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**Influence of Work Pressure on Proactive Skill Development in China: The Role
of Career Networking Behavior and Guanxi HRM**

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Abstract:

This research examines how work pressure influences proactive skill development in the context of the Chinese workplace. Drawing from the conservation of resources theory, we develop a model which argues that career networking behavior serves as the mechanism that allows employees to transform work pressure into proactive skill development. We further argue that in the context of the Chinese workplace, guanxi HRM, which is a culturally-specific workplace practice deeply-rooted in Chinese tradition, plays a contingency role in influencing the extent to which work pressure influences career networking behavior. We test our model using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling for a sample of employees (N=392) in China. The results show that career networking behavior positively mediates the influence of work pressure on proactive skill development and that guanxi HRM positively and significantly moderates the influence of work pressure on career networking behavior. The overall findings provide empirical support for the relevance of contextual and motivational factors in explaining employee proactive skill development. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are fully discussed.

Keywords

work pressure, proactive skill development, career networking behavior, guanxi HRM, conservation of resources, China.

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1. Introduction

In today's career context characterized by rising work pressure due to overload of job demands and fast-changing role expectations (e.g. Hewlett & Luce, 2006; Parker & Liao, in press), employees are increasingly expected to be proactive in managing their career (De Vos et al., 2009; Fuller & Marler, 2009; Spurk et al., 2015). Against this backdrop, proactive skill development and career networking behavior are the 'know how' aspects of proactive career behaviors (Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015) that have been linked to employment, career success (Forret & Dougherty, 2004) and career adaptability in an age of boundaryless careers (Savickas, 2013). Prior research on proactive career behaviors has been concerned primarily with the influence of dispositional motivational antecedents such as personality (e.g. Reed et al., 2004), self-efficacy (e.g. Hirschi et al., 2013) and future work selves (e.g. Strauss et al., 2012; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015), while overlooking important contextual factors. This oversight is a cause of concern because 'work based decisions, transitions, and experiences are rooted in interactions in a broad array of external influences' (Blustein, 2011, p. 1), which are becoming increasingly culturally-diverse (Savickas et al., 2009). Thus, there are reasons to believe that the extent to which employees respond to work pressure in relation to their career is influenced by national cultures. As such, investigating the role of the culturally-specific workplace practice in which proactive career behaviors are formed is of both theoretical and practical importance.

In the context of the Chinese workplace, guanxi human resource management (hereinafter guanxi HRM) is an example of culturally-specific work practices that can

influence proactive career behaviors. Guanxi HRM refers to ‘HRM practices (e.g., staffing, promotion, and performance appraisal) that are influenced and driven by interpersonal connections rather than rules and regulations’ (Zhang, Long, Wu & Huang, 2015, p. 699). It is an application of the indigenous Chinese guanxi culture, rooted in Confucianism, that describes personal, non-work related, connections reinforced implicitly by reciprocity and exchange of favors (Chen, Chen & Huang, 2013). An important outcome of guanxi is increased attachment, personal-life inclusion and favorable treatment to guanxi beholders (Zhang, Long, Wu and Huang, 2015). Given that guanxi is an influential philosophy that is deeply-rooted in Chinese society, it is difficult to imagine the absence of guanxi in Chinese workplaces (see Chen et al., 2013; Warner, 2011).

This study therefore contextualizes proactive career behaviors in workplaces where employees simultaneously manage work pressure and culturally-specific HRM practices. It focuses on proactive skill development as a specific form of proactive career behavior given the vital role of continuous learning and personal development for one’s career (Warner, 2011; Wei, Liu, Chen & Wu, 2010). The aim of this study is to examine how (the mechanism) and under what conditions (the context) work pressure influences proactive skill development in China. Drawing from conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001), it develops and tests a model which argues that the relationship between work pressure and proactive skill development is mediated by career networking behavior, contingent on guanxi HRM.

The study makes several contributions to the literature on proactive career behaviors. First, the study focuses specifically on proactive skill development in order to address the weaknesses of previous research (e.g. Strauss et al., 2012; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015) that treats proactive career behaviors as a composite construct of

related yet different proactivity-related behaviors (Hirschi et al., 2013; Weng & McElroy, 2010). Such conceptualization and operationalization risk leading to confounding results and is inappropriate in explaining how and why employees engage in specific behaviors, which often involve different considerations and outcomes (Strauss et al., 2012). Second, the study contributes to the small but growing research on the importance of culture as a context for understanding workplace behaviors (Blustein, 2011; Gergen, 2009; Stead, 2004). It considers the effects of the Chinese indigenous guanxi culture in the workplace by focusing specifically on guanxi HRM as a boundary condition. Lastly, greater understanding of the antecedents, mechanisms and boundary conditions of proactive skill development allows for more accurate predictions of proactive career behaviors more generally in the context of culturally-diverse workplaces.

2. Hypothesis development

2.1 Proactive skill development and conservation of resources theory

Proactive skill development refers to deliberate and self-started actions aimed at attaining learning and development in skills (Antonacopoulou, 2000; Boyce, Zaccaro & Wisecarver, 2010) for employment and employability. The underlying assumption is that rather than passively following instructions, employees self-initiate changes in their job and situations (Frese & Fay, 2001) in relation to the development of specific skills. For example, a marketing professional can decide to up-skill his/her foreign language capabilities in order to be more efficient with foreign clients, without being required to do so by his/her employer. This is considered proactive skill development as the behavior taken to improve the specific skill set is self-starting, self-initiated and is not directed nor required by the employer.

Proactive skill development is a specific form of the broader proactive career behaviors which refer to proactivity-related behaviors in relation to broad career objectives beyond those of specific jobs (Grant & Parker, 2009; Grant, Parker & Collins, 2009). Increasingly scholars acknowledge that proactive career behaviors comprise of specific behaviors that require separate attention due to their different considerations and outcomes (Strauss et al., 2012). For instance, it includes networking aimed at facilitating resource acquisition and proactive skill development aimed at competency improvement of the self (Parker & Liao, in press). The fast-changing job demands and the continuous learning expectation have generated a surge of research on understanding the contributing factors of proactive skill development (Boyce et al., 2010; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015).

By its very nature, proactive skill development is risky due to uncertainties involved and potential image or ego damage (Parker & Liao, in press). For this reason, it is important to understand what motivates such behavior (Strauss et al., 2012). Research to date has identified ‘can do’, ‘reason to’ and ‘energized to’ motivational factors that explain proactive behaviors (Hirschi, 2013; Parker, Bindl & Strauss, 2010). These prior studies focus extensively on personal characteristics as predictors of proactive career behaviors, with limited empirical research on how situational characteristics like work pressure, viewed in conjunction with a motivational system, influence employees’ concrete actions like career networking behavior and proactive skill development.

We draw from COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to explain the motivations behind employee proactive skill development. COR is a widely-used theory of motivation to explain people’s behavioral and intentional responses in situations where they experience potential or actual resource depletion (Westman, Hobfoll, Chen, Davidson

& Lasky, 2005). Within COR, resources refer to objects, conditions, personal characteristics, energies and any other things that people value (Hobfoll, 1989). According to Hobfoll (2001), people are motivated to create, protect, foster and nurture their social, personal, material, and energy resources so as to sustain well-being and protect against future resource loss.

The key tenets of COR theory involve both resource conservation and acquisition. The resource conservation tenet means that when people experience resource loss at work, they tend to conserve existing resources which may manifest in the form of reduced voice (e.g. Ng & Feldman, 2012) and increased emotional exhaustion (e.g. McCarthy et al., 2016) or burnout (e.g. Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008). This tenet suggests that harmful impacts of resource loss on psychological well-being are more salient than the positive impact of resource gains (Hobfoll, 2001).

The second tenet, which is less-studied, concerns the investment behaviors in resources which can protect people against or recover from resource loss (Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, 2009; Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl & Westman 2014). People make investments in ways to maximize their returns. Thus, a corollary of this tenet suggests that people with excess work resources tend to re-invest those resources back into work (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 2001). The resource investment tenet has been supported by empirical studies on organizational citizenship behavior (e.g. Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; Salanova, Aut & Peiro, 2005) and voice (e.g. Ng & Feldman, 2012), two forms of proactive work behaviors (Crant, 2000; Frese & Fay, 2001). As argued in the next section, this tenet of COR theory is particularly relevant for understanding how work pressure leads employees to develop career networks which in turn motivates them to invest in skill development.

2.2. Work pressure and career networking behavior

Work pressure refers to employees' experience with increased job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Guratlain & Khan, 2015), defined as 'the physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job requiring constant psychical and psychological effort' (van Woerkom et al., 2016, p.141). Increased job demands may not necessarily lead to actual loss to every employee concerned, depending on employees' available stock of competence, personality and support. However, increased job demands is likely to lead to a fear of loss as employees need to expend time, physical energy, emotional energy and attention to process sometimes competing demands, envision solutions within tight timeframes and deal with potential conflicts. Research on job demands has been mostly concerned with the negative impact that work pressure has on employee health-related issues, such as burnout and stress (Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008). This research addresses a neglected aspect of work pressure by focusing on how it can act as a motivator for employees to be proactive in developing their networks for the following reasons.

First, the '*resource investment*' tenet of COR assumes people are motivated to combat resource depletion by gaining new or additional resources. To create more pleasurable situations, a number of psychological resources can be invested, such as social support (e.g. Halbesleben, 2006), particularly in environments where work is conceptualized as a relational act (Blustein, 2011; Flum, 2001). One such relational resource which employees can draw from in the Chinese workplace is their guanxi network. Guanxi considers people into categories and treats in-group and out-group members differently (Farh, Tsui, Xin and Cheng, 1998). In-group members benefit from access to in-group resources embedded in the guanxi networks (Chen & Chen 2004). Career networking behaviour in this research refers to an indigenous guanxi

context of China, defined here as employees' deliberate attempts to develop networks and maintain relationship with people who can provide in-group guanxi benefits to their career. As a behavioural manifestation of career goals in the self-management process, career networking behaviour involves accessing and utilising in-group resources embedded in the guanxi networks.

Second, an emerging stream of research suggests that workload can be viewed as a challenge, rather than hindrance or stressor and can have beneficial influences on employee outcomes, such as job satisfaction (e.g. LePine, Podsakoff & LePine, 2005; Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007). This research stream challenges the conventional view that work pressure, as part of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), invokes a health impairment process. The beneficial role of work pressure has also been found in China where research suggests a positive relationship between employee outcomes, such as enhanced job performance and increased salary, and long working hours (Lu, Siu, Au & Leung, 2009; Lu, Kao, Siu & Lu, 2010). Thus, empirical support exists for COR theory which leads us to hypothesize that work pressure provides a situational 'reason to' motivation for engaging in career networking behavior, particularly in contexts where working is conceptualised as a relational act (Blustein, 2011).

Hypothesis 1. Work pressure is positively related to career networking behavior in China.

2.3. Career networking behavior and proactive skill development

As employees acquire valuable resources through career networking behavior, two corollaries of the resource investment tenet of COR suggest that proactive skill

development is a likely outcome. First, people are motivated to engage in behaviors to avoid the loss of resources that have been acquired (Halbesleben et al. 2014). For instance, employees who have developed guanxi relationship with their supervisors can get higher supervisory support and favourable performance evaluations. To sustain these beneficial treatments, employees may choose to invest in skill development to sustain their performance. This is because networking provides in-group guanxi members with resources which are valuable for skill development. The norm of reciprocity embedded in guanxi culture also requires employees to reciprocate the favors received through acts that increase personal inclusion and attachment, which in turn can reinforce guanxi in the relationships. Research on supervisor-subordinate relationship for instance reports that employees with higher levels of human capital are likely to be treated favorably by supervisors because they are capable of performing a wide range of tasks without much input by the supervisor (Graen, 2012; Morgeson et al., 2005). Likewise, employees who are more knowledgeable, better skilled and more competent are more likely to be selected by others to form differentiated relationships than those who do the opposite. Proactively developing one's skills therefore can be an effective way for an employee to continue to contribute to their guanxi networks and hence reinforce guanxi resources obtained.

The second corollary of COR theory is that people with more resources are better positioned to obtain additional resource gains (Hobfoll, 2001). It is well established that networking provides benefit including access to information, support, feedbacks, and supervisor administrative decisions (Chen et al., 2009; Farh et al., 1998; Wei et al., 2009; Xin & Pearce, 1996). These network resources allow employees to be in an advantageous position in assessing and diagnosing their job competencies against expected standards, thereby increasing their self-awareness. One product of self-

awareness is the employees' realization of possible discrepancies between their actual and expected sets of skills for their jobs. Employees can address their skill deficiencies through proactive skill development involving goal setting for self-improvement and self-initiated learning (Avolio, 2004; Day et al., 2009).

Hypothesis 2. Career networking behavior is positively related to proactive skill development in China.

2.4. The mediating role of career networking behavior

Based on the first two hypotheses, we further propose that career networking behavior is a consequence of work pressure and can serve as an underlying mechanism that transforms work pressure into proactive skill development. To begin, high work pressure may create a fear of loss, which engenders the motivation to combat resource depletion by resources gains. Career networking behavior provides an effective way to gain new or additional socio-psychological resources, including support, perceived fit with the organization and job satisfaction (Potter, Woo & Campion, 2016).

Increased support can be in the form of feedbacks obtained, which can help employees gain insights on personal performance and organizational goals (Boyce et al., 2010). Prior research suggests that feedback facilitates needs analysis that forms the basis of self-learning (Quratulain & Karim, 2015). This is because a resultant perception of skill discrepancy is a motivational antecedent of intention to undertake self-development initiatives (Boyce et al., 2010). Additionally, proactive skill development has underlying risks because individuals may have to cope with uncertainties and prioritize future outcomes over short-term benefits (Strauss et al., 2012). Increased psychological resources gained through career networking behavior can help employees in initiating, sustaining and evaluating proactive skill

development. Bindle and Parker (2011) propose a conceptual model by linking time pressure and situational constraints with proactive career behavior by way of employees' knowledge, skills and attributes. Drawing from COR theory, we build upon their conceptualization and hypothesize that career networking behavior helps to account for the relationship between work pressure and proactive skill development.

Hypothesis 3. Career networking behavior mediates the relationship between work pressure and proactive skill development.

2.5. The moderating role of guanxi HRM

One of the main contentions of this research is that the social and cultural environments are important considerations in explaining employee networking behavior. The cognitive-motivational element of COR theory suggests that people are strategic and selective in the types of resources they invest in and the ways through which investment is undertaken (Hobfoll, 2001). The extent to which people respond to resource-based threat, loss and investment depends on the value people assign to specific resources (Halbesleben et al., 2009). People can construct the value by constantly attending to cues obtained from their environment (Bandura, 1986). Such cues include cultural values and beliefs and have the potential to influence people's framing of relationship and working (Blustein, 2011). Thus, we argue that the extent to which work pressure provides a 'reason to' motivation for proactively developing networks depends on the degree to which social and cultural values and norms influence workplace behaviors and practices.

One workplace practice which is relevant in the cultural context of the workplace in China is guanxi HRM, defined as HRM practices based on guanxi principles of interpersonal and relational connections rather than on contractual and

rules-based principles (Chen et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2015). China-based research has shown that HRM-related decisions on recruitment, promotion and performance evaluation tend to favor those in the guanxi network with decision-makers (Farh et al., 1998; Xin & Pearce, 1996). In this case, guanxi HRM provides a situational cue about the instrumentality of guanxi practices. According to situational strength theory (Meyer et al., 2010; Mischel, 1977), the situation can signal non-ambiguous and clear cues which have the capacity to influence people in undertaking uniform behaviors independent of their personal characteristics. Research shows that people undertake personal initiatives not just because of efficacious belief in their capabilities, but also because they believe personal initiative leads to desired outcomes (Parker et al., 2010). Resource signals enhance the perceived value of resources people seek to attain, which in turn increases the likelihood of undertaking resource investment behaviors (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015; Campbell, Perry, Maertz, Allen & Griffeth, 2013).

In the context of the Chinese workplace, guanxi HRM signals to employees that, to be promoted, rated more favorably, paid higher, or assigned better tasks, it is worthwhile to cultivate guanxi relationships. In other words, beliefs about the value of employee investment in career networking behavior is strengthened when the organization's HRM system of performance evaluation, recruitment, remuneration and task allocation are based on relational rather than contractual ideologies. Within COR theory, guanxi HRM sensitizes employees to the instrumentality of guanxi and thus guides their strategic pursuit of desired resources (Koopman, Lanaj & Scott, 2016) through proactively developing networking related to guanxi. By contrast, in organizations where HRM-related decision-making is based on rules and regulations, the value of guanxi is unclear to employees' career development. Employees are less prone to find a variety of situations in which their daily activities at work are guanxi-

inducing. This sends a signal to employees that engaging in guanxi networking may not be a worthwhile endeavor. When the signal is weak and the goal is ambiguous, people are less likely to put effort in developing guanxi networking proactively.

Hypothesis 4. The relationship between work pressure and career networking behavior is moderated by guanxi HRM such that the relationship is stronger for higher levels of guanxi HRM.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedures

The data for analytical purposes were collected through a large-scale survey of professional mid-level managers in Chinese enterprises. A questionnaire which was first developed in English language was translated using back-translation techniques to ensure semantic equivalence (Byrne, 2016). The questionnaire was pilot tested with 20 employees selected randomly to identify any ambiguities involved in item phraseology (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003). Following appropriate refinements to eliminate confusing and ambiguous language, a total of 650 questionnaires was sent to a sample of Chinese employees from a database of a large HR recruitment company in Beijing. A set of notes also accompanied the questionnaire to explain the purpose of the study and procedures to protect confidentiality and privacy. After three weeks and two follow-up reminders at a week's interval, a total of 420 questionnaires were returned. Following data cleaning and the exclusion of incomplete questionnaires, a total of 392 responses were retained for the purposes of analysis. The sample comprised 268 male participants and 124 female participants, with the average tenure of 4.7 years. In terms of age, 18.6% of respondents were under 30 years old, 58% were between 30 and 40, and 22.7% were over 41 years old.

3.2. Measure

The survey instruments were developed based on an extensive review of the relevant literature. The survey included multiple scale items for each of the constructs included in the hypothesized model. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-scale ranging from 1= *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*, excluding the demographic questions. Construct validity was established through confirmatory factor analysis.

3.2.1. Work pressure

Work pressure was measured with five items from the Quantitative Workload Inventory (QWI) developed by Spector and Jex (1998). The items include: (1) how often does your job require you to work very fast; (2) how often does your job require you to work very hard; (3) how often does your job leave you with little time to get things done; (4) how often is there a great deal to be done; and (5) how often do you have to do more work than you can do well. QWI describes job demands or expectations and has been used frequently in prior studies to measure work pressure (e.g. Lu and Kao, 2013; Lu, Siu and Lu, 2010). Internal consistency reliability (alpha) was 0.86.

3.2.2. Career Networking behavior

Career networking behavior was assessed by using the career networking behavior scale developed by Sturges, Guest, Conway and Davey (2002) which has been used extensively in prior research (e.g. De Vos et al., 2009; De Vos and Soens, 2008). We selected three of the seven original items based on their face validity related to this research and their relevance to the measure, represented by factor loadings above .60 in the original scale. We contextualized the items by asking respondents to rate the

following items in the context of guanxi networking: (1) I have got myself introduced to people who can influence my career; (2) I have talked to senior management at company social gatherings; and (3) I have built contacts with people in areas where I would like to work. Internal consistency reliability (alpha) was 0.85.

3.2.3. Guanxi HRM

Guanxi HRM was measured with five items developed by Chen et al. (2004). These items which have been used in Zhang, Long, Wu and Huang's (2015) study showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .92$). The measure asked participants to rate the extent to which (1) performance appraisals are often influenced by guanxi; (2) many people joined the company through guanxi; (3) many people got promoted through guanxi; (4) task allocations are often decided based on guanxi and (5) bonuses and salary are often decided through guanxi. Internal consistency reliability (alpha) was 0.84.

3.2.4. Proactive skill development

Proactive skill development was measured by the self-development scale developed by Boyce et al (2010). The scale included four items, namely (1) I intentionally performed self-directed learning activities to acquire new knowledge; (2) I purposefully attempted to learn new skills through a personal development program; (3) I deliberately performed self-development activities to improve my work; and (4) I had been actively engaged in self-development activities to help me become more effective at work. Internal consistency reliability (alpha) was 0.73.

3.3. Analytical method

The hypothesized model was tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation

Modeling (PLS-SEM) in the SmartPLS (Version 3.2.3) software. PLS-SEM is commonly used in the management literature, including career studies (e.g. Waters, 2003), due to its capacity to undertake simultaneous assessment of the theoretical constructs and relationships between these constructs (Hair, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2014). Gefen, Straub and Boudreau (2000) have noted that PLS-SEM is the most appropriate structural equation approach in situations where the research aim is predictive application and theory building. PLS-SEM is also capable of estimating complex models and modeling of continuous moderator influences as is the case here.

3.4. Common method variance

As data were collected from self-reports, we acknowledge the possibility of common method bias. To address this issue, several recommendations in the literature (e.g. Podsakoff et al., 2012) were adopted, including the communication of the confidentiality of responses at the beginning of the study; pilot-testing the surveys to avoid misconception in order to minimize the bias from common method variance. We also undertook Harman's one-factor analysis which showed that no single factor emerged and no single factor accounted for more than 50 percent of the variance of all the relevant items. We further applied Lindell and Whitney (2001) partial correlation technique in which we used tenured as a marker variable. When it was controlled for in the correlation analysis, there were no significant changes in the relationships at 95% level of confidence among the variables. Altogether, these results suggested that common method bias was not a major issue in the data and succeeding analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Reliability and validity of measurement

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, average variance extracted (AVE) and correlations among the study variables. Support for reliability and validity of the measurement models was obtained, with the composite reliability (i.e. evidence of internal consistency reliability) exceeding .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), AVE (i.e. evidence of convergent validity) exceeding .50 (Hair et al., 2014), and the square root of the AVE values greater than the relationship between the variable and each of the other variables (i.e. discriminant validity) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The supplementary examination of the cross loadings showed that all scale items had their highest coefficients with their associated construct, providing additional evidence for discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2014). Additionally, each predictor variable's VIF value was higher than .20 and lower than 5, demonstrating that collinearity was not an issue here (Hair et al., 2014).

Insert Table 1 about here

4.2. Hypothesis testing

Results of the research model are summarized in Figure 1. PLS-SEM produced the standardized value of the path coefficients, the significance of which was measured by comparing the empirical t -value with the critical value, with the former derived from the original path coefficient estimate divided by the bootstrap standard error (Hair et al., 2014). In this study, bias-corrected bootstrapping confidence intervals were obtained based on 5,000 bootstrap samples using the no-sign-changes approach.

The first hypothesis, which predicted a positive relationship between work pressure and career networking behavior was supported. The result showed a significant positive path coefficient, $\beta = .17, p < .01$. Hypothesis 2, which predicted a positive relationship between career networking behavior and proactive skill

development was also supported, $\beta = .57, p < .01$.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The mediated role of career networking behavior in the relationship between work pressure and proactive skill development, as developed in Hypothesis 3, was tested by following the mediator analysis procedure recommended by Hair et al (2014). First, the direct effect of work pressure on proactive skill development was estimated with the direct path coefficient of $\beta = .36, p < .01$. Next, the model was estimated by including career networking behavior as the mediator of the work pressure-proactive skill development relationship. The results showed a positive and statistically significant mediation effect: $\beta = .22, p < .01$. A comparison of the two models showed that the inclusion of the mediator significantly improved the overall performance of the model as evidenced by the change in R^2 of proactive skill development from .13 to .32. This suggests that career networking behavior explains the relationship between work pressure and proactive skill development. Bias-corrected Bootstrapping analysis produced the following 95% confidence intervals (.15, .28), therefore supporting Hypothesis 3.

To test the moderating role of guanxi HRM on the relationship between work pressure and career networking behavior (Hypothesis 4), a standardized product indicator approach was computed and included in the model (Hair et al., 2014). The interaction term after undertaking Bootstrapping analysis yielded $\beta = .17, p < .05$ which suggests that guanxi HRM positively and significantly moderates the work pressure-career networking behavior relationship. The nature of the moderating relationship is depicted in Figure 2. As can be seen, higher levels of guanxi HRM were associated with higher levels of career networking behavior for any given level of work pressure. The information in Figure 2 showed that work pressure was more

strongly related to career networking behavior when participants rated guanxi HRM to a higher degree. All together these evidences provide support for Hypothesis 4 that guanxi HRM moderates the influence of work pressure on career networking behavior.

Insert Figure 2 about here

4.3. Model performance assessment

Our estimated model seems to have reasonably good predictive power judging by the computed R^2 values of .26 and .32 for career networking behavior and proactive skill development respectively. We also calculate the Stone-Geisser's Q^2 value for endogenous variables (Geisser, 1974) by using the blindfolding procedure for an omission distance of 9. A Q^2 value larger than zero indicates the predictive relevance of the model for the associated endogenous variables, whereas a value of zero or below suggests a lack of predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2014). The Stone-Geisser's Q^2 analysis yielded Q^2 value of .19 for career networking behavior and .18 for proactive skill development, which are substantially above the threshold value of zero.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Economic deregulation and restructuring have led to unprecedented changes in China's economy during the last two decades. Today, Chinese employees, like their counterparts in the West, need to play a proactive role in managing their networks and skills throughout the course of their career (Ren, Wood & Zhu, 2015; Rousseau, Ho & Greenberg, 2006). Against this backdrop, dealing with excess workloads, manifested in multiple demands and long work hours, has become the norm in the workplace (Ren et al., 2015). The expectations on employees to manage work pressure from increasing job demands underscores the importance of understanding how and why

people engage in proactive career behaviors (Parker & Liao, in press). This research draws from the COR theory to explain how and under what conditions work pressure influences proactive skill development of Chinese employees. The results confirm that (1) the influence of work pressure on proactive skill development is mediated by career networking behavior; and (2) guanxi HRM positively moderates the work pressure- career networking behavior relationship in predicting proactive skill development. The explicit consideration of situational and contextual factors provide a more nuanced understanding of the underlying mechanism which explain the influence of work pressure on proactive skill development. The results show that work pressure can provide the motivation for Chinese employees to engage in career networking behavior contingent on the level of guanxi HRM. Guanxi HRM has the potential to enhance the influence of work pressure on career networking behavior which itself plays an important role in explaining the effects of work pressure on proactive skill development.

5.1. Theoretical contribution

This study makes three theoretical contributions as follows. First, our findings provide implications for motivating proactive career behaviors beyond those in the career literature. As commented by Straus et al (2014), research on proactive career behaviors focus extensively on ‘can do’ motivations residing in personal resources. This paper introduces work pressure as a ‘reason to’ situational motivator and by so doing provides empirical support for the theoretical value of the ‘resource-investment’ tenet of COR theory in the proactive career literature, which is also less-studied (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

The notion that work pressure may be leveraged by employees to achieve career goals may appear counterintuitive. Indeed, work pressure is well established in the employee well-being literature with studies focusing extensively on the unpleasurable consequences of job demands, manifested in the form of job strain, stress, burnout, erosion of job satisfaction, and suboptimal performance (Hakanen et al., 2008; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), while overlooking its impact on other type of behaviors. The present study departs from the conventional focus of work pressure to show that it is not always associated with negative consequences. In situations of organization-initiated depletion of resources, employees have the capacity to use personal resources to negotiate their situation by investing in new resources through proactive career behaviors. This empirical finding addresses answers to the research call for the less-studied buffering of job demands (van Woerkom et al., 2016).

Second, our findings sharpen our understanding of proactive career behaviors by establishing the process link of different, yet related, proactive behaviors. The career development literature has traditionally treated both career networking behavior and proactive skill development as elements of proactive career behaviors. In this study we draw from COR theory to argue that career networking behavior is a precursor to proactive skill development and that it plays an important mediating role in explaining the work pressure-proactive skill development relationship. As such career networking behavior acts as a coping strategy which employees use to combat resource loss and acquire valuable resources. The resource investment tenet of COR is directly observed through the influence of work pressure on career networking behavior and indirectly on proactive skill development.

Third, we contribute to an emerging literature on career and vocational behaviors in general regarding the relevance of context in understanding country-specific

phenomena. The literature on proactive career behaviors, for instance, is founded on western-based notions, some of which are not necessarily applicable in non-western settings. The Chinese context is one such example, which is heavily influenced by the guanxi culture. In this research we explicitly acknowledge the role of guanxi through guanxi HRM in explaining how work pressure influences career networking behavior. The findings shed light on how employees successfully cope with resource loss as a result of work pressure by acquiring, protecting and developing new resources from guanxi networks. Consistent with the strategic nature of human behavior underlying COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), guanxi provides a valuable resource for employees to construct their proactive career behaviors. The study thus provides empirical support to a small but growing body of research which suggests that ‘resource investment is a complex process that is driven by several psychological factors’ (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p.1336) contingent on social and cultural contexts.

5.2. Practical implication

Beyond theoretical contributions to the career literature, this research has several meaningful practical implications. Working under pressure which is increasingly becoming a norm (Hewlett & Luce, 2006) does not necessarily lead to adverse employee outcomes. Although work pressure deprives employees of time, energy and attention, it can also act as a motivator for proactive resource investments which have positive employee outcomes. To individual employees, networking provides in-group benefits to combat resource loss due to an overload of job demands and self-initiated skill development reinforces new resources obtained and equips people to take advantages of opportunities.

An implication for employers is that taking context into consideration is important, particularly in an age when the workplace is becoming increasingly culturally-diverse. The moderating role of guanxi HRM in strengthening career networking behavior is particularly salient for organizations wanting to implement scientific HRM practices in a context where interpersonal relationships are valued. A recent trend in China is the adoption of western-based HRM practices as the country becomes more integrated into the global economy. The adoption of western-based contractual HRM practices as opposed to the relational guanxi-based HRM practices presents an urgent need to understand the influence of traditional Chinese values (Warner, 2011) and the influence of HRM practices on career behaviors in general. Thus, knowledge of the context-specific mechanism which transforms work pressure into proactive skill development is of value to employers in predicting employee career outcomes such as proactive skill development.

5.3. Limitations and future research

As with any study, this research has several limitations which open up new avenues for future research. First, the fact that our data were collected from the same source constitutes one limitation of this research. We followed the necessary procedural and analytical measures (Podsakoff et al., 2012) to minimize the possibility of common method bias. Prior studies also show that common method bias is of less an issue in moderated regression (Pierce, Gardner, Dunham & Cummings, 1993; Sun & Pan, 2008). Nonetheless, we recommend that future research on proactive skill development should ideally be based on data from varied sources such as employees and employers in order to avoid common method and self-reporting biases. Second, given that our research design is correlational in nature, we are cautious of making

any causality claims. Future research could employ experimental design to further establish causality of the relationship. Third, we use data in the context of China only and we caution readers not to generalize our findings to other cultural contexts. Future research could extend the relevance of culture by undertaking cross-cultural comparisons of the antecedents of proactive skill development.

5.4. Concluding remarks

Drawing upon COR theory, the 'reason to' pathway hypotheses developed in the study enriches our understanding of why people undertake proactive skill development when faced with work pressure. The study departs from the conventional treatment of career networking behavior and proactive skill development as a composite construct of proactive career behaviours. Rather, the study argues that career networking behaviors is a precursor of proactive skill development and that career networking behavior itself is subject to context-specific cultural influences. Additionally, an organization's HRM practices, which in the case of the Chinese workplace as embodied in guanxi HRM, signals the overall work environment and management attitudes towards human resources and thus impacts employees' career behaviors. In sum COR theory, in particular its resource investment tent, was evidenced as a robust theoretical framework to explain the buffering of work pressure. Work pressure does not always come with negative consequences and this presents an ongoing research challenge to further explicate dispositional and situational factors related to specific proactive career behaviors.

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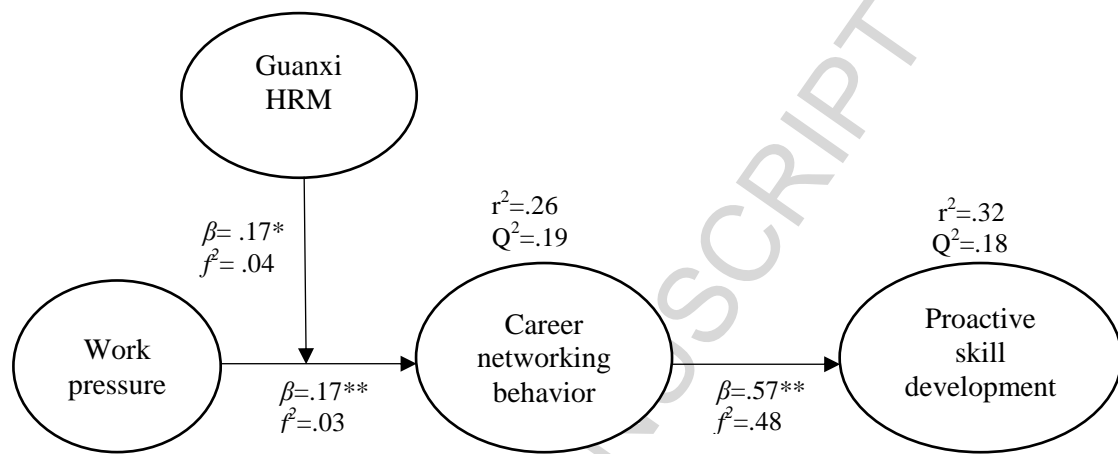
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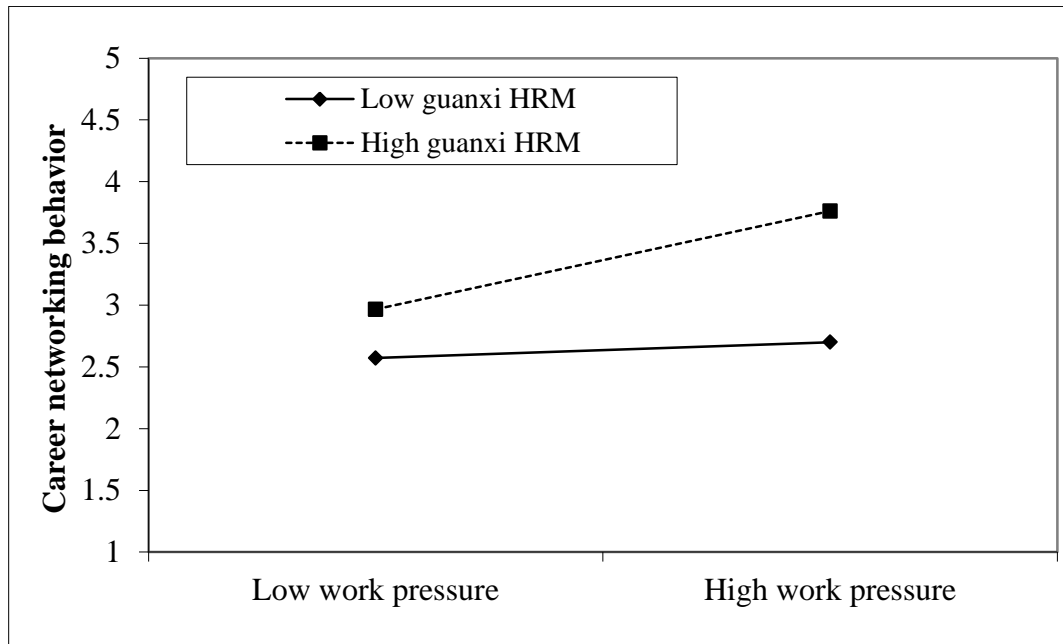
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Figure 1 Research model: Results of the structural model assessment



** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Figure 2 The moderating role of guanxi HRM on the relationship between work pressure and career networking behavior



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Table 1 Descriptive statistics, average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR) and correlation coefficients

	means	Standard deviation	AVE	CR	1	2	3	4
1. work pressure	4.64	1.06	.63	.90	.80			
2. career networking behavior	5.37	.88	.77	.91	.37**	.88		
3. guanxi HRM	4.93	.96	.61	.86	.55**	.42**	.78	
4. proactive skill development	5.38	.75	.56	.83	.31**	.56**	.47**	.75

N=392

Bold-faced numerals on the diagonal represent the square root of the average variance extracted

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

**Influence of Work Pressure on Proactive Skill Development in China: The Role
of Career Networking Behavior and Guanxi HRM**

Highlights

- Career networking behaviour provides a coping mechanism to attenuate potential resource loss of work pressure
- Career networking behavior motivates proactive skill development
- The effects of work pressure on proactive skill development is mediated by career networking behavior
- Guanxi HRM positively moderates the work pressure- career networking relationship