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The impact of perceptions of organizational politics on workplace friendship

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While the correlations between perceptions of organizational politics (POPs) and workplace friendship are still unclear according to the literature, this study elaborated the POPs-workplace friendship correlations and investigated the effect of organizational level on POPs and workplace friendship with organizational level as an interfering variable. Results of the survey conducted on 225 valid samples support the hypothesis of this study, that is the stronger the POPs, the better the workplace friendship; though the assumed moderating effect of organizational level is insignificant. These results contribute to the related literature, management practice and further studies.

Key words: Perceptions of organizational politics (POPs), workplace friendship, organizational level, social exchange theory.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace friendship has been drawing the attention of and broadly discussed by scholars (Payne and Hauty, 1955; Nadler, 1979; Kram and Isabella, 1985; Berman, West and Richter, 2002; Barley and Kunda, 2001; Mao, 2006; Miller, Rutherford, and Kolodinsky, 2008) as it promotes organizational and employee outcomes and helps achieve goals. Employees may need work-related knowledge, information, and skills to accomplish their missions and goals or emotional support to relieve work stress, and workplace friendship can provide both instru-mental support (Berman et al., 2002) and emotional support (Kram and Isabella, 1985; Berman et al., 2002). Employees may also scramble for resources to ensure self-interests, and organizational politics thus arise as resources are limited (Drory and Romm, 1990). There-fore, employees will begin with political behavior in order to seek resources and to ensure self-interests (Ferris et al., 1989; Drory and Romm, 1990), Politics is a social

social influence process (Ferris et al., 1989), and political behavior is the maximization of short- or long-term interests through strategic planning to seek self-interests by sacrificing that of others (e.g. colleagues). According to Pfeffer (1992), organizational politics is an attempt that individuals exploit to accomplish their expected outcomes by obtaining resources or securing power. In this respect, organizational political behavior is mostly converted and subjected to the differences in perception (Sussman et al., 2002), perceptions of organizational politics (POPs) refers to actions taken by employees who are perceived to be self-interested (Mayes and Allen, 1977; Kacmar et al., 1999); while workplace friendship the voluntary and reciprocal relations within the organization (Wright, 1978; Rawlins, 1992) where collegial support is shared and obtained through interpersonal interaction (Kram and Isabella, 1985; Berman et al., 2002). In a political work environment, POPs influences the work attitude, organizational coherence and collegial relationships of employees (Ferris et al., 1996); and it is the cause of interpersonal or inter-team confrontations and competitions. Therefore, it is worthy of investigating workplace friendship in a highly political work environment. Nonetheless, POPs is rarely considered in the workplace friendship lite-

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rature. While POPs is obtained from the subject experience, and the response of individuals (e.g. workplace friendship) is based on perceptions rather than facts of that time, the employee's perception of political behavior may influence his faith in workplace friendship.

Organizational politics refers to a self-servicing behavior threatening the interests of others. A practitioner avoids group activities (Mintzberg, 1985), reduces collegial interaction, withholds information from others and maligns others for prominence (Harris et al., 2007), this will result in poor workplace friendship or even no workplace friendship. Therefore, individuals with stronger POPs have weaker workplace friendship. However, there are plausible arguments resulting in inverse speculation. When POPs is strong, the situation is more uncertain and ambiguous, because employees do not know what will be rewarded, punished or recognized (Harris et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2008). Consequently, employees will seek advice and suggestions from colleagues. As workplace friendship facilitates information sharing and spread among employees (Sias and Cahill, 1998) to help reduce uncertainty and ambiguity with the support of voluntary and reciprocal relations from workplace friendship (Wright, 1978; Rawlins, 1992), employees can receive more information to avoid what will negate their interests. Based on the above arguments and the viewpoint of reciprocal relation, it is reasonable that the stronger the POPs, the better the workplace friendship. In general, ambivalent speculations indicate that the POPs-workplace friendship correlation is unclear. Existing literature on POPs can neither explain the contradictions nor elucidate the association between them, and their association remains an open case. Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between POPs and workplace friendship to identify an organizational determinant of workplace friendship.

Also, Madison (1980) pointed out that employees of a higher organizational level have a stronger POPs than employees of lower positions, because they have more power, allowing them to obtain resources and manipulate political behaviors to earn more profits. As they do not need to compete with others, they can maintain a better image and thus have better workplace friendship. However, Mao (2006) pointed out that the organizational level and workplace friendship are negatively correlated. That is, employees of higher organizational level have weaker workplace friendship than employees of lower organizational level. Therefore, employee position is served as an intervening variable in this study to test if it affects POPs and workplace friendship.

To answer this question, it is important to identify and examine if organizational level affects the POPs and workplace friendship correlation.

Apart from identifying the main POPs effects on workplace friendship, this study investigated the moderating effect of organizational level on the POPs and workplace friendship correlation.

Conceptual background and hypotheses

The association between POPs and negative outcomes, e.g. intent to turnover, absence, job anxiety, job involvement, and job satisfaction (Ferris et al., 1989) may result in uncertainties (Harris et al., 2007; Chen and Fang, 2008) and ambiguities (Harris et al., 2007) in a political environment. Out of uncertainties and ambiguities, employees manipulate political behaviors to secure self-interests, reduce uncertainties of the organization, and exert influence to obtain or share resources in order to reduce negative outcomes from organizational politics. According to the social exchange theory, employees may exchange valuable outcomes or interests by establishing relationships with others (Gouldner, 1960; Cropanzano, and Mitchell, 2005). It is thus valid for interpreting POPs-workplace friendship correlations. Given that organizational politics is the result of resource scarcity (Drory and Romm, 1990), employees thus adjust themselves to obtain more resources or reduce uncertainties within the organization with collegial interactions when prevailing organizational politics is perceived. Interactions of such kind are often launched out of voluntary and reciprocal relations where employees may garner greater support and more information from others to obtain resources and reduce uncertainties. Barley and Kunda (2001) indicated that the availability of interaction is a crucial factor affecting workplace friendship and allows individuals to obtain and share information and support through collegial interactions. Though organizational politics is a self-servicing behavior threatening the interests of others, employees also fear that their interests may be subsumed by others. Also, workplace friendship emphasizes simila-rities among employees, that is, value, interest, hobby, and attitude. Similarity represents a kind of attractive relation, the greater the similarity, the better the quality of interaction (Davis, 1981). While exchanging interests with quality interaction is the best way to ensure self-interests (accomplishment of personal goals), obtain resources and reduce uncertainties in a political environment, employees handle interpersonal relations more cautiously and value interaction quality. As the voluntary and reci-procal relation is the key to interaction quality, workplace friendship is comparatively more trustworthy in a political environment; and quality interaction thus exists among employees through workplace friendship according to the social exchange theory (Gouldner, 1960; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Therefore, based on the rationale of social exchange theory, the following hypothesis is pro-posed:

Hypothesis 1: POPs and workplace friendship are positively correlated.

Political behavior increases with the decrease of valuable organizational resources (Chen and Fang, 2008), suggesting that organizational resources are limited. Accord-

ing to Mao (2006), resources are allocated by employees of higher organizational level who manipulate politics to earn profits from their accesses to more resources and more power when compared to employees of lower organizational level. Additionally, employees are similar regarding status and authority (Sias and Cahill, 1998) and thus have similar power (Mao, 2006). According to the workplace friendship literature, employees tend to interact with others having similarities with them (Sias and Cahill, 1998; Mao, 2006). In this respect, employees of higher organizational level will have fewer opportunities to develop workplace friendship, as there are fewer of them; while it is the opposite for employees of lower organizational level. Consequently, employees of higher organizational level have weaker workplace friendship than employees of lower organizational level.

Hypothesis 2: The stronger the POPs, the higher the organizational level, and the weaker the workplace friendship.

METHOD

Sample and collection

A questionnaire was pre-tested to confirm its suitability. A total of 50 respondents from 5 companies participated in the pre-test. Based on the results of the pre-test, all items are suitable. The respondents of this study are full-time managers and employees across different industries in order to increase the degree of representation and generalization. This study employs a judgment sampling methodo-logy. The participants for this study were 50 department managers and 500 people recruited from the ten companies (each company was administered 50 questionnaires for 5 department managers). Before mailing to the participating companies, each company was contacted by telephone to determine if managers would be willing to cooperate in the study.

To avoid effects of homological deviation caused by common method variance, the employees provided their ratings of POPs and organizational level, but their supervisors rated their employees' workplace friendship. Then the relationship between the two variables will not be contaminated by common method variance. We conducted the survey at the requested of a manager to rate his/ her ten employees about the workplace friendship (sample pair: 1 manager-10 employees). These participating managers administered questionnaires to the individual employee who forward them directly to his/ her manager who sent back questionnaires to the researcher. The respondents completed the survey during work time and on a voluntary basis. Return envelopes were provided to ensure the anonymity of responses for participants, and each questionnaire includes a cover letter assuring anonymity for the respondents. 288 questionnaires were obtained resulting in return rate of 57.60%, and 33 questionnaires were unusable.

Measures

This study measured POPs with Kacmar and Carlson's (1997) 15-item scale. Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (code as 1) to strongly agree (code as 5). Recent empirical studies of POPs successfully used this scale, including Chen and Fang (2008), and Harris et al. (2007) valid for measuring POPs in this study. The sample items are (1) Peo-ple in this organization attempt to build themselves up by tearing others down. (2) Promotions around here are not valued much because they are so political. (3) My colleagues usually can lend a hand if you are in trouble. Three of 15 items were reverse coded. The Cronbach alpha reliability for the scale in this study was .78. The average POPs of the 255 respondents was 47.7 (SD 7.37; range 31 to 63),

This study measured organizational level with a single item which is employed by previous studies (Dillard, 1987; Bell et al., 1990; Mao, 2006). The item is as follow: If the hierarchy of your firm is divided into three levels from low to high (e.g. low, middle, and high-levels; coded as 1, 2 and 3 respectively), which level are you working in?' Nearly one-third (n=78, 30.6%) of the 255 respondents identified themselves as being in middle organizational levels. The distribution of respondents' organizational levels is presented in Table 1.

This study measured workplace friendship using the 6-item scale of Nielsen et al. (2000) on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'disstrongly agree' to 'strongly agree'. Mao, Chen, and Hsieh (2009) successfully used this scale when measuring workplace friendship with these 6 items, indicating that the scale is valid for measuring the variable in this study. The items were as follows: 1) He/ she has formed strong friendships at work; 2) He/ she socializes with co-workers outside of the workplace; 3) He/ she can confide in people at work; 4) He/ she feel he/ she can trust many co-workers a great deal; 5) Being able to see his/ her co-workers is one reason why he/ she looks forward to his/ her job; and 6) He/ she does not feel that anyone he/ she works with is a true friend. These items were summed (after the score on the last item was reversed) to produce a friendship prevalence score for each respondent. A higher score on the scale indicated a higher degree of perceived friendship in the workplace. The Cronbach alpha reliability for the scale in this study was .78. The average workplace friendship of the 255 respondents was 22.20 (SD 3.41; range 13 to 30).

The analysis includes gender, age, education, and marital status as control variables because previous studies have found those variables affecting interpersonal/ social relationships/ networks (Cahill, 1988; Mackenzie et al., 2000; Sias et al., 2003; Mao, 2006). Also, organizational tenure is related to the development of workplace friendship in organization (Sias and Cahill, 1998). Therefore, the analysis also includes organizational tenure as one of control variables. Gender and marital status are coded as dummy variables: 0 for male and 1 for female, and 0 for single and 1 for married. Education is coded as 1 for high school diploma, 2 for college degree, and 3 for graduate degree. Organizational tenure is the number of years the participants serviced in the current company.

Data analysis

To examine the hypotheses, this study employs a hierarchical regression method to analyze the relationships between POPs, organizational level, and workplace friendship. First, the control variables and dependent variable are inserted into the regression equation to examine the control variables if affecting the dependent variable (adjusted R^2). Second, the independent variable is inserted into the equation to examine the independent variable if affecting the dependent variable after those control variables (change adjusted R^2). Finally, the moderating variable is inserted into the equation to examine the moderating effect if affecting the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable. Therefore, a hierarchical regression is an appropriate analysis tool for this study.

RESULTS

To understand the characteristics of the samples, descrip-

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents.

Variable		n	%	Mean	SD
Gender	Male	142	55.69	0.22	.42
	Female	113	44.31		
Age	18 to 25	51	20	32.16	6.69
	26 to 36	92	36.07		
	37 to 46	82	32.54		
	47 to 58	29	11.37		
Organizational tenure	Less than1 years	24	9.4	2.63	1.07
	Less than 5 years	117	45.9		
	Less than 10years	63	24.7		
	Less than 15years	30	11.8		
	30 years and over	21	8.2		
Education	High school diploma	9	3.5	2.04	.32
	College degree	228	89.4		
	Graduate degree	18	7.1		
Marital status	Single	135	52.9	.47	.50
	Married	120	47.1		
Organizational Level	Level 1 (low)	120	47.1	1.75	.80
	Level 2 (middle)	78	30.6		
	Level 3 (high)	57	22.4		

Notes:
1. Gender : 0=male, 1=female; Age: measured in years; Organizational tenure: measured in years;
Education: 1=high school diploma, 2= college degree, 3= graduate degree; Marital status:
0=single, 1= married; Organizational Level: level 1=1, level 2=2, level3=3
2. Characteristics of the respondents: employee

tive statistics for analyzing the data, Table 1 shows that 55.69% of respondents are male and 44.31% of respondents are female. Of the total sample, 20% of respondents are aged 18-25 years, 36.07% of respondents are aged 26-36 years, 32.54% of respondents are aged 37-46 years, and 11.37% of respondents are aged 47-58 years. Of the 255 respondents, 9.4% has less than one year of organizational tenure, 45.9% has less than five years of organizational tenure, 24.7% has less than ten years of organizational tenure, 11.8% has less than fifteen years of organizational tenure, and 8.2% has an organizational tenure more than fifteen years including fifteen years. Of the total respondents, 3.5% has a high school degree, 89.4% has a college degree, and 7.1% has a graduate degree. Of the 255 respondents, 52.9% is single, and 47.1% is married. Of the total samples, 47.1% is low level, 30.6% is middle level, and 22.4% is high level. According to the characteristics of the samples, the samples are appropriate for empirical credibility.

The unit of analysis in this study is the individual. Table 2 displays the bi-variate correlation matrix among all variables. The purpose of the bi-variate correlation function is to understand what the preliminary relationship between POPs and workplace friendship is. Regarding the bi-variate correlation matrix, the relationship between

POPs and workplace friendship is significant ($r=.733$, $p < .01$) and positive, and the relationship between POPs and education ($r=-.125$, $p < .05$) is significant and negative. The relationship between workplace friendship and education is significant ($r=-.199$, $p < .01$) and negative, but the relationship between workplace friendship and age is significant ($r=.17$, $p < .01$) and positive. According to the correlation between variables, the important finding of this study is that POPs has significant positive correlation with workplace friendships.

To test the hypotheses, this study employs a hierarchical regression method to analyze the relationship between POPs and workplace friendship. First, the control variables and dependent variable are entered into the equation. Second, the POPs variable is entered into the equation. Table 3 shows the results of Hypotheses. Regression step 1 is significant ($F= 4.35$, $p < .01$). The results show that the control variables selected to explain the influence on workplace friendships are adequate. Regression step 2 is also significant ($F = 57.66$, $p < .01$), demonstrating that the POPs variable chosen to explain the workplace friendship is also suitable.

Step 2 in Table 3 is significant ($F = 57.66$, $p < .01$), the β is .33 ($p < .01$) and the adjusted R-square is .572 after the POPs is included in the regression equation, the con-

Table 2. Correlation matrix.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
POPs	1							
Workplace friendship	.733**	1						
Gender	-.058	.010	1					
Organizational Level	-.021	.040	.202**	1				
Age	0	.170**	.198**	.335**	1			
Organizational Tenure	-.006	.088	.23**	.163**	.705**	1		
Education	-.125*	-.199**	-.059	.262**	-.112	-.275**	1	
Marital status	-.056	-.076	.116	.085	.129*	.162**	-.30	1

Notes:
1. POPs= perceptions of organizational politics; Gender : 0=male, 1=female; Age: measured in years; Organizational tenure: measured in years; Education: 1=high school diploma, 2= college degree, 3= graduate degree; Marital status : 0=single, 1=married; Organizational level: 1=low level, 2=middle level, 3=high level
2.*p<.05, **p<.01

Table 3. Hierarchical polynomial regression results for POPs and workplace friendship.

Variable	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Gender	-9.5	.19	.16
Age	.13**	.12**	.11**
Organizational tenure	-6.77	-4.95	-5.17
Education	-2.2**	-.1.16**	-1.18*
Marital status	-.63	-.38	-.29
POPs		.33**	.27**
Organizational Level			-1.622
POPs × Organizational level			3.49*
Adjusted R²	.06	.572	.577
Change adjusted R²		.512**	.515**
F	4.35**	57.66**	44.30**

Notes:
1.POPs= perceptions of organizational politics
2.*p<.05, **p<.01

tribution to the total workplace friendship is increased to 51.2% (Change adjusted R ²=.512, p<.01) compared with the adjusted R-square of .06 in step 1. Therefore, the result supports the hypothesis 1, indicating that workplace friendship tends to increase with higher POPs. Step 3 in Table 3 is significant (the β is 3.49; p<.01), and the adjusted R-square is .577 after the moderating variable-organizational level is included in the regression equa-tion. The contribution to the total workplace friendship is increased to .515% and significant (p<.01), H2: the stronger the POPs, the higher the organizational level, and the weaker the workplace friendship, is not supported under positive influence, because results show the oppo-site: the stronger the POPs, the higher the organizational

level, and the better the workplace friendship.

DISCUSSION

Results of this empirical study support H1: POPs and workplace friendship are positively correlated, (β=.33, p<.01; Change adjusted R ²=.512, p<.01; F=57.66, p<.01); that is, the higher stronger the POPs, the better the workplace friendship. As a highly political environment is uncertain and ambiguous, it is necessary for employ-yees to handle interpersonal relationships more cau-tiously in order to ensure self-interests. Quality collegial interaction can be established through workplace friend-ship to avoid interpersonal, interdepartmental or inter-team confrontations in the process of obtaining resources. Drory and Romm (1990) pointed out that employyees engage in organizational politics to seek resources and self-interests, and are more cautious in information allocation and dissemination. Therefore, employees with stronger POPs tend to withhold informa-tion (Harris et al., 2007). This study discovered that workplace friendship helps reduce and even eliminate anxiety in a highly political environment and encourages information sharing and spread among colleagues having better relations; that is the greater the POPs, the better the workplace friendship. Results of this study do not sup-port H2: the stronger the POPs, the higher the organi-zational level, and the weaker the workplace friendship. Though the effect of organizational level on POPs and workplace friendship is significant, its moderating effect is positive; that is the more political the environment, the higher the organizational level, and the better the work-place friendship. This needs further discussions. First is the correlation between organizational level and work-place friendship. According to Mao (2006), it is negative,

because employees of higher organizational level have more power to distribute resources and do not need to exchange resources through friendship. Though results of this study cannot significantly support that argument, statistics show something similar to Mao's argument. This suggests that the results of this study can affirm arguments in the past literature. However, another major discovery is that the organizational level-workplace friendship correlation is positive and significant in a highly political environment. In a highly political environment, this is possible that employees of higher organizational level may have stronger workplace friendship for two reasons. First, they are anxious if their self-interests will be sacrificed when there are conflicts of interests with others or other teams, and with the voluntary and reciprocal relations gained from workplace friendship, they may garner more collegial support to solidify their power to avoid their interests from diminishing or to avoid from being a sacrifice of political competitions. Second, when employees of higher organizational level need to promote policies or protocols in a highly political environment, they need better workplace friendship to expedite their plans; otherwise, colleagues will shun these policies or protocols. Therefore, organizational level has a positive moderating effect on workplace friendship. Therefore, power can be added as an intervening or a moderating variable in further studies in order to clarify the true POPs-organizational level-workplace friendship correlations.

Limitations

The aim of this study is to clarify the POPs-workplace friendship correlation, and the results support H1: the stronger the POPs, the better the workplace friendship. As there are studies affecting the generalization of theory, the limitations of this study are as follows: (1) as a cross-sectional study, the result of this study can interpret the workplace friendship of employees at a given time point as a result of time limitation. As workplace friendship develop is subject to change over time (Barley and Kunda, 2001), a cross-sectional study will be unable to cope with workplace friendship development over a period of time. Therefore, further studies may add time as a variable to clarify the correlations between time and workplace friendship development. (2) Culture is another factor affecting workplace friendship. Samples of this study are Taiwanese employees. Like other Chinese workers in the world, such as in China, Hong Kong, and Singapore, they believe harmony a virtue and fraternity an essential under the influence of Confucianism (Hofstede and Harris, 1988). These concepts thus facilitate workplace friendship development. However, whether it may generalize all cultures, such as the Japanese culture that emphasizes collectivism or the American culture that stresses individualism (Hofstede, 1983) needs further clarification. (3) The accomplishment

of personal goals and personal work attitude is associated with personal performance and organizational outcomes. Further studies may include employee performance as a variable to clarify the work performance of employees with better workplace friendship in a highly political environment. Therefore, further studies may include outcomes to test if workplace friendship moderates or intermediates POPs-outcome correlations. Therefore, by adding employee performance, the ontology of POPs and workplace friendship can be expanded.

(4) The workplace friendship in this study concerns the voluntary and reciprocal interpersonal relationship. However, whether or not workplace friendship in a highly political environment is purposive needs further clarification. These purposes may include avoidance from damage and scrambling for resources. Further studies may clarify what the purposes of workplace friendship are.

Implications

In terms of organizational management, the contributions of this study include: (1) managers should reduce POPs by paying more attention to the influence of POPs on the interpersonal relationship development. Better workplace friendship suggests better collegial relationships that facilitate the accomplishment of organizational goals. Therefore, workplace friendship has positive influence on organizational outcomes, e.g. performance improvement and positive work attitude, (Berman et al., 2002). By contrast, organizational political behaviors damage self- and organizational interests and influence personal and organizational performance. This study discovered that POPs has positive influence on workplace friendship, with an explanatory power up to 51%; that is the more the organizational political activities, and the better the workplace friendship. When there are conflicts between personal goals and the team, departmental or organizational goals, will workplace friendship become a political manipulation to avoid self-interest from being deprived or sacrificed? Kram and Isabella (1985) pointed out that some administrators do not support workplace friendship among employees to prevent factional formation and to eliminate factional interests from preventing the accomplishment of organizational goals. Therefore, this finding is a good reference for managers to examine if there is collective workplace deviant behavior and to justify if workplace friendship is under the influence of organizational politics and thus loses its true value. When employees are enthusiastic to develop workplace friendship, there will be potential threats. For example, organizational operations will be affected when employees aggressively participate in political activities.

Second, from the subordinate point of view, though workplace friendship provides employees with emotional support and improves their work attitude and productivity,

it is necessary to consider if a calculation exists in such a voluntary and reciprocal relation in a lowly political environment. That is, an employee will not be the tool of others in conflicts of interest. Therefore, managers may encourage workplace friendship in the benefit of employee outcomes. By contrast, when workplace friendship gradually evolves from a voluntary and reciprocal relation into a purposive relationship, and consequently, conflicts of interests in a highly political environment as a result of self-interest, managers should endeavor to reduce employee POPs and promote workplace friendship by encouraging teamwork and the division of labor and rewarding employees based on team or individual performance in order to improve the organizational identification of employees.

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