RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# The tremors of interconnected triggers over time: How psychological contract breach can erupt

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**Summary**

Adopting an intra-individual process, we explore the dynamics that underlie the emergence of a psychological contract breach. Thirty-seven unique storylines expose how selected stimuli shake employees' psychological contracts to attention and give rise to perceptions of breach as a result of an iterative process of disrupting (introducing triggers that prompt a shift from automatic processing to conscious attention of psychological contract terms), appraisal (revealing elements—goals, attribution, fairness, and resources—playing a role in appraising and making sense of triggers), and (problem-focused and emotion-focused) coping. We discuss the implications of accounting for breach in the absence of a discrete event and draw on selective attention theory to differentiate when stimuli become triggers with the capacity to activate the psychological contract. We extend existing research by revealing the unique role that triggers, and their interconnectedness play in the cognition of contract breach, building up pressure until a threshold has been surpassed and breach is perceived. Our study highlights the need for managers to use strategies to deescalate the accumulation of triggers.

**KEYWORDS**

dynamics, process research, psychological contract breach, triggers, within-person

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Ongoing organizational changes such as downsizing, restructuring, and reengineering not only reshape organizations but also affect employees' psychological contracts (Bellou, 2006; Cascio & Aguinis, 2008; Chaudhry & Song, 2014; Freese et al., 2011; Saunders & Thornhill, 2006). Psychological contracts capture employees' mental models of the exchange agreement between themselves and their organization (Rousseau, 2001). If an employer appears to fall short in delivering on their commitments, this can lead to employee perceptions of a psychological contract breach (Conway & Briner, 2005; Morrison & Robinson, 1997), with deleterious consequences for employee attitudes and behavior (Griep et al., 2016; Jensen et al., 2010; Solinger et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2007).

Empirical studies examining the consequences of contract breach have operationalized a breach as a self-contained/isolated event and examined it in terms of a simplistic cause–effect relationship (Dulac et al., 2008). However, there are grounds for complementing this view with one that accounts for the accumulation of small events that may ultimately give rise to the perceptions of breach (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Wiechers et al., 2019). Employee evaluations of their psychological contract can fluctuate monthly (Ng et al., 2014), weekly

(Solinger et al., 2016), and even on a daily basis (Conway & Briner, 2002), suggesting that the degree of dynamism of these contracts is not fully captured by studies that view breach as a discrete event. In light of this, scholars have begun to highlight the dynamic nature of psychological contracts (e.g., Bankins, 2015; Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018; Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Seeck & Parzefall, 2008; Solinger et al., 2016), prompting the following question: If the psychological contract is a dynamic process (Conway & Briner, 2005), should not breach also be viewed as a dynamic process?

To accommodate the dynamism of contracts, Rousseau and colleagues (2018) developed a phase-based model of psychological contract processes. The model captures both underfulfillment (a deficiency) as well as overfulfillment (excess), where the organization fails to deliver or delivers more than they promised, respectively, resulting in varying levels of positive or negative reactions (cf. Lambert et al., 2003). This lack of fit (either positive or negative) disrupts an individual's psychological contract, generating a transition from the status quo (i.e., the stabilized contract) to either renegotiation or reparation of the contract, where an employee attempts to restore it to its original state or create a revised set of obligations (Rousseau et al., 2018). While the idea of disruption is at the center of the dynamic phase-based model of psychological contract processes, what is less clear is how employees interpret these disruptions and whether they pick up on signals that precede the disruption, thereby activating their attention and making their psychological contract salient. To investigate this, we set out to explore the intra-individual processes that underlie the emergence of perceived contract breach by addressing the following research question: *How does the process of breach develop and unfold over time?*

Our study addresses a recent call for a more systematic ground-up exploration of the psychological contract as a process (Bankins et al., 2020). Specifically, our approach adds to the existing understanding of the processual nature of breach perceptions through an empirical examination of how selected stimuli (i.e., triggers; Wiechers et al., 2019) prompt attention to psychological contracts and give rise to perceptions of breach as a result of an iterative process of disrupting, appraisal, and coping. Second, we advance understanding by revealing an underexposed part of breach perceptions: the interconnectedness of stimuli as the driver of the emergence of contract breach. Whereas unattended, isolated stimuli typically go unnoticed (Lavie et al., 2004; Weick et al., 2005), novel meanings are attributed to the interconnectedness of stimuli, affecting perceptions of subsequent occurrences, both in the short and long terms (Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018; Ng et al., 2014; Solinger et al., 2016). Therefore, we offer an alternative yet complementary view of how breach occurs in the absence of a discrete event. Third, we provide empirical evidence that the accumulation of (interconnected) stimuli over time, even if they occur in a nonlinear manner, may exceed an individual's personal tolerance limit, resulting in the eruption of a perceived breach. This provides support to the idea that employees have breach thresholds (Rigotti, 2009; Schalk & Roe, 2007) and sheds light on the nonlinear dynamics of psychological contract breach.

## 2 | INTRA-INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT PERCEPTIONS

Psychological contracts are idiosyncratic, capturing the subjective individual perception of mutuality—not mutuality in fact—in the employment relationship: an intra-individual agreement existing "in the eye of the beholder" (Rousseau, 1995, p. 6). Consequently, there will be variation between employees in their perceptions as well as a lack of alignment between their perceptions and those of their employer (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Employees are often not aware of their agreements (Freese, 2007) and only become conscious of them if changes are made, because their mental schema forms a standard to evaluate whether or not signals are important enough to respond to (Rousseau, 1995, 2001; Schalk & Roe, 2007; Wiechers et al., 2019). For example, perceiving signals of underfulfillment motivates an individual to try to repair and reactivate the contract to a previous level of fulfillment (Tomprou et al., 2015). This evaluation automatically activates the sensemaking process as a result of the discrepancy between one's expectations and reality by assessing the situation and its significance (Bankins, 2015; Mumford et al., 2008; Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Smith & Kirby, 2009). Therefore, appraisal and sensemaking theories serve as the conceptual basis of the present study, as we explore the emergence of cognitions of psychological contract breach. Sensemaking theory facilitates the identification of the salient factors that are likely to activate a psychological contract, while appraisal theory allows for the systematizing, understanding, and predicting of individual differences in the assessment of these salient factors. Appraisal theory helps to estimate the different coping actions (Solinger et al., 2016; Tomprou et al., 2015) that employees engage in to diminish perceived discrepancies and restore balance in the employment relationship (Rousseau et al., 2018).

### 2.1 | Making sense through appraisal

When the reciprocal exchange is disrupted, employees will make an assessment based on their perception of promises made (Rousseau, 1995). This may elicit questions such as, "What's going on here?" and "Is this happening only to me or to others as well?". This will activate a process of conscious information searching to fill in an individual's "blanks" in their understanding (Diehl & Coyle-Shapiro, 2019). Because disruptive situations can entail ambiguity, confusion, and uncertainty (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick et al., 2005), people will often search for information through social comparison (Weick, 1995), as this is an approach that can provide indications about the reliability of an organization (Van den Van den Bos, 2015), thus aiding the generation of potential explanations (Weick et al., 2005). The sensemaking process is guided by appraisals (Mumford et al., 2008), which help an individual assess the situation and its significance (Smith & Kirby, 2009). These appraisals often proceed automatically (i.e., primary appraisal is uncontrolled, efficient, rapid, and rigid; Moors et al., 2013) and are followed by a slower and

more flexible process (i.e., secondary appraisal is a reflective process; Moors et al., 2013), aiding individuals' understanding of the situation (Mumford et al., 2008). Primary appraisal provides indications about whether the incident is relevant (e.g., a threat to personal values or personal goals) and whether it has positive or negative implications (Catino & Patriotta, 2013; Weiss et al., 1999). Secondary appraisal amplifies the primary appraisal by ascribing meaning to the incident (Weiss et al., 1999). However, as most elements of these appraisals primarily take place on an automatic, uncontrolled, and unconscious level, existing research provides little guidance with regard to which elements will capture an individual's attention, making their psychological contract salient. Uncovering these elements underlying the appraisal of disruptions will develop our understanding of how employees assign meanings to perceived signals of over- or under-fulfillment of contract terms.

## 2.2 | Coping choices

We make use of coping theory, as coping responses are the generative principles that explain how and why breach perceptions unfold the way they do (Bankins, 2015; Solinger et al., 2016; Tomprou et al., 2015). For instance, Bankins (2015) showed that employees actively manage and directly repair psychological contracts through specific coping actions, referred to as remedies, with resultant changes to their beliefs about their contract. Even when initial actions turned out to be ineffective, employees continued to enact different coping responses. This highlights the iterative and sometimes enduring repair process that individuals initiate, generated through cycles of sensemaking and appraisal. A dynamic perspective to exploring the process driving breach perceptions and the ways in which employees influence this through coping actions can enhance our understanding of how a breach develops and unfolds over time.

Coping determines moment-to-moment responses to the appraised significance of occurrences and comprises a broad array of possible reactions to stressful experiences (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) study distinguished problem-focused from emotion-focused coping, also referred to as active and passive coping styles (Liu & Perrewé, 2005). Because this classic two-dimensional structure of coping has already been used in several studies on psychological contracts (e.g., Tomprou et al., 2015), we also employ this categorization in our study. Problem-focused coping involves changing occurrences through direct action or active problem solving, such as by taking control, information seeking, and evaluating opportunities and losses. Emotion-focused coping involves softening or soothing emotions associated with the matter, such as through support seeking, avoidance, the withdrawal of effort, accepting responsibility or blame, and self-control. These two types of coping actions differ in the degree to which they lead individuals to appraise the likelihood that the disruption of the psychological contract can be resolved (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Solinger

et al., 2016; Tomprou et al., 2015) with differential consequences for the future state of the psychological contract (Solinger et al., 2016). Appraisal, therefore, is the pivotal stage in the process of any unfolding breach.

## 3 | COLLECTING RESEARCH DATA

To gain insight into the dynamism of psychological contacts (Bankins, 2015; Ng et al., 2014; Schalk & Roe, 2007; Solinger et al., 2016), a process perspective is essential (Conway & Briner, 2005). Process research reveals the dynamic activity underlying change (Langley et al., 2013) and provides insights into the patterns that guide how and why things emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time (Langley, 1999). As all forms of behavior are temporally bounded and unfold over time (Roe, 2014), understanding patterns—sequences in time—in events is key to understanding a process (Langley, 1999; Pentland, 1999). Scholars have attempted to identify and explore certain patterns in psychological contracts, such as how employees can use their agency to deliberately shape, renegotiate, repair, or attempt to reactivate or change their contract (Bankins, 2015; Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Rousseau et al., 2018; Seeck & Parzefall, 2008; Van der Schaft et al., 2019). A process approach facilitates an account of these dynamic patterns, moving beyond the idea of a breach as a discrete event. It achieves this by focusing on unfolding and ongoing sequences of events, giving a fuller and broader representation of the dynamics of the psychological contact exchange, including the process of psychological contract breach.

A qualitative methodology using a critical incident technique (CIT), based on work done by Flanagan (1954), permits this explanatory and process-oriented focus (see Langley, 1999; Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011) as it relies on participants sharing stories, about a specific occurrence, that are significant ("critical") to them. It gives a voice to informants (Eisenhardt et al., 2016) and forms "an understanding of the world from the perspective of those studied" (Pratt, 2009, p. 856). As it collects storylines of participants who, in their own words, reveal unfolding and ongoing sequences in time, while describing the significant events or processes experienced (Chell, 1998), it is considered the most suitable technique for qualitatively investigating processes (e.g., Chell, 2004; Langley, 1999).

Prior psychological contract research has used CIT to understand employees' perceptions of organizational obligations (Aggarwal & Bhargava, 2009), responses to perceived contract breach (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011), violation (Fullerton & Taylor, 2015), the contribution of i-deals to acceptance of a new psychological contract (Davis & Van der Heijden, 2018), and the temporal nature of psychological contracting (Van der Schaft et al., 2019). We chose to give voice to 37 respondents in their recall of the most impactful disruption during change to reveal the developing and unfolding process of breach over time.

## 3.1 | Research context

To allow for an investigation of intra-individual breach perceptions, we first selected a homogeneous sample to narrow down the range of alternative explanations (Palinkas et al., 2015). This data collection took place in the Dutch field of higher education—specifically, teachers of four universities of applied sciences.[1] Universities of applied sciences have faced many challenges over the past decades due to economic strain, political and fiscal challenges, technology, globalization, shifting student and employee demographics, and, above all, increasing calls for accountability (Kezar, 2014). In conjunction with the value-laden desire to reform and improve education (Dollansky, 2014), these external factors continuously redefine higher education and the processes that affect it (Kezar, 2014). This provides the context for the primary respondents in our study.

The total sample consisted of 37 participants (see Table 1) who agreed to participate in this study in response to an email requesting their participation. The average age of the participants was 48.43 years (SD = 8.66), and 56.76% of them were women; the average length of their organizational tenure was 12.76 years (SD = 18.66). In order to increase the explanatory power of the sample (Palinkas et al., 2015), we decided after 23 interviews to expand the sample to include teachers (n = 8) who had recently voluntarily resigned from their organization. As our sample of 31 teachers represented a homogeneous group of professionals, we searched for disconfirming evidence to validate (or not) the patterns found in other organizational contexts (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For this, we used a purposive sample (n = 6) different from the original group in terms of profession and organization, namely, workers in finance, IT, sales, and healthcare to generate variety for theory development and to confirm its validity (Palinkas et al., 2015).

## 3.2 | Interview procedure

Thirty-seven semistructured interviews were conducted in Dutch by a native Dutch speaker. The quotations used in this paper were translated by a native speaker of English. Each interview lasted for approximately an hour. At the beginning of each interview, respondents were informed about the aim of the study and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Following CIT principles, the interviewees were asked to give an example of a disruption in their usual ongoing employment exchange. An interview guide was used to prompt interviewees so that the patterns that underlie their narratives could be delineated. During the data collection, we remained open to emerging developments and early preliminary analyses and stuck to the most theoretically promising leads (Murphy et al., 2017), which led to alterations being made to questions in the subsequent interviews. CIT allows for a narrative data

[1]Dutch higher education follows a binary system, with a distinction between research-oriented universities and profession-oriented universities of applied sciences. In the latter, the mode of education is practice-based, with a strong emphasis on group work and teaching the skills necessary for professional practice. These institutions award bachelor's and master's degrees only.

chronology to be established; therefore, in many cases, a timeline was drawn up by the interviewer and individual interviewees to accurately represent the successive occurrences, making it possible to understand and extend our explorations (Pentland, 1999) to determine the "how" and the "why" of disruptions to the psychological contract.

## 3.3 | Data analysis

To analyze the data, we progressed through several stages of coding (see Figure 1). Coding is analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56) and the critical link "between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 46). The topics of our interview guide ensured that the data were linked to our research questions and existing psychological contract work (c.f., Bankins, 2015; Tomprou et al., 2015). We followed the suggestions of Gioia et al. (2013) in all our coding, where any disagreements led us to "revisit the data, engage in mutual discussions, and develop understandings for arriving at consensual interpretations" (p. 22). The data were coded in Atlas.ti, as this software allows for the easy exchange of data. The coding and findings were continuously discussed with other researchers; the memo function in Atlas.ti was used to summarize thoughts and ideas for interpretation. Although our data analysis followed a nonlinear path that involved "conceptual leaping," as is normal in qualitative research (Klag & Langley, 2013, p. 151), for clarity, we present our analysis in a linear fashion with four distinct phases.

First, we established lower-order codes (see, e.g., the first-order coding of the interview snippet from Participant 3 in Table 2). These initial code names were derived from actual terms used by our participants ("in vivo codes"; Charmaz, 2014, p. 55) and helped to preserve participants' meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself. However, as these in vivo codes do not stand on their own (Charmaz, 2014), our research team discussed, compared, merged, and renamed the codes as we looked for their implicit meanings and actions. These lower-order codes were added to our initial coding frame which was then used to code subsequent interviews.

Second, we generated higher-order concepts. This process allowed us to gain greater insight into what the data meant and which parts had the analytical capability to progress our analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Our research team used these insights to constantly compare and contrast data across different interviews, searching the existing literature to identify concepts that could help explain the data and appeared to be relevant to the research question, until saturation revealed the similarities and differences among these codes. Through this abductive reasoning (see Żelechowska et al., 2020), we were able to group together similar codes under a broader label and identify higher-order concepts. These were cross-checked with researchers at other universities during an international small group meeting.

Third, we distinguished categories that identify phases underlying an unfolding breach. Categories are at the heart of an analysis (Strauss, 1987). Therefore, we returned to another round of coding to link the qualitatively different phases we identified with potential outcomes we observed. In this phase, the emphasis was placed on

**TABLE 1** Participants. [Correction added on 03 June 2022, after first online publication: Table 1 has been updated in this version.]

| # | Gender | Age | Organization | Tenure within organization | Position |
|---|--------|-----|--------------|----------------------------|----------|
| P1 | Female | 62 | A | 31 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P2 | Female | 55 | B | 15 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P3 | Female | 62 | A | 17 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P4 | Male | 50 | B | 17 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P5 | Female | 38 | A | 10 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P6 | Female | 46 | C | 9 years | Lecturer/part-time researcher, tenured faculty member |
| P7 | Male | 49 | A | 6 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P8 | Male | 38 | B | 8 years | Lecturer/part-time coordinator, tenured faculty member |
| P9 | Female | 43 | B | 24 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P10 | Male | 58 | C | 12 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P11 | Female | 54 | C | 16 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P12 | Female | 56 | C | 15 years | Lecturer/part-time coordinator, tenured faculty member |
| P13 | Male | 43 | C | 14 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P14 | Female | 50 | A | 8 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P15 | Male | 30 | B | 7 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P16 | Female | 29 | B | 2 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P17 | Male | 49 | B | 22 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P18 | Female | 47 | C | 16 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P19 | Male | 49 | C | 8 years | Lecturer and part-time coordinator, tenured faculty member |
| P20 | Male | 52 | C | 5 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P21 | Male | 60 | C | 32 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P22 | Female | 53 | C | 9 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P23 | Male | 33 | C | 7 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P24 | Male | 55 | C | 11 years | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P25 | Female | 38 | C | 5 years | Lecturer/part-time coordinator, tenured faculty member |
| P26 | Female | 42 | C | 11 years[a] | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P27 | Female | 44 | A | 5 years[a] | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P28 | Female | 38 | C | 6 years[a] | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P29 | Female | 50 | D | 23 years[a] | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P30 | Male | 47 | C | 2 years[a] | Lecturer/part-time coordinator, three-year tenured |
| P31 | Male | 48 | D | 7 years[a] | Lecturer, tenured faculty member |
| P32 | Male | 51 | E | 14 years | Business controller, tenured |
| P33 | Male | 51 | F | 3 years | Business information architect, tenured |
| P34 | Female | 55 | G | 3 years | Salesperson, tenured |
| P35 | Female | 46 | H | 13 years | (Internal) consultant, tenured |
| P36 | Female | 58 | I | 38 years | Executive assistant, tenured |
| P37 | Female | 63 | J | 21 years | Nurse, tenured |

[a]Tenure before leaving the organization.

exploring how meanings, actions, and social structures are systematically interrelated, to unify ideas analytically based on possible theoretical meanings of the data and the grounded theory coding, in order to fill in the gaps (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Using the memo function stored in Atlas.ti, we distilled the categories of disrupting, appraising, and coping. In this phase, as a form of peer debriefing (Given, 2008), three independent researchers randomly

checked the consistency of our coding of the interviews and critically interrogated emerging theories. This helped challenge our assumptions, contributed to the credibility of the findings and conclusions drawn, and gave us confidence in building our theory.

The fourth and final phase of the analysis was a validation check based on a purposive sample in other organizational contexts ($n = 6$) to confirm or contradict the patterns found (Creswell & Miller, 2000).
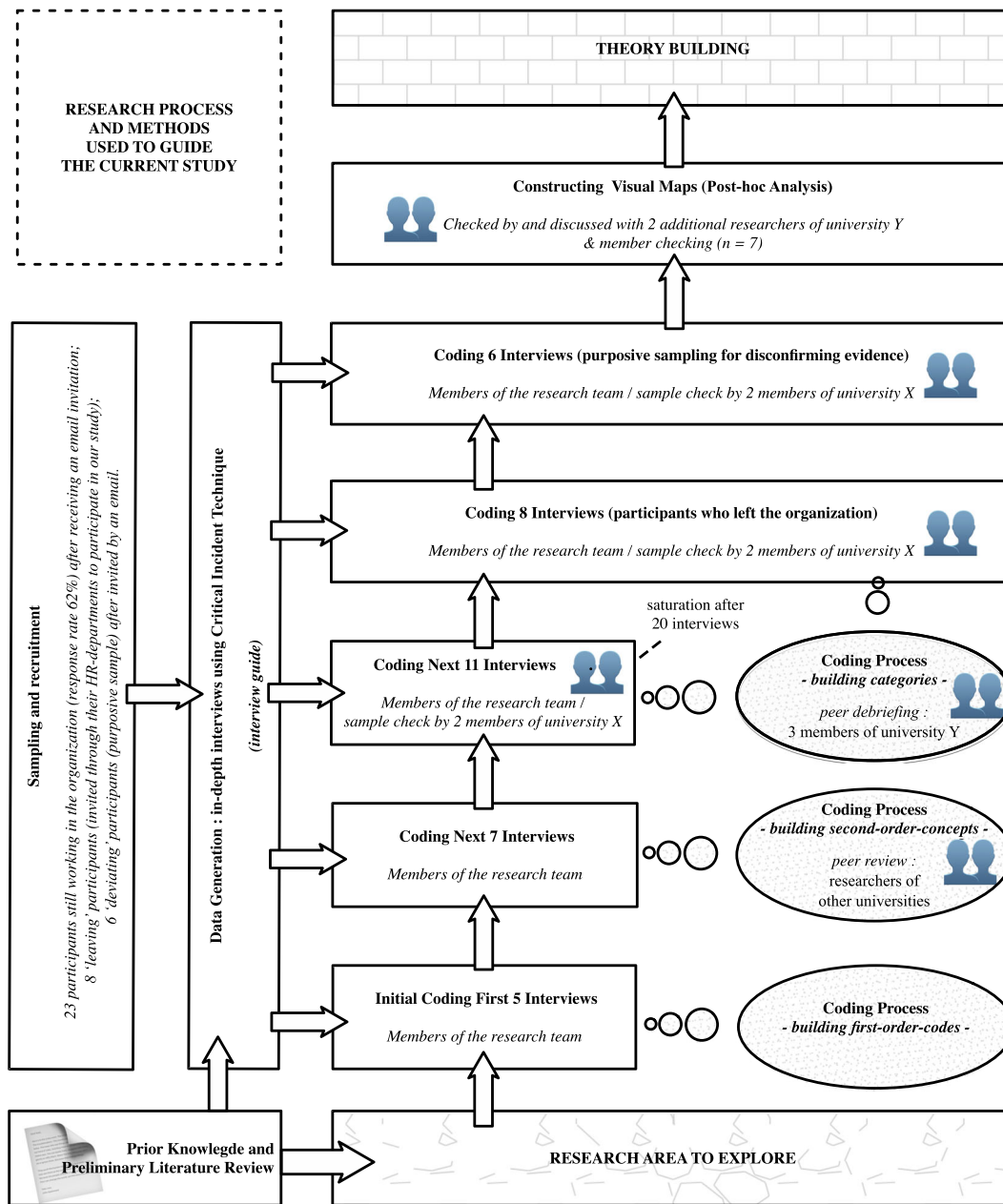
**FIGURE 1**    Flow chart research process and methods used [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

These were checked by and discussed with two independent researchers. No significant differences were found.

# 4 | FINDINGS

Table 3 illustrates the structure and ordering of the process of psychological contract breach through representative quotations from the participants. These quotations reveal a general pattern in which individuals perceive signals (triggers) disrupting their psychological contract, appraise its significance for and impact on the psychological contract, and finally, cope with appraised amendments to the psychological contract.

## 4.1 | Disrupting the psychological contract

Participants were asked to recall a critical incident in their relationship with their employer. Contrary to our expectations, very few respondents mentioned signals of overfulfillment of contract terms. Consistent with Morrison and Robinson (1997) and Conway and Briner (2002), they reported a prevalence of negative incidents. Just four participants mentioned a positive signal; however, these were immediately followed by negative signals. For example, one participant (P31) revealed: "*While other people were better qualified, our proposal was accepted; a project which I developed in my spare time and hoped would become a part of my job. Amazing! For me, this really was a sign of appreciation!*" However, this was followed by: "*But the promise they*

**TABLE 2** Interview snippet: Example of coding orders in this study

| Interview Snippet | Lower-order | Higher-order | Categories |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Participant 3* | | | |
| "Suddenly, I read in the email that there was a special committee." | expected (change in) task(s) | direct trigger | DISRUPTING |
| *I : "What were you thinking at the time?"* | | | |
| "What was I thinking at that time? I was quite taken aback. Something like, well, I had a lot of different feelings. I felt set aside. I felt unnoticed. That was about it. | emotional response | emotional appraisal | APPRAISING |
| So I thought, because later on I started to think, that if you chat more often with the boss, enter his room frequently, and drop some ideas every now and then, you'll get the job. And no one asked about the normal routine, who was doing what and so on. So that… | procedural fairness | fairness | APPRAISING |
| I felt anger, too, of course." | emotional response | emotional appraisal | APPRAISING |
| *I : "Were you the only one to whom this happened?"* | | | |
| "I don't know, I didn't discuss it with others. I've only been talking about it at home." | seeking support (at home) | emotion-focused coping | COPING |
| *I : "Yes… And what made this really disturbing?"* | | | |
| "Because I felt I deserved to be in the committee. Because I was really into it. | unfulfilled expectation | fairness | APPRAISING |
| I'm just very committed. I mean, I can also prepare and start up things and so on. But ultimately I think: How do you motivate students to reach their goals without the idea of them being judged solely on their results." | | | |
| *I : "So it affected a personal goal?"* | | | |
| "Well yes, that was cut off because I was no longer allowed to participate in the whole process." | goal discrepancy | appraisal of goals | APPRAISING |
| *I : "So, this is an incident in itself? Or…"* | | | |
| "It was a single event and that was also the moment I thought "go to hell". I was so upset… | emotional response | emotional appraisal | APPRAISING |
| My boss was communicating so terribly. I thought to myself: This will not happen to me anymore. | blaming supervisor | appraisal of attribution | APPRAISING |
| Later on, I understood why he is the person he is… Oh well, but at that moment I wasn't able to handle the situation." | reframing the situation | emotion-focused coping | COPING |

**TABLE 3**   Overview of categories, concepts, and examples of supporting quotations

| | |
|---|---|
| "Then, I sat with that interim manager and he began, well, in a very measured way: ..And this is your score. And that means that you are no longer allowed to supervise internships. Yes…except under surveillance. That kind of heavy words were used. And I was just completely, completely confused […] No. This can't be happening, not like this, tasks were suddenly taken away from me." (P11) | |
| "Out of the blue, because I incidentally met her for something else, the HR manager said to me... I don't even know what the other thing was. She says: Oh well, that sabbatical, that is not going to happen. And then I was thinking: You tell me this just like that? You could at least have invited me to talk about it. We have discussed this before, talked it through. You should have invited me and told me: Well, listen, about next year; we'll have to make some changes and I am very sorry for you. But even that did not pass her lips… Like, I feel sorry for you, that this is not going to happen, or something like that… but no, nothing! And now I think, yeah, come on!" (P1) | **Trigger (direct)** |
| "And then you come back together and don't know what they said to the others, and then they tell you. So, this is how it is? Yes, I can stay and what about you? My colleague said: No, I'm out, I'm sacked. That was "The" moment of truth." (P10) | **Trigger (indirect)** |
| "I really wanted to expand my contract, also because I intended to buy a house, one full day or half a day extra. I have been busy for a year on this matter, I have been working here longer than most and I have seen other people being hired and some got an expansion of their contract. Not me. […] What do you do then? You become excited and anxious. In the end I was convinced. When another job opportunity passes, I am out of here." (P28) | **Trigger (slow)** |

→ **DISRUPTING**

| | |
|---|---|
| "It's something in my work that challenges me and it gives me energy. And that, no matter in how friendly a manner you tell me, is taken from me." (P3) | |
| "It feels like a great loss: I have thrown in 200% passion, I have built beautiful things here and then you feel it sliding out of your hands." (P29) | **Goals** |
| "I think the Board overreacted, so that what actually was a small blemish, through their efforts to remove it became a massive stain. And from that point, we were beyond the point of no return. And if you ask me, and I am still convinced of that, the report was critical, and measures had to be taken for a good reason. All true. But they blew it out of proportion." (P19) | |
| "I am part of it too. Of course I cannot blame the manager for everything. Maybe I could have paid more attention." (P4) | **Attribution** |
| "I have a strong sense of righteousness. So, what made me angry... the victimizing of those managers conflicts with my sense of justice. Blaming teachers for something they are not trained to do also clashes with that sense of justice. The whole process gave me a really bad taste and in essence my reaction was: I don't want to work here in this way. It simply isn't worth it. Even though I got off alright, I do not want this. That's it, really." (P22) | |
| "I was entitled to that promotion; I had the right qualifications, I had been working there for 10 years and I felt I met all the requirements. You had to arrange a lot of paperwork for the application and then you sit there and then he finally says, with some silly excuse, well no, it's not going to happen. I thought: How is that possible? And then you hear from other people who did get promoted. I think, that is not right, that is unfair, I thought that was unfair. My sense of justice was damaged there. That influenced my functioning as a teacher a lot. The fun was gone." (P7) | **Fairness** |
| "I myself am religious. Then you think, these things are in God's hands. And I am very open about this. Well, it turns out that, during these moments you don't feel in high spirts and you feel totally stuck. So, I think, well, calm down, and we'll see how it turns out. My religion really helped me, yes. Even during those episodes. I really experienced it like that."(P23) | |
| "It really helped that we started out together, my colleague and I, and that we could share glances and think: Are we mad or are they bonkers? The fact that we shared this confirmed that "it wasn't us". On my own I couldn't have managed to stay here for even a year." (P27) | **Resources** |

→ **APPRAISING**

| | |
|---|---|
| "So I went directly to the Chairman of the Board. I said: Tell me, what's this? And where will it go from here?" (P1) | |
| "So we had to reorganize. And then that [PowerPoint] slide: It was revealed that a percent of each team had to be removed. I was the only one who started writing down all the numbers like crazy. Oh, I even took a picture, I think. And I think, I now need to have those figures to the decimal point, because I will look at the effects on the basis of the personnel lists. I think, okay, how much, and that I was going to calculate in my head [..] That I was going to see what names I can come up with, what are the consequences, I wanted to know, info, info, info. Heads are going to roll here, I thought." (P20) | **Problem-focused coping** |
| "Then I started thinking: You know, I can remain angry, discriminated against or whatever, for the rest of my life. And then I thought to myself: Yeah, if I want to stay I want to feel like I'm staying but my heart's not in it. I was deeply disappointed and I will not hesitate to say so, but I have to move on, and not become bitter about this…" (P18) | |
| "In those situations I get over things rather quickly. Enjoying my job is very important to me and for the most part, I can deal with it by myself, and I don't have too many sleepless nights about it like this." (P4) | **Emotion-focused coping** |

→ **COPING**

*made was never fulfilled. I waited and I waited... Then I got the hunch: They do not want to do this, it was never discussed, never on the table, complete silence. Of course, that does not feel right.*"

Rather than specifying one particular incident, all of the participants mentioned many other occurrences that had taken place both before and/or after the critical incident: a chain of larger and smaller signals—often at a rapid pace—that followed each other. These signals disrupted participants' daily routine and provoked conscious awareness of their contract terms (e.g., "*I did instantly think, oh nooo, this is going to mean something ... You immediately start thinking about your role and your position*" (P25)). In doing so, the signals activated participants' psychological contract, generating a sudden awareness of the present experience in relation to (its possible discrepancy with) their perception of the contract terms, as a result of a shift from automatic processing of stimuli to a conscious level of processing. In line with earlier work (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Pate, 2006), we coded these occurrences as "triggers" to reflect the fact that they were consciously perceived as signals of deviations from the existing psychological contract. Triggers herald the process of a budding breach as employees' interpretation of, and response to, can ultimately lead to the perceptions of breach.

The focus on triggers refines our current understanding of the process of breach. Neuroscientific insights (e.g., Dehaene et al., 2006; Lavie et al., 2004; Lieberman et al., 2002) clarify that, while most stimuli pass unattended, others activate conscious attention to the psychological contract and may be the originator of the development of breach perceptions. Although psychological contracts constantly serve as a primary lens that filters employee experiences, they only receive full attention in response to certain stimuli (Bankins, 2015; Rousseau, 1995; Schalk & Roe, 2007). Those specific stimuli cause a shift from automatic processing to conscious attention (Kahneman, 2011)—in this case, conscious attention to the exchange relationship, triggering psychological contracts "into action" (Schein, 1980). Triggers activate an awareness of one's mental model of a psychological contract, necessitating a shift from automatic processing (i.e., the unconscious and intuitive processing of information; Lieberman et al., 2002) to conscious attention (i.e., reflective consciousness, serial processing, and logical reasoning; Lieberman et al., 2002). They "awaken" an individual's psychological contract by interrupting the unattended flow of stimuli by drawing attention to the present moment and orienting individuals' attention toward the contract terms.

In our interviews, we identified a number of triggers. All these triggers that signaled a deviation from the norm and activated explicit attention toward the exchange relationship. Three types of trigger were found in the data: direct (74%), indirect (21%), and slow (5%). Direct triggers directly targeted participants, whereas indirect triggers targeted others but, in the process, redirected participants' full attention to the terms of their own contract. Employees observed how their colleagues had been treated by their organization. In response, they wondered, "What will happen to me?," leading to heightened vigilance (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Our findings also showed that, especially with regard to indirect triggers, the unfavorable comparisons with colleagues added significance to the point that these indirect triggers could be as powerful as direct triggers in their effect. Indirect triggers reflect the idea that, in a shared organizational environment, the psychological contract should be seen as a referent "cognition" (Rigotti, 2009, p. 444) and may lead to adverse reactions where an unfavorable social comparison is drawn (Chaudhry & Song, 2014). In nine cases, we identified a slow trigger. These triggers were initiated by the procrastination of the organization in meeting its obligations. We coded them as "slow triggers," as these slowly developing triggers were experienced when participants paid conscious attention to repetitive, persistent, and substantial delays and postponements of delivery by the organization. As a result of the time lapse, attention to the terms of psychological contract was activated.

## 4.2 | Appraising triggers

Our findings revealed that participants instantly appraised the significance and impact of the perceived trigger(s), estimating the probability of needing modifications to either the present situation or their contract. Four elements were found to play an important role in this appraisal process: participants' goals (i.e., appraisal of whether or not the trigger had the potential to undermine participant *goals*), personal belief (i.e., appraisal of the perceived *fairness* of the exchange), and abilities (i.e., participants determined their available *resources* to cope with the trigger), within the circumstances (i.e., participants *attributed* the trigger as intentional and/or avoidable) in relation to participants' well-being (Smith & Kirby, 2000).

### 4.2.1 | Goals

Consistent with the findings of Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000), we found that an individual's goals influenced how present occurrences were interpreted and stored in their memory, as well as how past occurrences were recalled. Goals can be personal, task related, or assigned by others (Locke & Latham, 1990). Triggers related to these goals were mentioned by all participants, with no exception ($n = 37$). Our results show that goal striving plays a major role in monitoring psychological contracts, and impediments to progress toward goal attainment can trigger perceptions of breach.

### 4.2.2 | Fairness

For many participants ($n = 28$), fairness was of crucial importance. Fair treatment increases individuals' confidence that, in the long run, their contributions will be adequately reciprocated (Blau, 1964) and reflects the instrumental function of fairness (Cropanzano et al., 2003) and was demonstrated by the majority of the participants assessing the extent to which the trigger compromised their personal goals and also their desire for psychological control. However, two cases reflected strong evidence of moral concerns, that is, appraisals about what is ethically appropriate beyond (economic) self-interest or group interest

(Cropanzano et al., 2003). In both cases, the appraisals involved something been done to another person(s) and the impact—even if it did not affect them—seemed to be more severe (e.g., "*It felt like a personal attack on him; it really was a foul and mean war that was being waged. This should not be*." (P36)).

### 4.2.3 | Resources

Numerous participants were guided by their expectations of support from colleagues or supervisors while appraising the impact of the trigger. While some estimated that some kind of support would be offered, others expected a lack of support (e.g., "*I am afraid people will not say hello anymore*" (P6)). We observed a wide variety of responses to the beneficial impact of relationships inside and outside work. In assessing the impact of a trigger, employees appraise their competence, social support, and other resources to subsequently re-establish an equilibrium between them and the organizational environment (Hobfoll, 2001). Moreover, our findings showed the positive effects of personal resources such as optimism, humor, perceived control, and self-efficacy (Hobfoll, 2001). Resources ($n$ = 30) are a key part of appraising a trigger, but the amount of support and the degree to which that support is needed differs among employees.

### 4.2.4 | Attribution

Attribution was identified in 35 of the 37 cases signaling that it plays a significant role in the development of breach perceptions. Our findings are in line with the classification (reneging, i.e., breaking promises on purpose and incongruence, i.e., misunderstandings between employee and organization) of Morrison and Robinson (1997) and complement Lester et al.'s (2002) disruption (i.e., inability of the organization to fulfill prior commitments due to changing environmental factors, for example). Many participants made efforts to weigh the triggers by appraising the situation as intentional and/or capable of being avoided. Whether or not they perceived the situation as intentional, many blamed the organization or its representatives for what had happened to them ($n$ = 30), and some participants (also) felt guilty about their own misperceptions ($n$ = 16). Perceptions of purposeful reneging by the organization resulted in more intense negative emotions. The attribution individuals make plays an important role in determining how they respond (Lester et al., 2002).

### 4.3 | Coping actions

In all of the cases examined, there were indications that participants dealt with triggers by engaging in multiple coping actions. Coping (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010) reflected how employees responded to the appraised significance of a trigger (or a number of triggers), stretching their pre-existing schema of the exchange agreement in an attempt to incorporate the change into their psychological contract. In 32 of the 37 cases, participants reported a variety of *problem solving actions* but, generally, they contacted their supervisor ($n$ = 25), sent emails ($n$ = 11), or searched for information (internally as well as externally) with regard to the organization ($n$ = 16). One participant contacted their trade union and another contacted a lawyer. Seeking emotional support from colleagues (*emotion-focused coping action*; Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010) was reported in 33 of the 37 cases. In general, this kind of support was experienced positively because it helped participants to cope with the (sometimes rough) situation they were in together. However, some indicated that this kind of support had the potential to have a negative effect, as colleagues created confusion by describing the existing situation in a different light, raising doubts in the mind of respondents. Less visible forms of emotion-focused coping, including suppressing, modulating, regulating emotions, and accepting responsibility or blame were also found.

Consistent with the findings of Solinger and colleagues (2016) and Tomprou and colleagues (2015), we found that coping actions differed depending on participants' perceived likelihood that the trigger could be handled. If the probability of successful resolution was perceived to be low, participants were more likely to choose a more passive coping response, such as withdrawing effort for a few days. More specifically, the data revealed that three conditions appeared to be significant in determining respondents' choice of coping actions. First, the process leading up to the critical event was important. Most interviews showed, for example, that the extent of participants' involvement in the (changing) circumstances and the perceived fairness in this process determined their willingness to be flexible (Rousseau, 1996) and to eventually accept the changed agreement as part of the existing contract (e.g., "*I was quite actively involved in the process early on. [...] Therefore, perhaps, not consciously but rather unconsciously, a kind of acceptance sank in*" (P15)). Second, consistent with Rousseau (1996), we found that a good-faith employment relationship was important because trust creates a willingness to be flexible and to engage in a positive reframing of triggers. Finally, the personal impact of a trigger was found to be crucial. The more overwhelming the trigger was perceived to be in terms of magnitude and consequence (e.g., changes in daily routine, changes in core tasks, or sleepless nights affecting the participants' private lives), the harder it became to reestablish balance in the employment relationship and to reactivate the contract to the prior level of fulfillment.

## 5 | POST-HOC ANALYSIS

Although the content analysis revealed the characteristics of triggers, it did not delineate how triggers emerge, their frequency, or their impact. Based on the dominance of triggers in the data, with an average of six triggers per participant, we expected triggers to play a pivotal role in the process of contract breach. For example, slowly developing triggers (i.e., slow triggers) seem to be situated at the end of the timeline, within which a range of triggers accumulates over

time. To isolate the within-person process of psychological contract breach, we used a visual mapping strategy to preserve the voices of the actors within the narrative and determine the order and sequences that underlie the identified patterns of events. This enabled us to better understand intra-individual experiences.

The visual mapping strategy (Langley, 1999) is particularly relevant to the strategy of theorizing based on narrative process data because a visual sequence of events situates various parallel dimensions within the same timeline. The storylines were reconstructed for each participant. Two additional researchers checked and reviewed several visual maps on the basis of the corresponding interview. We sought feedback from seven participants in order to test the constructed stories and preliminary theory across several stages of analysis. Throughout the analytic process, a research diary was maintained to summarize thoughts and ideas regarding interpretations of and comments on emergent analyses. First, the different occurrences that were reported in each interview were identified, such as attending a meeting, sending an email to one's supervisor, or seeking information. Second, we situated the occurrences within a timeline using the categories (disrupting, appraising, and coping) that were identified through our content analysis. This yielded unique storylines for each individual that delineated how the cognition of breach had developed through the accumulation of interconnected triggers over time (see Figures 2 and 3 for examples).

## 5.1 | Interconnectedness of triggers leading to breach perceptions

In general, interconnectedness strengthened the effect of the initial trigger and caused it to have a lingering effect, even when the triggers had occurred over an extended period of time or as "*aftershocks*," as one participant (P3) described them. Participants tried to alter their contracts based on their experiences of the triggers, but a regular rapid succession of often interconnected triggers seemed to hinder this process. Every subsequent trigger not only disrupted the psychological contract again but also interfered with—and restarted—the process of processing the initial trigger: "*In fact, it was a repeat of the violation of the agreement all over again*" (P14). A sequence of triggers will place pressure on the employee-employer relationship, leading to the perceptions of breach (Figures 2 and 3).

All intra-individual storylines that were identified from the visual maps contained at least three or more consecutive interconnected triggers, which were explicitly articulated by some participants: "*And so, there were three identical occurrences in a short time, which I linked all together; I thought it was the same hassle*" (P26). Only after being triggered into action did respondents notice that they had perceived something out of the ordinary, and conscious attention was then paid to the specific context. Having been jolted by a trigger, the majority of the participants tended to be more alert when they appraised the
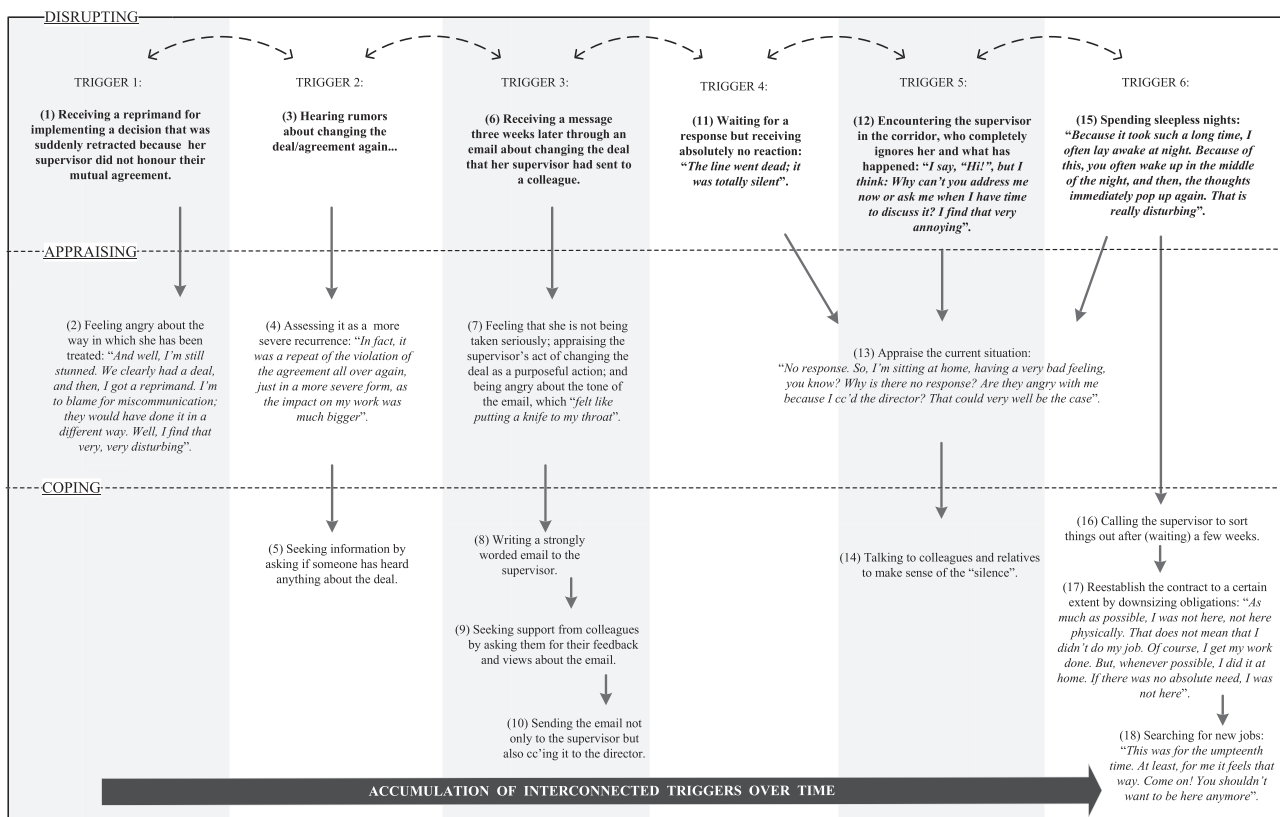


**FIGURE 2** Visual map of the breach process *(participant 14, woman, age 50)*
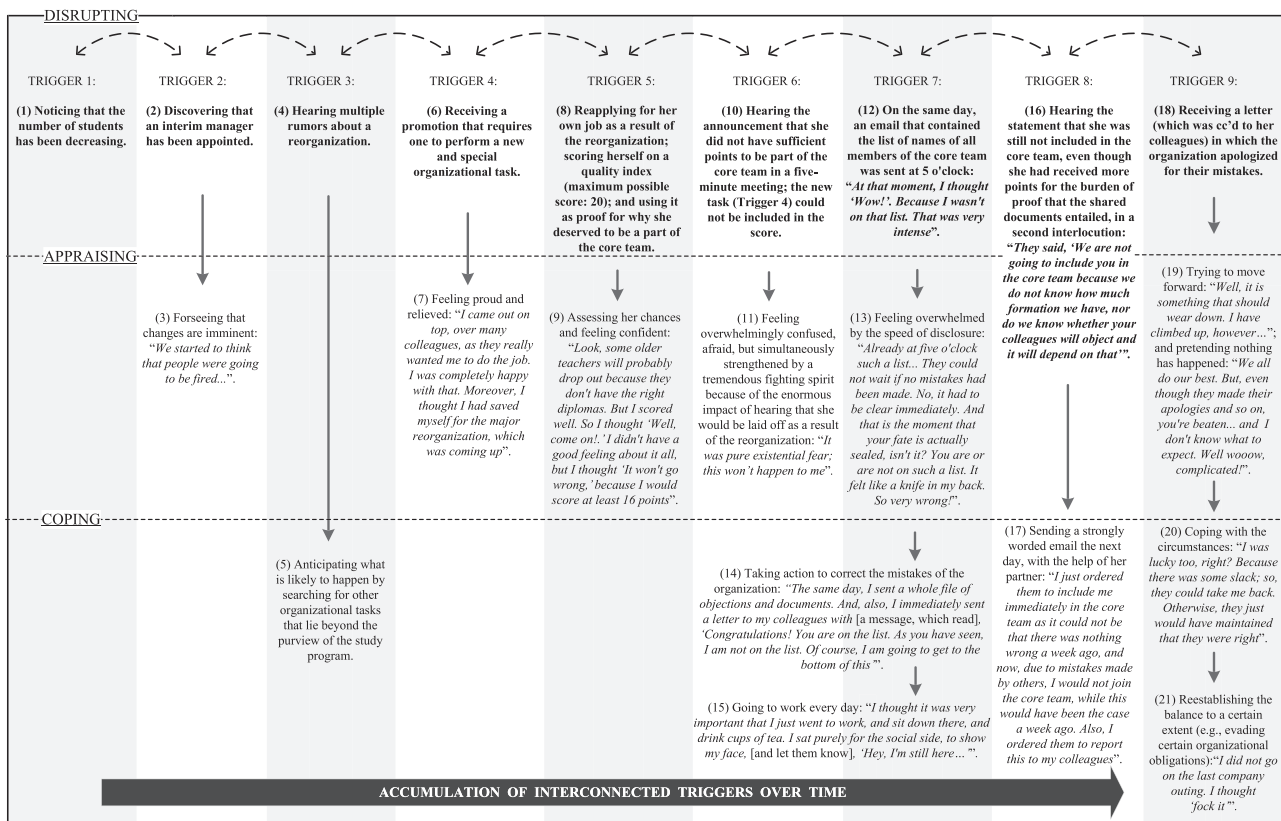
DISRUPTING

| TRIGGER 1: | TRIGGER 2: | TRIGGER 3: | TRIGGER 4: | TRIGGER 5: | TRIGGER 6: | TRIGGER 7: | TRIGGER 8: | TRIGGER 9: |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1) Noticing that the number of students has been decreasing. | (2) Discovering that an interim manager has been appointed. | (4) Hearing multiple rumors about a reorganization. | (6) Receiving a promotion that requires one to perform a new and special organizational task. | (8) Reapplying for her own job as a result of the reorganization; scoring herself on a quality index (maximum possible score: 20); and using it as proof for why she deserved to be a part of the core team. | (10) Hearing the announcement that she did not have sufficient points to be part of the core team in a five-minute meeting; the new task (Trigger 4) could not be included in the score. | (12) On the same day, an email that contained the list of names of all members of the core team was sent at 5 o'clock: "*At already at that moment, I thought 'Wow!'. Because I wasn't on that list. That was very intense*". | (16) Hearing the statement that she was still not included in the core team, even though she had received more points for the burden of proof that the shared documents entailed, in a second interlocution: "*They said, 'We are not going to include you in the core team because we do not know how much formation we have, nor do we know whether your colleagues will object and it will depend on that'*". | (18) Receiving a letter (which was cc'd to her colleagues) in which the organization apologized for their mistakes. |

APPRAISING

| | (3) Forseeing that changes are imminent: "*We started to think that people were going to be fired...*". | | (7) Feeling proud and relieved: "*I came out on top, over many colleagues, as they really wanted me to do the job. I was completely happy with that. Moreover, I thought I had saved myself for the major reorganization, which was coming up*". | (9) Assessing her chances and feeling confident: "*Look, some older teachers will probably drop out because they don't have the right diplomas. But I scored well. So I thought 'Well, come on!.' I didn't have a good feeling about it all, but I thought 'It won't go wrong,' because I would score at least 16 points*". | (11) Feeling overwhelmingly confused, afraid, but simultaneously strengthened by a tremendous fighting spirit because of the enormous impact of hearing that she would be laid off as a result of the reorganization: "*It was pure existential fear; this won't happen to me*". | (13) Feeling overwhelmed by the speed of disclosure: "*Already at five o'clock such a list... They could not wait if no mistakes had been made. No, it had to be clear immediately. And that is the moment that your fate is actually sealed, isn't it? You are or are not on such a list. It felt like a knife in my back. So very wrong!*". | | (19) Trying to move forward: "*Well, it is something that should wear down. I have climbed up, however...*"; and pretending nothing has happened: "*We all do our best. But, even though they made their apologies and so on, you're beaten... and I don't know what to expect. Well wooow, complicated!*". |

COPING

| | | (5) Anticipating what is likely to happen by searching for other organizational tasks that lie beyond the purview of the study program. | | | (14) Taking action to correct the mistakes of the organization: "*The same day, I sent a whole file of objections and documents. And, also, I immediately sent a letter to my colleagues with* [a message, which read], '*Congratulations! You are on the list. As you have seen, I am not on the list. Of course, I am going to get to the bottom of this*'". (15) Going to work every day: "*I thought it was very important that I just went to work, and sit down there, and drink cups of tea. I sat purely for the social side, to show my face,* [and let them know], '*Hey, I'm still here...*'". | (17) Sending a strongly worded email the next day, with the help of her partner: "*I just ordered them to include me immediately in the core team as it could not be that there was nothing wrong a week ago, and now, due to mistakes made by others, I would not join the core team, while this would have been the case a week ago. Also, I ordered them to report this to my colleagues*". | (20) Coping with the circumstances: "*I was lucky too, right? Because there was some slack; so, they could take me back. Otherwise, they just would have maintained that they were right*". (21) Reestablishing the balance to a certain extent (e.g., evading certain organizational obligations):"*I did not go on the last company outing. I thought 'fock it'*". |

ACCUMULATION OF INTERCONNECTED TRIGGERS OVER TIME

FIGURE 3 Visual map of the breach process (*participant 6, woman, age 46*)

expected recurrence of triggers. As one participant put it: "*I see things happen around me. I think, 'Hold on! I really should pay attention now because something is coming up which I have dealt with before'*" (P20). As demonstrated by these quotations, triggers—even small ones—have the ability to create uncertainty about the employment relationship, leading employees to more actively scan their environment for additional signals (Morrison & Robinson, 1997) and helping them to prepare and mobilize their cognitive processes to cope with the situation: "*I am much more attentive, more alert, critically alert. What's coming up? Who knows what? What's about to happen?*" (P9). However, as participants became more vigilant, the likelihood of identifying similar triggers in subsequent events also increased: "*Once this was the lens through which I saw the organization, I saw that there was a continuous flow of disturbing events*" (P29). The participants perceived an accumulation of interconnected triggers because triggers that matched memories of past triggers activated their psychological contracts more readily. As one interviewee observed: "*The first time you think, 'Okay!' but, when it happens time after time, the feeling of contempt starts to increase more and more*" (P27). The interconnectedness between triggers increased the strain placed on the employment relationship until a threshold was reached, at which point participants came to the realization that their contract had been broken: "*This was for the umpteenth time. At least, for me, it feels that way. Come on! You should not want to be here anymore*" (P14).

Participants appraised the probability of a trigger recurring in the future based on their retrospective experiences. This is illustrated in the following explanation, provided by one participant in response to a question about why they considered the impact of a perceived trigger to have been strong: "*Because I am foreseeing that something really will change because of this. Something is changing, yes, throughout the organization. So, maybe this will happen again soon*" (P20). Recent within-person research (Bankins, 2019) has underscored the strength of temporal flashbacks and flashforwards in shaping an individual's perceptions of their psychological contract. Consistent with this work, our findings reveal that breach perceptions are influenced by retrospective and prospective meanings: Participants' anticipation of the future was based on their present experiences. The expected recurrence can provoke an emotional response (Oreg et al., 2018), which can cause an individual to feel as though an anticipated event has been actualized (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012).

Because individuals respond more strongly to negative than to positive events due to the positive–negative-asymmetry effect (see Baumeister et al., 2001), the impact of negative triggers (e.g., receiving criticism from a manager) will be larger than the impact of positive triggers of the same type (e.g., receiving positive feedback from a manager). Consequently, almost all the participants (n = 34) reported that they had experienced strong negative emotions: "*I was extremely mad and emotional and all that*" (P11). Moreover, we found that, in the chain

of triggers, at least one of the interconnected triggers resulted in negative feelings. This fueled perceptions of the breach. Additionally, the findings revealed that, when there was no attempt to intervene and mitigate the accumulation process, employees abandoned the organization, either figuratively or literally. In order to restore balance, participants themselves deescalated the situation by reducing their own contributions, such as by "*skipping meetings*" (P29) and not investing 100% of their effort in their work ("*90% or much less will also do*" (P18)). If the organization or participants were unable or unwilling to counteract the accumulation process, participants ($n = 8$) chose to leave the organization: "*I'm just a very principled worker and, if a couple of things aren't right, then I'm gone; that is now*" (P27). Despite attempts by some participants to restore balance, the employment relationship continued to be a dysfunctional one: "*The organization became a sort of enemy. I've given the best years of my life and they treat me like this [...]. But they do not drive me crazy. I'm just not committed anymore*" (P11).

Consistent with Akhtar et al. (2016)), our findings indicate that more frequent and/or impactful triggers lead to a more negatively charged attitude toward the fulfillment of organizational obligations ("*All you see is an accumulation of disturbing occurrences, once you have started noticing*" (P27)), which is directly related to job search behavior and withdrawal. As illustrated in the response of one participant who left their organization, the frequent and interconnected triggers were instrumental to their leaving: "*In the last six years I have had six different managers, who all have left for various reasons; in fact, we had to deal with six years of crisis management. Every half year a new manager onboarding... I simply physically felt a wave of disappointment. A couple of them I really trusted, but after half a year it was gone. I do not want that anymore*" (P24). Consequently, the frequency of triggers, as well as the memory of past triggers and the appraised probability of the recurrence of triggers, but above all the interconnectedness of triggers, play a pivotal role in the development of psychological contract breach perceptions.

# 6 | DISCUSSION

In addressing calls to investigate dynamism in psychological contracts (Bankins, 2015; Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018; Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Solinger et al., 2016), our study finds that potential disruptions, employees' cognitions, and behaviors interrelate and influence each other, reinforcing each other over time (Mitchell & James, 2001). This temporal iterative process of disrupting, appraisal, and coping leading up to the perceptions of contract breach was found for all respondents, irrespective of whether they stayed or voluntarily resigned. That said, perceptions of contract breach in the latter group built up over a longer period of time. Triggers elicit not only breach perceptions but also the interconnectedness of these triggers over time ultimately drive perceptions of contract breach among all respondents. Every connected trigger disrupts the psychological contract and restarts the process of disrupting, appraising, and coping, thereby creating a cumulative effect until a threshold has been reached and cognition of breach occurs.

## 6.1 | Triggers and their interconnectedness

Triggers signal a personally relevant situation within the employment relationship that necessitates attention. In the continuous flow of stimuli arising during the course of an individual's day-to-day work, triggers mark the specific moments that activate their attention to the terms of their contract. Different experiences result in the formation of different schemas (Rousseau, 2001), and psychological contracts serve as a personal lens that influences whether a stimulus is perceived to be a trigger. Therefore, some degree of attention to a stimulus is necessary for it to stand out from the general flow of stimuli (Dehaene et al., 2006; Lavie et al., 2004; Lieberman et al., 2002). When individuals pay more attention to an incoming stimulus, this will increase the likelihood that they become consciously aware of it (Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2010; Driver, 2001), activating their psychological contract.

Selective attention theory (Driver, 2001) helps explain why individuals become aware of some stimuli while ignoring or suppressing others (e.g., Driver, 2001; Drover et al., 2018). An individual's attentional filter allocates attention (even unintentionally) to stimuli (Yantis & Johnston, 1990). Unattended stimuli are weakened, allowing them to pass through all stages of processing at an unconscious level, whereas the selected stimuli will reach the higher level of processing in the cognitive mode (Kahneman, 2011; Lieberman et al., 2002; Treisman, 1969) and will be transferred into the working memory (Lavie et al., 2004). Triggers are those selected stimuli that reach that higher level of processing and have the capacity to activate the mental model of the psychological contract.

Attention selection is determined by *personal pertinence* of stimuli (e.g., Johnston & Dark, 1986; Norman, 1968; Treisman, 1969) and prior experienced *stored stimuli* (e.g., Dehaene et al., 2006; Failing & Theeuwes, 2018; Molden, 2014), explaining why some stimuli turn into triggers and others do not. Highly personal pertinent stimuli will prompt a shift in focus, elicit conscious attention (Kahneman, 2011; Lieberman et al., 2002), and activate the mental schema of the exchange agreement (Rousseau, 2001; Rousseau et al., 2018; Schalk & Roe, 2007; Wiechers et al., 2019). Insignificant details are tuned out, and amplification of those stimuli—triggers—that have personal relevance to the fulfillment of terms of the psychological contract occurs. Our findings corroborate this as triggers ($n = 37$) are linked to the appraisal of participants' goal attainment. As "goals are the starting point and/or reference point of almost all behavior" (Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2010, p. 470), they indicate a high personal pertinence level. This explains why some stimuli, due to goal guided attention found here, stand out, differentiating why related stimuli turn into triggers and others do not.

In addition, prior experience with a stimulus can elicit lingering and enduring selection biases (Failing & Theeuwes, 2018). Subsequently, a stimulus can become prioritized in attention due to this history-driven selection (Failing & Theeuwes, 2018), which can happen even in cases when that stimulus is neither salient nor completely relevant to current goals (Theeuwes, 2019). These stored

stimuli (buffered in a nonconscious store; Dehaene et al., 2006) operate in the background and do not activate conscious awareness until a comparable or related stimulus comes along. Therefore, comparable or related stimuli of previous triggers may be activated faster because of the memory effect, whereby a (repeatedly) attended to stimulus in the past will now be more efficiently selected and identified (e.g., Molden, 2014). Selective attention also includes memory-guided attention, such that a trigger can elicit conscious attention to the psychological contract due to prior stored and easily accessible triggers. With all our respondents, chains of triggers were revealed over time, all linked together and based on previous experiences. These stored stimuli help explain the observed interconnectedness of triggers as stimuli matching the memories of past triggers—so-called connected triggers that will effortlessly activate the psychological contract.

## 6.2 | Accumulation to psychological contract breach

Our findings not only corroborate but also extend the ex-ante contentions of Conway and Briner (2002), who provide initial empirical evidence that small triggers ("everyday events") on a regular basis can accumulate to a breach even though, singularly, they would not. This is particularly the case when the triggers are perceived to be interconnected because people attribute novel meaning to this connectedness of triggers (Weick et al., 2005).

Because of a negativity bias (Baumeister et al., 2001), negative triggers carry more weight as individuals respond more strongly to negative than to positive events. We also found that negative triggers elicit expectations of more negative triggers, due to habituation effects (e.g., Dijksterhuis & Smith, 2002). When some of the participants expected their obligations to be breached, they seemed less surprised by and more prepared for negative triggers, resulting in anticipatory coping actions as active exchange participants of the contract (Bankins, 2015; Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Seeck & Parzefall, 2008), which weakened the impact of subsequent negative triggers. Consequently, we suggest that the accumulation process is not a simple sum of negative events but is a process involving the perceiving, appraising of, and coping with interconnected triggers, building up nonlinearly to surpass an individual's tolerability and creating a perception of psychological contract breach. Moreover, because they are stored in memory, perceived triggers can have a lingering and enduring effect. This means that these perceptions can build up over a long period of time (over months or even years, as our visual maps indicate). Multiple triggers affect each other and alter perceptions of the degree to which an organization has fulfilled its obligations to its employees. This accumulation of multiple connected triggers over time builds up pressure on the exchange relationship, until an individual's tolerance limit is surpassed and a psychological contract breach is perceived (Rigotti, 2009). Breach resembles an eruption (i.e., an accumulation of tremors breaking through one's personal tolerance limit).

## 7 | PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Our findings have important implications for practitioners, as they reveal that a psychological contract breach is not necessarily a single discrete event, but a result of multiple connected triggers over time. Because employees attribute novel meanings to the connectedness of triggers, managers need to be sensitive to this and its accumulating effect in order to diminish the likelihood of a breach. As past triggers will easily elicit new triggers due to the history-driven selection (Failing & Theeuwes, 2018), managers need to pay particular attention to prior context. Most employees appraise occurrences based on fairness so managers should pay attention to perceived fairness in decision-making, such as early involvement in the process, doing so with respect and decency, and communicating honestly, openly, and adequately (see Cropanzano et al., 2007), facilitating less vigilance among employees, and decreasing the impact of subsequent triggers. Also, most employees appraise occurrences based on their resources, such as their belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to accomplish a certain change (Hobfoll, 2001). By providing training or coaching to employees, managers can help them cope with changing circumstances (see de Ruiter, 2017). These strategies may aid the de-escalation of the cumulative effect of triggers.

Our findings also reveal how indirect triggers, experienced indirectly through a coworker rather than as a direct violation, may lead to the perceptions of breach. As individual perceptions are influenced through social networks (Ho, 2005), more attention is paid to stimuli related to the proximity of the social referents. The focus on deescalating the cumulative effect of triggers must occur not only on an individual level but also at a group level. Managers who keep abreast of perceptions regarding the team or department keeping its promises are subsequently in a better position to predict a budding breach, because employees develop similar beliefs of contract fulfillment of organization-wide promises as their friends and substitutes (Ho, 2005). Moreover, managers can also indirectly influence these employee perceptions of fulfillment through tactics that touch upon the group level by, for example, organizing smaller focus groups, or group level interventions such as World Café or Open Space, in order to deescalate breach perceptions.

## 8 | LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has a few limitations, the first of which pertains to the sample. Even though we validated our findings with a purposive sample, additional research is needed to how the mechanisms that underlie the process of breach occur in more fast-paced, dynamic, unsettled, and highly competitive environments (e.g., banking, high-technology firms, and fast-growth new ventures).

Second, future studies could replicate the present study using other research methods. The present method (CIT) may be insufficient

at detecting the process of disruption, due to overfulfillment, as negative events are more easily retrieved from one's memory than positive ones. An explanation for these findings may be that feelings of underfulfilment of the contract terms have a stronger lingering impact than comparable good experiences, consistent with the evidence of the deep impact of negative experiences provided by Baumeister and colleagues (2001). For example, in relationships, negative events seem to be five times more powerful than positive events (Gottman, 1994). Therefore, another research technique (e.g., a daily diary technique) is needed to explore the process of overfulfillment, to detect potential disruption more closely in the moment they emerge, and to mitigate the positive–negative-asymmetry effect.

Although the use of CIT method allowed us to delineate processes (Langley, 1999), it is subjected to potential recall bias (Flanagan, 1954) as participants recollect past events. The findings suggest that triggers accumulate over time by virtue of their interconnectedness. Appraisal theories (Moors et al., 2013), sensemaking theories (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015), and neuroscientific research findings (Dehaene et al., 2006; Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2010) indicate that this connectedness may occur instantly. However, we were unable to capture the exact moment that triggers or their interconnectedness occurred and could only do this retrospectively. Future research studies should therefore uncover other elements of dynamism that underpin the occurrence of breach, using different time frames across different contexts to (a) empirically distinguish between different triggers that are elicited by a given context and (b) discover how and when triggers provoke awareness, how they are interpreted, and whether they have an impact on the cognition of breach. For instance, a vignette study that is similar to De Jong et al.'s (2017) study, in which they examined individuals' responses to different sequences of underfulfilled and/or overfulfilled obligations, can be conducted to address these questions. A sophisticated approach would be to conduct laboratory experiments using electro-encephalograms or functional magnetic resonance imaging to capture the shift to a state of conscious awareness (Dehaene & Changeux, 2011) and discover how and when triggers provoke awareness and conscious attention. Such an approach would be ideal because it would use brain activity as an indicator of the activation of attention to triggers and would consequently provide solid evidence about the timing of different elements of the appraisal process.

Finally, future research studies must pay greater attention to within-person processes as the degree of breach is affected by the manner in which an individual detects and assesses a trigger, and the accumulation of triggers increases the likelihood of perceptions of breach. More knowledge about these micro processes that underlie the process of breach (e.g., how individuals sense and activate complete attention to triggers) can equip employers with tools that they can use to detect the first signals of an emerging breach. This would give employers opportunities to alleviate (early) unrest when their companies undergo organizational change to minimize the occurrence of psychological contract breach.

## 9 | CONCLUSION

Our study of intra-individual processes that underlie the emergence of a psychological contract breach reveals the unique role that triggers and their interconnectedness play in the cognition of contract breach. The process of breach seems to be a nonlinear, idiosyncratic process involving the perceiving of, appraising of, and coping with interconnected triggers over time, which strains the employment relationship until a threshold has been surpassed and the psychological contract breach is perceived. Our findings extend the existing literature by delineating some aspects of the dynamic, complex, and nonlinear process of contract breach and provide new directions for further research.

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