Countering the trend towards careerist orientation in the age of downsizing Test of a social exchange model

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Abstract

Predicated on the assumption that employee careerist orientation resulting from organizational actions to cut costs constitutes a potential threat to their long-term profitability and success, this study proposed and tested a social exchange model of careerist orientation in the People's Republic of China. Specifically, it was hypothesized that organizational justice and career growth opportunities will be related to careerist orientation, but the relationship will be mediated by trust in employer. Structural equation modeling results provided support for the model. Trust in organization fully mediated the relationship between careerist orientation and its antecedents.

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Today, the employer's attitude is that making money is number one, the employees are not number one anymore. Constant changes in company structures create less loyalty. In the past ten to twenty-five years, employees have acted more like free agents. There is less trust, more anxiety, and less loyalty on the employee's part. Loyalty to the company has to be fostered by the company. (Mid-level manager cited in [Stroh and Reilly, 1997, p. 83](#)).

1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a dramatic shift in the competitive environment of organizations. The shift began sooner in the traditionally capitalist economies of Japan, US and Western Europe, and has now manifested itself in the traditionally protectionist socialist economies of China and the former Soviet bloc. Regardless of when it occurred, organizational responses to the shift have been consistent across time ([Mroczkowski and Masao, 1997](#)). Specifically, organizations have had to implement cost

control mechanisms not only to survive but to ensure viability. While necessary, much of the cost control has been directed at employees because of the burgeoning costs of maintaining large workforces. Although downsizing has been shown to be reasonably effective in enhancing organizational survival ([Cameron, 1994](#); [Cascio, 1993](#); [Emshoff, 1994](#)), an important cost, however, of this strategy that is often overlooked is in the psychological contract of the employee with the “changed” organization.

A psychological contract describes employees perceived reciprocal obligations existing with their employer ([Rousseau, 1989](#)). While the traditional relational contract was premised on the provision of job security and promotion opportunities by the organization in exchange for employee effort and commitment, in the emergent transactional contract, the organization no longer provides life time employment and employees now have responsibility for their career development ([Peiperl and Baruch, 1997](#)). Underpinning the transactional contract is the organization's demand that the workforce be flexible and dispensable to suit its contingencies. The psychological reaction of employees to the emergent transactional contract is the adoption of a careerist orientation that denotes a recognition of the long-term incompatibility of personal and organizational goals ([Feldman, 1985](#); [Feldman and Weitz, 1991](#)). Implicit in the adoption of a careerist orientation is the message that

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employees are putting self-interest first and are no longer willing to provide ‘organization–man’ commitment.

In spite of the trend towards a transactional contract and the resulting adoption of a careerist orientation on the part of employees, some organizations that have implemented downsizing have been quite successful in maintaining a relational contract. What has not been well understood at this point is what appears to govern or lessen the careerist orientation. The answer may lie in how the organization manages its social exchange relationship during the transition period (Cameron et al., 1991). Data obtained from employees in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) were used to test a parsimonious social exchange model of careerist orientation. Specifically, the study examined the mediating influence of trust in organization on the relationship between careerist orientation and its hypothesized antecedents of organizational justice and career growth opportunities. The study is predicated on the assumption that without addressing the trend towards careerist orientation that such emergent organizational strategic actions like downsizing and restructuring precipitate, organizations may be ignoring a key factor in their long-term profitability and success (Burack and Singh, 1995; Emshoff, 1994). In Section 2, we briefly discuss China’s employment system in the context of its economic reform program.

2. Employment system in the context of China’s economic reform

In the late 1970s, China implemented an economic reform program within the framework of its socialist political system. The overriding objective of the economic reform program was to change its economic system from a planned economy to a socialist market economy. The shift from a planned economy to a socialist market economy has altered many of the institutional practices that defined the employment relationship in China. A key institutional practice was the iron rice bowl that describe an enterprise-based employment system that guaranteed lifetime employment and cradle-to-grave welfare benefits (Child, 1994; Ding et al., 1997). Implementation of the National Labor Law, which stipulated that all employees including those in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have to enter into written contracts with their employers, signaled the end of the old personnel model based on the iron rice bowl (Warner, 1995). The demise of the iron rice bowl has been reinforced by the widespread implementation of downsizing as a strategy to maintain organizational effectiveness in the face of competitive pressures. In 1999, 6.52 million employees were laid off by SOEs (Ke, 2001) and the unemployment rate increased from 2.6% in 1993 to 10.5% in 2000 (Asia Development Bank, 2000).

Understanding careerist orientation in a collectivist culture like China is particularly important given the Chinese cultural emphases on loyalty, relationships and reciprocity

(Hwang, 1987; Yang, 1993). Downsizing in a Chinese context undermines these cultural values, which lead employees to respond with a careerist orientation, a form of personal control in an increasingly turbulent career environment.

3. Theoretical framework and literature review

A popular conceptualization of the employment relationship is one of exchange in which employees exchange effort and loyalty for such organizational inducements as material and social rewards. This exchange relationship has been observed to be characterized by economic and social elements. In distinguishing between economic and social exchange, Blau (1964) noted that, while both forms of exchange imply an expectation of some future return for contributions, they differ in the nature of expectations and time frame. Economic exchange is contractual, of a specific time frame, and entails transactions whose value is independent of the exchange. In contrast, a social exchange is an informal and open-ended or long-term exchange of favors, which is premised on a diffuse obligation to reciprocate (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960).

Underpinned by a social exchange perspective, this study hypothesized trust in employer to fully mediate the relationship between organizational justice, career growth opportunities and careerist orientation. Essentially, this study suggests restoration of employee trust in employer as a key variable in strengthening employee–organization linkage and in defining the employment relationship needed to support the emergent organizational strategies (Herriot et al., 1998).

3.1. Antecedents of trust in employer

In distinguishing between an economic and social exchange, Blau (1964) posited that social exchange involves unspecified obligations the fulfillment of which depends on trust. Following Mayer et al. (1995, p. 712), trust is defined as ‘the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the truster irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party’.

An antecedent of trust in employer examined in this paper is organizational justice. The literature distinguishes between distributive and procedural justice with the former referring to the perceived fairness of the outcomes employees receive while the latter describes the perceived fairness of the means used to determine these outcomes (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997; Folger and Konovsky, 1989). In contrast to organizational politics, perception of distributive justice signals an organization’s value and recognition of employee’s contributions that should serve to strengthen effort–reward expectancies leading to attributions of trust-

worthiness to the organization. This is because distributive justice will lead employees to expect that the organization will discharge its obligations of noticing and rewarding employee efforts made on its behalf, as well as ensuring long-term fairness of the organization to reward performance (Eisenberger et al., 1990).

Mayer et al. (1995) explained the development of trust in terms of integrity, which, in their view, stems from the perceived consistency of another's actions and the extent to which another's actions are congruent with his or her words. Based on an employee's past experiences with an employer, the employee comes to cognitively establish expectations regarding the future behavior of the employer. This is made possible by the trust engendered by procedural justice because it facilitates consistency of treatment by restricting opportunities for managerial discretion regarding how employee's valued outcomes are determined. Brockner et al. (1997) noted that the more the trustee is perceived to be procedurally fair, the less likely is the truster to feel the need to monitor or control the trustee. This view is consistent with the relational model of procedural justice that links concerns about justice to the social bond that exist between people and their experiences with groups and authorities (Lind and Tyler, 1988; Tyler and Lind, 1990). We, therefore, expect procedural justice to be positively related to trust in employer.

The final antecedent of trust examined in this study is career growth opportunities. A trust-enhancing mechanism identified by Mayer et al. (1995) is benevolence, defined as the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the truster implying that the trustee has some specific attachment to the truster. The organization's provision of career growth opportunities represents a discretionary action which although will enhance the employee's skill and therefore his/her contributions to the organization, also enhances his/her employability security. The provision of resources and opportunities for employees to grow and develop their careers not only underlines mutuality of interest but also signals an organization's investment in a social exchange relationship with its employees. In view of the growing number of organizations that have been reported to breach the obligation to provide career development opportunities for their employees (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994), enhancing the employability security of employees will engender trust in the organization.

The preceding discussion was distilled into the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: Distributive justice will be positively related to trust in employer.

Hypothesis 1b: Procedural justice will be positively related to trust in employer.

Hypothesis 1c: Career growth opportunities will be positively related to trust in employer.

3.2. *The mediating role of trust in employer*

Trust in employer has been found to underpin myriad employee work attitudes and behaviors (Konovsky and Pugh, 1994; Robinson, 1996). Robinson (1996), for example, reported that violation of the psychological contract shatters trust in an employer leading to reduced performance of civic virtue and in-role performance. Consistent with the social exchange underpinnings of this study, the hypothesized influence of trust in employer in counteracting the development of careerist orientation is explicable in terms of reciprocity. Mayer et al. (1995) noted that trust is predicated on the expectation that the trustee will perform actions that benefit the truster without the truster monitoring the trustee. Rhoades et al. (2001) reported that employees who perceive their organizations as being supportive (and therefore trustworthy) reciprocated with commitment to the organization. Organizational justice and career growth opportunities underline the organization's trustworthiness, which, in turn, serves as a mechanism through which these antecedents counter careerist orientation. Following Konovsky and Pugh (1994), we contend that to the extent that trust is a manifestation of social exchange and social exchange underpins the organization's support and concern about the welfare of its employees (as reflected in the hypothesized antecedents), trust will mediate the relationship between organizational justice, career growth opportunities and careerist orientation.

The preceding discussion was distilled into the following hypothesis and tested in this study.

Hypothesis 2: Trust in employer will be negatively related to careerist orientation and will mediate the relationship between its antecedents (distributive justice, procedural justice and career growth opportunities) and careerist orientation.

4. Method

4.1. *Sample and procedure*

Respondents for this study were employees of a listed Chinese household appliance manufacturer located in Shunde City, Guangdong Province, PRC. The company employs approximately 1000 employees the vast majority of whom are production employees. Having implemented the employment contract system, the management of this company has the authority to layoff employees. At a scheduled seminar for supervisors, the authors were given an opportunity to explain the general purpose of the study and procedures for questionnaire administration. Each of the 60 supervisors at the seminar received three copies of the questionnaire to be given to their subordinates for completion during their nonworking hours. A cover letter that described the general purpose of the survey, assured

respondents of confidentiality, informed them that participation in the survey was voluntary and explained procedures for completing and returning the questionnaires was attached to each questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were returned sealed in envelopes provided by the authors to a drop-in box located in the human resource department and specifically marked for that purpose.

Of the 180 questionnaires distributed, 158 were returned but 9 were not usable representing an effective response rate of 83%. Of the 149 respondents, 68% were females, the average age was 37 years ($S.D.=6.18$) and the average education was 13 years ($S.D.=3.35$).

4.2. Measures

The survey instrument was in Chinese but was initially constructed in English and translated into Chinese by a professional translator at a university in Hong Kong. To validate the Chinese version, one of the authors back-translated the survey instrument into English. To ensure that the back translation was an accurate prose translation and not a literal English language translation (Werner and Campbell, 1970), we pretested the Chinese version of the survey instrument on twenty clerical employees (not included in the sample) of the participating organization. They were specifically requested to comment on the clarity of the wording of the items. Their comments revealed only minor changes in the wording of a few items suggesting that the items retained their meaning in Chinese. Unless otherwise indicated, response options ranged from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*.

4.2.1. Distributive justice

A five-item version of a scale developed by Price and Mueller (1986) was used to measure distributive justice. The scale measures the extent to which rewards received by employees are perceived to be related to performance inputs. Sample items are “I am fairly paid or rewarded considering my job responsibilities” and “I am fairly paid or rewarded considering the stresses and strains of my job.” The scale’s α reliability in this study was .92, which compares favorably with the .94 α reliability Moorman (1991) reported for a five-item version of the scale.

4.2.2. Procedural justice

A 10-item scale adapted from Moorman (1991) was used to measure procedural justice. These items focused on both the structural and interpersonal components of procedural justice (Tyler and Bies, 1990). Sample items are “My supervisor clarifies decisions and provides additional information when requested by employees,” “When decisions are made about my job, my supervisor shows concern for my rights as an employee” and “To make job decisions, my supervisor collects accurate and complete information.” The scale’s α reliability in this study was .97.

4.2.3. Career growth opportunities

A four-item scale developed by Bedeian et al. (1991) was used to measure career growth opportunities or expected utility of one’s present job for attainment of valued career outcomes. Sample items are “I feel that my present job will lead to future attainment of my career goals” and “My present job is relevant to growth and development in my career.” The scale’s α reliability in this study was .85.

4.2.4. Trust in employer

A seven-item adaptation of a scale developed by Gabarro and Athos (1978) was used to measure trust in employer. Sample items are “My employer is open and frank with me” and “I can expect my employer to treat me in a consistent and predictable manner.” The scale’s α reliability in this study was .92.

4.2.5. Careerist orientation

A five-item abbreviated version of a scale developed by Feldman and Weitz (1991) was used to measure careerist orientation. Sample items are “In the final analysis, what is best for you in your organization is not going to be consistent with what is in the organization’s best interests” and “I do not think of myself as an organization man/woman.” The scale’s α reliability in this study was .72.

5. Results

Consistent with Anderson and Gerbing’s (1988) recommended two-step approach to structural equation modeling, we first examined the adequacy of our measurement model using LISREL 8 (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1993) confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). We compared a five-factor orthogonal model (procedural justice and distributive justice were combined), four-factor orthogonal model and a one-factor model (all items of the five variables were loaded onto one factor) with a null model. The results of the CFA indicate that our hypothesized five-factor orthogonal model ($\chi^2=872.25$, $df=428$, $P<.01$) fitted the data better than the null model ($\chi^2=4203.71$, $df=465$, $P<.01$), one-factor model ($\chi^2=1755.83$, $df=433$, $P<.01$) and four-factor orthogonal model ($\chi^2=1251.10$, $df=431$, $P<.01$). Additionally, the other fit indexes for the five-factor model ($CFI=0.88$, $GFI=0.84$, $TLI=0.87$) were significantly better than those for the one-factor model ($CFI=0.65$, $GFI=0.43$, $TLI=0.62$) and the four-factor model ($CFI=0.78$, $GFI=0.73$, $TLI=0.76$) indicating initial support for the measurement model.

Fig. 1 presents the factor loadings and error variances for each measured variable in our measurement model as they load on their respective latent factor. As shown in that figure, the loadings range from .55 to .93 and were all statistically significant ($P<.01$). For the five-factor model, we also compared orthogonal with oblique models, in which all error terms across the latent constructs were allowed to

Fig. 1. Measurement model characteristics.

be correlated. The results show that the five-factor oblique model ($\chi^2 = 801.96$, $df = 424$, $P < .01$) fitted the data better than the five-factor orthogonal model (see Fig. 1 for values of χ^2 and df). However, the other fit indices for the five-factor oblique model (CFI=0.90, GFI=0.85, TLI=0.87) were only marginally better than those for the five-factor orthogonal model (CFI=0.88, GFI=0.84, TLI=0.87). Consequently, evidence for the discriminant validity of this study's measures while encouraging is somewhat equivocal.

Table 1 presents the reliabilities, descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations of the study variables. As shown in that table, procedural and distributive justice, and career growth opportunities were positively related to trust in

employer, which, in turn, was negatively related to careerist orientation.

To test the structural model, we reduced the number of indicators for the constructs (Bagozzi and Heatherton, 1994). This procedure consolidates the manifest items of a latent variable into a smaller number of composite indicators

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables studied ($N = 149$)

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5
1. Careerist orientation	4.54	0.68	[.72]				
2. Trust in employer	4.79	1.21	-.34**	[.92]			
3. Procedural justice	4.89	1.34	-.31**	.66**	[.97]		
4. Distributive justice	4.33	1.27	-.27**	.62**	.45**	[.92]	
5. Career growth opportunities	4.89	1.27	-.39**	.65**	.53**	.58**	[.85]

** $P < .01$.

Table 2
Results of nested model comparisons ($N = 149$)

Models	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	TLI	CFI	GFI
1. Null model	1028.47***	45	—	—	—	—	—
2. Fully mediated model (hypothesized)	52.64**	28	975.83**	17	0.96	0.97	0.94
3. Partially mediated model 1 ^a	51.27**	27	1.37	1	0.96	0.98	0.94
4. Partially mediated model 2 ^b	52.62**	27	0.02	1	0.96	0.97	0.94
5. Partially mediated model 3 ^c	52.40**	27	0.24	1	0.96	0.97	0.94

TLI=Tucker-Lewis Index, CFI=Comparative Fit Index, GFI=Goodness of Fit Index.

^a In comparison to the hypothesized fully mediated model, partially mediated model 1 adds a path from procedural justice to careerist orientation.

^b Partially mediated model 2 adds a path from distributive justice to careerist orientation.

^c Partially mediated model 3 adds a path from career growth opportunities to careerist orientation.

** $P < .01$.

*** $P < .001$.

Fig. 2. Estimated path coefficients of the hypothesized model.

and is commonly used in structural equation analysis (Zaheer et al., 1998). The results of the test of the structural model are presented in Table 2. As shown in that table, the fit indices revealed our hypothesized model to adequately fit the data ($\chi^2 = 52.64$, $df = 28$, $P < .001$, CFI = 0.97, GFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.96). We also compared the fit of a number of partially mediated models to our hypothesized model. Table 2 indicates that none of the three alternative partially mediated models examined improved fit. Consequently, we concluded that the hypothesized full-mediated model was the best fitting model.

Fig. 2 presents the results of the LISREL estimates that provided support for the hypothesized model. In general, our findings indicate that (a) procedural and distributive justice, and career growth opportunities were positively related to trust in employer, and (b) trust in employer was negatively related to careerist orientation and fully mediated the relationship between careerist orientation and its hypothesized antecedents.

6. Discussion

Support for the hypothesized model suggests that organizational justice and career growth opportunities are indirectly related to careerist orientation through trust in employer. Mayer et al. (1995) noted that procedural justice fosters trust in the other party in the exchange relationship because it facilitates consistent and predictable behavior, which is especially important when one party is unable to monitor the behavior of the other party in the relationship. The impact of career growth opportunities on trust in

employer can be explained in terms of benevolence. An employer's provision of resources and opportunities for employees to psychologically grow and develop their careers suggests that the employer has a specific attachment to the employee (Mayer et al., 1995). Although employee career growth and development is perceived by employees as part of the employer's contractual obligations, violations of this obligation and the consequent erosion of trust in employer have been reported in the extant literature (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Robinson and Morrison, 1995). Our findings contribute to the literature by identifying some trust-enhancing antecedents or factors. These antecedents, as Brockner et al. (1997, p. 578) noted, serve as sense-making processes, which enable employees to confidently predict the long-term consequences of their relationship with the organization.

The finding of a negative relationship between trust in employer and careerist orientation provides empirical support for the growing calls for restoration of trust as a central plank in the emergent employment relationship (Burack and Singh, 1995; Herriot et al., 1998). Eisenberger et al. (1997) reported that perceived organizational support (which in the context of this study stems from organizational policies that signal mutuality of interest and an organization's investment in a social exchange relationship with its employees) signals an organization's trustworthiness, which engenders, on the part of employees, a felt obligation to incorporate organizational membership and role status into their social identity.

This study has a number of limitations that must be highlighted. First, the cross-sectional correlation nature of the data precludes causal inferences. Longitudinal research is needed to better establish the causal status of the variables

examined in this study. Second, the exclusive reliance on self-report data may have inflated relations among the variables. The CFA results that revealed the five-factor model to be the best fitting model relative to the one-factor and four-factor models were corroborated by the results of the exploratory factor analysis that tested Harman's one-factor model (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). This suggests that our findings are not entirely attributable to method variance. Third, requesting supervisors to distribute questionnaires to three of their subordinates may have led to selection bias as some supervisors had more than three subordinates. Although we were unable to ascertain the extent to which selection bias affected our findings, it is unlikely the findings can completely be explained by selection bias. Future research should, however, use a more representative sample to minimize the problem of selection bias. Finally and perhaps a major limitation of this study is the failure to examine potential criterion measures of careerist orientation. Previous research has shown careerist orientation to be negatively related to organizational commitment, job involvement, job satisfaction and internal motivation (Chay and Aryee, 1999; Feldman and Weitz, 1991), and positively to turnover intentions (Chay and Aryee, 1999). The growing dependence on employees as a source of competitive advantage stems from these positive work attitudes and their behavioral outcomes (Pfeffer, 1998). The negative influence of careerist orientation on these work attitudes suggests a potentially negative influence of careerist orientation on organizational effectiveness. Consequently, future research should examine the influence of careerist orientation on such work behaviors as performance of in-role and citizenship behaviors, absenteeism and actual turnover.

Notwithstanding these limitations, our findings have a practical implication. Given that no organization can function without some employees being psychologically attached to it and behaving as organizational citizens, it becomes necessary to understand how organizations can counter a careerist orientation on the part of employees. The findings suggest that organizations and their managers can counter careerist orientation by redefining the employment relationship to emphasize the mutuality of interest between employees and the organization, and making trust the axis on which such a relationship revolves (cf. Baruch, 1998). Consequently, the management of employee trust in employer as a vehicle for strengthening employee–organization linkage constitutes a critical human resource activity in the age of downsizing.

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