



Putting non-work ties to work: The case of guanxi in supervisor–subordinate relationships[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Western-based theories of supervisor–subordinate relationships tend to focus on social exchanges in the work domain while omitting potential exchanges that occur in the private domain. However, there are many contexts, particularly in transitional economies lacking strong bureaucratic work structures (e.g., China, Brazil), where personal exchanges outside of the work domain serve as a critical, binding fabric in the workplace. One such example is the indigenous Chinese concept of *guanxi*, which captures the personal ties between supervisors and subordinates and operates as a protective mechanism for subordinates and a loyalty-inducing agent for supervisors. Using 281 supervisor–subordinate dyads from China, we explored an important antecedent and consequences of *guanxi* while controlling for the parallel process of the traditionally work-focused construct leader–member exchange (LMX). Results suggest that although both *guanxi* and LMX mediate the effects of proactive personality on affiliative OCB (i.e., interpersonal facilitation), *guanxi* is more strongly related to challenging OCB (i.e., taking charge) and LMX is more strongly related to task performance.

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Employees are embedded in relationship networks to accomplish tasks. Among the various relationships within these networks, arguably the most important ties are those between an employee and his or her supervisor (Chen, Friedman, Yu, Fang, & Lu, 2009; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). These ties can be classified into two categories (Boyd & Taylor, 1998; Ibarra, 1993; Lincoln & Miller, 1979). The first category captures connections built upon task activities through which work-related resources and affect are exchanged, referred to as *work ties*. Supervisor–subordinate work ties are often exemplified by leader–member-exchange (LMX) theory and have been extensively documented in the literature (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The second category – referred to as *non-work* or *personal ties* – represents connections that arise from social interactions beyond the work domain and involve more social–emotional goals, including intimacy and companionship (Boyd & Taylor, 1998). An example of personal, non-work-related ties is reflected in the indigenous Chinese concept of *guanxi*, which describes a fundamental dynamic in personalized networks of influence and represents a central idea in Chinese society. Despite the acknowledged importance of studying supervisor–subordinate personal ties in organizational settings, (e.g., Albrecht & Halsey, 1992; Berman, West, & Richter, 2002; Lincoln & Miller, 1979), limited

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attention has been devoted toward understanding the antecedents, consequences, and necessary conditions of this construct (Burris, Rodgers, Mannix, Hendron, & Oldroyd, 2009). More importantly, it is unclear how non-work ties differ from work ties as drivers of employee work behaviors. For simplicity, we use the terms “personal ties” and “non-work ties” interchangeably below.

The relative paucity of research on supervisor–subordinate personal ties (i.e., *guanxi*) is likely explained, at least partially, by the separation of employee work life and personal life in Western organizations whereby employees rely primarily on their work-related exchanges with supervisors to get things done (Chen, Yu, & Son, 2014; Coates & Pellegrin, 1957; Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997; Khatri & Tsang, 2003). However, employees from societies that are undergoing substantial economic and social transitions (i.e., transitional societies), and specifically those that are moving from insufficient bureaucracies at work toward increased bureaucracy such as China, Russia, and Brazil, typically have high personal dependency on their supervisors beyond the work domain (Smith, Huang, Harb, & Torres, 2012). As a result, managers and employees in these environments are tied together and influence each other's behaviors through both work-related and non-work-related personal interactions (Pearce, Branyiczki, & Bigley, 2000). Thus, the multi-dimensional nature of supervisor–subordinate relationships suggests that prior inferences drawn primarily from LMX research might be incomplete because some observed effects are also a product of unmeasured personal ties (Ibarra, 1993). Perhaps not surprisingly, there have been several calls for the integration of non-work ties into supervisor–subordinate scholarship (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006; Boyd & Taylor, 1998; Farh, Tsui, Xin, & Cheng, 1998; Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2009; Mehra, Dixon, Brass, & Robertson, 2006).

With the aim of addressing these specific calls and broadening the lens of general leadership research (Popper, 2012), our purposes are to develop a preliminary nomological net for supervisor–subordinate personal ties by identifying their antecedents and consequences, as well as to examine the differential predictive validity of personal ties compared to work ties (i.e., LMX). Specifically, drawing on a relational perspective (Li, Liang, & Crant, 2010; Thompson, 2005) we posit that a dispositional variable, subordinates' proactive personality –representing one's tendency to initiate positive changes in his or her work context (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001) – will drive both non-work and work-related supervisor–subordinate ties. According to this approach, employee–management relations are central to the context of work and employee behavior is shaped by the complex interplay between individual members and the larger systems they encounter (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Weick, 1979). This approach is also consistent with social cognitive theory, which emphasizes the means whereby individuals exhibit personal agency in shaping work contexts and distal job performance (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). In this lens, proactive personality is a critical construct as it captures an employee's tendency to proactively engage in relationship-building activities (Li et al., 2010). Perhaps not surprisingly, past research has found empirical links between proactive personality and a number of relational-based outcomes, including LMX (Li et al., 2010; Zhang, Wang, & Shi, 2012) and social networks (Thompson, 2005).

Concerning the consequences of subordinate–supervisor relationships, we link supervisor–subordinate personal ties with distinct aspects of follower performance, including in-role (i.e., job-specific performance and generic forms of task proficiency or technical requirements) and extra-role performance dimensions. Further, because prior work notes that different aspects of extra-role behaviors are driven by unique mechanisms (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Chiaburu, Marinova, & Lim, 2007; Hoffman, Blair, Meriac, & Woehr, 2007), we follow recent recommendations to distinguish between affiliative and proactive forms of extra-role performance (Grant & Parker, 2009; McAllister, Kamdar, Morrison, & Turban, 2007; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). Namely, we examine subordinates' interpersonal facilitation (affiliative behaviors capturing “acts that help maintain the interpersonal and social context needed to support effective task performance in an organizational setting” [Van Scotter & Motowidlo, 1996, p.526]) and taking charge behaviors (proactive behaviors capturing “voluntary and constructive efforts, by individual employees, to affect organizationally functional change with respect to how work is executed” [Morrison & Phelps, 1999, p.403]), which permits a more parsimonious and comprehensive examination of employee extra-role behaviors. Using structural equation modeling and indirect effect analysis, we test hypotheses concerning the distinctiveness between non-work and work ties in predicting different facets of employee performance and hence demonstrate the importance of studying both work and non-work ties simultaneously.

In doing so, our study makes several noteworthy contributions to the literature. First, drawing from recent advances concerning individual dispositions and relational-based outcomes (Li et al., 2010; Thompson, 2005; Zhang et al., 2012), we identify a key antecedent of subordinates' ties to supervisors. Specifically, we contend that proactive personality captures subordinates' desire and motivation to build high quality work ties (i.e., LMX) and personal ties (i.e., *guanxi*) with their supervisors. Therefore, consistent with a social cognitive framework, we demonstrate how a distal predictor influences performance outcomes through different proximal factors.

Second, we posit that subordinate work ties and personal ties contribute to different components of performance. Work ties (i.e. LMX) will be predictive of task performance, whereas personal ties (i.e., *guanxi*) will contribute to extra-role behaviors aimed at constructing positive change (i.e., taking charge). We expect that both work and non-work-related ties will be positively predictive of extra-role behaviors aimed at maintaining an environment conducive for task performance (i.e., interpersonal facilitation). In doing so, our study sheds light on an important issue for practitioners and scholars alike by highlighting two distinct drivers of employee behavior in a transitional society. This has many potential implications for multinational enterprises (MNEs), expatriates, and Western managers seeking to understand a diversified workforce.

Finally, although personal ties between a leader and follower are particularly relevant in transitional societies, they also likely have theoretical appeal in Western-based leadership theories. For example, in Western societies, employees may interact with supervisors outside the work domain and develop personal ties (although perhaps to a lesser extent). Thus, more broadly, our research provides an opportunity to enrich leadership research in general.

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