

SUPERVISOR–SUBORDINATE GUANXI AND EMPLOYEE VOICE BEHAVIOR: TRUST IN SUPERVISOR AS A MEDIATOR

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Previous researchers have shown that supervisor–subordinate guanxi (s–s guanxi) is related to a wide range of subordinates’ work-related outcomes, such as voice behavior; however, few have examined the correlation between s–s guanxi and employee voice behavior. With a sample of 221 employees and their supervisors from 3 private companies in China, I examined the mediating effect of trust in supervisor on the relationship between s–s guanxi and employee voice behavior by using structural equation modeling and bootstrapping analysis. Results showed that s–s guanxi was positively related to employees’ promotive and prohibitive voice, and that trust in supervisor partly mediated these correlations. My findings extend extant research on the effects of s–s guanxi on employee voice behavior and can be used as a guide by companies adopting diverse measures to achieve good s–s behavior and, in turn, inspire employees’ voice behavior.

Keywords: supervisor–subordinate guanxi, trust in supervisor, employee voice behavior, promotive voice, prohibitive voice, work-related outcomes.

Chinese society is well known for being relationship- and authority-oriented, with the guanxi between supervisor and subordinate a key factor used to decode the structure in various organizations (Guo & Li, 2015), and in the last 10 years there have been numerous studies on supervisor–subordinate guanxi in China (Zhang, Deng, & Wang, 2014). *Supervisor–subordinate guanxi* (s–s guanxi) is an indigenous Chinese construct that refers to the personal relationship built by two parties for the instrumental purpose of achieving personal goals (Law,

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Wong, Wang, & Wang, 2000). Previous researchers have shown that s–s guanxi is related to a wide range of subordinates' work-related outcomes, such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, turnover intention, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), service performance, and career development (Cheung, Wu, Chan, & Wong, 2009; Liu & Wang, 2013; Wei, Liu, Chen, & Wu, 2010; Weng, 2014).

Voice behavior refers to extrarole behavior carried out voluntarily by employees with the intent to improve their organization's status quo (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Because subordinates' voice behavior is a facet of OCB (Bolino, Hsiung, Harvey, & LePine, 2015), it may, to some extent, be influenced by s–s guanxi. Employees' suggestions and ideas contribute to the growth of organizations (Chamberlin, Newton, & Lepine, 2017); however, there are very few studies in which the correlation between s–s guanxi and employee voice behavior has been examined. Previous researchers have shown that trust in supervisor is positively correlated with s–s guanxi and voice behavior (Gao, Janssen, & Shi, 2011; Han, Peng, & Zhu, 2012). Therefore, I examined the correlation between s–s guanxi and employee voice behavior, and introduced trust in supervisor as a mediator. My aim was to enrich the literature on the outcome variables of s–s guanxi.

Literature Review and Development of Hypotheses

In a Chinese context there are two different tactics used in research on supervisor–subordinate relationships. The *etic approach* involves adopting the Western construct of leader–member exchange to measure supervisor–subordinate relationship quality, whereas the *emic approach* entails adopting the indigenous Chinese construct of s–s guanxi to measure supervisor–subordinate relationship quality (Guo, 2011). In their empirical study Law et al. (2000) showed that the s–s guanxi construct is different from that of leader–member exchange. Guo (2011) conducted a review of the extant literature and theories, and indicated that leader–member exchange is a contractual (economic or psychological) relationship in nature, whereas s–s guanxi is a mix of contractual and identity (a relational state based on role and status) relationship types. Further, Guo reported that the reciprocal principle of leader–member exchange is equal treatment, whereas in s–s guanxi the key principal is *renqing*, which involves favoritism. Thus, I adopted the construct of s–s guanxi to measure supervisor–subordinate relationships in this study.

Supervisor–Subordinate Guanxi and Voice Behavior

Voice behavior can be categorized into *promotive voice*, which describes employees' expression of ideas or suggestions to improve organizational efficiency, and *prohibitive voice*, which describes employees' expression of

concerns about incidents, work practices, or employee behaviors that are harmful to the organization (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012). Because using voice means challenging the status quo or past decisions, or highlighting a serious matter or problem, it is often perceived to be risky by employees who want to use voice (Morrison, 2014).

S–s guanxi reflects a continued exchange process (Han et al., 2012). On the basis of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), Liu and Wang (2013) found that s–s guanxi is positively correlated with OCB towards individuals (OCBI) and OCB towards the organization (OCBO). Good s–s guanxi causes subordinates to believe that they are more important than others in the organization, so that they may perceive having a higher insider status and experience greater self-esteem (Cheung et al., 2009; Han et al., 2012), which can inspire voice behavior (Li, Liu, & Zheng, 2016). Further, good s–s guanxi means that subordinates see their supervisors as more dependable (Wong, Wong, & Wong, 2010), and supervisors are more generous to their subordinates, so subordinates feel safe to engage in voice behavior and are more inclined to activate even prohibitive voice behavior. In addition, Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003) found that poor-quality relationships between employees and leaders, and lack of support from leaders are the main causes of discomfort for employees who want to offer advice and suggestions. Chen and Tjosvold (2007) concluded that personal guanxi positively influences constructive criticism for Chinese managers and employees. Thus, guanxi with supervisors can be considered a key factor affecting employees' voice behavior, and I developed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: S–s guanxi will positively predict employees' promotive voice behavior.

Hypothesis 1b: S–s guanxi will positively predict employees' prohibitive voice behavior.

Mediating Effect of Trust in Supervisor

Trust in supervisor refers to subordinates' positive expectations regarding the actions and intentions of their supervisor (Wong, Ngo, & Wong, 2003). On the one hand, Law et al. (2000) indicated that Chinese supervisors afford more chances for receiving promotions and bonuses to subordinates with whom they share good s–s guanxi. According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), subordinates who receive these benefits may have greater trust in their supervisors. Wong et al. (2003) found that interpersonal s–s guanxi positively predicts trust in one's supervisor. Han et al. (2012) utilized social exchange theory, social identity theory, and the theory of reasoned action, and administered open-ended questionnaires to 303 supervisor–subordinate dyads from six companies in northern China. They conducted a content analysis of their data and found that s–s guanxi is positively correlated with trust in supervisor.

On the other hand, because voice behavior is often perceived to be risky (Morrison, 2014), the level of trust in one's supervisor is an indicator of the risk quantity that a subordinate will tolerate (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). Therefore, trust in supervisor may play a significant role in employees' decision to express their views (Premeaux & Bedeian, 2003). Gao et al. (2011) found in their empirical study that trust in one's leader is positively correlated with employee voice behavior. Thus, s–s guanxi may enhance employees' trust in supervisor, whereas trust in supervisor may promote employees' voice behavior, and I developed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Trust in supervisor will mediate the relationship between s–s guanxi and employees' promotive voice behavior.

Hypothesis 2b: Trust in supervisor will mediate the relationship between s–s guanxi and employees' prohibitive voice behavior.

Method

Participants and Procedure

I distributed paper questionnaires to 347 supervisor–subordinate dyads from three private companies in the car sales, real estate sales, and food processing sectors in central China. Employees rated s–s guanxi and trust in supervisor, whereas supervisors rated the voice behavior of employees. Questionnaires were distributed and collected with the assistance of the companies' human resources departments. After deleting questionnaires with incomplete responses, I obtained 221 valid responses from matched dyads (221 subordinates and 56 supervisors). Participants were informed that the survey was anonymous, all data were confidential and would only be used for research purposes, and that they could drop out at any time.

Among the subordinates, 52.9% were men and 47.1% were women. Regarding age, 67.0% were 30 years or under, 27.6% between 31 and 40 years, and 5.4% 41 years or over. Regarding level of education, 81.9% had an associate's degree or bachelor's degree, 11.3% had a high school diploma, and 6.8% had a master's degree. Regarding tenure, 54.8% had been working in the company for fewer than 3 years, 37.1% for 4 to 8 years, and 8.1% for more than 8 years. Among the supervisors, 66.1% were men and 33.9% were women. Regarding age, 28.6% were 30 years or under, 57.1% between 31 and 40 years, and 14.3% 41 years or over. Regarding tenure, 12.5% had been working in the company for fewer than 3 years, 32.1% for 4 to 8 years, and 55.4% for more than 8 years.

Measures

Participants rated all items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Supervisor–subordinate guanxi. I used the six-item scale developed by Law et al. (2000) to measure s–s guanxi in a Chinese context. A sample item is “I always actively share with my supervisor my thoughts, problems, needs, and feelings.” Cronbach’s α was .90 in this study.

Trust in supervisor. Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, and Fetter (1990) developed a six-item scale to measure trust in/loyalty to one’s leader. I used the Chinese version of this scale, which was translated by Jang, Wang, Shi, and Zhao (2017) and found to have good reliability. A sample item is “My supervisor would never try to gain an advantage by deceiving employees.” Cronbach’s α was .91 in this study.

Employee voice behavior. Liang et al. (2012) developed a 10-item scale to measure employees’ promotive (five items) and prohibitive (five items) voice in a Chinese context. A sample item for promotive voice is “I proactively suggest new projects that are beneficial to the work unit.” A sample item for prohibitive voice is “I proactively report coordination problems in the workplace to management.” I selected eight items from the scale to measure employees’ promotive (four items) and prohibitive (four items) voice. Cronbach’s for the full scale and the two subscales were .91, .91, and .83, respectively, in the present study.

Control variables. As gender, age, level of education, and tenure may influence employees’ voice behavior (Liang et al., 2012), I controlled for these variables in the present study.

Data Analysis

SPSS version 18.0 was used when conducting a correlation analysis to establish the relationships among the main variables. Mplus version 7.0 was used for structural equation modeling and bootstrapping analysis to test the hypotheses.

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations for s–s guanxi, trust in supervisor, promotive voice, and prohibitive voice.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Study Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. S–s guanxi	3.85	0.79	1			
2. Trust in supervisor	3.95	0.84	.47**	1		
3. Promotive voice	3.08	0.90	.44**	.42**	1	
4. Prohibitive voice	2.95	0.84	.39**	.44**	.65**	1

Note. $N = 221$, ** $p < .001$.

Results of structural equation modeling and bootstrapping analysis (2,000 resamples) are shown in Figure 1 and Table 2. As can be seen in Table 2, after the gender, age, level of education, and tenure of employees were controlled for, the total effects of s–s guanxi on promotive voice and prohibitive voice were significant, so Hypotheses 1a and 1b were supported. In addition, the indirect effects of s–s guanxi on promotive voice and prohibitive voice via trust in supervisor were significant, and the conditional direct effects of s–s guanxi on promotive voice and prohibitive voice were also significant. This means that trust in supervisor partly mediated the effect of s–s guanxi on employees’ promotive and prohibitive voice; therefore, Hypotheses 2a and 2b were supported.

Table 2. Results of Mediation Testing

	Effect type	Estimate	SE	95% CI	Percent
Indirect	SSG → TIS → VB1	.14*	0.046	[0.05, 0.23]	29.6%
	SSG → TIS → VB2	.18*	0.054	[0.08, 0.29]	40.9%
Direct	SSG → VB1	.34**	0.084	[0.17, 0.50]	70.4%
	SSG → VB2	.27*	0.083	[0.10, 0.43]	59.1%
Total	SSG → VB1	.48**	0.065	[0.35, 0.60]	100%
	SSG → VB2	.45**	0.066	[0.32, 0.58]	100%

Note. SSG = supervisor–subordinate guanxi, TIS = trust in supervisor, VB1 = promotive voice, VB2 = prohibitive voice, CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$.

Further, the goodness of fit of the hypothesized model was acceptable (chi square/degrees of freedom = 2.018, comparative fit index = .921, Tucker–Lewis index = .908, root mean square error of approximation = .068), supporting the above results.

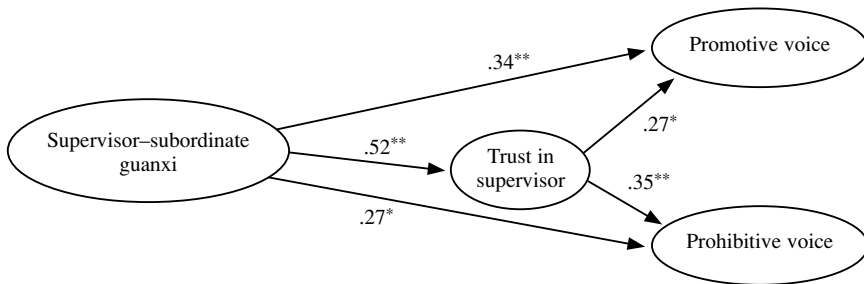


Figure 1. The mediating effect of trust in supervisor.

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$.

Discussion

Although the number of studies on s-s guanxi has increased in the last decade (Zhang et al., 2014), few researchers have investigated the effect of s-s guanxi on employee voice behavior. My findings are similar to those of Liu and Wang (2013), that is, s-s guanxi was observed to be positively correlated with employees' promotive and prohibitive voice. Thus, I have extended extant research on the effects of s-s guanxi on employee voice behavior.

I also found that s-s guanxi was positively correlated with trust in supervisor, which is in accord with the findings reported in previous studies (Han et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2003) and indicates that s-s guanxi plays a significant role in the formation and development of subordinates' trust in their supervisor in a Chinese context (Han et al., 2012). Further, my finding that trust in supervisor partly mediated the effect of s-s guanxi on employees' promotive and prohibitive voice shows that s-s guanxi not only directly but also indirectly influences employee voice behavior.

With respect to practical implications, my findings regarding the effect of s-s guanxi on employee voice behavior suggest that, to stimulate employees to express their opinions, companies should adopt diverse measures to achieve good s-s guanxi, such as encouraging open and frank communication in the workplace, and organizing parties after work hours (Liu & Wang, 2013). The mediating effect I observed of trust in supervisor indicates that, to stimulate employees to voice their views, companies should also focus on increasing the level of employees' trust in their supervisor. Supervisor interactional justice is vital in developing subordinates' trust in supervisor, so supervisors should adopt a kind manner when interacting with their subordinates and keep their subordinates updated on organizational matters (Lam, Loi, & Leong, 2013).

In regard to the limitations to this study, the scale of trust in supervisor that I used was developed in the West and may not be suitable for use in a Chinese context. Although it had good reliability in this study, scale development in the Chinese context is recommended for future Chinese management research. Further, the data I obtained are cross-sectional, which may have skewed the results to some degree. Future researchers could consider employing a longitudinal research design to enhance my conclusions. In addition, I investigated the sole mediating effect of trust in supervisor in examining the relationship between s-s guanxi and employee voice behavior. Future researchers should consider examining the potential mediating effects of other variables on this relationship.

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