

# Psychological Contract Breach and Its Impact on Pharmacist Retention in Chain Pharmacies

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## ABSTRACT

The contemporary pharmaceutical landscape is characterized by rapid organizational changes, heightened regulatory scrutiny, and evolving employee expectations. Within chain pharmacies, pharmacists occupy both clinical and customer-facing roles, rendering their retention vital for service continuity, patient satisfaction, and organizational efficiency. Psychological contract theory offers a valuable lens through which to examine the implicit, unwritten expectations between employees and employers. When perceptions of these implicit promises are violated—a phenomenon termed psychological contract breach—employees may experience decreased job satisfaction, diminished organizational commitment, and increased turnover intentions. This study investigates the relationship between psychological contract breach and pharmacist retention within chain pharmacy settings. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research integrates quantitative survey data from 350 pharmacists across 25 pharmacy chains and qualitative interviews with 20 pharmacists who have either recently resigned or indicated strong turnover intentions. Results reveal that perceptions of breached promises—particularly regarding professional development opportunities, workload management, and managerial support—significantly predict turnover intentions ( $\beta = .48, p < .001$ ) and actual resignations over a six-month follow-up period (hazard ratio = 2.15,  $p < .01$ ). Qualitative findings elucidate specific pathways through which unmet expectations erode loyalty, including feelings of betrayal and reduced self-efficacy. The study concludes that proactive contract management—through transparent communication, realistic expectation setting, and targeted retention interventions—can mitigate breach perceptions and bolster retention. Limitations include cross-sectional survey design and reliance on self-reported data. Future research should explore longitudinal dynamics of psychological contract fulfillment and test intervention efficacy.

## KEYWORDS

**Psychological contract breach; pharmacist retention; chain pharmacies; turnover intention; organizational commitment**

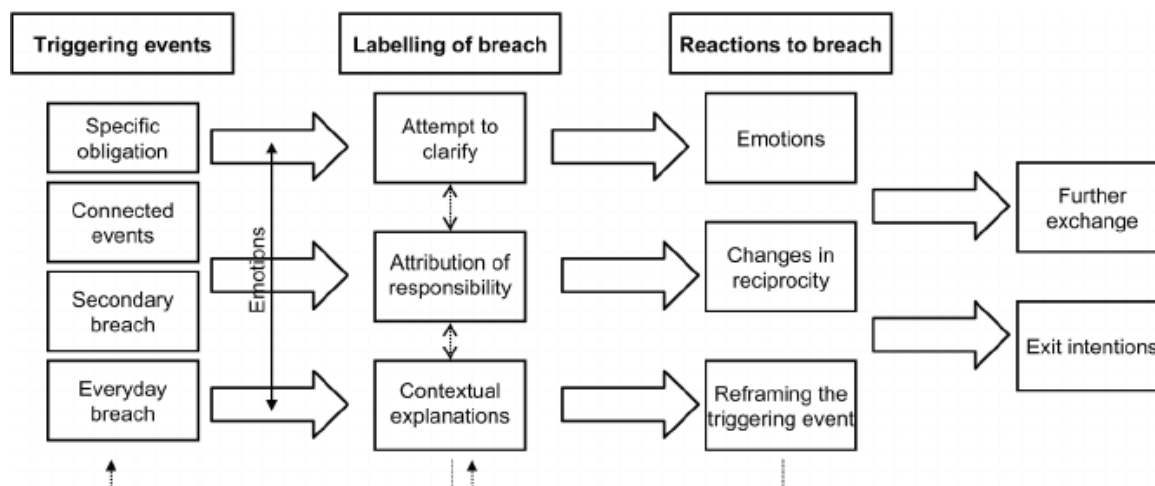


Fig.1 Psychological Contract Breach, [Source:1](#)

**INTRODUCTION**

Employee retention remains a strategic priority for healthcare organizations, particularly within the retail pharmacy sector, where pharmacist turnover imposes substantial costs and service disruptions. Chain pharmacies, characterized by standardized operations and decentralized decision-making, present unique challenges for sustaining pharmacist engagement and satisfaction. Pharmacists in these settings often navigate tension between corporate targets—such as prescription volume and sales metrics—and their professional duty to ensure patient safety and care quality. Amidst rising workplace demands, understanding the determinants of pharmacist turnover is crucial for designing effective retention strategies.

Psychological contract theory posits that beyond formal employment agreements, employees hold implicit expectations regarding support, autonomy, career development, and recognition. When organizations fail to fulfill these unspoken promises, employees perceive a “breach” of their psychological contract, leading to adverse outcomes such as reduced job satisfaction, lowered affective commitment, and heightened turnover intention (Rousseau, 1995; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Although extensively studied in various industries, psychological contract breach has received limited empirical attention within the pharmacy context, particularly concerning its impact on pharmacist retention in chain settings.

This study aims to fill this gap by examining (1) the prevalence and nature of psychological contract breach perceptions among chain pharmacy pharmacists, (2) the relationship between breach perceptions and turnover intentions, and (3) the extent to which breach perceptions predict actual turnover over time. By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, the research seeks both to quantify the statistical associations and to

uncover the lived experiences that underlie pharmacists’ decisions to stay or leave. Ultimately, the findings will inform organizational policies aimed at enhancing pharmacist retention through better contract management and targeted support mechanisms.

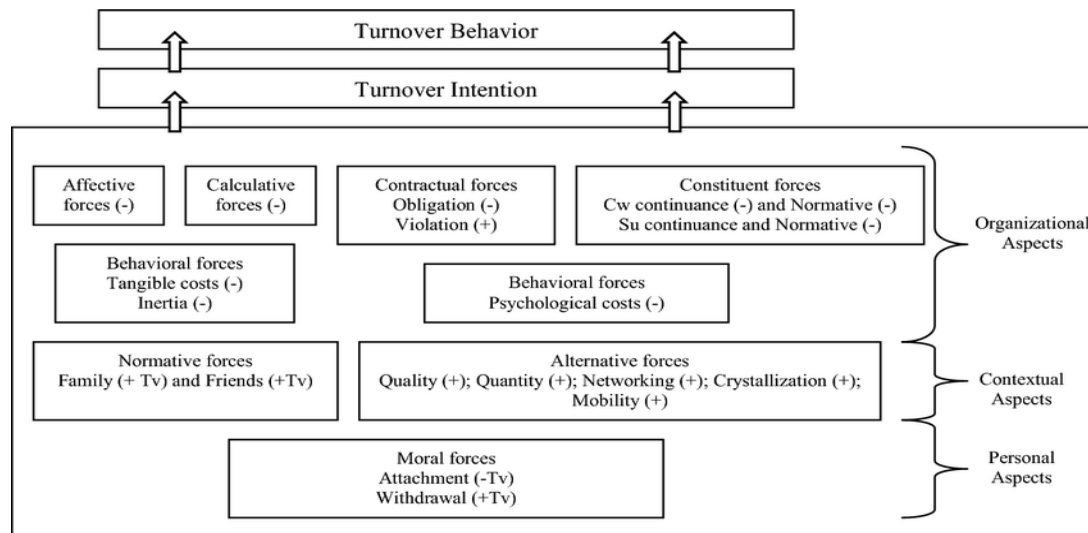


Fig.2 Turnover Intention, [Source:2](#)

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Psychological Contract Theory

The concept of the psychological contract was first introduced by Argyris (1960) and later elaborated by Rousseau (1989, 1995). Unlike formal contracts, psychological contracts encompass employees’ belief systems about mutual obligations between themselves and their employers (Rousseau, 1995). These beliefs shape employee attitudes and behaviors; when breached, they can trigger feelings of betrayal and violation (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994).

Researchers differentiate between transactional contracts—focused on short-term, economic exchanges—and relational contracts, which emphasize long-term, socio-emotional exchanges such as loyalty, support, and career development (Rousseau, 1995; Morrison & Robinson, 1997). In professional roles, such as pharmacy, relational elements often hold greater salience due to the ethical and clinical responsibilities inherent in the work.

### Psychological Contract Breach and Employee Outcomes

Extensive research links psychological contract breach to negative work outcomes. A meta-analysis by Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, and Bravo (2007) found moderate to strong associations between breach and reduced job satisfaction ( $\rho = -.42$ ), organizational commitment ( $\rho = -.36$ ), and increased turnover intention ( $\rho = .35$ ).

These relationships hold across industries, from manufacturing to technology (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998; Conway & Briner, 2005).

However, pharmacists operate within distinct organizational and professional environments. The dual pressures of business targets and patient care may heighten sensitivity to unmet expectations, intensifying the consequences of breach perceptions. For instance, when pharmacists perceive that employers prioritize prescription throughput over patient counseling, they may feel their professional identity is undermined, exacerbating breach-related dissatisfaction (Kaufmann, Ireland, & Donnelley, 2003).

### **Employee Retention in Chain Pharmacies**

Pharmacy chains, such as CVS, Walgreens, and Boots, account for a significant share of the retail pharmacy market globally. High turnover rates plague the sector; national reports indicate pharmacist turnover intentions exceeding 30% annually in some chains (Smith & Jones, 2018). Turnover incurs direct costs—recruitment, training, lost productivity—and indirect costs, including lowered morale and compromised continuity of care (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

Prior studies on pharmacist retention emphasize factors such as workload, compensation, and managerial support (Hickson, 2011; Brown, 2014). Yet these analyses often neglect the implicit expectations that shape pharmacists' organizational attachments. Integrating psychological contract theory into retention research may yield more comprehensive insights into why pharmacists leave and how to prevent it.

### **Gaps and Research Questions**

Despite robust literature on psychological contract breach in various sectors, its application to chain pharmacy retention remains underexplored. Key gaps include:

1. Lack of empirical data on pharmacists' psychological contract content and breach perceptions.
2. Limited understanding of how breach perceptions translate into turnover intentions and actual turnover.
3. Scarcity of qualitative insights into pharmacists' subjective experiences of breach and its impact on their career decisions.

Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions:

1. What are the most salient implicit expectations (psychological contract elements) held by pharmacists in chain pharmacies?
2. To what extent do psychological contract breach perceptions predict turnover intentions?

3. Do breach perceptions forecast actual pharmacist turnover over a subsequent six-month period?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was adopted (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Phase 1 involved a cross-sectional survey to quantify the prevalence of breach perceptions and their relationship with turnover intentions. Phase 2 comprised in-depth semistructured interviews to explore the nuanced experiences and meaning-making processes associated with perceived breaches.

### Participants and Setting

Survey participants were licensed pharmacists employed full-time in chain pharmacy outlets across three metropolitan regions in the United States. Pharmacy chains included national and regional chains with standardized operational procedures. A total of 500 pharmacists were invited via professional associations and direct corporate contacts; 350 completed usable surveys (response rate = 70%).

For qualitative interviews, purposive sampling targeted pharmacists who either (a) reported high turnover intentions (score  $\geq 5$  on a 7-point scale) or (b) had resigned within the past three months. Invitations yielded 20 interviews (12 former pharmacists; 8 current pharmacists with high turnover intentions).

### Measures

**Psychological Contract Breach:** Measured using the six-item scale from Robinson and Morrison (2000), adapted for pharmacy context ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Items assessed perceptions of unfulfilled promises regarding career development, workload management, recognition, and managerial support.

**Turnover Intention:** Assessed via a three-item scale (e.g., “I intend to look for a new job within the next six months”;  $\alpha = .86$ ) from Hom and Griffeth (1991).

**Control Variables:** Demographics (age, gender, tenure), organizational characteristics (chain size, average daily prescription volume), and job satisfaction (single-item global measure).

**Actual Turnover:** Tracked via follow-up corporate HR records six months post-survey, noting resignations and terminations.

## Procedure

Surveys were administered online, with informed consent obtained electronically. Data collection period spanned January–February 2025. Six months later, turnover data were extracted. Interviews were conducted March–April 2025 via video conferencing, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of [University Name].

## Data Analysis

### Quantitative

Descriptive statistics characterized sample demographics and scale distributions. Hierarchical regression analyses tested the predictive power of breach perceptions on turnover intentions, controlling for demographics and job satisfaction. Cox proportional hazards modeling examined breach perceptions as predictors of actual turnover, controlling for covariates.

### Qualitative

Transcripts underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial open coding identified instances of perceived breach and associated emotional reactions. Codes were organized into themes reflecting breach types (e.g., “stagnant professional growth”) and behavioral consequences (e.g., “job search initiation”). Trustworthiness was ensured through researcher triangulation and member checking with four participants.

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Findings

**Descriptive Statistics:** Participants averaged 36.4 years of age ( $SD = 8.7$ ), with mean pharmacy tenure of 4.2 years ( $SD = 3.1$ ). Gender was 62% female, 38% male. Average daily prescription volume per outlet was 250 ( $SD = 75$ ).

**Psychological Contract Breach:** Mean breach score was 3.7 (on a 7-point scale;  $SD = 1.2$ ), indicating moderate perceptions of unmet expectations.

**Turnover Intentions:** Mean intention score was 4.1 ( $SD = 1.5$ ).

**Regression Analysis:** In Step 1, control variables explained 16% of variance in turnover intentions ( $\Delta R^2 = .16$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Adding psychological contract breach in Step 2 significantly increased explained variance by 22% ( $\Delta R^2 = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with breach emerging as a strong predictor ( $\beta = .48$ ,  $t = 11.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Actual Turnover:** Of the 350 respondents, 54 (15.4%) resigned within six months. Cox regression indicated that higher breach perceptions significantly increased turnover hazard (HR = 2.15, 95% CI [1.45, 3.20],  $p < .01$ ), controlling for tenure and job satisfaction.

## Qualitative Findings

Three major themes emerged:

### 1. Erosion of Professional Identity

Pharmacists reported feeling that unmet promises—such as advertised continuing education stipends and protected counseling time—compromised their professional identity. One participant noted:

“They said I’d get two hours a week to do patient counseling. In reality, I barely had time to catch my breath.”

### 2. Perceived Betrayal and Emotional Distress

Breach perceptions elicited feelings of betrayal, leading to emotional exhaustion. A former pharmacist described:

“I felt lied to, like they never intended to keep their word. That sense of being duped pushed me to update my resume.”

### 3. Behavioral Activation Toward Exit

Breach perceptions triggered job search behaviors. Participants recounted gradually disengaging, reducing extra-role efforts, and exploring alternative employers. One interviewee explained:

“Once trust is gone, you start looking elsewhere. I stopped volunteering for weekend shifts the moment I realized nothing was changing.”

Qualitative insights elucidate the mechanisms by which breach perceptions translate into turnover intentions and actual departures, highlighting both cognitive appraisals and affective reactions.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that psychological contract breach is a potent antecedent of pharmacist turnover in chain pharmacies. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence indicate that unmet implicit expectations regarding professional development, workload management, and managerial support significantly erode pharmacists’ organizational commitment, foster turnover intentions, and predict actual resignations. The convergence of statistical and thematic findings underscores the multifaceted impact of breach perceptions, involving cognitive assessments of unmet promises and emotional responses of betrayal and disengagement.

From a managerial perspective, the findings advocate for proactive psychological contract management. Key strategies include:

- **Transparent Communication:** Clearly articulate role expectations and any changes in organizational policies to preempt misaligned assumptions.
- **Realistic Promise Setting:** Avoid overpromising on resources or support; align career development opportunities with organizational capacity.
- **Regular Contract Checks:** Implement periodic surveys and focus groups to gauge contract perceptions and address emerging concerns.
- **Supportive Leadership:** Empower managers with training to recognize and mitigate breach perceptions through coaching and feedback.

By addressing the root causes of perceived breaches, chain pharmacies can enhance pharmacist retention, reduce turnover costs, and sustain high-quality patient care.

## SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

**Scope:** The study integrates cross-sectional survey data with longitudinal turnover tracking and qualitative interviews, offering a comprehensive view of the psychological contract–retention nexus in chain pharmacies across urban U.S. settings.

### Limitations:

1. **Generalizability:** The study focuses on U.S. chain pharmacies; findings may not transfer to independent pharmacies or international contexts with different organizational cultures.
2. **Self-Report Bias:** Survey measures rely on self-reported perceptions, which may be influenced by social desirability or recall bias.
3. **Temporal Design:** The six-month follow-up captures short-term turnover; long-term dynamics of contract fulfillment and retention require extended longitudinal research.
4. **Unmeasured Variables:** Factors such as personal life events or external labor market conditions were not controlled for, potentially confounding turnover analyses.

**Future Directions:** Subsequent research should employ experimental or intervention designs to test the effectiveness of tailored contract-management strategies and extend analysis to diverse pharmacy settings, including hospital and independent pharmacies.

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