



Too attached to speak up? It depends: How supervisor–subordinate guanxi and perceived job control influence upward constructive voice



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 January 2015

Revised 26 May 2017

Accepted 4 July 2017

Keywords:

Supervisor–subordinate guanxi

Voice behavior

Job control

ABSTRACT

In general, reciprocal supervisor–subordinate relationships (high leader–member exchange relationships) provide a supportive context for employees to speak up. In China however, supervisor–subordinate relationships or *guanxi* are characterized by affective characteristics and hierarchical characteristics which may respectively facilitate and inhibit employee voice. We draw on Guanxi Theory to develop a model of differential effects of two dimensions of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* (affective attachment to the supervisor and deference to the supervisor) on voice. Results of a multi-source, lagged field study demonstrated that the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of *guanxi* facilitated and the deference to supervisor dimension of *guanxi* inhibited voice, when employees experienced low job control. We discuss ways these findings extend our understanding of the nature of supervisor–subordinate relationships, *guanxi*, and their impact on voice.

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1. Introduction

Upward constructive voice is the voluntary expression of ideas, information, or opinions that aim to benefit the organization (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Van Dyne, Cummings, & McLean Parks, 1995). Upward constructive voice is important because suggestions for change that are directed at the supervisor can contribute to organizational effectiveness and build competitive advantage (Detert, Burris, Harrison, & Martin, 2013) by facilitating innovation (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Nemeth & Staw, 1989), learning (Edmondson, 1999, 2003), and decision making (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Unfortunately, employees are often reluctant to speak up (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003; Perlow & Williams, 2003; Pinder & Harlos, 2001), and so scholars have examined different ways to promote upward constructive voice (hence referred to as “voice”).

Research demonstrates that the quality of supervisor–subordinate relationships is a key predictor of voice (for a review, see Morrison, 2011). Specifically, empirical work consistently shows that leader–member exchange (LMX; Liden, Wayne, & Stillwell,

1993), which represents a reciprocal and mutually beneficial supervisor–subordinate relationship, facilitates speaking up (e.g., Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Burris, Detert, & Chiaburu, 2008; Detert & Burris, 2007; Van Dyne, Kamdar, & Joireman, 2008). These positive effects occur because LMX reduces employee fears about the negative consequences of voice and strengthens employee expectations that supervisors will be responsive to voice and their suggestions will make a difference.

Regrettably, our current understanding of the effects of supervisor–subordinate relationships on voice is based primarily on social exchange arguments about contributions and reciprocity from a prototypically Western perspective. This is problematic because different cultures tend to develop different types of supervisor–subordinate relationships (Chen, Friedman, Yu, Fang, & Lu, 2009; Hui & Graen, 1997; Khatri, 2011). Specifically, indigenous Chinese theory argues and empirical work demonstrates that supervisor–subordinate relationships in Chinese cultural contexts are based on *guanxi*, defined as the “informal, particularistic personal connection between two individuals who are bound by an implicit psychological contract to follow the social norm of *guanxi* such as maintaining a long-term relationship, mutual commitment, loyalty, and obligation” (Chen & Chen, 2004, p. 306).

Supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* relationships are guided by two sets of rules and obligations that differ from LMX norms and are

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particularly salient in Chinese cultural contexts (Chen, Chen, & Huang, 2013; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009).¹ One dimension of supervisor–subordinate guanxi emphasizes affective connections (i.e., affective attachment to the supervisor). In this case, subordinate and supervisor are affectively involved with one another and they accept the obligation to abide by the rules of mutual care, understanding, and altruism (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009). A second dimension of supervisor–subordinate guanxi emphasizes the hierarchical nature of the relationship (i.e., deference to the supervisor) (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen et al., 2013; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009). In this case, subordinate and supervisor emphasize different but reciprocal obligations toward one another. The subordinate accepts the obligation to exhibit deference, obedience, and loyalty, and the supervisor accepts the obligation to show paternalistic consideration. Focusing on these affective and hierarchical dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi is important because guanxi is very influential in Chinese cultural contexts (for initial evidence, see Chen, Friedman et al., 2009) and differs from typical conceptualizations of LMX supervisor–subordinate relationships (Chen, Friedman et al., 2009; Khatri, 2011). Also, as we posit in more detail later, the rules and obligations associated with these two dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi may have paradoxical implications for employee voice.

Our purpose in this article is to address the question of when, how, and why the emphasis an employee places on these dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi influences voice in Chinese cultural contexts. We draw on Guanxi Theory (Hwang, 1987) as the theoretical framework for our model. Guanxi Theory posits that the nature of a dyad's guanxi determines the rules and obligations that govern dyadic interactions (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen et al., 2013; Hwang, 1987). Specifically, we expect that the rules of mutual care, understanding, and altruism associated with the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi facilitate employee voice. In contrast, we expect that the rules of obedience and loyalty associated with the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi inhibit employee voice. Furthermore, guanxi theorizing argues that the favor exchange that characterizes guanxi can function as a mechanism to gain information, influence, and resources (Hwang, 1987; Park & Luo, 2001; Xin & Pearce, 1996), and so guanxi is especially salient when individuals (or organizations) lack influence and the environment seems uncertain (Bian, 1997; Guo & Miller, 2010; Li, Poppo, & Zhou, 2008). Building on this theorizing, we propose that the nature of supervisor–subordinate guanxi more strongly influences voice behavior when employees experience low (rather than high) job control, defined as the extent to which employees think that they can control issues and events that influence their work (Karasek, 1979; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). Fig. 1 displays our conceptual model.

The present study aims to contribute to the voice and guanxi literatures. First, by contrasting indigenous Chinese perspectives on supervisor–subordinate relationships (i.e., guanxi) with prototypical perspectives adopted in Western cultural contexts (i.e., LMX), we expand our understanding of the impact of supervisor–subordinate relationships on employee voice. Second, drawing on indigenous Chinese guanxi theorizing (Bian, 1997; Li et al., 2008; Xin &

Pearce, 1996), we identify job control as an important boundary condition for understanding when supervisor–subordinate guanxi dimensions affect voice in Chinese cultural contexts. Finally, we also contribute to the guanxi literature by expanding the nomological network of guanxi and by demonstrating that supervisor–subordinate guanxi can have both positive and negative effects on employee behavior (i.e., employee voice) (Chen et al., 2013). Taken together, the overarching objective of this study is to employ the Chinese indigenous perspective of guanxi to contextualize the link between supervisor–subordinate relationships and voice and to contribute to a more global (rather than mostly Western) understanding of this linkage (Chen, Leung, & Chen, 2009; Tsui, 2004, 2006; Whetten, 2009).

In what follows, we first introduce Guanxi Theory (Hwang, 1987) and argue that using this framework as a theoretical lens provides a deeper understanding of when, how, and why the different dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi are related to employee voice. We then present the justification for our predictions, followed by the method and results. We conclude by discussing the implications of our results for theory and practice, with an emphasis on how the unique patterns in our findings change our understanding of the linkage between supervisor–subordinate relationships and voice in Chinese cultural contexts and beyond.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Guanxi theory

Guanxi Theory (Hwang, 1987) specifies the cultural origins of the Chinese indigenous construct of guanxi and elaborates on the rich and complex nature of guanxi. Specifically, Chen and Chen (2004) defined guanxi as an “informal, particularistic personal connection between two individuals who are bounded by an implicit psychological contract to follow the social norms of guanxi such as maintaining a long-term relationship, mutual commitment, loyalty, and obligation” (p. 306). Guanxi originates in Confucianist thought, which posits that people fundamentally exist in relationship to others (King, 1991; Liang, 1988) and need to fulfil guanxi rules and obligations to maintain harmony in hierarchically structured relationships (Chen et al., 2013). Guanxi ties are modelled according to family relationships (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009) and emulate the degree of closeness and hierarchical ordering in the five traditional relationships (*wu lun*: emperor–subject, father–son, husband–wife, elder brother–younger brother, and friend–friend) which are central to Confucianist thought (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen et al., 2013; Chuang, 1998; Hong, Zhu, & White, 2013). Specifically, guanxi relationships can be characterized horizontally based on affective attachment and closeness to the self as well as hierarchically based on relative social prestige and position (Chen et al., 2013; Hwang, 1987).

Drawing on this Confucianist heritage, Chen, Friedman et al. (2009) conceptualized supervisor–subordinate guanxi as a multi-dimensional construct that has both affective and hierarchical dimensions. Specifically, the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi is defined as the degree of emotional connection, understanding, and willingness to care for the supervisor across varied circumstances (Chen, Friedman et al., 2009). This dimension of supervisor–subordinate guanxi emphasizes rules and obligations of mutual care, understanding, and altruism. The more affectively close the relationship between supervisor and employee, the more each feels obliged to care for the other, tries to understand the other, and grants favors requested by the other (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009).

¹ We acknowledge a third dimension of supervisor–subordinate guanxi identified by Chen, Friedman et al. (2009) who defined personal-life inclusion as the degree to which subordinates and supervisors include each other in their private or family life. Personal-life inclusion emphasizes sharing meals, paying regular visits, and exchanging gifts. Given that our research focuses on the implications of guanxi for voice behavior at work, the personal-life inclusion dimension of guanxi has less relevance to our research because it focuses primarily on relationships outside of work (Smith et al., 2014). For the same reason, our approach differs from leader–member guanxi (LMG; Law, Wong, Wang, & Wang, 2000) which also emphasizes non-work social exchanges based on gift giving and dinner invitations (Chen et al., 2013; Law et al., 2000).

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