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Is there any cost of being helped? A theoretical analysis of interpersonal helping behavior recipients in Chinese organizations

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ABSTRACT

Because of its important impact on organizational effectiveness, interpersonal helping behavior (IHB) has received a tremendous amount of scholarly attention. Little research, however, has explored IHB from the recipient's perspective in the Chinese context where cultural values and emphases are different from those of in Western contexts. Therefore, the author develops a theoretical model and systematically investigate the impact of receiving IHB on an employee's performance appraisal, manager's liking of the employee, perceived generalized self-efficacy (GSE), and organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) in the Chinese context. In particular, the author proposes the following. First, receipt of IHB has a negative impact on a Chinese employee's GSE and OBSE. Second, managerial performance appraisal and manager's liking mediate the relationship between receipt of IHB and a Chinese employee's GSE, and between receipt of IHB and a Chinese employee's OBSE. Third, a Chinese employee's organizational tenure moderates the relationship between receipt of IHB and a Chinese employee's GSE, and between receipt of IHB and a Chinese employee's OBSE. By investigating consequences of receipt of IHB in Chinese organizations, this theoretical model provides important insights into managing the receiving aspect of IHB without discouraging the demonstrating aspect of IHB.

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1. Introduction

Because of its economic growth, China has received an increasing amount of research attention (Zhao, Wu, Sun, & Chen, 2012). As a result, scholars and practitioners have long been searching for determinants of organizational performance in the Chinese context. Meanwhile, evidence from prior studies conducted in Western economies has suggested that interpersonal helping behavior (IHB), defined as taking voluntary actions to help coworkers with work-related problems and issues (Mossholder, Richardson, & Settoon, 2011), enhances overall organizational effectiveness (e.g., Organ, 1988; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). Given its practical significance, one would expect that exhibiting IHB is valued by Chinese managers and employees. Indeed, findings of previous research have indicated that employees who exhibit IHB generally receive higher managerial performance evaluations (e.g., Bachrach, Wang, Bendoly, &

Zhang, 2007), and experience positive self-perceptions such as improved mood (e.g., Glomb, Bhawe, Miner, & Wall, 2011), increased feelings of efficacy (e.g., Tang & Ibrahim, 1998), and enhanced self-perceptions (e.g., Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2000).

In spite of what we have known about IHB, the author believes that the existing literature has three major gaps that need to be filled. First, when exploring managerial performance appraisal of employees, existing studies have focused on how exhibiting IHB affects Chinese employee's managerial appraisal outcomes (e.g., Bachrach et al., 2007; Hui, Lee, & Rousseau, 2004; Jiao, Richards, & Zhang, 2011; Rotundo & Xie, 2008). Although this research focus provides important insights into understanding how Chinese managers view employees exhibiting IHB to their coworkers (i.e., the helpers), this research stream falls short of explaining how Chinese managers' appraisals of employees receiving IHB from coworkers (i.e., the IHB recipients). Understanding how Chinese managers view employees receiving IHB is particularly crucial because Chinese societies are characterized as high masculine cultural contexts where individuals emphasize achievement, accomplishment, and success at work (Hofstede, 2001). This implies that receipt of IHB in the Chinese context may perhaps be

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perceived negatively by managers and, consequently, needs further investigation.

Second, although the vast majority of IHB research conducted in Western contexts has shown that exhibiting IHB results in experiencing positive self-perceptions (e.g., Glomb et al., 2011; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2000; Tang & Ibrahim, 1998), Chinese cultural values and assumptions are fundamentally different from those of in Western contexts (Farh, Zhong, & Organ, 2004). In particular, because of high masculine cultural values, Chinese people strive to preserve and strengthen *mianzi*, which is considered an important Chinese societal feature that manifests an individual's self-imagined competency and personal value in a particular performance situation (Bedford, 2011; Bond & Hwang, 1986, pp. 213–266; Lin, 2011). The strong desire of maintaining and/or strengthening *mianzi* has resulted in Chinese people's reluctance to seek help (i.e., receiving help) because seeking help could result in experiencing embarrassment and/or loss of *mianzi* (Lau & Wong, 2008). Given this, it become pivotal to understand how receipt of IHB influences the recipient's perceptions of personal competency and self-worth as a member of the organization.

Finally, in their effort of finding the boundary between in-role and extra-role behaviors, scholars have discovered that Chinese may consider IHB part of their in-role requirements to a greater extent than do individuals in Western contexts (e.g., Jiao, Richards, & Hackett, 2013). This finding implies that the IHB recipient and managers in the Chinese context might perceive and interpret the receipt of IHB from coworkers differently compared to those in Western contexts. Given that the concept of IHB was originated in North America (Ye, 2012), it is critical to investigate if negative personal and organizational consequences could occur when receiving this so-called "in-role" helping through the lens of the manager who conducts employee performance appraisals and the employee who receives IHB from coworkers in the Chinese context. Unfortunately, to the author's best knowledge, no existing study has explored consequences experienced by the IHB recipient in the Chinese context. In other words, prior research has predominantly employed "the helper's" perspective, which focuses on understanding the helper's consequences. Consequently, the helper's perspective may fall short of explaining the dyadic nature of IHB.

In light of the above discussion, the author develops a theoretical model that fills the aforementioned research gaps in the IHB literature. Specifically, the purpose of this article is two-fold. First, the author develops a theoretical model describing consequences that the IHB recipient might experience at the managerial and personal levels in Chinese organizations. Specifically, the author attempts to understand how a Chinese employee's receipt of IHB from coworkers affects a Chinese manager's performance appraisal and liking of the employee, and how the Chinese employee's receipt of IHB from coworkers influences his or her generalized self-efficacy (GSE) and organization-based self-esteem (OBSE). Next, the author explores the moderating role that organizational tenure plays. Consequently, this article makes several contributions. First, because of its strong implications on overall organizational effectiveness, IHB has received a tremendous scholar attention in the Chinese context (Farh et al., 2004). Among various research streams of IHB in Chinese organizations, a particular stream of research demonstrates that Chinese managers give higher performance ratings to employees engaging in higher levels of IHB (e.g., Jiao & Hardie, 2009). Although this research stream provides important information on Chinese managers' performance appraisal of the helper, it does not address Chinese managers' evaluations and views of the IHB recipient. Thus, by exploring how managerial performance appraisal and manager's liking are affected by an employee's receipt of IHB from coworkers, this article advances the existing body of knowledge by providing insights into

understanding Chinese managers' objective evaluations and subjective views of the IHB recipient. Second, in contrast to previous research that has examined the helper's self-perceptions, this article focuses primarily on investigating the IHB recipient self-perceptions' in the forms of GSE and OBSE in the Chinese context. This emphasis is crucial because investigating self-perceptions from the IHB recipient's perspective provides a holistic view of IHB in Chinese organizations. More importantly, because GSE and OBSE are found to be associated with positive individual and organizational performance-related outcomes in Chinese organizations, such as increased individual well-being (e.g., Wang, Zhang, & Wang, 2014), reduced burnout (e.g., Tang, Au, Schwarzer, & Schmitz, 2001), enhanced employee productivity (e.g., Chen, Yang, & Li, 2012), improved employee performance (e.g., Lau, Lam, & Wen, 2014), and decreased work stress (e.g., Liu, Siu, & Shi, 2010), the study of GSE and OBSE in the context of receiving IHB may allow Chinese managers to better determine how IHB should be managerially encouraged and evaluated in organizations. Finally, because employee in-role and extra-role behaviors may be inseparably intertwined given China's unique cultural emphases (Farh et al., 2004), the study of this so-called in-role helping from the recipient's perspective may enrich our understanding of cultural differences in extra-role behaviors. As such, this article provides additional insight into the literature that investigates cross-cultural differences in employee IHB.

This article is organized as follows. In the second section, the author provides a brief review of the IHB literature. Next, the author develops the theoretical framework and arguments. As presenting the theoretical arguments, the author specifies the propositions that may be tested by future empirical research. In the fourth section, the author discusses the implications for theory and managerial practice as well as future research directions. The final section concludes this article with a brief summary.

2. Literature review

2.1. Interpersonal helping behavior (IHB)

Originated in North America, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), defined as individual behavior that is discretionary not recognized by the formal reward systems, and in the aggregate promotes organizational effectiveness, plays an important role in determining organizational performance (Harrison, Newman, & Roth, 2006; Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009). Given its crucial impact on organizational performance, OCB has been further explored and suggested to be a multi-faceted construct, which includes IHB, courtesy, sportsmanship, conscientiousness, and voice (Organ, 1988). Among these five forms of OCB, IHB has been explored most frequently because it is a strong predictor of overall organizational performance (Podsakoff et al., 2000; Whiting, Podsakoff, & Pierce, 2008). Accordingly, several prior studies have attempted to understand outcomes of IHB. For instance, in an early theoretical analysis of prosocial organizational behavior conducted by Brief and Motowidlo (1986), it was posited that IHB enhances job performance, increases effectiveness of organizational members, and facilitates communication and coordination between organizational members. A later study conducted by Podsakoff, Ahearne, and MacKenzie (1997) confirmed that IHB improves performance quantity as well as performance quality. Similarly, empirical evidence shown in Barksdale and Werner's (2001) study suggested that overall employee performance ratings are predicted by employee IHB. Heilman and Chen's (2005) experimental studies suggested that consequences of IHB are gender specific. Specifically, they found that IHB enhances only men's work evaluations and recommendations, whereas

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