychological contract might be elicited, and a quantitative approach used to investigate the strength of these items. Thirdly, as dance institutions place a great deal of importance on word of mouth to encourage new recruits, and the dance industry is well connected, what role can psychological contracts play in promoting the institution? Fulfillment of psychological contracts has the potential to retain dancers within their institution, which may also lead to positive organizational citizenship behavior and, subsequently, recommendation to potential recruits. Finally, there is scope for further research to investigate how psychological contracts impact on operational aspects of the dance institution in terms of teaching methods, recruitment processes, and the marketing and facilitating of the student experience. As highlighted by Rousseau (2004: 120), 'understanding and effectively managing these psychological contracts can help organizations thrive'. Such an approach would provide an insight into the dance training industry, enabling a clearer understanding of what it means to be an intending professional dancer and how perceptions of institutional obligation can influence psychological contracts.

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Author biographies

Alicia R Stanway is an early career researcher in the Faculty of Business and Law at Edith Cowan University based in Perth, Western Australia. She received her PhD in business from the University of South Australia. Her research interests include personality assessment, psychological contracts in organizational and educational contexts, and psychosocial development in creative contexts. Her current work focuses on the nexus between personality traits and organizational behavior of dancers in higher education.

Sarbari Bordia is a senior lecturer in the Research School of Management at Australian National University based in Canberra, Australia. She holds an EdM in TESOL studies from Temple University, Philadelphia, USA, and a PhD in the same discipline from the University of Queensland, Australia. Her research interests include multi-lingual corporate communication, psychological contracts in organizational and educational contexts, and internationalization of management education. Her research has been published in journals such as *Journal of Management, Journal of Vocational Behavior, Journal of Applied Social Psychology, Journal of Business and Psychology*, and *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*. She is the co-author of the *Journal of International Education in Business*.

Erich C Fein is a senior lecturer in the School of Business and Law at Central Queensland University. He received his PhD in industrial/organizational psychology from the Ohio State University and also holds an MFA in creative writing from Eastern Washington University. His research focuses on motivational constructs and processes that are relevant to performance and wellness management and employee selection and development. His recent work has focused on the intersection of compound traits and motivation in learning contexts. He is currently engaged in projects related to ethical climate and employee performance and the use of virtue ethics in ethics education. His publications have appeared in *International Journal of Selection and Assessment, Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, and *Journal of Management Development*. His most recent publication, 'Categorizing person-based ethical constructs using a taxonomy of cognitive skills, moral volition, and personal values', appears in *Research in Ethical Issues in Organizations* 8 (2012).