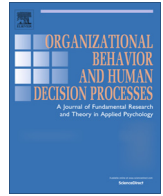




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# Configuring challenge and hindrance contexts for introversion and creativity: Joint effects of task complexity and guanxi management



Xiaomeng Zhang<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jing Zhou<sup>b</sup>, Ho Kwong Kwan<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business, Oriental Plaza, 1 East Chang An Ave., Beijing 100738, China

<sup>b</sup> Rice University, Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Business, 6100 Main Street, Houston, TX 77005, United States

<sup>c</sup> Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, School of International Business Administration, Shanghai 200433, China

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## ABSTRACT

We conducted a phenomenon-based research study in China. Starting with interviews and observations to capture the phenomenon, we built on and extended the challenge stressor–hindrance stressor framework to investigate how task complexity interacts with managing guanxi with a supervisor to influence the relationship between introversion and creativity. In Study 1, using a sample of 597 employees and their supervisors, we hypothesized and found a three-way interaction effect between introversion, task complexity, and guanxi management. For employees who scored high on the introversion trait continuum, the joint condition of high task complexity and low guanxi management was the most conducive to creativity and the joint condition of low task complexity and high guanxi management was the least conducive. The beneficial effect of high task complexity and low guanxi management gradually diminished and ultimately disappeared as employees scored lower on the introversion continuum, whereas the adverse effect of low task complexity and high guanxi management gradually appeared and ultimately intensified rapidly as employees moved from lower to higher levels of introversion. In Study 2, we replicated these results using a sample of 243 employees and their supervisors from a different industry. We discuss the implications of these results for future research and management practice.

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## 1. Introduction

“I am introverted. Most of my IT colleagues are introverted. Managing guanxi with my boss is tiring so I try to avoid it. I want to focus on work and let my work speak for itself.”

Interviewee, an IT professional whose creative achievements include writing two original programming books, both of which became national bestsellers in China, and making novel contributions to the creation of an operating system, shared with us his reasons for avoiding guanxi management with his manager during our interview.

“I worked on a complex cost-saving project. Before I took on the project, other employees had tried but could not figure things out. I worked on it independently for almost four months. During that time, my engagement in coming up with new and useful solutions was hugely affected by the need to manage guanxi with my manager. When I needed to manage this guanxi, I felt drained. I couldn't stay engaged in the project. I couldn't think

properly. I just couldn't come up with good ideas. When I didn't have to manage guanxi with my manager, I was able to focus on the project and fresh ideas just kept flowing into my mind. In the end, I created a new solution that resulted in an annual cost-saving of seven million for my company!”

Interviewee, an auditing professional who is also introverted and provided a vivid and fuller description of the phenomenon that inspired the present investigation.

The interviews that we conducted for the present investigation revealed an interesting phenomenon: a fundamental aspect of life in Chinese organizations—managing guanxi with one's supervisor—may hinder introverted employees' creativity. During one-on-one interviews, our interviewees suggested that although complex tasks provide the challenge for creativity, managing guanxi with supervisors has an adverse effect on introverted employees' creativity. This phenomenon has considerable practical significance. With a population of over 1.3 billion people (approximately one fifth of the world's total population), the number of introverts in the workforce in China is likely to be large. As one piece of suggestive evidence, a study that measured introversion found that 63.4% of 8779 employees were introverted (EAPs Consulting,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [xmzhang@ckgsb.edu.cn](mailto:xmzhang@ckgsb.edu.cn) (X. Zhang), [jzhou@rice.edu](mailto:jzhou@rice.edu) (J. Zhou), [weicheong2317@hotmail.com](mailto:weicheong2317@hotmail.com) (H.K. Kwan).

2015). Although China is a sizable emerging economy, to achieve sustainable growth, it must change its economic development model from “made in China,” which often involves jobs with low task complexity, to “created in China,” which often involves jobs with high task complexity (Keane, 2007; Morris & Leung, 2010). How to promote employee creativity is thus a central concern for managers. The use of phenomenon-based research that can reveal the forces that challenge introverted employees to be creative or that hinder their creativity in China adds significant value to management knowledge and practices (Morris & Leung, 2010; Zhou & Su, 2010). Despite not being confined to China, this phenomenon has not been addressed in the research.

Indeed, at least a third of the world’s population comprises introverts (Cain, 2012), and introverted employees represent a significant portion of the workforce (Bartol & Bartol, 2007; Schmitt, Allik, McCrae, & Benet-Martinez, 2007). Although large in number, because of their quiet nature, introverts are not usually the center of attention in organizations. A burgeoning research stream has put introverted individuals front and center, focusing on understanding the valuable contributions they make (Grant, Gino, & Hofmann, 2011). This nascent research stream is rapidly gaining momentum because its initial findings suggest that despite their quiet nature, introverts can make resounding contributions in the workplace, but the task and social conditions conducive for them to make such contributions are likely to be uniquely configured. Unfortunately, we know little about these conditions (Cain, 2012; Grant et al., 2011).

This lack of understanding puts introverted employees at a disadvantage in terms of career opportunities and advancements (Cain, 2012; China Youth Daily, 2012). Until the conditions that are conducive to their making valuable contributions are identified, they cannot use their capabilities to the fullest and excel in the workplace. It also puts organizations at a disadvantage, as they cannot fully benefit from the capabilities of introverts unless they understand how to create the right conditions for introverts to excel. Thus, practically and scientifically, it is important to understand the conditions under which introverted employees make valuable contributions. Some scholars have argued that creativity is the most noteworthy contribution that employees can make to their organizations (Amabile, 1996; Oldham & Cummings, 1996) because it represents the highest level of human capability. It is essential for organizations to constantly generate new ideas to gain competitive advantage, especially in today’s uncertain and competitive business environment (Morris & Leung, 2010; Zhou & Su, 2010). Indeed, employee creativity—the generation of novel and useful ideas regarding products, services, and work processes by individual employees (Amabile, 1988; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shalley, Gilson, & Blum, 2009)—can benefit organizational performance (Gong, Zhou, & Chang, 2013). Thus, in this paper we focus on creativity as the outcome variable.

We make several contributions. First, in line with phenomenon-based research, we start with the observation of an important phenomenon in the Chinese context. We extend the conceptualization of challenge versus hindrance stressors from the stress literature (Lepine, Podsakoff, & Lepine, 2005; Podsakoff, Lepine, & Lepine, 2007) to the creativity literature to develop an understanding of the phenomenon—the most and least conducive conditions for introverts to exhibit creativity. This approach adds conceptual novelty to the theorizing of how contextual factors interact with personal factors to affect creativity. Research has suggested that to understand the conditions under which individuals with certain personality traits exhibit high levels of creativity, it is necessary to precisely categorize the nature and configuration of the positive and negative contexts that affect how individuals situated in them exhibit creativity (Zhou & Hoever, 2014). Given the fundamental roles task complexity and guanxi management play in organiza-

tions in general and in the Chinese context in particular, we identify the former as a challenge and the latter as a hindrance for employees who score high on the introversion continuum.

Chinese employees often feel the need to spend time and energy managing relationships, referred to as guanxi management, with their supervisors (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen, Chen, & Xin, 2004). Following the conceptualization developed by Law, Wong, Wang, and Wang (2000) and drawing insights from Chen and Chen (2004), we define employees’ guanxi management as behavior that employees engage into develop, manage and maintain an informal and personal connection with their supervisors. In the theory section, we explain in greater detail that employees who score high on introversion find guanxi management taxing and that it distracts them from coming up with creative ideas while working on complex tasks. Hence, for those who score high on introversion, the joint condition of high task complexity and low guanxi management is most conducive, and the joint condition of low task complexity and high guanxi management is the least conducive. We also theorize that although all employees, whether low or high on the introversion continuum, need to be challenged by complex tasks, the beneficial effects of the contextual configuration for those who score high on the introversion continuum gradually diminish and ultimately disappear for those who score lower, and the adverse effect of low task complexity and high guanxi management intensifies as employees score higher. As such, we develop a holistic treatment of the change in the beneficial versus the adverse effects of contextual configuration along the introversion continuum.

Second, our conceptual distinction between a challenge context (task complexity) and a hindrance context (guanxi management) adds theoretical novelty to the guanxi literature. Although managing guanxi with one’s supervisor is crucial in Chinese firms and creativity is a highly desirable outcome for those firms, few studies have looked at how guanxi management may hinder introverts’ creativity. We theorize how less guanxi management is beneficial for highly introverted employees. Although earlier work on guanxi emphasized its benefits to the parties directly linked by a guanxi connection (Xin & Pearce, 1996), more recent studies have revealed that guanxi practices have a motivational cost for other employees (i.e., managers use guanxi to make human resource management decisions; see Chen et al., 2004) when they experience procedural injustice (Chen & Chen, 2009; Chen, Friedman, Yu, & Sun, 2011). By focusing on guanxi management as a hindrance, we emphasize the cognitive cost of guanxi management for highly introverted employees directly linked by a guanxi connection and thereby contribute to the growing stream of research that shows the negative influences of guanxi.

Third, by focusing on creativity, we advance the emergent literature on the conditions under which introverts contribute to essential workplace outcomes. Although creativity is an essential outcome, it has received sparse attention in the research. We also contribute to the creativity literature by providing an answer to a fundamental and yet unsolved puzzle—when is introversion positively related to creativity?

### 1.1. Challenge vs. hindrance contexts for the introversion–creativity relationship

Creativity is the generation of novel and useful ideas. Both novelty and usefulness are necessary for an idea to be judged as creative. By definition, individual creativity differs from organizational innovation in that whereas the former focuses on individual employees’ idea generation, the latter focuses on implementing the ideas throughout an organization (Amabile, 1988; Oldham, 2003). Thus, employee creativity provides a starting point for organizational innovation and is a key driver for firms’ success

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