

Repairing the Psychological Contract after Mergers and Acquisitions: An Integrative Conceptual Framework of Organizational Justice, Trust Repair, and Employee Voice

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ABSTRACT

Mergers and acquisitions alter more than formal structures: they also unsettle employees' beliefs about what the organization has promised and what each party owes the other. Although post-merger research documents uncertainty, justice perceptions, trust loss, and psychological contract breach, these streams are often examined separately and usually emphasize negative reactions rather than repair. This conceptual paper develops an integrative framework of psychological-contract reconstruction during post-merger integration. Drawing on psychological contract theory, organizational justice, trust-repair research, and employee voice scholarship, the framework begins with an M&A-specific inherited-obligation discontinuity: employees may continue to hold pre-merger promises while responsibility shifts to a successor organization. This discontinuity increases breach risk without being equivalent to breach. Procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice are proposed to buffer the effect of breach on trust loss; organizational reparative actions are distinguished from the employee outcome of trust recovery; and breach-repair fit strengthens the credibility of those actions. The voice pathway is decomposed into voice opportunities, employee speaking behavior, and managerial responsiveness. Psychological-contract reconstruction is defined as a mutually intelligible and credible revision of reciprocal obligations rather than reluctant acceptance of reduced expectations. Seven propositions specify direct, mediating, and moderating relationships and a temporal process with feedback and failure conditions. The framework extends post-merger research by clarifying how successor organizations inherit and renegotiate legacy obligations and by separating justice appraisal, reparative action, trust recovery, voice, and contract reconstruction. For practice, it suggests diagnosing inherited and broken obligations, matching reparative actions to those obligations, making decision processes contestable and explainable, and ensuring that employee voice receives a substantive response. The model offers a testable agenda for longitudinal research on employee-centered post-merger integration.

Keywords: psychological contract; post-merger integration; organizational justice; trust repair; employee voice

INTRODUCTION

Mergers and acquisitions (M&As) are commonly justified through strategic complementarity, scale economies, market access, capability acquisition, or financial synergy. Yet the realization of those objectives depends heavily on the post-merger integration (PMI) process, where organizational systems, roles, routines, identities, and employment relationships are reconfigured. Classic and contemporary research has repeatedly shown that the human side of integration can become a central source of difficulty because employees experience uncertainty about jobs, status, reporting relationships, career prospects, decision rights, and the future character of the organization (Birkinshaw et al., 2000; Marks & Mirvis, 2011; Schweiger & DeNisi, 1991; Seo & Hill, 2005). These experiences are not only reactions to change in general. They are also evaluations of whether the organization is continuing to honor obligations that employees believed existed before the transaction.

Psychological contract theory provides a particularly useful lens for this problem. A psychological contract

consists of an individual's beliefs regarding reciprocal obligations between the employee and the organization (Rousseau, 1989, 1995). M&A can destabilize these beliefs because the organizational actor that originally made or implied promises may be absorbed, replaced, or redefined. Established expectations about job security, development, recognition, autonomy, fair treatment, career continuity, or managerial support may become uncertain even when the formal employment contract remains unchanged. Empirical work in merger and organizational change contexts shows that employees can interpret altered conditions as psychological contract breach, with consequences for trust, attitudes, withdrawal, and the perceived quality of the employment relationship (Holland & Scullion, 2021; Manalsuren et al., 2017; Raeder, 2023).

Despite this relevance, three limitations remain in the way employee-centered PMI is commonly theorized. First, M&A studies frequently explain the antecedents and consequences of negative employee reactions without specifying how damaged employment relationships can be repaired. Second, organizational justice and trust are often treated as parallel predictors of employee outcomes, even though fairness judgments may shape causal attributions about a breach and therefore affect the possibility of trust recovery. Third, participation is generally discussed as communication, involvement, or change management practice, but less attention is given to employee voice as a mechanism through which disputed obligations can be clarified and renegotiated. These limitations matter because post-merger integration is inherently dynamic. A breach does not necessarily end the employment relationship; rather, it may initiate a period of reassessment in which employees decide whether the merged organization is willing and able to establish a credible new basis for exchange.

The aim of this paper is therefore to develop an integrative conceptual framework of psychological-contract repair in PMI. The central argument is that relational recovery requires more than good communication or generalized support. It begins with an M&A-specific inherited-obligation problem: employees may continue to treat pre-merger promises as binding even though authority for those promises has shifted to a successor organization. The model then separates breach, justice appraisal, organizational reparative actions, trust recovery, and psychological-contract reconstruction, while specifying how voice opportunities become actual voice behavior and how managerial responsiveness determines whether speaking up contributes to renegotiation. Seven propositions identify direct, mediating, and moderating relationships among these mechanisms and integration-supportive employee responses.

The contribution is fivefold. First, it identifies inherited-obligation discontinuity as an M&A-specific antecedent of psychological contract breach rather than treating breach as a direct synonym for organizational change. Second, it distinguishes organizational reparative actions—the interventions undertaken by the organization—from trust recovery, the employee-level change in positive expectations that may or may not follow those actions. Third, it assigns distinct roles to justice dimensions: procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice shape interpretation and credibility, while distributive justice evaluates outcome equity and the adequacy of compensatory or substitute outcomes. Fourth, it decomposes employee voice into opportunity, actual speaking behavior, and managerial responsiveness, thereby specifying when voice can support renegotiation rather than remain symbolic. Fifth, it defines psychological-contract reconstruction independently of renewed trust as a mutually intelligible and credible revision of reciprocal obligations, and it specifies temporal feedback and conditions under which repair may fail. The resulting process model is intended for longitudinal testing across acquisitions, statutory mergers, domestic and cross-border transactions, and integrations accompanied by restructuring or downsizing.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Post-merger integration as a disruption of the employment relationship

PMI requires organizations to align tasks and systems while simultaneously developing workable social relationships between previously separate employee groups. Birkinshaw et al. (2000) distinguish task integration from human integration and show that value creation depends on the interaction between the two. This distinction is important because operational integration can proceed even while the employment relationship deteriorates. New reporting lines, redesigned jobs, standardization, relocations, redundancies, changes in rewards, and altered career structures can be technically rational while still being interpreted by employees as losses or broken commitments.

Employee responses to M&A are shaped by uncertainty and by the meaning attached to organizational actions. Schweiger and DeNisi (1991) demonstrated that realistic merger communication could reduce dysfunctional responses, while Seo and Hill (2005) synthesized multiple theoretical perspectives to explain how anxiety, identity concerns, acculturation, role conflict, job characteristics, and justice influence employee reactions across the M&A process. More recent work continues to show that justice and trust are consequential during

integration. Bansal (2020), for example, found that perceived organizational justice during M&A was associated with employee satisfaction and affective commitment, while Al Hosani et al. (2020) identified justice, trust, communication, and perceived HR effectiveness among the factors associated with employee alienation during PMI. These findings indicate that employees interpret integration not only in terms of what changes but also in terms of how and why changes occur.

A relational perspective extends this logic. When employees have invested effort, loyalty, knowledge, and identity in an organization, major integration decisions are evaluated against accumulated expectations. The post-merger organization therefore inherits a set of pre-existing psychological obligations even if managers did not personally create them. From the employee's perspective, a new owner or merged entity may become the successor to prior promises. This inherited-obligation problem makes psychological contract theory particularly suitable for explaining why formally legitimate organizational changes can still be experienced as relational violations (Holland & Scullion, 2021; Manalsuren et al., 2017).

This paper uses the term inherited-obligation discontinuity to describe the M&A-specific ambiguity that arises when employees continue to attribute pre-merger promises to the employment relationship while the organizational actor, decision authority, or capacity to honor those promises has changed. The discontinuity may concern who now owns the obligation, whether a legacy promise applies across both employee groups, or whether the successor regards the promise as still binding. It is conceptually distinct from psychological contract breach: discontinuity can exist before any employee concludes that an obligation has actually been unfulfilled. The risk of breach increases when successor managers remain silent about legacy commitments, communicate inconsistent positions across legacy groups, or replace established obligations without explicit renegotiation. Conversely, explicit recognition, transfer, substitution, or renegotiation of inherited commitments can reduce discontinuity even when the substantive terms of employment must change.

2.2 Psychological contract breach, violation, and renegotiation

Psychological contracts refer to perceived reciprocal promises and obligations rather than to legally enforceable terms (Conway & Briner, 2005; Rousseau, 1989, 1995). Breach occurs when employees perceive that the organization has failed to fulfill one or more promised obligations. Violation refers to the affective and emotional experience that may follow such a perceived breach, particularly when the discrepancy is interpreted as serious, avoidable, or unjust (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). The distinction is important in PMI because employees may recognize that some pre-merger expectations cannot be maintained but react differently depending on whether the change is explained, negotiated, compensated, and implemented fairly. Breach must also be distinguished from inherited-obligation discontinuity: the latter concerns uncertainty about the status and ownership of prior obligations, whereas breach is the employee's subsequent judgment that an obligation has not been fulfilled.

Psychological contract breach is associated with a range of negative work outcomes. Meta-analytic evidence links breach to lower trust, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, citizenship behavior, and performance, as well as higher turnover intentions (Bal et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2007). Earlier evidence also shows that perceived violations are common and closely connected to declining trust in the employment relationship (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). The effects are not solely transactional. A change to pay, role, or career opportunity can also signal how much the organization values the employee and whether future promises deserve confidence. In merger contexts, Manalsuren et al. (2017) found declines in perceived fulfillment across multiple psychological-contract domains following an institutional merger announcement, with communication, job security, and uncertainty featuring prominently in employee concerns. Holland and Scullion (2021) similarly show that psychological-contract elements can shape talent retention across acquisition stages. Evidence from other abrupt organizational disruptions also shows how rapid changes in work arrangements can alter the perceived employment exchange (Gong & Sims, 2023).

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes that psychological contracts are dynamic. Raeder (2023) argues that organizational change can undermine psychological contracts but also identifies supportive practices that may sustain or restore them. Sanders and Florkowski (2025) conceptualize psychological contracting as an iterative process of sensemaking in which employees repeatedly interpret promise formation, fulfillment, disruption, and response. This dynamic view is especially important for PMI because the goal cannot realistically be to restore every pre-merger expectation. Instead, effective repair may require the construction of a revised contract that employees consider understandable, reciprocal, and credible.

2.3 Organizational justice as an interpretive mechanism

Organizational justice concerns employees' perceptions of fairness and has long been used to explain how workers evaluate organizational decisions and treatment (Greenberg, 1990; Cropanzano et al., 2007). Four dimensions are commonly distinguished: distributive justice, concerning the fairness of outcomes; procedural justice, concerning the fairness of decision procedures; interpersonal justice, concerning respectful and dignified treatment; and informational justice, concerning the adequacy and truthfulness of explanations (Colquitt, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001). These dimensions are particularly salient in M&A because integration decisions create winners, losers, ambiguities, and comparisons between legacy groups.

Justice is often modeled as a direct predictor of employee attitudes, but its role in psychological-contract repair can be more specific. Fairness provides information about intent, respect, and future predictability. Employees who lose a valued role may still distinguish between an outcome that was unavoidable and one that was arbitrary, biased, secretive, or disrespectful. Procedural and informational justice can therefore influence whether a changed obligation is interpreted as betrayal or as a legitimate renegotiation under new conditions. Bansal (2020) highlights the importance of justice in PMI, and research on the Renault-Nissan alliance shows how multiple forms of justice can contribute to trust and cooperation in post-combination relationships (Bird et al., 2022).

The repair logic implies that justice does not erase a breach. Rather, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice influence the employee's attribution of the breach and the credibility of the organization's response. A fair process can reduce perceived malevolence or instability, while unfair treatment can magnify even relatively modest changes into evidence that the new organization is untrustworthy. Distributive justice requires separate treatment in the model. Because many breaches concern the loss of an outcome—such as pay, status, security, autonomy, or opportunity—distributive unfairness can be partly embedded in the event that employees are already evaluating as a breach. Treating it as the same moderator as the process-oriented justice dimensions would risk conceptual double counting. The framework therefore uses procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice as interpretive moderators of the breach–trust relationship, while distributive justice is treated as an appraisal of substantive outcome equity and of whether compensatory or substitute outcomes offered during repair are adequate.

2.4 Trust repair after organizational disruption

Trust reflects a willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations regarding another party's intentions or behavior. Major organizational change can damage employee trust because employees become more dependent on decisions made under uncertainty. To avoid construct conflation, this paper uses trust repair as an umbrella process but distinguishes two elements within it. Organizational reparative actions are the observable interventions undertaken after a breach, such as acknowledgment, explanation, apology, compensation, reform, monitoring, or structural safeguards. Trust recovery is the employee-level outcome: an improvement in positive expectations about organizational reliability, integrity, or benevolence and a renewed willingness to accept vulnerability. Reparative actions can occur without trust recovery, and trust may recover only partially or after repeated evidence over time (Dirks et al., 2009; Gillespie & Dietz, 2009).

Research specifically on employees shows that repair is possible but contingent on the response. Henderson et al. (2020) found that reparative tactics generally improved trust and negative emotions following psychological contract breach, whereas denial was ineffective; full reparation was especially powerful. Research on trust violations also shows that the effectiveness of a response depends on the type and meaning of the violation,

rather than on a universally superior tactic (Kim et al., 2004). Kähkönen et al. (2021), in a systematic review of employee trust repair, emphasize the value of early repair before small violations escalate. In organizational change settings, Kähkönen (2021) identifies information sharing, change-management knowledge, ethical behavior, and collaboration as trust-repair mechanisms at the team level. Together, these studies support a distinction between what the organization does, how employees evaluate the credibility and fit of that response, and whether trust actually changes.

The closest foundation for the present argument is Sverdrup and Stensaker (2018). Their longitudinal study of post-merger integration shows that trust restoration can be understood as renegotiation of the psychological contract and develops a three-stage relational model centered on restoring balance and renegotiating the contractual basis of the relationship. The present framework does not claim that the trust–renegotiation connection is new. Its theoretical advance is to specify the mechanisms and boundary conditions that remain implicit in that account: an M&A-specific inherited-obligation discontinuity before breach; separate roles for process-oriented and distributive justice; a distinction between organizational reparative actions, perceived repair credibility, and employee trust recovery; breach–repair fit as a moderator; and a decomposed voice pathway in which opportunity, speaking behavior, and managerial responsiveness are not treated as one construct. Raeder (2023) identifies practices that can sustain psychological contracts during organizational change, Henderson et al. (2020) examine breach-repair tactics, and Kähkönen et al. (2021) synthesize employee trust-repair evidence. The present model connects these insights to explain when a successor organization can convert inherited, disputed obligations into a reconstructed post-merger exchange rather than simply restore a prior level of trust.

2.5 Employee voice as participative repair

Employee voice is discretionary communication of ideas, concerns, suggestions, or problems intended to improve organizational functioning or influence relevant decisions (Morrison, 2011, 2014; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). The framework distinguishes three related but non-equivalent constructs. Voice opportunity is the existence of a credible organizational channel through which employees can raise concerns. Voice behavior is the employee's actual act of speaking up. Managerial responsiveness is what follows: acknowledgment, reasoned explanation, investigation, or action by a manager or decision owner. An opportunity does not guarantee that employees will speak, and speaking does not guarantee that management will respond. Research shows that managerial openness and psychological safety influence whether employees perceive speaking up as sufficiently safe and worthwhile (Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 1999).

In PMI, these distinctions matter because psychological contracts are subjective and managers may not know which obligations employees believe have been broken. Voice behavior can reveal a perceived loss of status, career continuity, autonomy, recognition, or other expectations that a formal restructuring announcement does not capture. When employees can ask questions, challenge assumptions, suggest alternatives, and receive reasoned responses, voice can also increase procedural and informational justice. Research on psychological contracts and voice shows that breach can alter the form and tone of employee voice, including constructive or destructive responses (Afshan et al., 2021; Botha & Steyn, 2023; Lin et al., 2022). The present framework adds the reverse pathway: when a credible opportunity is used and management responds substantively, voice can help clarify disputed obligations and support their renegotiation.

The enabling condition is therefore not merely the presence of a consultation mechanism. Voice opportunity must be sufficiently safe to generate actual voice behavior, and voice behavior must receive a substantive managerial response if it is to contribute to repair. Symbolic consultation may worsen breach when employees are invited to speak but observe no acknowledgment, explanation, or action. In the proposed framework, managerial responsiveness is treated as a moderator of the voice behavior–reconstruction relationship rather than being folded into the definition of voice itself.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW AND THEORY-DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

This article uses an integrative conceptual review and theory-synthesis approach rather than a systematic evidence review. Conceptual articles are appropriate when the objective is to connect theoretical conversations, clarify construct boundaries, and derive testable relationships rather than estimate an average empirical effect

(Jaakkola, 2020; Torraco, 2005). The review was therefore designed for conceptual coverage and mechanism development, not for exhaustive enumeration of all studies in each field.

Literature identification proceeded iteratively across four bodies of peer-reviewed scholarship: (1) employee and human-integration research in M&A and PMI; (2) psychological contract breach, violation, fulfillment, and change; (3) organizational justice and employee trust-repair research; and (4) employee voice research. Targeted searches were conducted using Google Scholar and journal/publisher databases with combinations of terms including ‘merger’, ‘acquisition’, ‘post-merger integration’, ‘psychological contract’, ‘psychological contract breach’, ‘trust repair’, ‘organizational justice’, ‘employee voice’, ‘organizational change’, and ‘renegotiation’. The search was supplemented by backward and forward citation chaining from foundational and recent anchor studies. Foundational publications were retained when they define core constructs or mechanisms, while recent work was emphasized where it develops trust repair, dynamic psychological contracting, or employee responses to organizational change.

Selection was based on theoretical relevance to the employee–organization relationship during the post-announcement and integration period. Studies were included when they directly informed at least one construct, causal mechanism, boundary condition, or temporal relationship in the proposed model. M&A-specific evidence was prioritized; research from broader organizational-change settings was used where a mechanism—such as trust-repair tactics, psychological safety, or voice—has not been studied sufficiently within M&A. Studies focused primarily on deal valuation, acquisition selection, shareholder reactions, or external stakeholder trust were outside the conceptual boundary. Because the purpose is integrative theory development, no claim of exhaustive or systematic coverage is made.

The synthesis proceeded through structured comparison rather than simple narrative accumulation. Studies were compared on the focal construct, unit of analysis, causal role, temporal position, organizational context, and treatment of outcomes. This comparison exposed three recurrent ambiguities that the framework resolves: breach versus the pre-breach status of inherited obligations; organizational reparative actions versus employee trust recovery; and voice opportunity versus voice behavior and managerial responsiveness. Constructs were then ordered into a temporal process, and propositions were derived only where the literatures provide a defensible mechanism connecting distinct constructs. Moderating relationships were used when a mechanism changes the strength of another relationship, while mediation was reserved for intervening states through which an effect is expected to operate. The resulting framework is intended to be parsimonious enough for empirical testing while transparent about the conceptual choices used to derive it.

Table 1. Distinct roles of the core constructs in psychological-contract repair

Construct	Core question	Function in the framework	Illustrative indicators in PMI
Inherited-obligation discontinuity	Do pre-merger obligations still bind the successor?	Pre-breach antecedent capturing ambiguity over ownership, continuity, or transfer of legacy promises	Silence about legacy commitments; inconsistent treatment across legacy groups; unclear transfer or substitution of promises
Psychological contract breach	Has the organization failed to fulfill an obligation?	Employee judgment of non-fulfillment; distinct from change itself and from inherited-obligation ambiguity	Perceived non-fulfillment of security, development, autonomy, recognition, reward, or career commitments
Organizational justice	Was the decision and repair process fair?	Procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice shape attribution and credibility; distributive justice evaluates outcome equity and repair adequacy	Consistent procedures; respectful treatment; adequate explanations; equitable outcomes and compensation

Organizational reparative actions	What does the organization do after the breach?	Observable organizational inputs intended to acknowledge, explain, compensate, reform, or prevent recurrence	Acknowledgment; apology/explanation; compensation; policy reform; safeguards; follow-through
Perceived repair credibility	Does the employee regard the response as relevant and believable?	Intervening appraisal of whether reparative actions are sincere, proportionate, matched to the breach, and likely to endure	Perceived sincerity; relevance; proportionality; breach–repair fit; confidence in safeguards
Trust recovery	Does employee trust improve after the response?	Employee-level outcome reflecting renewed positive expectations and willingness to accept vulnerability	Improved perceived reliability, integrity, benevolence, and willingness to rely on the organization
Voice opportunity	Is there a credible channel for employee input?	Organizational condition that enables, but does not guarantee, speaking up	Consultation forum; Q&A; grievance channel; employee forum; feedback process
Voice behavior	Do employees actually raise the concern or suggestion?	Employee behavior that surfaces disputed obligations and information needed for renegotiation	Questions; concerns; suggestions; challenges; problem reports
Managerial responsiveness	What happens after employees speak?	Acknowledgment, explanation, investigation, or action that determines whether voice becomes consequential	Reasoned response; follow-up; decision revision; explanation when no change is possible
Reconstructed psychological contract	What can both parties credibly expect going forward?	Revised reciprocal obligations that are mutually intelligible and regarded as binding; not merely reluctant acceptance of imposed reductions	Clear role expectations; revised development pathways; realistic security or mobility terms; transparent performance obligations

AN INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK OF PSYCHOLOGICAL-CONTRACT REPAIR IN PMI

4.1 From inherited-obligation discontinuity to perceived breach

M&A creates a discontinuity between the organizational past and the integrated future, but organizational change alone is not equivalent to psychological contract breach. The M&A-specific antecedent proposed here is inherited-obligation discontinuity: uncertainty over whether, how, and by whom pre-merger promises will be honored after authority shifts to a successor organization. Employees may face role redesign, altered performance expectations, changes in reporting relationships, redundancy risk, relocation, revised rewards, or new cultural and behavioral norms, yet these events become breach only when employees judge that an obligation the organization owed them has not been fulfilled.

Inherited-obligation discontinuity can therefore precede breach without determining it. It is lower when the successor organization explicitly recognizes a legacy commitment, transparently substitutes a new obligation, or negotiates its withdrawal. It is higher when employees receive silence, contradictory messages, or unequal interpretations of legacy promises across merging groups. This distinction helps explain why employees exposed to a similar objective magnitude of integration change may reach different conclusions about breach: the crucial antecedent is not simply how much has changed, but whether the successor has established a credible position on obligations inherited from the pre-merger relationship.

Proposition 1. During post-merger integration, greater inherited-obligation discontinuity is positively associated with subsequent psychological contract breach, beyond the objective magnitude of integration change.

4.2 Justice appraisals shape the meaning of the breach

A breach can be interpreted as inability, necessity, negligence, or intentional disregard. Justice perceptions help employees make this attribution. Procedural justice communicates whether decisions were made consistently and with appropriate safeguards; interpersonal justice communicates respect; and informational justice provides accounts for why commitments changed. These process-oriented justice dimensions are theoretically positioned to alter the meaning of a breach after it has been perceived. Employees may still experience loss, but fair procedures, dignified treatment, and adequate explanations can reduce the inference that the organization acted with disregard or that future promises are inherently unreliable.

Distributive justice plays a related but different role. In PMI, the fairness of the outcome itself may be part of what employees believe was promised, so distributive injustice can contribute to the perceived severity of the breach rather than cleanly moderate its consequences. During repair, however, distributive justice becomes important again when employees evaluate whether compensation, substitute opportunities, revised workloads, or other outcomes are proportionate to the loss. The framework therefore models procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice as moderators of the breach–trust relationship and treats distributive justice as an appraisal of substantive outcome equity and repair adequacy.

Proposition 2. Higher perceived procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice weakens the negative relationship between psychological contract breach and employee trust during post-merger integration.

4.3 Organizational reparative actions, credibility, and trust recovery

Fair treatment creates conditions for repair, but it is not itself a reparative action and it should not be conflated with trust recovery. Organizational reparative actions are management interventions undertaken after a perceived breach—such as acknowledgment, explanation, apology, compensation, policy correction, structural reform, monitoring, or safeguards against recurrence (Dirks et al., 2009; Gillespie & Dietz, 2009; Henderson et al., 2020). Trust recovery is the employee outcome that may follow: an improvement in positive expectations about the organization and willingness to accept vulnerability. Between the two lies perceived repair credibility, an employee judgment that the response is sincere, relevant to the harm, proportionate, and likely to endure.

Justice and breach–repair fit shape that credibility through different mechanisms. Fair procedures, respectful treatment, and truthful explanations make organizational actions easier to interpret as genuine rather than manipulative. Breach–repair fit concerns substantive congruence between the damaged obligation and the response. A lost promotion pathway may require a revised career architecture or development opportunity; an arbitrary redundancy process may require transparent criteria and review; and a broken autonomy expectation may require redesigned decision rights rather than generalized reassurance. Repair is therefore more likely to change trust when the organization addresses the specific content and meaning of the breach rather than relying on symbolic communication.

Proposition 3. Perceived repair credibility mediates the positive relationship between procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice surrounding the repair process and employee trust recovery.

Proposition 4. The positive relationship between organizational reparative actions and perceived repair credibility is stronger when breach–repair fit is high than when it is low; higher credibility in turn supports trust recovery.

4.4 Employee voice: opportunity, behavior, and managerial responsiveness

Organizations cannot repair what they do not understand, but the presence of a formal channel should not be treated as equivalent to employee voice. Voice opportunity is the availability of a credible mechanism through which employees can raise concerns. Voice behavior is the employee’s actual decision to use that opportunity. Psychological safety influences this conversion because employees may remain silent when speaking up appears personally risky or futile (Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 1999). These distinctions are important in PMI because managers may underestimate the obligations employees attach to long-standing routines, status

arrangements, career expectations, or relationships.

Once employees speak, managerial responsiveness determines whether voice becomes part of repair. Responsiveness can involve acknowledgment, reasoned explanation, investigation, visible follow-up, or action; it does not require that management accept every request. A responsive exchange can clarify what the employee believed was promised, what the organization can still provide, and what substitute obligation may be feasible. By contrast, a consultation exercise in which employees speak but receive no response may be interpreted as symbolic and can reinforce distrust or breach. Voice behavior can therefore contribute to psychological-contract reconstruction only when the organization demonstrates that the expressed concern has entered a genuine decision or explanation process.

Proposition 5. Voice opportunity is positively associated with employee voice behavior during post-merger integration, and this relationship is stronger when employees experience higher psychological safety.

Proposition 6. The positive relationship between employee voice behavior and psychological-contract reconstruction is stronger when managerial responsiveness is high; when responsiveness is absent or merely symbolic, voice is less likely to produce reconstruction and may reinforce breach perceptions.

4.5 From trust recovery to psychological-contract reconstruction

Repair should not be evaluated solely by whether employees return to their pre-merger attitudes. In many integrations, a complete restoration of the previous employment relationship is impossible because roles, structures, and strategic priorities have genuinely changed. The more realistic endpoint is psychological-contract reconstruction: a new set of reciprocal expectations that is sufficiently explicit, mutually intelligible, and attributable to both parties to guide future exchange. Reconstruction is conceptually distinct from trust recovery. Trust concerns confidence in the organization's future conduct; reconstruction concerns the substantive content of the obligations that employee and organization now understand to apply.

Reconstruction must also be distinguished from reluctant acceptance. An employee may accept reduced security, status, or opportunity because exit options are limited or resistance appears futile while still believing that the organization has not established a reciprocal or legitimate new basis for exchange. Such acquiescence is not a reconstructed psychological contract. Reconstruction requires clarity about revised obligations, some basis for reciprocity, and credible evidence that the organization treats the new commitments as binding. Trust recovery makes this transition more plausible because employees are more willing to rely on revised promises, while responsive voice can clarify and negotiate their content. When reconstruction occurs, employees have fewer reasons to withdraw and stronger reasons to cooperate with integration activities, share knowledge, and invest effort in the combined organization.

Proposition 7. Psychological-contract reconstruction mediates the positive relationship between employee trust recovery and integration-supportive responses, including cooperation, knowledge sharing, and lower withdrawal intentions.

4.6 Temporal ordering, feedback, and conditions of repair failure

The framework is temporally ordered but not mechanically linear. Inherited-obligation discontinuity can emerge as the successor organization takes control; breach is registered when employees judge that an obligation has not been fulfilled; justice appraisals and reparative actions then shape how the event is interpreted and whether trust begins to recover. Voice can occur at several points: early voice may reveal an unrecognized breach, while later voice can clarify or negotiate the content of a revised contract. Trust recovery is also cumulative rather than instantaneous, because employees may require repeated evidence that reparative actions and new promises are being honored. Once reconstructed, the revised psychological contract becomes the comparison baseline for subsequent organizational behavior, creating a feedback loop in which later fulfillment can consolidate repair and later non-fulfillment can reopen breach.

Repair can fail even when formal interventions are present. Repeated broken promises can make new assurances non-credible; symbolic consultation can turn voice opportunity into further evidence of disrespect;

severe losses may be difficult to compensate; and employees with limited bargaining power may outwardly accept revised terms without experiencing genuine reconstruction. Early intervention may prevent small violations from escalating (Kähkönen et al., 2021), but repeated inconsistency can make each subsequent repair attempt harder to believe. These conditions are important empirically because apparent compliance, silence, or retention should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that the psychological contract has been repaired.

Figure 1. Integrative conceptual framework of psychological-contract repair during post-merger integration

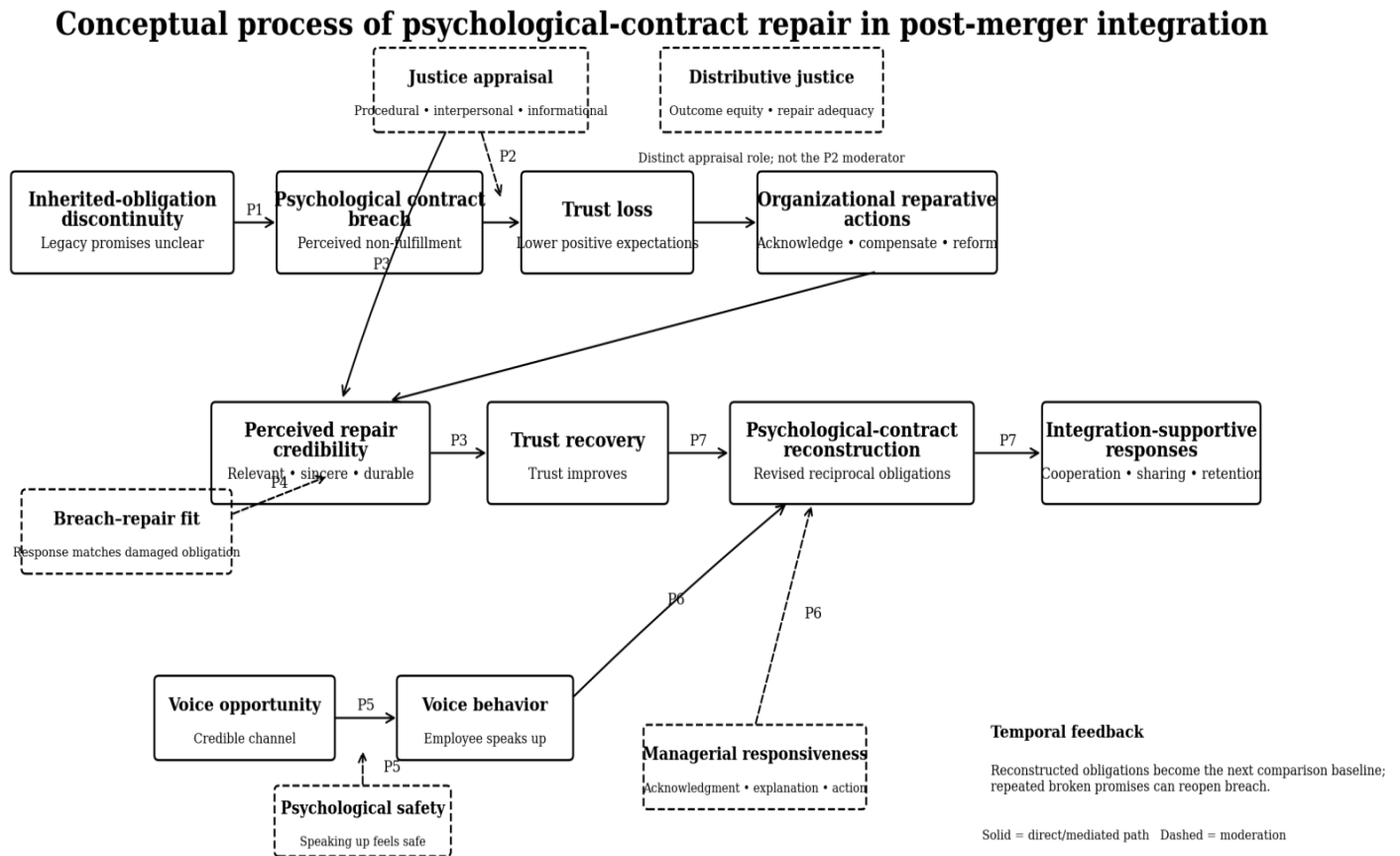


Table 2. Propositions and indicative empirical tests

Proposition	Relationship	Suggested design	Indicative measures/outcomes
P1	Inherited-obligation discontinuity → psychological contract breach (direct antecedent)	Multi-wave employee panel beginning near merger announcement; control objective change magnitude	Inherited-obligation discontinuity; breach; objective/subjective change magnitude
P2	Procedural/interpersonal/informational justice × breach → trust loss (moderation)	Longitudinal survey with interaction tests	Justice dimensions; breach; organizational trust
P3	Justice → perceived repair credibility → trust recovery (mediation)	Repeated measures around a documented repair intervention; mediation analysis	Justice; repair credibility; trust recovery
P4	Reparative actions × breach–repair fit → repair credibility → trust recovery (moderated process)	Scenario experiment or field comparison of matched versus generic repair responses	Type of breached obligation; reparative action; fit; credibility; trust recovery

P5	Voice opportunity → voice behavior, moderated by psychological safety	Multi-wave survey or field study of consultation mechanisms	Voice opportunity; psychological safety; actual voice behavior
P6	Voice behavior → psychological-contract reconstruction, moderated by managerial responsiveness	Longitudinal mixed-method design following issues raised through voice channels	Voice behavior; responsiveness; expectation clarity; negotiated obligations
P7	Trust recovery → psychological-contract reconstruction → integration-supportive responses (mediation)	Multi-wave SEM with behavioral and withdrawal outcomes	Trust recovery; reconstructed obligations; cooperation; knowledge sharing; turnover/withdrawal intention

DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical contributions

The framework makes several theoretical contributions to the study of employees in M&A. The first is an M&A-specific explanation of why psychological contract problems can arise before a clear instance of non-fulfillment is judged. The concept of inherited-obligation discontinuity captures the fact that employees can carry forward promises made by a legacy organization even though authority, organizational identity, and managerial responsibility have shifted. This makes the successor's treatment of inherited commitments a theoretically distinct antecedent of breach and explains why similar objective integration changes may produce different employee interpretations.

Second, the framework specifies its advance relative to the closest existing studies. Sverdrup and Stensaker (2018) demonstrate that trust can be restored through rebalancing and renegotiation of the psychological contract in a post-merger change setting; Raeder (2023) identifies practices that help sustain psychological contracts during organizational change; Henderson et al. (2020) examine tactics for repairing psychological contract breach; and Kähkönen et al. (2021) synthesize employee trust-repair evidence. The present model does not replace those contributions. It connects them through a more differentiated causal architecture: inherited-obligation discontinuity precedes breach; process-oriented justice moderates breach-related trust loss; organizational reparative actions are evaluated for fit and credibility before trust recovers; and a reconstructed contract is a distinct endpoint rather than a synonym for restored trust.

Third, the framework clarifies the role of organizational justice and avoids treating all justice dimensions as interchangeable. Procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice perform an interpretive function because they shape attributions about how and why the breach occurred and whether the repair response is credible. Distributive justice is retained, but its role is located in outcome equity and the adequacy of compensatory or substitute outcomes. This distinction reduces overlap between the breach construct and the fairness of the very outcome that may constitute the breach.

Fourth, the model separates organizational reparative actions, perceived repair credibility, and trust recovery. This prevents trust repair from referring simultaneously to what management does, the process through which employees interpret those actions, and the employee outcome. It also clarifies breach–repair fit as a boundary condition: acknowledgment or communication is not inherently reparative when it does not address the obligation that employees believe was damaged.

Finally, employee voice is decomposed into opportunity, behavior, and managerial responsiveness, and psychological-contract reconstruction is defined independently of both trust and acquiescence. A channel for participation is not equivalent to speaking up; speaking up is not equivalent to receiving a response; and remaining in the organization is not evidence that a new reciprocal contract has been accepted. The model is therefore temporally explicit and incorporates feedback: reconstructed obligations become the next comparison baseline, while repeated broken promises, symbolic consultation, or constrained bargaining can reopen the

repair cycle. This process view encourages longitudinal rather than purely cross-sectional testing.

5.2 Managerial implications for post-merger integration

For practitioners, the framework suggests that employee concerns after a merger should not be treated as a single attitude problem. Organizations first need to diagnose both the content and the status of perceived obligations. Employees may be concerned about security, career continuity, recognition, autonomy, workload, fairness, location, flexibility, managerial access, or development, but managers should also establish whether these expectations originated before the merger and whether employees believe the successor organization inherited them. Different breaches require different responses, and silence about the status of legacy commitments can itself create inherited-obligation discontinuity. A uniform message that the merger is strategically necessary may be true but still fail to address what employees believe was promised to them.

Second, organizations should separate explanation, reparative action, and trust recovery. Informational justice requires timely and candid explanations, but reparative action requires observable intervention. Where an obligation cannot be maintained, managers should communicate the constraint, acknowledge the loss, explain the decision process, and identify what compensatory or substitute commitments can realistically be offered. Where the breach resulted from poor implementation rather than necessity, corrective action should be visible. Managers should then assess whether employees actually regard the response as credible and whether trust improves rather than assuming that an action automatically repaired the relationship.

Third, integration governance should include structured voice architecture that separates opportunity, behavior, and responsiveness. A useful channel has a defined route for input, sufficient psychological safety for employees to use it, a responsible decision owner, a response timeframe, and a way for employees to see what was acknowledged, explained, or changed as a result. Even when management cannot accept a request, a reasoned response can contribute to procedural and informational justice. Inviting input without follow-up risks turning consultation into an additional breach signal.

Fourth, organizations should avoid overpromising during the uncertainty of PMI. Psychological-contract repair is weakened when managers attempt to restore morale with commitments that later prove impossible. Credibility is more valuable than reassurance. Realistic commitments, explicit contingencies, and clear follow-up can create a more stable revised contract.

Finally, repair should be monitored over time with measures that keep the model's constructs separate. Pulse measures can distinguish inherited-obligation discontinuity, perceived breach, justice, exposure to reparative actions, repair credibility, trust recovery, voice behavior, managerial responsiveness, and clarity of revised obligations rather than collapsing them into a single engagement score. Apparent acceptance should also be interpreted carefully: employees with limited bargaining power may comply with revised terms without experiencing genuine psychological-contract reconstruction. Such differentiation helps managers identify whether the problem lies in the status of inherited promises, the fairness of implementation, the fit or credibility of the repair response, lack of trust, or ambiguity about future obligations.

FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

The framework opens several empirical directions. First, future studies should use longitudinal designs beginning as close as possible to the merger announcement. At least four measurement points would allow researchers to distinguish inherited-obligation discontinuity and initial breach perceptions from subsequent justice appraisals, reparative actions and their credibility, trust recovery, and psychological-contract reconstruction. Objective indicators of integration change should be collected alongside employee perceptions so that Proposition 1 can test whether inherited-obligation discontinuity predicts breach beyond the magnitude of the change itself. Cross-lagged or latent-change models could also examine the proposed feedback in which reconstructed obligations become the baseline for later fulfillment or renewed breach.

Second, researchers should test the distinction between organizational reparative actions, perceived repair credibility, and trust recovery, as well as breach–repair fit. Experimental designs can manipulate the type of breached obligation and the reparative response to determine whether matched responses are judged more

credible than generic apologies or explanations and whether credibility mediates subsequent trust recovery. Field research can complement experiments by examining naturally occurring variation in repair practices across business units and by tracking whether initial improvements in trust persist when later organizational behavior either confirms or contradicts the repair message.

Third, future research should distinguish employee groups. Legacy-company membership, hierarchical level, tenure, critical-talent status, and exposure to restructuring may shape both the psychological contract and the perceived fairness of integration. Acquired-company employees may also evaluate the same decision differently from employees of the acquiring organization because they enter the integration with different reference points and status concerns.

Fourth, employee voice should be studied as a sequence rather than a single frequency measure. Researchers should separately assess whether a credible opportunity exists, whether employees actually speak, whether psychological safety predicts use of the opportunity, and whether managers respond with acknowledgment, explanation, or action. This separation allows direct tests of Propositions 5 and 6 and helps distinguish genuine participative repair from symbolic consultation. Studies should also examine whether non-response after voice produces stronger disappointment than having no voice opportunity at all.

Fifth, cross-national research is needed because psychological obligations, fairness norms, employment protection, bargaining power, and expectations of authority vary across institutional contexts. Comparative research in smaller and emerging economies would be particularly valuable because much M&A theory is derived from large Western markets even though consolidation and ownership change are common in transitional economies. Bargaining power should be examined explicitly because employees with few alternatives may remain, comply, or report acceptance without having reconstructed a reciprocal psychological contract.

Finally, researchers should connect employee-level repair to integration performance while preserving the mediation specified in Proposition 7. Multi-level designs could examine whether units with stronger trust recovery subsequently develop clearer reconstructed obligations and, in turn, show higher knowledge transfer, fewer coordination failures, lower regrettable turnover, or faster stabilization of routines. Repeated measurement can also test failure conditions such as serial broken promises, symbolic voice processes, and severe non-compensable losses. Such studies would link the human side of PMI more directly to the strategic outcomes that motivate M&A.

LIMITATIONS

This paper is conceptual and therefore does not establish causal effects. The proposed temporal ordering of inherited-obligation discontinuity, breach, justice appraisal, reparative actions, repair credibility, trust recovery, voice processes, and contract reconstruction should be tested against alternative and reciprocal models. Greater trust may itself improve justice perceptions; responsive voice episodes may directly strengthen trust; and employees who reconstruct obligations may retrospectively reinterpret earlier breach. The framework also simplifies the plurality of organizational agents who represent the employer. Employees may form distinct psychological contracts with senior management, direct supervisors, HR, or legacy organizational units, and these relationships may not move together.

A further limitation is that the model emphasizes repair among employees who remain in the organization. In integrations involving large-scale redundancies, some obligations may be impossible to repair for departing employees. Nevertheless, justice and respectful treatment remain relevant because the treatment of leavers can also be observed by survivors and can influence their own beliefs about the organization. Future research should therefore examine spillover and social-information effects across employee groups.

CONCLUSION

Post-merger integration changes the employment relationship at the same time that it changes the organization. The successor organization inherits not only systems and employees but also expectations created before the transaction. When the status of those obligations is unclear, inherited-obligation discontinuity increases the risk

that subsequent integration decisions will be interpreted as psychological contract breach. Successful repair then requires more than communication or morale initiatives. Procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice shape how breach affects trust and how credible a repair response appears; distributive justice informs whether outcomes and compensation are substantively fair; organizational reparative actions must fit the damaged obligation; and trust recovery must be distinguished from the actions intended to produce it. Employee voice contributes when a credible opportunity leads to actual speaking and management responds substantively. The endpoint is psychological-contract reconstruction—a mutually intelligible and credible set of revised obligations—not merely restored trust or reluctant acceptance of reduced terms. By making these constructs, relationships, feedback loops, and failure conditions explicit, the framework extends existing post-merger trust and psychological-contract research and offers a testable basis for longitudinal study of employee-centered integration.

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