

The Dark Side of After-Work Socialization in China: A Case of Employee Sufferings in Supervisor-Subordinate Guanxi

Tahir Mumtaz Awan^{1,2*}

¹Department of Management Sciences, COMSATS University Islamabad, Pakistan

²Research Fellow, China Brand Center, Business School of Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China

***Corresponding author:** Tahir Mumtaz Awan, Assistant Professor, Department of Management Sciences, COMSATS University Islamabad, Park Road, Chak Shehzad, Islamabad, Pakistan, Tel: +923175777577; Email: tahir_mumtaz@comsats.edu.pk

Received Date: November 17, 2020; **Published Date:** December 03, 2020

Abstract

Organizational practices are moving towards blurring the boundary between personal and professional life. This fact is evidenced by the literature and popular accounts. There is also evidence about boundary management for handling role responsibilities and as a tool for shaping workplace identity and relationships. It all seems only for one single objective of an ideal worker. An important aspect of this changing organizational practice is supervisor-subordinate guanxi. Despite the increasing number of studies on supervisor-subordinate guanxi in Chinese society is seen, still, paucity in this research area is noticed concerning its antecedents. The current study is a case of administrative staff with a special focus on the repercussions of supervisor-subordinate guanxi concerning after-work socialization and effect on their personal life. Due to the negative effect on their personal life, the study is titled a dark side of after-work socialization. The study reveals that though benefits and favors were given often they felt annoyed and uncomfortable. Medical as well as psychological issues were noticed by them and other people also and are also diagnosed and verified by the medical doctors and psychiatrists. These conditions though make their bank account better but personal health and life get disturbed.

Keywords: Supervisor; Subordinate; Guanxi; After-Work Socialization; China

Abbreviations: SSG: Supervisor-Subordinate Guanxi; LMX: Leader-Member Exchange; EDP: Executive Development Programs.

Introduction

Guanxi is a very old Chinese concept based on favors. One of the views about guanxi states personal exchanges are considered more important than laws and written agreements while another perspective told guanxi as a collocation and bribe. The concept of guanxi studied in this research is the quality of personal relationships [1]. The said research further elaborated that these personal relationships (referred to as “guanxi” in this study here onwards) can

increase or decrease due to positive and negative incidents. Guanxi is not always stated as negative but mostly the impacts of guanxi are seen as more negative as compared to positive. A well-known example of understanding and refraining from guanxi is a very famous electric equipment manufacturer (especially air conditioners) GREE Electric Appliances Incorporation. GREE is a Chinese-origin manufacturer, headed by Dong Mingzhu (Chairperson and President) who is a famous figure in the media due to her “Say No to Guanxi” policy since she started as a salesgirl in the firm.

She made her way towards the upward ladder in the hierarchy because of her determination that guanxi is not the only way of doing successful business as stated by

Forbes. She was also listed among the top 100 CEOs by the Harvard Business Review Best CEOs as reported by Business News Daily in the year 2013. Guanxi is also explained as a one-dimensional measure of the quality of supervisor-subordinate guanxi. It stresses regular social interactions between supervisors and subordinates in non-work settings. The limitations to this measure are the little theoretical foundation and non-differentiation of guanxi as an affective relationship from guanxi as an instrument. Categorical and dynamic approaches are explained in the already published literature [2-5]. According to the categorical view, guanxi is discussed as particularistic ties. Guanxi can be stated as the existence of direct particularistic ties between two or more.

Further, the three subtypes were identified as family ties, familiar persons, and strangers. On the other hand, the dynamic approach of guanxi is termed as the general quality of the relationship. The subjective assessment of the personal relationship of the guanxi parties is discussed in the literature under the dynamic approach. In the network literature, parallel to the quality of guanxi is the notion of 'tie strength'. Family first, familiar persons next, and strangers last is the hierarchical order of three-type category of quality of relationship. Shreds of evidence were found in research about the negative association between distant family relations and guanxi, which shows a decrease in the strength of family bonds in Chinese societies. The change in guanxi relations overtime was noticed, stating its dynamic nature, hence is viewed as elastic, not static [6-8]. The positive and negative incidents during interactions result in an increase or decrease in personal relationships [1]. The current study is one step ahead of this discussion. Whether unidimensional or multidimensional supervisor-subordinate guanxi is prevailing, the negative impact of this after-work socialization based on supervisor-subordinate guanxi on the personal life of subordinates is the core idea of this study. This is important to study the negative impact as evidenced [2] that employees having good guanxi with their supervisors obtain more benefits (e.g. more bonuses, promotion opportunities) than those with poor guanxi [9]. The primary research question of this study is to find out the negative repercussions of supervisor-subordinate after-work socialization. The main purpose this study served is to find out what negative impact the after-work socialization had on the subordinate side. The physical and mental health of the subordinate is in prime concern along with personal and family life issues and difficulties the subordinate has to face. For this purpose, the author digs out whether or not the subordinate must accompany in after-work socialization activities. Sometimes the subordinate unwillingly accompanies the supervisor to keep his reputation in the eyes of the supervisor.

This research also provided careful observation to find out the answer to a very important question i.e. are there some

benefits associated with subordinates with the accompanying supervisor in after-work socialization activities. If the subordinates receive some benefits, surely, they willingly wait for the next time any such incident occurs and they accompany the supervisor. Furthermore, it is also studied that whether or not the subordinates accompanying the supervisor in after-work socialization are receivers of guanxi, which is not termed as ethical, and differentiate the behavior of supervisor with that specific subordinate as compared to others. The study finally discussed regarding two cases (both cross-gender) how the supervisor treated the subordinates who accompany him in after-work socialization activities (sometimes business-related and sometimes non-business) in comparison to those who refused him or made an excuse of their absence to be in that activity.

Theoretical Background

It was noticed that supervisor-subordinate guanxi (SSG) in China and the concept of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) in the West are distinct. Based on the studies few similarities and differences were found between these two important concepts. Both LMX and SSG shed light on the quality of the relationship between the supervisors and subordinates. Also, both of the concepts are grounded in social exchange and are the relational models. On the other hand, the relationship foundation of both is not the same. LMX is a work-related relationship while SSG is an off-work relationship as explained that can be based on personal relationships. The effect of relationships on both parties is also a segregating factor between both concepts. The relational model in LMX is termed as 'equity-matching' that explains the fair exchange of effort/performance and rewards. While SSG works on a relational model termed as 'communal-sharing' which is building strong personal obligations based on pluralistic ties or sentimental ties between the parties involved. Hence the LMX (in the west) and SSG (in China) have no common grounds. Both of these concepts can't be discussed in parallel. This is similar to the cultural differences between China and the west. A careful look over the recent literature reveals a handful of proponents of supervisor-subordinate guanxi [10-15]. They termed it ethical and said it as a source of competitive advantage for businesses and individuals. As the fellow worker sees someone getting the benefit, they may also strive to achieve the same level which may result in high performance according to their view. Also, the author thinks it is positive for various desirable organizational outcomes such as organizational citizenship behavior and conflict resolution. Also, there is an opposing view of guanxi practices, which in the current research is referred to as the dark side of supervisor-subordinate guanxi [8]. More specifically this research is considering a negative impact on subordinates, both physically and mentally because of the after-work socialization regarding supervisor-subordinate

guanxi. This topic is less discussed in the literature and the current study will open a new direction towards this area of research.

Methodology

The methodology opted for this study is a case study. The case study method is said to be an attempt to investigate systematically an event or set of events with a specific aim to describe and explain the phenomena. A very simple definition of a case study is an in-depth, qualitative studies of one or a few illustrative cases. This study can be termed as an individual case study as a series of interactions are made with a subordinate. At the different points of times, for around two years a subordinate was observed. Although in the start the interactions between the author and subordinate were not planned for this case study, slowly this information was worth. Hence this study was undertaken and about two years of information about the supervisor-subordinate guanxi was filtered and the author jots it down. Case-studies are categorized as exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive [16-18,3] and can contain either single or multiple case studies where actual replications, not sampled cases are studied.

This study was based on the first type i.e. exploratory as the negative side of the supervisor-subordinate guanxi is the main theme with specific consideration towards after-work socialization's negative impact on the subordinate. The reason for categorizing this study as exploratory was found analogous as a study following instinctive paths often perceived by others as slipshod. This sort of exploratory study may be said as useful as a pilot study. These kinds of studies can be helpful to plan a larger, more comprehensive investigation [19]. Hence based on the current study, future research on the negative side of supervisor-subordinate guanxi can be conducted. The supervisor-subordinate guanxi is not a new topic in literature but the unique intention of this study is the consideration of how personal (both psychologically and medically) and family life of subordinates gets negatively affected. In return, they are receivers of guanxi, but the benefits are way lower than the negative impact.

Participants

The participants of the study include two subordinates (both of them females) working under the same supervisor (male) who are receivers of guanxi. It is important to mention here that the identity of all the participants was kept confidential. The supervisor in this case study is of the male gender, married with one child, and about 36 years of age. He is supervising a staff of around 25-28 persons. He is responsible to look after the Executive Development Programs (EDP) under the flagship of a renowned university

in the southern part of the People's Republic of China. He is often engaged with informal gatherings organized by and for the students. Furthermore, it is important to mention here that EDP students are either at senior managerial level in renowned firms or are the owners/managing directors. Hence, it was termed very important that every event organized for and by the students must meet high standards. One of the important reasons behind this is to develop and increase their interest and to attract more students based on the referral programs (for which the students do not get any benefit). Another important reason to mention here is the contribution in monetary terms by these students for the EDP and university. While alumni dinners and gatherings were organized, a considerable amount of funds were often generated. The student gatherings organized by a group of students or sometimes individual firms were mostly at their facility or a commonly agreed place (usually Karaoke Television (KTVs) as the trend of after-work socialization at KTVs is very common in China.

Talking about the two female participants of this study, their identity is also kept confidential. The information that can be made public about their profile is that one of them is around 27 years of age, female and unmarried, while the other one is around 28 years of age, female and married for the last about 3 years. They both started work in this university around two and a half years ago and were constantly working under the mentioned supervisor. Most of the subordinates (around 80 - 85%) working under the same supervisor are females. In the start, the author, being good friends was interacting with them only to spend some leisure time and have meals. Being good friends and more familiar they started discussing the work and after-work socialization issues often. Sometimes the discussion continued for two to three hours and sometimes lasted for a few minutes. Later these issues were discussed in detail as with time trust of participants of this study was developed which also instigated a thought to write this case study.

Analysis

The after-work socialization activities in this study are referred to as the dinners and day-out planned with the staff and/or students of EDP of that university. Often the dinners were arranged at the KTVs, restaurants, or student's factories/offices. Sometimes the arrangement was made by the supervisor while mostly students arrange these gatherings. Usually, the purpose of students to arrange these gatherings is also to introduce other fellow students and the administrative staff to their company products and services. The use of social media (WeChat, QQ, etc.) is increasingly popular in China both for official and personal communication and mostly the coordinating staff (two female participants

of the study) seems like a good source for introducing their products/services to others. They simply place a link of the student's products/services on these social media networks (that can be viewed by all the participants) which in turn help them advertise their products/services without any cost. In return, those coordinating staff often received gifts, free samples of the products/services from that company. The negative impact is discussed in two main categories in the following discussion. First is the psychological or emotional impact on the subordinate's life and the second is the therapeutic or medicinal impact. The first psychological impact covers the uncouth behavioral part of the personality of the subordinate. The considerable changes in the behavior were noticed including rude behavior with other colleagues, informal or casual behavior toward work, personal dissatisfaction of non-accomplishment (of personal and organizational goals), etc. were confirmed. As a result, participants confirmed the visits to a psychiatrist regarding the discussion about behavioral problems were noticed. Even in two years of observation, author came to know also that one of the participants even paid about 5-6 visits for hypnosis treatments. Although few people don't believe in treatment by hypnosis keeping aside this issue as one of the participants believes the hypnosis treatment may help her to improve the behavior, which worked out for a few days only.

Though a lot of money was spent on these psychiatric and hypnotic treatments in the end was disappointed as no considerable change was noticed. The second part covers the ghastly medicinal effect on the subordinate. Due to the alcohol overdose often, sleeping late after the gathering is over (that disturbs the sleeping cycle of the individual for the next few days), the alcohol effect (drowsiness and laziness) on the next day of work after the gathering, the deteriorating medical health was inveterate. This effect was confirmed by the participants and they admitted taking sleeping pills to adjust sleeping cycle. It is important to mention that sleeping pills are not publicly sold at the pharmacies in China and one need to visit a doctor and have to explain the problem, get a prescription and the limited number of pills is given to patients. China is famous for Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) also. They were noticed taking both TCM and western medicines for a considerable period, but no significant change was reported.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are categorized into two sections namely psychological mutilation and medicinal maiming. Each of them is described below in detail.

Psychological Mutilation

Foul behavior: Being aware of support from the supervisor, participants had depicted bad behavior with other

colleagues. Although, the behavioral issue was reported to the supervisor time and again, no serious action was taken. Misbehavior during the weekly meetings was also reported and other colleagues had a sense of hatred. This hatred was not fully expressed in front of them or the supervisor because of the good relations with the supervisor. The other colleagues also have thought that the supervisor had some physical relationship also with one of the participants, which was straightly neglected. No such clarification was either given by the supervisor or the subordinate about this issue. These behavioral concerns were slowly becoming a routine matter for the staff and they slowly started swallowing it.

Unceremonious behavior toward work: The concern toward work was also an important problem noticed. Absenteeism was getting a regular part of their job. Often it happened that due to an overdose of alcohol, the next day they were unable to get up for work on time which resulted in coming late for work or either remain absent from work. This was noticed by the colleagues but because of good relations with the supervisor and receiver of guanxi, no reinforcement measure was taken. The supervisor knew that they won't be able to come to work the next day and often asked himself that if you stay late in the gathering and get overdose you can rest the next day. This affected the work progress and often their work remained uncompleted. Other staff members were assigned the same work to ensure the progress of the department. Also, no fear of losing a job was depicted as compared to many other workers in China and even in the same office had this fear.

Personal discontent of non-accomplishment (of personal and organizational goals): Often feeling of non-accomplishment and low performance was noticed in their attitude. They mentioned the discontentment feelings often and said that have a bad feeling for the work and also for the supervisor but not thought of any preventive way to do better work. This feeling of being a human is natural but being the receiver of guanxi and in the good books of the supervisor, soon they get back to the routine and had no problem in going the same way. Along with personal goals, they had a feeling that due to non-contribution organizational objectives were also affected. This created some problems for the supervisor also a few instances, but he managed to overcome those issues with his competency and the help of other subordinates. It was also noticed that upon reporting that work is incomplete, the subordinate also threatened resignation and the supervisor politely asked not to resign and try to do work in a better way.

Medicinal Maiming

Alcohol overdose: Alcohol overdose often was part of the routine during these after-work socialization gatherings.

Alcohol being part of Chinese society during dinner is very normal. Regardless of gender both males and females are fond of drinking different varieties of alcohol during socialization. The respondents of the study admitted to being drunk often in those gatherings. This affected health badly and complaints regarding throat infections, liver burning, hypotension, and upset stomach, etc. were often reported. Few times also violent behavior was noticed being drunk and the next day admitted that it was because of an alcohol overdose.

Sleep-cycle commotion: Sleeping late after the gathering is over (that disturbs the sleeping cycle for the next few days) was reported during discussions that ultimately lead to insomnia and depression. According to the doctors, these conditions are also somehow related to alcoholism. For the treatment of these kinds of issues visits to psychiatrists in Mainland China as well as Hong Kong were reported. A handsome amount of money was spent from medicinal cure up to hypnosis treatments by the participants. These psychiatric treatments were adopted when they realized bad sleeping routine, improper rest even if returns home early.

Drowsiness and laziness: The alcohol effect (drowsiness and laziness) on the next day of work after the gathering was over was reported by the participants. Due to the drowsiness and laziness at work, often participants were found taking rest during working hours. Commonly Chinese people take a break of one and a half to two hours and enjoy noon-nap. In the afternoon they return to work again. Longer breaks and often sleeping more than the allowed noon rest time was observed. Quite a several times it was noticed that even if they came office on time in the morning, appeared missing from the office and taking a nap. Body aches and stiff neck was also reported during work hours because of sleeplessness.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on this study few suggestions and recommendations were made in the below part of the text. These suggestions and recommendations are not to discourage after-work socialization gatherings. Also, it is to state here clearly that the author is not against after-work socialization activities and is a believer in the fact that these gatherings are a part of the Chinese culture and can't be omitted from society.

Supervisors need to develop a cooperative environment: It is one of the obligations of the supervisor to develop a cooperative environment and make all the subordinates feel like a part of the team. If knowingly a supervisor does not clarify the prevailing injustice environment (according to the subordinates working under a certain supervisor) may create hatred and even increase the turnover rate.

Increase in communication: In situations discussed in this research, it is needed to increase communication between the subordinates. Formal and informal meetings are to be arranged frequently in which subordinates can discuss issues and report if there are any behavioral complaints. The method of blind feedback (in written form without mentioning the names) maybe is good. Supervisors can develop a culture of blind feedback at vertical and horizontal levels. More specifically blind peer-feedback, as well as blind feedback about the supervisor, can be a good method to know the existing problems and issues.

Maintain discipline in such after-work socialization activities: Another important step that supervisors need to take is to maintain discipline among such after-work activities. The timings are to be kept in mind. As it is customary in nearly all parts of China to take dinner between 5.30 PM to 6.30 PM usually (though in some cities late-night dinner is also common), so on a considerable time these activities are to be finished and subordinates are allowed to go back home. This surely will not affect their health (both physical and mental) which ultimately will help them achieve personal as well as organizational goals.

Limit the gatherings and planning them over the weekends: To limit the gatherings to a considerable number and planning them over the weekend can also be a good option. Scheduling of these activities a few days prior can also help subordinates to make necessary arrangements and refrain from giving excuses for not attending the activities. It happened that due to sudden arrangements often subordinates gave excuses of family affairs and other important affairs to deal with, which in turn gave the supervisor a bad impression about them. He had in his mind that these are lame excuses just to avoid attending the gathering.

Prioritize the importance of activity/gathering and give choice to attend or not attend: Along with scheduling of activities it is also recommended to prioritize. Evaluating whether an activity is important or not, had some valuable output of not, and then decide whether to participate or not. Also selecting the subordinates in turn and sometimes give them relaxation and choice to choose out of the planned activities will increase participation and output of the activity.

Empowerment to lead the activity: Giving empowerment to the subordinates to lead the activities in absence of a supervisor may also be one of the important ways to encourage their participation and increased attention toward these after-work socialization activities. This way they might think of these activities as value-adding and part of their job.

Conclusion

The current study is based on the negative impact of supervisor-subordinate guanxi. Although participants were receivers of guanxi but reported bad medical and psychological problems. This may be a general thought that bank account may depict a better position and they earn a better salary and have extra bonuses. This is true that participants received many raises and financial benefits but on the other hand, it is a strange fact that huge credit card loans are to be paid in their names. The reason for the huge loan was termed as overspending. Huge spending by participants was reported during those gatherings along with buying other personal consumption items.

As a receiver of guanxi, participants had to accompany the supervisor during the after-work socialization activities. As a result, a feeling of hatred (that isn't fully expressed due to the supervisor's pressure) was seen among colleagues. Also, colleagues doubted in their minds that they had physical relations also which was straightaway declined by both the supervisor and the subordinate. The participants were found to have medical and psychological issues and medical as well as psychiatric examinations were noted and personally seen by the author as well. It was recommended that the supervisor has authority which he exercised well but the counterpart i.e. responsibility also needs to be dealt with well. More specifically he had the responsibility to stop the conflict and negative thinking prevalent among the subordinates and have to treat them equally. The recommendations and suggestions of the study also explained various methods to improve the working environment and decrease the negative effect of after-work socialization.

Limitations

The identity of the subordinates and supervisor studied, and their organization was not disclosed. Only the information available for this study that can be made public is that supervisor and subordinates discussed were part of the EDP run by one of the top ten universities of China located in the southern part of the country. As the supervisor and subordinates were not agreed to get them identified hence their selves were kept confidential. Being an outsider (foreign national) and not part of the Chinese society, few of the cultural differences were noticed among the author and participants of the study. Hence it may a limitation that few cultural variables were not considered but all the discussion is purely based on a discussion with Chinese nationals. They may have countered the cultural differences as they all share the same nationality (of the People's Republic of China). Gender discussion in this study can be a limitation as in the case of same-gender supervisor(s) and subordinate(s) the results vary a little. According to the author's knowledge and

understanding, only a little variation can be noticed but not a major change in results can occur. Only psychological and medical issues were discussed that affected the subordinate. Other important issues were not considered as the participants of the study were not comfortable talking about it. These psychological and medical issues were witnessed by the author and discussed in detail during different face to face interactions of author and subordinate.

References

1. Chen XP, Peng S (2008) Guanxi dynamics: Shifts in the closeness of ties between Chinese coworkers. *Management and Organization Review* 4(1): 63-80.
2. Law KS, Wong CS, Wang D, Wang L (2000) Effect of supervisor-subordinate guanxi on supervisory decisions in China: An empirical investigation. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 11(4): 751-765.
3. Yin RK (2011) *Applications of case study research*. Sage 34: 264.
4. Chen CC, Chen YR, Xin K (2004) Guanxi practices and trust in management: A procedural justice perspective. *Organization Science* 15(2): 133-257.
5. Tsui AS, Farh JLL (1997) Where guanxi matters: Relational demography and guanxi in the Chinese context. *Work and Occupations* 24(1): 56-79.
6. Wong C, Tinsley C, Law K, Mobley W (2003) Development and validation of a multidimensional measure of guanxi. *Journal of Psychology in Chinese Societies* 4(1): 43-69.
7. Chow IHS, Ng I (2004) The characteristics of Chinese personal ties (guanxi): Evidence from Hong Kong. *Organization Studies* 25(7): 1075-1093.
8. Fei Ht, Fei X, Hamilton GG, Zheng W (1992) *From the soil: The foundations of Chinese society*. University of California Press, pp: 176.
9. Farh JL, Tsui AS, Xin K, Cheng BS (1998) The influence of relational demography and guanxi: The Chinese case. *Organization Science* 9(4): 471-488.
10. Fiske AP (1992) The four elementary forms of sociality: framework for a unified theory of social relations. *Psychol Rev* 99(4): 689-723.
11. Awan TM, Haizhong W, Li X (2018) Factors affecting employee-based brand equity: Evidence from China. *International Journal of Management Studies* 25(1): 1-20.

12. Chen Y, Friedman R, Yu E, Sun F (2011) Examining the positive and negative effects of guanxi practices: A multi-level analysis of guanxi practices and procedural justice perceptions. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* 28(4): 715-735.
13. Cheng R (2015) The Word Guanxi (Collocation) And Meanings Of Bribe: Deeply Rooted, Disgusting, Sad Endings.
14. Han Y, Altman Y (2009) Supervisor and subordinate guanxi: A grounded investigation in the People's Republic of China. *Journal of Business Ethics* 88(1): 91-104.
15. Lin LH, Ho YL (2010) Guanxi and OCB: the Chinese cases. *Journal of Business Ethics* 96(2): 285-298.
16. Bromley PD (1990) Academic contributions to psychological counselling. 1. A philosophy of science for the study of individual cases. *Counselling psychology quarterly* 3(3): 299-307.
17. Hagan FE (1997) *Research methods in criminal justice and criminology*. Allyn and Bacon Boston.
18. Tellis W (1997) *Introduction to Case Study-The Qualitative Report*. Urban Land Institute.
19. Swanson RA, Holton EF (2005) *Research in organizations: Foundations and methods in inquiry*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.