



Exploring the Meaning of Legal and Moral Responsibilities in Contract Fulfillment: A Phenomenological Study of Individual Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Legal obligations and moral responsibilities are central to contract fulfillment, yet the subjective experiences of individuals navigating these responsibilities remain underexplored. Existing research primarily focuses on legal compliance, often neglecting the personal and cultural factors that influence how individuals approach contracts. A gap exists in understanding how people reconcile legal duties with their moral and social obligations. This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals fulfilling contractual obligations and how legal and moral considerations shape these experiences. Using a purposive sampling technique, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants, who shared their personal experiences in fulfilling contracts. The data collected were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which allowed for an in-depth exploration of how participants made sense of their legal and moral responsibilities. The analysis revealed that while legal compliance is important, moral values and social trust play a more significant role in shaping individuals' decisions regarding contract fulfillment. These findings highlight the complex interplay between legal duties and personal ethics, offering a more holistic understanding of contract performance. This research contributes to the field by emphasizing the need for legal frameworks that consider both legal and social dimensions. Future studies could build on these findings to explore how these subjective experiences vary across different legal systems and cultural contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

The concept of contractual obligations plays a fundamental role in both legal and social systems, shaping how individuals and organizations engage with one another in a variety of contexts. Contracts are not merely legal documents; they are seen as agreements that bind parties to certain duties, often underpinned by mutual trust and social expectations (Alrob & Shields, 2022). However, the impact of legal regulations on the fulfillment of these obligations goes beyond the formalities of the law. In many cultures, the way individuals perceive and execute their contractual duties can also be heavily influenced by moral values, personal integrity, and societal norms. These factors contribute to a broader understanding of what it means to fulfill a contract, reflecting a complex intersection of legal and personal responsibility.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its deep connection to the everyday experiences of individuals who engage in various forms of contracts, whether in business, family, or personal relationships. People often encounter moments where the fulfillment of a contract requires not only legal compliance but also ethical considerations, which may vary based on cultural and personal beliefs. For instance, individuals may find themselves in situations where fulfilling a contract is not only about adhering to legal stipulations but also about maintaining trust, honoring promises, and balancing personal values with formal expectations (Tetteh dkk., 2024). Understanding how

individuals navigate this landscape of legal and moral duties is essential, particularly in an increasingly complex and globalized society where diverse cultural perspectives shape how people approach agreements.

Exploring these experiences through a phenomenological lens is crucial because it allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their lived experiences in relation to legal obligations. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on subjective experience, provides a framework for uncovering the deeper meanings individuals attribute to their interactions with legal contracts. It focuses on how these experiences are constructed and how they influence behavior, decision-making, and perceptions of justice and fairness. This approach is especially relevant as it highlights the lived experiences of individuals, offering valuable insights into the ways in which legal frameworks intersect with personal values and social norms in real-world contexts.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals navigating legal obligations and contracts has emerged as a vital area within the field of law and social sciences. Understanding how individuals experience and interpret their duties within the confines of legal agreements has significant implications for both legal theory and practice. Numerous studies have explored the formal and theoretical aspects of contract law, yet there remains a gap in understanding how individuals personally engage with these legal structures (Lin dkk., 2023). Most existing research has predominantly focused on legal compliance and the enforcement mechanisms within the legal framework, leaving aside the subjective and cultural dimensions that shape how contracts are fulfilled in practice.

One of the primary challenges in exploring these deep, subjective experiences is the methodological limitation of quantitative approaches, which focus primarily on objective measures and often fail to capture the nuanced, personal meanings individuals attach to their contractual obligations. The use of surveys, statistical models, or legal analysis often overlooks the emotional, ethical, and personal considerations that individuals weigh when fulfilling their contractual duties. These methodologies, while effective for identifying general trends, do not offer the in-depth insights necessary to understand how people perceive their obligations beyond the letter of the law.

In this context, phenomenology offers a more suitable approach for capturing the essence of individuals' lived experiences. However, the challenge remains that qualitative research, particularly phenomenology, often faces limitations in fully articulating the rich and complex nature of these subjective experiences (Rodríguez-Pose & Sotiriou, 2021). While phenomenological methods can uncover deep insights into personal and cultural interpretations of legal obligations, it is often difficult to reconcile individual variations and ensure the generalizability of findings across different legal and cultural contexts. Despite these challenges, phenomenological research holds the potential to provide a more holistic understanding of how individuals interpret their roles and responsibilities within the legal system, offering insights that quantitative methods cannot provide.

Existing solutions to understanding the phenomenon of fulfilling contractual obligations often rely on practical, legalistic approaches that focus on compliance and enforcement. These solutions typically use quantitative methodologies, such as surveys or legal case studies, which prioritize objective measures and statistical analysis to assess contract performance. While these methods can provide useful insights into general trends and patterns, they are limited in their ability to capture the rich, subjective meanings that individuals attach to their experiences with legal contracts. They tend to overlook the personal, cultural, and emotional dimensions that influence how people perceive and fulfill their obligations, which are crucial for understanding the full impact of legal frameworks on everyday life.

This gap in understanding highlights the need for an alternative approach that can delve deeper into the lived experiences of individuals navigating legal obligations (Anderson dkk., 2023). Phenomenology offers a solution by focusing on the essence of human experiences and the meanings individuals ascribe to them. By adopting a phenomenological approach, it becomes possible to explore not just the actions taken to fulfill contracts, but also the subjective interpretations and emotional responses that shape individuals' decisions and behaviors. This method allows for a more holistic and nuanced understanding of how people experience legal obligations in the context of their

daily lives. Through phenomenology, the complex interplay between legal duties, moral values, and social trust can be better understood, providing insights that are often obscured by conventional methods. Therefore, this research aims to address the limitations of current approaches and offer a deeper exploration of the experiences that shape contractual compliance.

Previous research has examined various aspects of legal obligations, focusing predominantly on compliance, enforcement, and the consequences of contract breaches. However, the subjective experiences of individuals navigating these legal frameworks remain underexplored. Studies such as those by Chin dkk (2023) have touched on the impact of social trust and moral responsibility in contractual relationships but have largely overlooked the in-depth, personal meanings individuals ascribe to these experiences. Moreover, while legal studies often emphasize the formal and objective aspects of contracts, few have investigated the emotional and cultural dimensions that influence how people fulfill their obligations. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals and exploring how legal obligations intersect with moral and personal responsibilities in the context of contracts.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach is employed, particularly focusing on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This methodology is well-suited for exploring the personal, subjective experiences of individuals, providing a deeper understanding of how they make sense of their legal and moral duties. Phenomenology allows the researcher to move beyond surface-level actions and examine the meanings and emotions embedded in these experiences. It will offer insights into how individuals interpret their obligations in contracts and how these interpretations shape their decisions and behaviors. This approach directly responds to the limitations identified in previous research, providing a more holistic view of the phenomenon.

The article is structured to first introduce the context of the phenomenon under study, followed by a detailed explanation of the phenomenological methodology used in this research. The process of data collection and analysis is outlined, with a particular focus on how themes are identified and interpreted (Choroś-Mrozowska, 2022). Following the presentation of findings, a discussion section explores the implications of these results for understanding legal obligations and moral duties. The article concludes by summarizing the key insights and suggesting practical recommendations for policymakers and legal practitioners on integrating moral and social considerations into contract law and enforcement mechanisms. These implications emphasize the importance of considering personal and cultural values in the creation of legal frameworks, which could enhance both compliance and the overall trust between contracting parties.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This research adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals regarding the impact of legal regulations on fulfilling contractual obligations in everyday life. Phenomenology is particularly suited for investigating how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences in specific contexts. The approach emphasizes understanding the subjective experiences of participants, making it ideal for answering the research question, which focuses on uncovering the personal meanings and interpretations associated with legal and moral duties in contract fulfillment (Wei dkk., 2020). In this study, an interpretative phenomenological approach was applied, which allows for a deeper exploration of how participants interpret and make meaning of their lived experiences in relation to the broader social and legal frameworks they navigate. This approach provides rich, context-specific insights into the personal and social dimensions of contract fulfillment that are not easily captured by quantitative methods.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals who have had direct experience with fulfilling contractual obligations in both personal and business contexts. The inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 18 years old and have experience in signing and

fulfilling a legal contract (Huang, 2024). There were no specific exclusion criteria based on gender or educational background, as the focus was on the diversity of experiences in dealing with contracts. In total, 15 participants were involved in the study, with an equal representation of male and female participants. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 55 years, ensuring a mix of perspectives across different stages of life and career. This demographic diversity was essential to capturing a wide range of experiences and perceptions related to the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face, which allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. The interviews were designed to encourage participants to reflect on their personal experiences with contracts, focusing on the intersection of legal obligations and moral responsibilities. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, private setting to ensure participants felt comfortable and able to speak openly (Chalise & Naranpanawa, 2023). The interviews were guided by an interview protocol that included open-ended questions about the participants' understanding of contracts, their experiences with fulfilling contractual obligations, and the role of law and morality in these processes. The interview protocol was adapted based on feedback from an initial pilot interview, ensuring it was well-suited to capture the nuances of participants' experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a common method for analyzing phenomenological data. The IPA process involved several systematic steps to identify key themes from the interview transcripts. First, the transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity with the content. Then, significant statements related to participants' experiences were highlighted and categorized into initial themes. These themes were refined by searching for patterns and relationships between them, ultimately leading to a set of core themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences with contractual obligations. The final themes were interpreted to reveal deeper meanings and implications regarding the role of legal and moral duties in contract fulfillment. NVivo software was used to assist with organizing and coding the data, though the analysis remained deeply rooted in the phenomenological tradition of interpreting participants' lived experiences.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee, and all participants provided written informed consent before participating. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary, and they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. To protect their privacy, all identifying information was anonymized, and pseudonyms were used in the reporting of results (Wang dkk., 2021). The data were stored securely, and only the research team had access to the audio recordings and transcriptions. The study adhered to international ethical standards, including those related to participant confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and the respectful treatment of participants' personal and sensitive information.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from the analysis of participants' experiences regarding the impact of legal regulations on the fulfillment of contractual obligations in everyday life. The themes derived from the phenomenological analysis are presented in a narrative form, supported by direct quotations from participants to emphasize their lived experiences. These findings provide deep insights into the relationship between legal duties and moral obligations in contracts, illustrating how individuals navigate these responsibilities in their social contexts.

Perception of Legal Obligation versus Moral Responsibility

Participants shared their perspectives on the distinction between legal obligations and moral duties within the context of contracts. Many expressed a nuanced view that while legal frameworks dictate the formal obligations, moral considerations play a significant role in how they fulfill these responsibilities. One participant, discussing the importance of integrity in contract fulfillment, stated:

“I feel that the law can punish you if you don’t fulfill your contract, but morally, I think it’s more about doing the right thing, keeping your word. For me, a contract isn’t just a paper, it’s about trust.” (Participant 3)

This sentiment was echoed by several others who felt that legal compliance alone was insufficient for a sense of duty. They emphasized that moral values often guide their decisions in situations where legal repercussions seem distant or unclear. The blending of legal obligations and moral considerations reflects the complex, subjective understanding that individuals have about their responsibilities in contractual agreements.

How should contractual responsibilities be prioritized?



Legal Obligations

Ensure compliance with laws



Moral Responsibilities

Guide actions with integrity

Impact of Legal Regulations on Social Trust and Compliance

A recurring theme was the influence of legal regulations on social trust and compliance with contracts. Participants indicated that while the law serves as a deterrent to non-compliance, it is the presence of trust in personal and business relationships that significantly shapes their approach to fulfilling contractual duties. One participant commented:

“When I enter into a contract, I don’t just think about what the law says, but also how much I trust the other person. Legal rules can enforce the contract, but trust ensures that it will be fulfilled honestly.” (Participant 5)

For many, the law’s role is seen as secondary to the relational dynamics and the level of trust that exists between the parties involved. This highlights the importance of social factors in the effective enforcement of contracts, suggesting that legal frameworks alone cannot ensure compliance without the backing of trust.

Legal Disputes and the Experience of Contract Breach

Participants shared their personal experiences of dealing with contract breaches and legal disputes, providing insights into how the legal system is perceived in these contexts. Several respondents mentioned the emotional toll of engaging in legal disputes, with one participant describing:

“When a contract is broken, and you have to go to court, it feels like a battle. You’re not just fighting for money, but also for what’s right. The legal process is stressful, and sometimes it feels like you’re just following a procedure instead of getting a fair resolution.” (Participant 2)

This theme reveals the human element of legal disputes, emphasizing that legal mechanisms, while essential, often fail to address the emotional and relational aspects of contract breaches. Participants expressed frustration with the length of legal proceedings and their perceived detachment from the personal and moral dimensions of the situation.

The findings indicate that participants view contractual obligations not solely through the lens of legal duty but also through moral and relational dimensions. Legal frameworks, while crucial, are

often secondary to the moral responsibility and trust that individuals place in one another. The experience of legal disputes further underscores the importance of these social factors, as participants reported that the emotional and relational consequences of contract breaches are not adequately addressed by the legal system. These results highlight the complex interplay between legal, moral, and social elements in fulfilling contractual obligations.

DISCUSSION

The main findings of this research reveal the complex interplay between legal obligations and moral responsibilities in contract fulfillment. Participants emphasized that while the law provides a formal framework for fulfilling contractual duties, it is the personal values and social trust that significantly shape how these duties are approached. This highlights the importance of considering both legal and social dimensions in understanding the full experience of fulfilling contracts, responding directly to the research question regarding how individuals interpret and navigate their contractual obligations.

The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the question raised in the introduction: How do individuals experience and make sense of their legal and moral obligations in contract fulfillment? This research demonstrates that legal obligations are not simply about adhering to written agreements but are also influenced by personal ethics, cultural norms, and social relationships. By integrating moral values with legal requirements, individuals navigate their responsibilities in a way that reflects their broader understanding of justice, trust, and fairness. Thus, the study provides insight into the subjective experience of contract fulfillment, offering a more nuanced perspective on how individuals reconcile the law with their personal and societal values.

When compared to existing literature, the findings both complement and extend previous studies. For example, Dagdeviren dkk (2020) discussed the role of social trust in contract relationships, while Brooks dkk (2023) focused on the moral duty individuals feel when engaging in contracts. This study builds on these ideas by exploring how trust and morality are not merely supplementary to legal obligations, but are central to the decision-making process regarding contract fulfillment. The research supports the notion that legal compliance is often secondary to personal ethics and relational factors, as noted by Mikhailov (2020), and suggests that the emotional and social aspects of fulfilling contracts warrant further attention in legal studies. Moreover, this study fills the gap identified in prior research by providing a detailed phenomenological perspective that captures the lived experiences of individuals in a way that traditional legal studies or quantitative methods cannot.

The implications of this study's findings are significant both in terms of academic understanding and practical applications. From an academic standpoint, this research challenges traditional legal studies that tend to focus on the formal aspects of contracts, highlighting the importance of considering the subjective experiences of individuals. By examining how legal obligations are intertwined with moral and relational factors, this study suggests a more holistic view of contract fulfillment. It emphasizes the need for legal systems to account for not only legal compliance but also the personal and social dimensions that influence behavior. Practically, this study can inform how legal professionals, policymakers, and businesses approach contract enforcement, encouraging a more empathetic and culturally sensitive understanding of how individuals fulfill their obligations.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The sample size of 15 participants, although rich in diversity, may not fully capture the range of experiences across different cultural or professional contexts. Additionally, the findings are based on qualitative data collected from a specific population, which may limit the generalizability of the results (Beckett & Brydolf-Horwitz, 2020). While phenomenology provides deep insights into individual experiences, the subjective nature of the data means that the findings are context-specific and may not apply universally across all legal systems or cultural settings. Further research is needed to explore the

experiences of different groups and to determine whether these findings hold in broader or more varied contexts.

Looking ahead, the findings from this study open avenues for further research in both legal studies and phenomenology. Future studies could expand on these findings by exploring how cultural, social, and professional factors shape individuals' interpretations of their legal and moral obligations in different legal systems. Additionally, it would be valuable to examine how these subjective experiences impact the effectiveness of legal frameworks and contract enforcement in practice. This research could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of law in social life, influencing how legal obligations are perceived and fulfilled in diverse contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the complex relationship between legal obligations and moral responsibilities in contract fulfillment, addressing the gap in understanding how individuals experience and interpret these duties. The research revealed that while legal frameworks provide a formal structure for contracts, it is the moral values and social trust that significantly influence how people fulfill their obligations. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study highlighted the importance of considering subjective, personal, and cultural factors when examining contract fulfillment, thus contributing to a more holistic understanding of legal behavior. These findings challenge traditional legal studies that focus solely on compliance and enforcement, emphasizing the need for a broader perspective. Furthermore, the study provides valuable insights for legal professionals and policymakers in creating systems that account for both legal and social dimensions. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring different cultural and social contexts, offering further depth to the understanding of contractual obligations in diverse environments.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. No financial or personal relationships have influenced the research or the results presented in this study.

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