Felt obligations to reciprocate to an employer, preferences for mobility across employers, and gender: Three-way interaction effects on subsequent voice behavior

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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that employees engage in voice behavior to reciprocate for the positive treatment they receive from employers, but less is known about individual differences in employees’ willingness to engage in voice behavior to that end. The present study proposes that felt obligations to the organization relate more strongly to voice behavior when employees also have stronger preferences for job stability (rather than job mobility). We also propose that this two-way interaction will be further moderated by gender; specifically, males who feel strong obligations to reciprocate and have strong preferences for job stability are especially likely to engage in voice behavior. Data collected from 209 employees over an 8-month period support both the proposed two-way and three-way interaction effects. Thus, while the norm of reciprocity is widely held, the effects of felt obligations to employers on voice behavior also depend upon both gender differences and individual differences in preferences for job stability.

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Vocational researchers have started to pay attention to employees’ voice behavior in the workplace because it helps enhance employees’ job performance evaluations (Ng & Feldman, 2012) and relates to their career growth (Wang, Weng, McElroy, Ashkanasy, & Lievens, 2014). In much of this literature, researchers have used a reciprocity argument to explain why employees engage in voice behavior (e.g., Deckop, Cirka, & Anderson, 2003; Ng & Feldman, 2015). Employees who receive favorable treatment from employers feel greater obligations to engage in voice as a way of reciprocating for that positive treatment. While this reciprocity argument is certainly reasonable, less attention has been paid to individual differences in willingness to reciprocate with voice behavior. That is, few studies have addressed why felt obligations to organizations do not elicit reciprocation behaviors from all employees or to the same degree.

This gap is important to fill because both researchers and practitioners have been assuming that instilling a strong sense of felt obligations among employees is an effective strategy for promoting their psychological attachment to the organizations (King & Bu, 2005). If there are individual differences in whether and how employees respond to feelings of felt obligation, then the above assumption needs to be modified. Overall, the attempt to identify the boundary conditions of the norm of reciprocity is especially relevant in the area of voice research because, unlike the case with most other pro-social behaviors, engaging in voice behavior can be somewhat risky for individuals. Colleagues, supervisors, or senior managers might take offense at employees’ criticisms or suggestions and social relationships with these employees might sour (Burris, 2012; Detert & Burris, 2007). Employees who engage in voice might also be seen as trouble-makers who disrupt the status quo, even when the suggestions they make only require marginal changes from existing practice. Hence, even a strong sense of felt obligation will not impel all employees to engage in the same level of voice behavior; we expect individual differences to play a moderating role in predicting voice behavior as well.

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We address this issue in more detail by examining two individual difference variables as moderators of the relationship between felt obligation and voice behavior. First, we examine whether individuals' preferences for job stability (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006) moderate the relationship between felt obligations to reciprocate and voice behavior. This moderator was chosen because it helps explain why felt obligations might be viewed by some people as career hurdles. For example, employees who want to experience a wide array of work assignments, network extensively with other professionals in the field, or work in a variety of geographical relocations may perceive the obligations to reciprocate more negatively because they are less committed to building their careers within any one firm (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). While they intellectually recognize and appreciate the positive treatment they receive from employers and feel the need to reciprocate, the intensity of reciprocation might be tempered when they view themselves as short-timers. In contrast, employees who prefer job stability seek longer-term or lifetime employment in an organization because of the security and predictability it delivers. These employees who prefer job stability are more likely to find reciprocating to employers rewarding.

Next, we examine the role of gender as a second individual difference moderator in the relationship between felt obligation and voice. Here, we predict a three-way interaction effect of gender, preferences for job stability, and felt obligations on voice behavior. We consider gender here because males and females might differ in the extent to which they perceive risks in exercising voice. We suggest that females tend to perceive they receive less career support than their male colleagues do. As such, female employees are more hesitant to exercise voice because they perceive the risks of doing so to be greater.

Indeed, little organizational research has yet addressed gender differences in responses to norms of reciprocity. In one of the few studies which have addressed this question, Wang et al. (2014) found that the effects of progress towards career goals on voice behavior were stronger for males than for females. Wang et al. suggest that males may be more likely than females to value career success. Consequently, male employees may be more likely to strongly reciprocate to their organizations when they are making excellent progress towards reaching those goals. Despite these authors’ work, more research that directly examines how felt obligations to organizations affect male and female employees differently is still warranted.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Social exchange theory and voice behavior

Voice behavior is constructive, change-oriented communication intended to identify workplace problems and improve workplace procedures and processes (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). This definition is consistent with Morrison’s (2011) work, which posits that voice can be problem-focused, suggestion-focused, or opinion-focused. Previous research on voice has largely adopted social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) as its theoretical framework. The norm of reciprocity holds that one partner in an exchange agreement will reciprocate positively to the other partner after the first party makes a move to improve the quality of their relationship (e.g., by doing a favor) (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Gouldner, 1960). Once the reciprocation process starts, each subsequent reciprocating act creates a self-reinforcing cycle (Molm, Whitham, & Melamed, 2012). Over time, the norm of reciprocity helps explain why social relationships continue to increase in quality (Shore, Coyle-Shapiro, Chen, & Tetrick, 2009).

Felt obligations to the organization refer to employees’ beliefs that they are personally responsible for serving the best interests of their employers (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). In prior research, felt obligations have been used to explain the social exchange process between employees and employers (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Fuller, Marler, & Hester, 2006). Employees’ felt obligations occur as the result of imbalances in their social exchanges with employers. That is, when organizations provide employees with valued rewards or positive treatment, they create an imbalance in the exchange relationship. Employees, in turn, are then motivated to bring their contributions to the organization in line with the inducements they received from it (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960).

In the present study, we examine when felt obligations to the organization as a whole are likely to result in voice behavior. To date, there have been two studies which directly examined the relationship between felt obligations and voice. Specifically, Choi (2007) and Liang, Farh, and Farh (2012) both observed that felt obligations to engage in constructive change were significantly and positively related to voice behavior. However, in neither case did the authors collect data on felt obligations to the organization as a whole. That is, they measured felt obligation to speak up rather than felt obligation to reciprocate to the organization; addressing the latter is more in line with social exchange theory.

Although exercising voice is somewhat risky, employees are still likely to reciprocate with it for at least three reasons. First, voice behavior is self-initiated; the employee does not need to wait to be asked to perform it and s/he can readily engage in it when felt obligations to reciprocate increase. Second, because voice is easily “heard” by others, it can quickly gratify employees’ needs to reciprocate. Third, voice behavior can have a major impact on how well organizations function and innovate (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). As such, employees view voice as a substantive and significant way of reciprocating. Thus, we predict:

Hypothesis 1. Felt obligations to the organization are positively related to voice behavior.

1.2. Moderating effect of preferences for job stability

Employees today recognize that job security and/or life-long employment in one firm are no longer realistic career options (Littler, Wiesner, & Dunford, 2003; Murrell, Frieze, & Olson, 1996). As a result, employees now have a stronger appreciation of the need to acquire different kinds of skills and knowledge (Bird, 1996), work in a variety of domestic or international settings (Stahl & Gerdin,
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