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A multilevel analysis of the role of interactional justice in promoting knowledge-sharing behavior: The mediated role of organizational commitment

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge sharing behavior has received increased attention in the context of business due to its important role in enhancing organizational competitive advantage. This study aimed to identify possible predictors of knowledge sharing behavior and its underlying mechanisms from a multilevel perspective. The results showed that interactional justice positively related to knowledge sharing behavior both at the individual and the team levels. And organizational commitment took a mediated role between them. This study is the first to highlight the role of organizational commitment and interactional justice in knowledge sharing behavior, enriching current understanding of organizational knowledge management and providing further suggestions as how managers can improve knowledge sharing behavior in their organizations.

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1. Introduction

Knowledge is a crucial organizational resource that can offer organizations competitive advantages in a dynamic economy (Spender & Grant, 1996). Research has shown that effective knowledge management is positively related to cost reduction, new product development, team performance, innovation, and organizational performance, as reflected by revenue gained from new products and services and sales growth (Collins & Smith, 2006; Hu & Randel, 2014; Lin, 2007a, b; Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009). Hence, exploring the predictive variables of knowledge sharing behavior and understanding its mechanisms are critical areas of focus for both scholars and managers.

Many organizations have tried using reward systems to stimulate employees' intragroup knowledge sharing behavior. As highlighted in previous research, knowledge sharing is often unable to be explicitly or directly rewarded due to its intangibility (Desouza, 2003; Lin, 2007a, b). Hence, some scholars have sought to identify intangible factors which can facilitate intragroup knowledge sharing behavior. As one of important intangible variables, organizational justice is a strong predictor of individual knowledge sharing behavior due to its positive influence on subordinates' commitment and trust to their organization

or supervisor (Wang & Noe, 2010). Organizational justice is concerned the ways in which employees determine if they have been treated fairly in their job, including procedural justice, distributive justice and interpersonal justice (Colquitt, 2001). The procedural and distributive justices are focus on individual fairness of decision making processes and outcomes distributive, respectively. And they may be the function of the organization policies/regulations which guarantee that each individual in a firm/department has the same standard of assessment and performance to follow. Comparing with the procedural and distributive justices, the interactional justice is often the matter of the subordinates' fairness perception from their supervisors in their daily interaction and is easy to be managed by the supervisor. Research on organizational justice has shown that the interactional justice is a strong predictor of subordinates' attitudes and behaviors (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Indeed, sometimes those effects are stronger than the effects for procedural and distributive justice (Ambrose & Schminke, 2003; Moorman, 1991; Williams, Pitre, & Zainuba, 2002). The importance of interactional justice may be explained by Bies's (2005) distinction between "exchanges" and "encounters." According to Bies, procedural and distributive justice are somewhat bounded in resource exchange contexts that may be relatively infrequent. In contrast, interactional justice can be judged in virtually any encounter between managers and subordinates, regardless of whether resource allocation decisions are being made. Therefore, Bies's arguments suggest that interactional justice has "day-in day-out" significance that the other justice dimensions may not possess.

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Although research shows that interactional justice has played an important role in predicting subordinates' attitudes and behaviors, the increased academic research focus only on the important role of the distributive and the procedural justices in knowledge sharing behavior (Lin, 2007a, b; Schepers & van den Berg, 2007; Wang & Noe, 2010), comparatively little attention has been paid to the interactional justice. Therefore, it helps us to understand the organizational justice–knowledge sharing relationship by studying the role of the interpersonal justice in knowledge sharing behavior and the underlying mechanism between them.

Furthermore, individual's behavior is easy to be affected by the team and organization they stayed at (Kenny & Judd, 1996), and the cross-level study may become an more and more popular method to examine how individual's or team's organizational justice perceptions affect organizational outcomes. However, very little attention is given to the antecedents of knowledge sharing from a multilevel perspective. Therefore, the second question is whether the predictors and the underlying mechanisms of knowledge sharing behavior are the same at both the individual and the team levels.

Overall, investigating the relationship between interactional justice and knowledge sharing behavior and their underlying mechanisms from a multilevel perspective, will enrich the understanding of knowledge sharing behavior and provide suggestions for knowledge management in a company.

2. Literature review

2.1. Interactional justice and knowledge sharing behavior

Knowledge sharing is a process in which individuals exchange their knowledge and create new knowledge together (De Vries, van den Hooff & de Ridder, 2006). It comprises two categories of behavior: knowledge donating, which refers to passing on one's own intellectual capital to others, and knowledge collecting, which refers to consulting others in order to acquire some of their intellectual capital. The two processes are conceptually separate and distinct, and are regarded as two separate dependent variables in our analysis.

Interactional justice (Colquitt, 2001) refers to the perception of individuals regarding how fairly their supervisors treat them. According to social exchange theory (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, et al., 1986), to maintain a spirit of professional reciprocity, the employees are more likely to trust and identify with their colleagues and supervisors and, in turn, to share knowledge with them, if their supervisors treat them fairly (Abrams, Cross, Lesser, et al., 2003; Ramasamy, Goh & Yeung, 2006). Furthermore, considering the agent role of the supervisor, employees tend to identify more strongly with their organization when they perceive a high level of fairness from their supervisors. And the identification to the organization will make employees tend to treat themselves as in-group members and share knowledge with other members (Ramasamy, Goh & Yeung, 2006). Therefore, individuals who perceive a high level of interactional justice are more likely to impart or request knowledge within their organization.

Hypothesis 1. Interactional justice positively correlates with both knowledge donating behavior (a) and knowledge collecting behavior (b).

2.2. Organizational commitment and knowledge sharing behavior

Organizational commitment is seen as the strength of an employee's identification with and involvement in a particular organization (Porter, Steers, Mowday, et al., 1974). It captures researchers' attention due to its positive relation with many organization-related outcomes, such as organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction (Lin, 2007a, b; Porter et al., 1974; Sjahruddin, Armanu, Sudiro, et al., 2013). Both models by

Scholl (1981) and Weiner (1982) have provided theoretical support for a commitment-OCB relationship (Schappe, 1998). They argued that commitment maintains behavioral direction when there is little expectation of formal organizational rewards for performance, and individual with high score of commitment is more likely to make contributions to the organization they belong to. Generally speaking, both knowledge donating and collecting behaviors may be the good ways to attain this goal. That is, asking others to share their expertise is one of the most efficient methods for employee's self-improvement within an organization, while sharing knowledge (e.g. work experience) with co-workers and supervisors is an effective way of enriching the organization as a whole. And previous studies have shown that commitment to an organization is an important antecedent of knowledge sharing (Lin, 2007a, b; Van den Hooff & De Ridder, 2004; Wang & Noe, 2010).

Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that organizational commitment influence both people's willingness to contribute to the organization that they belong to and their tendency to consult others about their expertise. Thus, the second hypothesis is provided as follows:

Hypothesis 2. Organizational commitment correlates positively with knowledge donating behavior (a) and knowledge collecting behavior (b).

2.3. The mediator of organizational commitment

The effect of psychological factor on one's behaviors could not be ignored. Social exchange view of commitment (Eisenberger et al., 1986) suggests the mediating role of organizational commitment in the relationship between perceived organizational support and employee's citizenship behavior. Employees easily perceive a higher level of organizational support and increase their identification to the organization when they were treated fairly by their supervisors, and in turn, this identification to company will increase individual's knowledge sharing behavior. Previous research showed that organizational commitment was often used as the mediator in organizational research, and was also found as the mediator in the relationship of other types of organizational justice (e.g., distributive and procedural justice) and knowledge sharing behavior (Lin, 2007a, b). Consequently, one could argue that changes in the perception of fairness would lead to changes in the levels of organizational commitment and in turn in the levels of knowledge donating and knowledge collecting behavior.

Hypothesis 3a. Organizational commitment mediates the association between interactional justice and knowledge donating behavior.

Hypothesis 3b. Organizational commitment mediates the association between interactional justice and knowledge collecting behavior.

2.4. Within-team and between-team effects

Individual's behavior is affected easily by the team and organization they stay at (Kenny & Judd, 1996). Research shows that the study of justice at higher levels of analysis may better inform organizational practice (Simond & Roberson, 2003). Thus, it is better to discuss the relationship between interactional justice at team level and team-level outcomes. Several theories provide the theoretical underpinnings for the emergence of interactional justice climate as a group-level property. First, given that members of the same group are exposed to the same leaders (Naumann & Bennett, 2000), managers' behavioral norms may form a shared basis for employee's justice perception in a work group. Second, the notion of "contagious justice" (DeGoeij, 2000) also suggests that people tend to engage in social talk and arrive at a shared, socially constructed interpretation of justice in front of some ambiguous justice events. In addition, the Attraction-Selection-Attrition perspective (ASA; Schneider, 1975), which proposes that individuals of similar

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