



Perceptions of black employees regarding the psychological contract within an African context

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Orientation: There is a need for researchers to investigate the constructs of psychological contract, work engagement and turnover intention within the context of the African knowledge system (AKS).

Research purpose: The objective of this article is to expand knowledge on how African black employees perceive and experience their psychological contract, work engagement and turnover intention. The article explains how these perceptions and lived experiences are influenced by the race and culture of African blacks.

Motivation for the study: Although the constructs of relevance are continually studied, not enough emphasis is placed on the given constructs from an AKS perspective.

Research approach/design and method: An explorative, qualitative, interpretive phenomenological research approach with open-ended interviews for data collection was implemented. A non-probability and purposeful sampling ($N = 16$) strategy was followed. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Main findings: African black employees' perceptions and experiences regarding the psychological contract, work engagement and turnover intention are influenced by their race, culture and traditions (e.g. the spirit of ubuntu, weddings, traditional callings, funerals and church customs).

Practical/managerial implications: African indigenous knowledge consciousness and diversity appreciation should be developed to ensure the effective implementation of human resources strategies and policies.

Contribution/value-add: A unifying organisational culture and diversity management strategy that considers the needs of African black employees should be cultivated.

Keywords: African indigenous knowledge systems; black employees; diversity management; organisational culture; psychological contract; turnover intention; ubuntu; work engagement.

Introduction

Although researchers and scholars have actively studied the psychological contract (PC), work engagement (WE) and turnover intention (TI) over the past decades, sufficient emphasis has not been placed on the acknowledgement of differing knowledge systems in workplaces and how these systems relate to the given constructs. This article argues that the psychological contract, work engagement and turnover intention are experienced differently by African black employees whose African knowledge systems (AKS) are characterised by a strong sense of collectivism (Adeleye et al., 2023). It is argued that organisations should acknowledge the unique characteristics pertaining to the indigenous AKS when operating within an African context (Adeleye et al., 2023). African black employees' lived experiences in workplaces differ from their Western counterparts because each interprets and perceives things from their own unique perspective. Hence, it is argued that their lived experiences of the psychological contract, work engagement and turnover intention may potentially also differ (Eze et al., 2021).

It is also worth noting that, studies on psychological contracts, work engagement and turnover intention originated in Western countries and cultures and revolved around Western knowledge systems (Aggarwal et al., 2021; Gervasi et al., 2022; Schreuder et al., 2023). Yet, these constructs

have not received the same attention from the context of the AKS. Rather, there seems to be limited research studies on the constructs under investigation within the context of the AKS (Eze et al., 2021). Intharacks et al. (2023) assert that people from different racial groups have cultural differences that account for the disparity in individuals' views, perceptions and understanding of a phenomenon. In fact, Nguyen et al. (2024) depicted that race and culture influence how phenomena are understood.

Notwithstanding, most studies carried out in Nigeria (Eze et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2024; Samuel & Engelbrecht, 2021; Schreuder et al., 2023) revealed that the constructs under study did not consider the importance of race and culture when managing the psychological contract. This points to an important research gap in the literature. The literature is largely silent on whether diverse employees – particularly African black employees perceive the psychological contract similarly to their Western counterparts (Samuel & Engelbrecht, 2021).

The article contributes on both theoretical, empirical and practical levels. Theoretically, it contributes to the body of knowledge pertaining to how the psychological contract affects work engagement and turnover intention from an African knowledge perspective. Any further publications derived from it will expand the current body of literature on the subject matter. Empirically, the research findings support the notion of the psychological contract and how psychological contract perceptions affect work engagement and turnover intention. The findings derived from the empirical research indicate the need for further research on the subject matter from an AKS perspective. Additionally, on a practical level, recommendations for an effective psychological contract management strategy in the context of AKS are made. This will assist human resource managers (HRM) in South African private enterprises to acknowledge and manage the psychological contract within a diverse employment relationship context to enhance work engagement and minimise turnover intention.

The article therefore aims to answer the following two research questions:

- *What are African black employees' (working in a private sector enterprise) perceptions and lived experiences regarding the psychological contract and its effect on their work engagement and turnover intention within the context of an AKS?*
- *What meaning does this knowledge about the perceptions and experiences of African black employees pertaining to the psychological contract hold for the discipline of business management and the subject area of HRM on the one hand and for HRM practitioners on the other hand?*

Following this introduction, the article presents a theoretical literature review, followed by an explanation of the research methodology implemented in the study. This is then followed by a discussion of the findings. The article concludes with suggestions for further research.

Literature review

Eze et al. (2021) noted that there are different knowledge systems to consider when studying a phenomenon, as knowledge systems influence one's level of understanding, viewpoint and perceptions. Specifically, AKS and Western knowledge systems should be considered when investigating a phenomenon as they present differing views based on either a collectivist or an individualist approach (Eze et al., 2021). These differing cultures influence the world we feel at home in – whether that is the Western world or an African environment (Eze et al., 2021). This implies that people originating from Western cultures often perceive things differently from people originating from African cultures. Managers are advised not to overlook these knowledge systems and their implications when dealing with matters pertaining to the psychological contract, work engagement and turnover intention in the workplace (Olaopa & Ayodele, 2021). The current article focusses on the African workplace and therefore on the AKS context.

The influence of African knowledge systems in workplaces

Knowledge is defined as 'an understanding that people gain through experiences and involves experiences and skills that people gain from interacting with information that can be explicit, tacit or implicit' (Dhewa & Cummings, 2023, pp. 15–16). They also add that knowledge enables a person to perform specific tasks (Dhewa & Cummings, 2023, pp. 15–16). In the same vein, Eze et al. (2023) explain that knowledge is anything that is known to the human mind and is used to guide actions by which a knowledgeable person is judged through consequences of the performed action.

Aful-Arthur et al. (2021) compare knowledge to science that people use to learn in order to know their history and cultures. Eze et al. (2021) argue that culture plays a paramount role in African people as it also affects their cognitive, emotional and social functioning. African cultures are important to Africans because their belief systems, values and morals influence their perceptions, behaviours and attitudes, including how and what they eat and drink, how they function, think and grow up (Eze et al., 2021). Sibandze and Dlodlu (2023) argue, for instance, that not only does African religion provide moral, emotional, psychological and social stability, but it also provides stability within workplace environments. African culture is therefore not just a culture, it is a way of life (Olaopa & Ayodele, 2021). Chantamool et al. (2023) mention that it is through this culture that people learn to support and care for their families and relations. These belief systems influence the behaviour and attitudes of all age groups (Eze et al., 2021).

African knowledge systems originated from and developed for African people (Dhewa & Cummings, 2023). This specific knowledge is essentially part of a generation's inheritance and must be passed on from one African generation to the next (Olaopa & Ayodele, 2021). However, Mutasa (2022)

notes that the AKS is dissipating because it is undocumented, yet it is an important resource facilitating community survival and development.

The spirit of the African worldview includes wholeness, community and harmony, all deeply embedded in cultural values (Mutasa, 2022). African individuals are expected to resemble their ancestral lineage and their actions must be in line with the larger family beliefs, norms and values (Olaopa & Ayodele, 2021). Local and indigenous knowledge refers to the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings (Eze et al., 2021). For rural and indigenous people, local knowledge informs decision-making about fundamental aspects of day-to-day life (Xego & Obioha, 2021).

The understanding of AKS requires an understanding of what African people value most and their way of knowing and viewing phenomena (Mutasa, 2022). Gathogo (2023) explains AKS as the totality of knowledge and practices that are explicitly or implicitly used in the management of socioeconomic, spiritual and ecological life aspects. The African knowledge system thus refers to a system that comprises the content and context of a knowledge system driven by shared beliefs, norms and values of the African cultural group of people who live in a non-Western civilisation (Gathogo, 2023). Gathogo describes the significance of knowledge systems as a knowledge resource for the global market, meaning that the social and intellectual capital resources of communities form part of the global knowledge production system (Gathogo, 2023). The AKS offers a unique knowledge base that differs radically from scientific systems, also known as Western knowledge systems (Olaopa & Ayodele, 2021).

The AKS has, as its foundation, a collectivist culture generally referred to as the ubuntu philosophy (Mutasa, 2022). A collectivist culture implies that most activities take place within a group and that when members of the group struggle, they support each other (Gathogo, 2023). A collectivist culture exhibits an attitude of wholeness in times of need (Olaopa & Ayodele, 2021). Mutwarasibo (2020) explains the attitude of wholeness within the AKS as based on the Ndebele proverb that says *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning a person's achievement is through other persons. Ubuntu is also described as a philosophy that believes that *I am because we are* or *a person is a person because of other persons* (Mutwarasibo 2020). Ubuntu exists where community members live in unity with the belief that the individuals survive on collective solidarity, that is, where each community member supports their fellow humans (Mutwarasibo 2020). According to Mutwarasibo (2020), ubuntu signifies that our lives are bound up with the lives of other humans through whom we learn and who we need to function humanely. Through ubuntu, Africans love, support and take care of one another (Mutwarasibo, 2020). The ubuntu philosophy demonstrates how African people are attached to their community and connect to the members of the community (Mutwarasibo, 2020). It is perhaps no

wonder that Desmond Tutu proclaimed ubuntu as a complex phenomenon that the whole world should know about (Mutwarasibo, 2020).

Within the Nigerian collectivist culture (Olaopa & Ayodele, 2021), a major tribe advocates a saying called '*ibo*', meaning that one person's success is that of the community, and similarly, if one man is poor, the community is poor (Eze et al., 2021). Therefore, caring and giving support for one another form part of their collectivist culture. In fact, Nigerian people are seen as part of one extended family; as such, individuals are expected to provide care and support to their families and communities (Dhewa & Cummings, 2023). In other words, the actions of such people are expected to be in line with the larger family beliefs, norms and values (Eze et al., 2021). Hence, AKS' inputs include the lived experiences of people in the African milieu, together with global information, accessed and processed from a local perspective (Eze et al., 2021). It includes the spirit of support and caring for fellow Africans that is embedded in African cultural beliefs (Khomo & Mutereko, 2021).

South Africa, like most other African countries, consists of multiracial and multiracial groups namely, Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi, Tswana, South Ndebele, Sotho, Venda, Tsonga and Swazi (Gathogo, 2023). Despite the clear importance of AKS, studies that have been conducted in South Africa within this context seemed not to have considered the importance of the total indigenous knowledge and practices present in workplaces (Khomo & Mutereko, 2021). It is argued that this is an important oversight of managers who often fail to acknowledge the importance of shared values lived by African blacks as a social group; values that may differ from a more developed or Western world (Gathogo, 2023). It is for this reason that the current research considered the constructs of relevance from the perspective of AKS.

The psychological contract

From a Westernised perspective, the psychological contract has been widely explored as a construct that involves an individual's belief systems that are based on commitments – expressed or implied – regarding the exchange agreement between the employer and employee (Schreuder et al., 2023). The psychological contract refers to the unwritten and voluntary nature of a social relationship that exists between an employer and an employee (Aggarwal et al., 2021). It is based on a reciprocal exchange relationship between an employee and an employer (Blau, 1964).

However, the psychological contract is understood and experienced differently from an African perspective. Previous African studies reported that the psychological contract in AKS is shaped by the culture and belief systems of African spheres (Eze et al., 2021; Mutasa, 2022; Olaopa & Ayodele, 2021). Olaopa and Ayodele (2021) indicated that culture enhances various behavioural manners. Cultural influences are therefore described as cognitive mechanisms

that are reflected in behaviours. Because individuals from different cultures, such as African black people, have different sets of values, their behaviour and interpretations will differ from their Western counterparts. Mutasa (2022) explains that overlooking these variations in perceptions and experiences impacts workplaces negatively in the long run. The social cognition or perceptions and understanding of the psychological contract would, for African black people, be influenced by their African cultures (Eze et al., 2021).

The disparities regarding the understanding of the constructs under investigation by African black employees potentially hold implications for workplaces based on how cultural differences are managed (Olaopa & Ayodele, 2021). For instance, individuals with independent selves (individualists) typically feel good about themselves, express their inner attributes and rights and demonstrate a greater capacity to withstand undue social pressure. Conversely, those with interdependent selves (collectivists) derive positive self-images from in-group experiences, exhibit a sense of belonging, maintain harmony, are receptive to others and show restraint regarding personal desires (Gathogo, 2023). Hence, African black people, typically collectivists, embrace the spirit of ubuntu.

Motives that are experienced within an exchange relationship also influence how individuals formulate their psychological contracts as either transactional or relational (Schreuder et al., 2023). A transactional contract is a contract directed towards material benefits for both the organisation and the employee (Rousseau, 2003). On the other hand, a relational contract is based on intrinsic rewards, for instance, trust, respect and devotion, which require significant efforts by both the employer and employees (Rousseau, 2003).

It is therefore argued that individuals from a different cultural background, such as African black employees, with their own set of indigenous knowledge sensibility experiences, are likely to perceive and interpret signals from their organisational environment differently from their Western counterparts. Employees with a Western background are shaped by their own varied cognition and motivational mechanisms as influenced by their knowledge system. Hence, these respective cultures influence individual psychological contract formations, perceptions, experiences and responses.

Work engagement

According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), work engagement is a concept that reflects how an organisation captures an employee's heart and mind to fulfil their daily task with energy, involvement and positive interaction in the workplace. Bakker (2022) concurs that organisations are successful when they manage to retain highly engaged employees who meet the employer's expectations.

From an African perspective, work engagement is perceived as positive perceptions and attitudes held by employees towards their organisation and its culture (Sani et al., 2023).

Engaged employees understand what needs to be performed and what the job is about (George et al., 2022). Ugwu et al. (2022) add that engaged employees are aware of their responsibilities, their organisation's culture and the culture of the people they work with. When employees understand their colleagues' culture, it becomes easier to work together and achieve organisational objectives (Ugwu et al., 2022). If this is not the case, employees from different racial groups might not work together efficiently because of their cultural disparities (Ugwu et al., 2022).

Also, Pepple et al. (2021) argue that companies that employ people from different races and cultures stand a good chance of driving productivity. The positive side to having people from different races and cultures is that the workforce becomes innovative and applies problem-solving skills (Obsuwan et al., 2021). Furthermore, people from different cultures share different skills and knowledge that propel high levels of employee work engagement (Obsuwan et al., 2021). In fact, research has shown that to enhance work engagement levels of employees within private sector organisations, organisations should follow a system of employment, appointment and promotion with apt consideration of the employees' different cultures (George et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, culture and customs also increase related challenges. For example, a study by George et al. (2022) revealed that 85% of research on work engagement conducted within Africa shows that African black employees are often not fully engaged in their jobs when compared to employees of Western cultures, especially white employees. These differences are mostly ascribed to cultural beliefs and customs, for example, traditional customs such as attending initiation schools to become traditional healers (George et al., 2022). Thus, it may be argued that the construct of work engagement in AKS is influenced by the cultural belief systems and customs of African black people.

Turnover intention

Organisations are facing re-occurring challenges related to turnover intention, which negatively hinder them from achieving short- and long-term objectives (Jing & Jan, 2022). Turnover intention is worsened by the fact that management often does not know how to effectively manage the number of people leaving their organisations (Jing & Jan, 2022). Consequently, organisational performance deteriorates because of high turnover rates within workplaces.

Turnover intention refers to the probability of an employee leaving their organisation within a certain period (Mokoena et al., 2022). This may often be because of the social employment relationship and inherent differences between an employee and an employer or between colleagues. Turnover intention is also catalysed by organisational and social factors such as individual cultural belief systems and organisational culture (Pepple et al., 2021). Disparities resulting from differing sociocultural

belief systems and organisational cultures (e.g. as noted between African black employees and employees with Western backgrounds) may amount to negative turnover intention within workplaces (Pepple et al., 2021). This is confirmed by research (George et al., 2022) that shows that 65% of black employees reported an increase in turnover intention because of their cultural belief systems. The study revealed that employees left their jobs after the employer did not consider traditional matters, which, subsequently, resulted in disagreements between the parties (Uchendu & Chinedu-Eze, 2021). Eze et al. (2021) therefore emphasise the importance of understanding the cultures of people from different racial groups as it assists in reducing employees' turnover intention levels and enhances their organisational commitment.

Clearly, the psychological contract, work engagement and turnover intention in AKS are influenced by the culture of African black people with their indigenous knowledge consciousness experiences. African black employees perceive the psychological contract, work engagement and turnover intention differently from their Western counterparts (Pepple et al., 2021). This conclusion holds much importance because of the way that the psychological contract, work engagement and turnover intention all impact the employment relationship. When one of these constructs is mismanaged, the psychological contract is affected negatively, and high levels of disengagement and turnover intention occur. This jeopardises organisational competitiveness and sustainability.

Research methodology and design

Research approach

A qualitative study with an interpretivist phenomenological research approach was employed to answer the research questions. An interpretative phenomenological analysis aims to uncover the lived experiences of participants (Gill, 2020). It was believed that an exploratory, qualitative approach will provide a deeper understanding of the research problem (Bairagi & Munot, 2019).

Research methods and strategy

The population consisted of 265 African black employees of a specific private sector organisation in the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality of South Africa. Male and female participants were chosen from both managerial and non-managerial levels to see whether they held different perceptions about their psychological contract and its impact on work engagement and turnover intention. A non-probability, purposive sampling strategy ($N = 16$) was followed to select eight black permanent managerial employees who represented 10.24% of all managerial employees and eight non-managerial employees who represented 30.74% of all black employees at the firm. Participants were between the ages of 18 years and 65 years.

Online, semi-structured interviews of approximately 45–60 min each were conducted for data collection. The interview guide contained the following open-ended questions relevant to this article:

- *Do you believe that your social background (as it pertains to your race and culture) may affect your perceptions and lived experiences regarding your psychological contract at work? Please explain your answer.*
- *How do you think your social background (for instance, as it relates to your African black race and culture) may affect your perceptions and lived experiences regarding your work engagement?*
- *What are your lived experiences as an African black employee that may affect your current turnover intention?*
- *Based on your lived experiences as an African black employee, how do you think management should manage the perceptions about their employees' psychological contracts to increase work engagement and lower turnover intention in your workplace?*

Data saturation was considered during the interview process (Daher, 2023). An eight-step thematic analysis process was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021):

- In Step 1, the researcher transcribed the interviews and obtained a sense of the whole through reading the transcripts several times.
- In Step 2, the researcher used opening codes under potential subcategories and compared the emerged coding clusters together and in relation to the entire data set.
- In Step 3, themes were developed. The researcher developed the potential themes from the list of codes, based on relationships that were identified between different codes.
- In Step 4, the researcher then checked if the themes related to the coded extracts and the entire dataset.
- In Step 5, the researcher explained the connection between themes and the entire dataset by determining relationships between the identified themes and extant literature.
- In Step 6, the researcher compared the findings of the full dataset to determine how each theme or code was expressed and whether any differences between the groups of themes were noticed.
- In Step 7, the researcher then presented the research findings to ensure transparency and to make the data easily accessible.
- In Step 8, the researcher explained the findings on each theme, indicating links between theoretical explanations of the empirical data and the raw data as derived from the empirical evidence.

Trustworthiness was considered throughout the study. Various measures were undertaken to ensure adherence to dependability, transferability, confirmability and credibility. In terms of dependability, the researcher ensured that the data collection methods were fully described, and mutual understanding between the researcher and the participants was ensured. Participants' responses were recorded and

transcribed to avoid misinterpretation and misrepresentation of data. To ensure transferability, the researcher kept detailed information about the fieldwork. Purposive sampling was used to increase the trustworthiness of the data. Moreover, steps were taken to ensure that the findings of the study reflect the lived experiences of the participants, rather than the preferences of the researcher (confirmability). To avoid potential researcher bias and shifting the interpretation of what the participants said to fit a certain narrative, an external individual (supervisor) reviewed and examined the analysis to ensure accuracy in the interpretation of results.

Research procedure

The researcher obtained permission by means of a formal letter addressed to the HRM of the selected private company to act as a gatekeeper of the study. The gatekeeper gave permission to access the organisation where the study was conducted. The gatekeeper recruited participants by email. Two hundred and fifty-six participants were invited to partake in the study and 16 accepted the invite to voluntarily participate in the study. In the invitation letter, the researcher introduced himself as a Master's degree student undertaking the research. The purpose and the objective of the study were explained. The informed consent documentation was distributed to participants through Microsoft Teams' message chat so that they could read it and give their consent to participate in the interviews.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from a South African University Ethics Review Committee with reference number 2022_HRM_012, and a gatekeeper was appointed. Participants were provided with full details of the study and informed of their right to voluntarily participate or withdraw at any time. The researcher ensured that participants were not exposed to any harm or risk during their involvement in the study. All collected data were kept confidential through data encryption, and anonymity was maintained throughout the study and reporting process.

Findings and discussion

From the data obtained in the study findings, four main themes emerged that are discussed in the current article, namely: psychological contract, work engagement, turnover intention and suggestions to management. Each of these main themes had several subthemes. The answers to the research questions were analysed to achieve the objectives of the research.

Main theme 1: Psychological contract

Five sub-themes emerged that related to how participants' lived experiences and perceptions regarding their psychological contract were influenced by being African blacks. The five subthemes were related to ubuntu, weddings, traditional callings, funerals and church customs.

Subtheme 1.1: Ubuntu

This theme highlights the importance of the cultural values of African blacks and how it impacted their psychological contract. It stresses the implications of employers who overlook the importance of the ubuntu culture. Some participants reported that their employer did not respect and consider their cultural values, particularly the spirit of ubuntu. This impacted their employment relationship negatively. The following quotes from participants 1, 5 and 7 substantiate the subtheme:

'I am a ... Motswana girl and growing up I was told that people must go find jobs and work hard. My culture plays a very ... important role in my exchange relationship. Because as a young Motswana girl who grew up in the rural area, I was told that *motho ke motho ka batho*, meaning a person is a person by others. In Setswana culture, when one family member gets employed, you don't work only for yourself, but you work for ... the...entire family. If this is overlooked in our ... psychological contract ... it will eventually affect our employment relationship negatively.' (Participant 1, 34 year old, female)

'As a ... Ndebele woman, my culture influences my understanding. [*But*] my employer doesn't understand why and how. Sometimes it's important to work ... even though it's difficult because children need to eat ... Ubuntu is the one that brings us as a family together ... my family must be supported, and if there is no ubuntu in our social contract, then ... [*there is*] no good psychological contract.' (Participant 5, 35 years old, female)

'My race and culture influence my psychological contract negatively. As a ... Ndebele man you are given a responsibility to take care of your family. Ubuntu naturally is part of my tribe. If me and my employer do not come to terms with this culture thing ... then we ... will not have a good employment relationship.' (Participant 7, 47 year old, male)

Subtheme 1.2: Wedding celebrations

This theme explored how values regarding traditional ceremonies such as weddings conflicted with expectations held by employers and how this aspect potentially impacts the psychological contract negatively. Participants reported that they experience that their culture is not respected and honoured. The following quotes from participants 12, 15 and 16 substantiate the subtheme:

'Traditions such as traditional weddings ... must be respected and honoured – at all cost in my culture. If the employer [*does*] not believe in these cultures, then obviously, we have a conflict in our relationship. It affects the psychological contract negatively because the employer seems not to understand the reasons I must attend [*a*] wedding.' (Participant 12, 46 year old, female)

'In Sepedi culture, if there is a traditional marriage ceremony, I need days to go to arrange the ceremony. If my employer does not look into [*understand*] that, it can affect my performance at work and my psychological contract negatively.' (Participant 15, 49 year old, male)

'It does influence my psychological contract negatively because when it is time for us to do traditional weddings, we are forced by our culture to attend these events and obviously

leave must be taken. The employer will tell you that you are not qualifying for leave at that time you want to go and ... attend funerals and weddings. So then, problems start.' (Participant 16, 30 year old, male)

Subtheme 1.3: Traditional callings

This theme underscores the perceived disregard for black culture within the employment relationship and how it negatively affects the psychological contract. It emphasises the importance of traditions such as ancestry callings not to be overlooked by the employer. The following quotes from participants 3 and 13 support this subtheme:

'Yes, ... it influences my psychological contract negatively. I was once denied some leave to attend a traditional ceremony of a traditional healer and that did not sit well with me because not attending such events ... you ... might end up losing your mind, but the employer does not look at it that way.' (Participant 13, 31 year old, male)

'Hundred per cent, it influences my social contract negatively... My boss needs to understand ... that I am traditional [*healer*] myself. I will need some time off to help the people. Obviously, some other times I ... won't come to work and that will surely affect the ... the whole of our psychological contract negatively because we won't agree on this one.' (Participant 3, 51 year old, male)

Subtheme 1.4: Funerals

This theme highlights how African black individuals' cultural values may clash with the policies and procedures established by the employers. It suggests that adherence to cultural values can sometimes conflict with workplace rules and expectations. Participants revealed that their religious obligations such as funerals conflicted with their psychological contracts with their employers because they feel their culture is disrespected and misunderstood. This theme is supported by the following quotes from participants 2, 1, 15 and 16:

'My culture does affect my psychological contract negatively. Let's say one person in the family has died, then we are not allowed to go out at night for a period of a year, or even not allowed to work at night. This will affect my work because ... we work shifts, including night shifts. This can be a problem, because the employer wants you to work night shift, while my culture says you are not working night shift.' (Participant 2, 41 year old, female)

'I told my supervisor that I need to go pay my last respect at a funeral and take some days off for additional cleaning and preparing. I saw that he was not happy and that affected my psychological contract perceptions negatively.' (Participant 15, 49 year old, male)

'When there are funerals, we are forced to attend, otherwise bad luck follows, but when you tell them that you need to go for a burial; they tell you [*that*] you don't qualify for days, so this changes the whole idea of the psychological contract.' (Participant 16, 30 year old, male)

Subtheme 1.5: Church customs

This theme emphasises the conflict between religious and work obligations and how these differences significantly impact the psychological contract between employers and

employees. The following quotes from Participants 11 and 6 substantiate the subtheme:

'My religious practices influence my psychological contract negatively, reason being I am a pastor. I am supposed to be at church on Sundays, but because the employer demands of me to make production to supply. In the end, the two are contradicting one another. I find myself in breach of the social contract I have with my employer, or in breach of my social contract with my own God that I am serving. So, my psychological contract will be affected negatively, obviously.' (Participant 11, 38 year old, female)

'I am a Christian and a church elder, everything that relates to my belief I have to honour. At church we do ordination, baptism and ... cancelling most times... these things ... for me I have seen it affected my employment relationship negatively as me and my boss clashed a lot because of my unavailability to honour my religious duties.' (Participant 6, 48 year old, female)

The five subthemes illustrate how the psychological contract is negatively affected by the lived experiences of African black employees who perceive that their culture is not understood and respected.

Main theme 2: Work engagement

Two subthemes emerged relating to work engagement, namely: cultural disrespect and clashes with work schedules.

Subtheme 2.1: Cultural disrespect

This theme presents aspects of cultural disrespect. It points out how a lack of cultural consideration influences African black employees' work engagement in the workplace. Participants revealed that their cultural beliefs, traditions and practices were not respected or considered by their employers. This lack of respect reduced their work engagement levels immensely as they did not feel appreciated. The following quotes from participants 1, 5 and 7 substantiate this subtheme:

'Being an African black person with indigenous knowledge awareness experiences impacted my work engagement negatively. There was a time where my employer refused to grant me leave for going to the traditional wedding. That for sure did not sit well with me. Since that day I am no longer engaged in my work with energy, zeal, and ambition as I used to be. So, you see ... my employer doesn't respect my culture and beliefs systems that I am connected too.' (Participant, 1, 34 year old, female)

'I would say in my experience in this workplace 80% of my culture affects err... my work engagement negatively because there is no consideration by our employer on these traditions and cultures, we believe in. For instance, if my employer doesn't respect that black people have the spirit of ubuntu or not having compassion with me, that will make me not engaged with energy, interaction, and motivation the level will drop.' (Participant 5, 35 year old, female)

'African people are culturally based, we are bound or connected to these beliefs. I was supposed to go to church for child baptism and ordinations ..., but the employer says no, you cannot go. For me it was like okay, I feel not being appreciated and respected and

that affected my work engagement very negatively. I would be lying if I say I am engaged; ... the energy has dropped because of my employer not respecting me as a black person with indigenous knowledge consciousness.' (Participant 7, 47 year old, male)

Subtheme 2.2: Clashes with work schedules

Participants reported that work schedule clashes with cultural practices impacted their work engagement levels. The following quotes from Participants 15 and 16 support the subtheme:

'I am an elder of the church and ... I ask my boss that we will have a thanksgiving at church, so I won't come to work on that day. But when the time came, it was something else. We are not taken seriously as black people. This impacted my work engagement level negatively.' (Participant 15, 49 year old, male)

'I am not engaged in a bit. I just come to work, get paid and get off. I have a wife who is a traditional healer. So, many times, I do not come to work because I am assisting the wife at home. My boss doesn't understand that, and he told me that I am not engaged in my work with energy as I used to [be] and I agree. I must follow the traditions and if my employer understands African spirituals then I can engage, but now I am not engaged at all.' (Participant 16, 30 year old, male)

The two subthemes clearly illustrate how African black employees feel culturally disrespected and therefore, unappreciated. These feelings impact their work engagement levels negatively.

Main theme 3: Turnover intention

Five sub-themes emerged from the theme of turnover intention, namely: discrimination and unfair treatment, cultural misunderstanding, lack of growth opportunities, lack of respect and loss of motivation and confidence.

Subtheme 3.1: Discrimination and unfair treatment

This theme expresses concerns over racial discrimination and unfair treatment based on race and how it affects turnover intention. Participants experienced that African black employees were not treated equally to white employees, which increased thoughts of leaving the company. This subtheme is supported by the following quotes from Participants 1 and 11:

'Black employees are still regarded as people who are not deserving and capable of high positions and high salaries, and this makes me want to leave this workplace.' (Participant 1, 34 year old, female)

'I saw a lot of racism ..., and inequality, I have experienced [this] as a black person in this workplace. These are the factors that enhances my turnover intention.' (Participant 11, 38 year old, female)

Subtheme 3.2: Cultural misunderstanding

This theme emphasises aspects that resulted from cultural misunderstandings, which increased turnover intentions. This subtheme is supported by the following quotes from Participants 8 and 15:

'There are lot of experiences that makes me think to quit my job. One relates to belief systems, or inconsideration by my employer with time to practice my culture such as funerals and weddings.' (Participant 8, 42 year old, male)

'For me to want to leave is the (lack of) respect in terms of culture. If you show signs of not understanding where I come from with this culture, then that makes me not (want to) stay in the company.' (Participant 15, 49 year old, male)

Subtheme 3.3: Lack of growth opportunities

This theme highlights how the lack of opportunities impacted turnover intention levels. Participants expressed frustration with limited career growth and development opportunities in their organisations. The following quotes from Participants 2 and 16 substantiate this subtheme:

'There are no promotions for black people in this environment. Yes, that increases my level of turnover intention.' (Participant 2, 41 year old, female)

'When you check the top management, only 10% is black employees and the rest is white counterparts. So, it is clear ... no opportunities for us blacks in here. So, these things enhance my turnover intention.' (Participant 16, 30 year old, male)

Subtheme 3.4: Lack of respect

This theme addresses the importance of respect in the workplace and how it impacts turnover intention. This subtheme is substantiated by Participants 4 and 7:

'I want to leave this company. No respect from management ... obviously, you know that black Africans culturally, respect forms part of our culture. Management keeps on disrespecting us here, so that is why I want to leave.' (Participant 4, 40 year old, female)

'... [B]eing [an] African black male in this company, [is] frankly not easy. African Blacks [are] not respected here, no recognition or reward, it is for only whites. That makes me want to leave, I won't be in a company that doesn't respect and see black people, no ... no.' (Participant 7, 47 year old, male)

Subtheme 3.5: Loss of motivation and confidence

This theme expresses the importance of motivation and confidence and how these attributes impact individual turnover intention. Participants revealed that negative experiences in the workplace, such as discrimination and disrespect, led to a loss of confidence, trust and motivation, ultimately influencing their turnover intentions. The following quotes from Participants 9, 10 and 12 substantiate this subtheme:

'Once these things start to happen, I am completely losing hope, confidence, trust and all that, and these result in me thinking to leave this company.' (Participant 9, 33 year old, female)

'I have experienced such a bad treatment to a point where I have decided that it's not worth stay[ing] in this organisation, black people will always be ill-treated.' (Participant 10, 34 year old, male)

'I experienced racism as a black female because I am never recognised, and it's really disappointing and painful because everyone wants to grow.' (Participant 12, 46 year old, female)

Main theme 4: Management suggestions

Four sub-themes emerged from the participants' suggestions on how management could alleviate the negative perceptions their employees hold about their psychological contract, thus increasing work engagement and lowering turnover intention in workplaces. The subthemes related to training and development, enhancing employee involvement and communication; increasing motivation, trust and recognition and ensuring cultural integration and inclusivity. The respective subthemes follow.

Subtheme 4.1: Annual training and development

Participants recommended that management should organise annual training workshops to develop middle management and increase their understanding and appreciation of the cultural diversity of African black employees. The following quotes from Participants 1 and 3 substantiate this subtheme:

'Management of this organisation must have middle management annual training and workshops that relate to African Black employees with their indigenous knowledge sensibility experiences to help them know the African cultures.' (Participant 1, 34 year old, female)

'No one, management's mind-set of this organisation must and ... should ... be liberated through trainings and workshops on ... knowing how African people believe [in] their culture, and treat them as such, and treat them fairly.' (Participant 3, 51 year old, male)

Subtheme 4.2: Employee involvement and communication

Participants proposed initiatives to improve employee involvement and communication within the organisation. The following quotes from Participants 5 and 8 emphasise this point:

'What I can propose and suggest is that they must establish what we called a ... cultural systems' committee, because it will be the one that will deal with all these things of African cultural beliefs systems which cause us to differ in how we see things from different angles and perspectives.' (Participant 5, 35 year old, female)

'What I think management can do is provide employee with [a] feedback box where employees will write all their feelings and complaints about management as anonymous and put their views and their feelings in the box, I think that may work.' (Participant 8, 42 year old, male)

Subtheme 4.3: Motivation, trust and recognition

Participants highlighted the significance of motivating employees through keeping promises about recognition and rewards, thus building trust and enhancing motivation. This subtheme is supported by the following quotes from Participants 9 and 15:

'Whatever they promise to the people, they must fulfil. By not fulfilling [their promises] they are killing the morale, they are killing the business, they are killing everything ... and everybody will go. Motivation is the most important thing ... a person is motivated by even a little thing, most of all money.' (Participant 9, 33 year old, female)

'I think management must have a programme and be realistic about their programme. If they promise someone promotions and career growth, they need to make sure that those things are happening.' (Participant 15, 49 year old, male)

Subtheme 4.4: Cultural integration and inclusivity

Participants proposed a triple strategy of assessment, adaptation and acceleration. Management should assess cultural diversity, adopt policies to align with cultural values and bridge the gap between culture and policies to enhance the psychological contract. The following quote from Participant 11 supports this point:

'I think the only thing that the management must do in order to manage this perception, they have to go to the triple strategy whereby they have to assess, adapt and accelerate. They have to look towards the different cultural diversity of all African black people both male and female, and then adapt what is relevant towards their policies and then make a link to ... their culture and our culture and their policies and find ways to work on the differences.' (Participant 11, 38 year old, female)

The aforementioned quotes confirm that race and culture mostly influence psychological contracting, work engagement and turnover intention of African black employees negatively. These emphasise the importance of workplaces acknowledging the innate differences between African cultures and the cultures of their Western counterparts. Participants from both management and non-management level employees shared their perceptions and experiences on the psychological contract and its perceived effect on work engagement and turnover intention and its subsequent effect on their employment relationships. Notably, there were no differences in how managerial and non-managerial employees perceive and experience these constructs.

Discussion and outline of the findings

The results of this study are supported by extant literature. Aderibigbe and Falola (2022) stated that traditional customs in most human societies are important elements that shape the total human social system; they become inseparable from life experiences. Understanding of African traditions and belief systems provides the all-important awareness of the difference between African customs and belief systems from those of a Western culture (Aderibigbe & Falola, 2022).

Cultures explain the way people experience their self-connectedness, as well as their connections to others, to nature and to the significant or sacred (Singh & Bhagwan, 2020). Specifically, Singh and Bhagwan (2020, p.4) define the African tradition as 'the inborn and aboriginal religion of Africans, embraced by the forefathers of the present generation'. African cultures, especially as they relate to tradition and religious practices, are essential for African black employees, and paramount to Africans who have indigenous knowledge sensitivity. In a similar vein, the results of the current study emphasise the importance of customs and beliefs in the African black culture.

These traditions and religious belief systems connect Africans to their being and roots and to how they see, view and perceive things at their workplaces.

Participants emphasised the importance of ubuntu as a philosophy of the African culture and how ignoring values ingrained in an ubuntu spirit contributes to feelings of disrespect and unfairness. Previous research by Chetty and Prince (2024) similarly reported that to manage African blacks' culture and tradition, employers need to have a good ubuntu leadership that offers empathy and understands employees' needs and their different perspectives on how they see things around them. Moreover, Tladi (2021) noted that ubuntu leadership prioritises respect because respect enhances conflict resolution, ethical conduct and cultural sensitivity. In addition, Obioha (2020) indicates that without ubuntu, the nation cannot be liberated from an individualistic mindset (Eze et al., 2021). This means that the nation can only be liberated from individualism when there is unity, love, respect, passion and a consideration for one another regardless of race and culture (Eke & Onwuatuegwu, 2021).

However, many workplaces are shaped on Western cultures and ways of doing things, with policies and practices aimed at profitability and individualist ideals (Pepple et al., 2021). These discrepancies in beliefs and cultures (individual's culture vs. organisational culture) lead to conflictual and unaddressed needs which impact the psychological contract and result in negative engagement levels and increased turnover intention levels (Pepple et al., 2021).

The main objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of African black employees (working in a South African private sector enterprise) regarding their psychological contracting and its effect on work engagement and turnover intention within the context of AKS. Extant literature supports the empirical results of the present study and offers valuable insights into the interconnectedness of African black employees, their culture and their psychological contract, work engagement and turnover intention within the context of a South African private organisation.

The study revealed the impact of cultural diversity and the broader dynamics of race and culture on psychological contracting in workplaces. The preceding literature review and the research findings underscore the importance of ethnic identity and its influence on the employment relationship. The literature and the findings consistently highlighted the significant impact of ethnic diversity and how individuals from different racial and cultural backgrounds perceive and experience the concepts of psychological contracting, work engagement and turnover intention. In fact, extant literature supports the notion that black employees often experience cultural difficulties in the workplace more so than other demographic groups, which ultimately impacts negatively on their psychological contracts (Eze et al., 2021; Mutasa, 2022; Olaopa & Ayodele, 2022; Ugwu et al., 2022).

Although the current study did not compare lived experiences of differing races and cultures pertaining to this phenomenon, it confirms that African black male and female employees experience that their culture is often disrespected and ignored, and these experiences negatively influenced their psychological contracting in the workplace. Specifically, the importance of traditional values (e.g. ubuntu) and traditional customs (e.g. religious, wedding and funeral customs) were relayed. Participants indicated that these cultural differences often resulted in feelings of being disrespected and discriminated against and led to clashes with work schedules.

Ultimately, it adds to the complexity of the employment relationship and may lead to lower engagement levels. For example, George et al. (2022) found that a contributing factor to Nigerian employees who were not fully engaged in their work, stemmed from negative experiences because of traditional customs (e.g. attending initiation schools for becoming traditional healers) at work and subsequent feelings of disrespect and being unappreciated. The current study confirmed this notion.

Participants also reported on their turnover intentions. They perceived that their cultural background contributed to their experiences of a lack of respect and of growth opportunities, discrimination and unfair treatment and a loss of motivation and confidence at the workplace. This increased their levels of turnover intention. Extant research confirms these findings, indicating that black employees often report an increase in turnover intention because of their cultural belief systems (Balogun, 2023; Brewis, 2022; Eze et al., 2021). Black employees resign because employers regularly do not consider traditional matters, which results in disagreements between the parties (Uchendu & Chinedu-Eze, 2021). Eze et al. (2021) therefore emphasise the importance of understanding the cultures of different people as it assists in reducing employees' turnover intention levels.

It is concluded from the current findings of the study that race and culture influence African black employees' lived experiences regarding their psychological contract, work engagement and turnover intention within the context of AKS.

Practical implications

The present study underscores the practical significance of comprehending the perceptions and lived experiences of African black employees regarding the psychological contract and its effect on work engagement and turnover intention. A sub-objective of this study was to determine the practical implications for HRM practitioners that result from the study's findings about the experiences of African black employees pertaining to their psychological contract experiences.

Most importantly, participants were alerted to the importance of cultural integration and inclusivity. Participants indicated that relevant development and training initiatives are

imperative to engrain diversity appreciation within the workplace and to achieve the goal of cultural integration and inclusivity. This emphasises the necessity for organisational strategies, policies and practices that are inclusive and adaptable to diverse cultural backgrounds, including African black employees (Balogun, 2023; Brewis, 2022).

Additionally, it should be noted that the meaning of both turnover intentions and engagement (both Western terms) hold implications for people from collectivistic cultures. Firstly, participants indicated that their communities and families expected from them to work hard in an endeavour to take care of them. Their successes should be shared with their communities and families. This expectation necessitates engagement. However, engagement is typically measured on an individual basis, while blacks' frame of reference is that of the group, that is, the collective. African black employees regard work as a group activity – they work to take care of their families and communities. Secondly, the intention to quit is an individual decision, but again, holds implications for their families. For example, respondents indicated that they wanted to leave because they did not feel welcome, respected or appreciated. These feelings are all experienced on the individual level, and yet, black employees see themselves as working for the benefit of the group. These contradictions in turnover intention should be considered by HRM as it would, in all probability, result in intra-personal conflict for the one harbouring this intention. The internal conflict African black employees may experience, especially when their psychological contracts have been breached, should be considered by HRM to assist them in dealing with their intrapersonal conflict.

Study limitations

Notwithstanding these important findings, scholars (Ugwu et al., 2021; Samuel & Engelbrecht, 2021) revealed that many of the studies on the psychological contract fail to consider the importance of race and culture when managing the psychological contract in workplaces. However, the nature of understanding the psychological contract is subjective. Moreover, the psychological contract is a crucial element in understanding employee work behaviours and a variety of work outcomes that occur because of the psychological breach (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002). These behaviours include engagement and turnover intentions. The current research provided rich, in-depth contributions with regard to the lived experiences of African black participants regarding their psychological contract and its perceived influence on work engagement and turnover intention within the context of an AKS.

Nonetheless, the study aimed to investigate the experiences of African black employees working at a single private organisation in the northern district of the Tshwane metropolitan area in South Africa. Future studies should consider the lived experiences of employees from other races and cultures concerning the psychological contract. Specifically, research into the lived experiences of collectivist

versus individualistic societies as they relate to this phenomenon should be further explored. Additionally, Pretoria North is known for its conservative right-wing views (Boeder, 2023). Therefore, conducting the same study in less conservative areas of South Africa may yield different results. Notwithstanding the above, the qualitative research approach applied is rigorous enough to make the study reliable, trustworthy and repeatable.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article highlights key challenges faced by African black employees because of religious, cultural and traditional influences that impact their perceptions of the psychological contract and employment relationships. Previous research supports the notion that the psychological contract is shaped by the culture and belief systems within African contexts (Olaopa & Ayodele, 2022). Challenges include unmet expectations, limited career growth, disengagement and turnover intention. Human resource professionals and private sector management must address these challenges through diversity appreciation, training and effective psychological contract management. Organisations that successfully outperform their competitors are known to provide team-building initiatives, engagement programmes and employee development (Schreuder et al., 2023).

Recommendations include cultural awareness training for managers, regular meetings to address cultural disparities and feedback mechanisms. Additionally, celebrating diverse cultures and appointing cultural team leaders can promote inclusivity. Efforts to minimise negative impacts on work engagement levels are crucial, including fulfilling promises of career advancement regardless of race or culture. Sharma et al. (2022) mention that employees feel welcome and appreciated within the organisation when there are opportunities for career growth, motivation and promotions. Implementing a triple strategy approach (assess, adapt and accelerate) can help manage cultural differences effectively. Continuous education on anti-discrimination practices and fair career growth opportunities is essential. Organisations must respect and accommodate African black employees' cultures and traditions within the employment relationship (Chantamool et al., 2023). Addressing cultural misunderstandings can enhance perceptions of the psychological contract and foster a harmonious work environment. Mutwarasibo (2020) emphasised that welcoming the African black culture and learning about it are essential because people from different cultures drive innovation and increase competition. Regular evaluation of diversity interventions must be ensured. Feedback mechanisms, such as anonymous suggestion boxes should be considered, as they allow employees to freely express their feelings, concerns and complaints. Such voice channels may help management to assess and address issues affecting the psychological contract, with its subsequent effect on engagement and turnover intention.

Furthermore, HRM should contemplate instituting initiatives geared towards celebrating and comprehending the array of cultures present in the workplace, such as organising cultural day festivities. A practical approach to realising this goal involves appointing religious and cultural team leaders representing diverse ethnic backgrounds. This measure serves to bolster compliance with the *Employment Equity Act (EEA)* section 6 (1) regulations, thereby ensuring the preservation and acknowledgement of the religious, traditional and cultural elements inherent within the diverse workforce (Gathogo, 2023).

Moreover, Tladi (2021) argues that to have a successful employment relationship between employers and employees, obligations that involve terms and conditions of service, as well as cultural and traditional aspects, should be always respected. Religious traditions and cultural beliefs are deeply ingrained in individuals, shaping their daily lives. Organisations should navigate a delicate balance between operational needs and the diverse cultural backgrounds of their employees. Aderibigbe and Falola (2022) point out that traditions are found in most human societies and are important elements that shape the total human social system. In instances where this balance proves challenging, recourse to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) may provide guidance on prioritising either cultural practices or operational requirements (Gathogo, 2023). This underscores the necessity for HRM to reassess their approaches to race and cultural diversity, particularly within ethnically diverse workplaces.

Hence, it is crucial to consider diversity management strategies that respect varying values, beliefs and religions. Promoting a unified organisational culture fosters harmony between employers and employees, thus nurturing a positive employment relationship. Oyinlola et al. (2021) highlighted that while developing equitable strategies to appreciate cultural differences can be challenging, such efforts ultimately benefit corporate environments. Operating within a culturally diverse country like South Africa presents distinctive challenges, necessitating an approach that respects and incorporates a variety of cultures, customs and religions. Neglecting these diversities can impede organisational effectiveness. Oyinlola et al. (2021) further emphasise that organisations that pioneer strategies to address the perceptions of their diverse workforce (including African black employees' views concerning their psychological contract) can enhance work engagement and reduce turnover intention. Pursuing this goal is deemed highly worthwhile.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

L.B.M. wrote the manuscript based on his research project, while M.H. supervised the research and co-authored and edited the manuscript to ensure that all submission requirements were met.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.H., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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