

Learning Orientation, Guanxi, and Life Satisfaction: Evidence from China

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Abstract

This study examined the relationships of life satisfaction with learning orientation and Chinese guanxi. In addition, the moderating effect of guanxi on the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction was also examined. Two hundred and eighty usable survey responses from full time employees of People's Republic China were used to test the proposed relationships. Results based on hierarchical regression analyses showed that both learning orientation and guanxi positively impacted life satisfaction. However, guanxi did not moderate the association between learning orientation and life satisfaction. The significance and limitations of the results are discussed.

Keywords: Guanxi; Learning orientation; Life satisfaction; Chinese employee

1. Introduction

Learning orientation refers to individuals' strong willingness to learn new knowledge and skills to achieve priority in one's life (Colquitt & Simmering, 1998; Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar, 1994). Generally, strong intrinsic learning motivation will motivate individuals to pursue success and enjoy the process of personal development (Ames & Archer, 1988). In the current economy facing intensive uncertainties, individuals' desire for learning to improve their competence is largely derived from fears about employability (Ames & Archer, 1988; Martin, Staines, & Pate, 1998). People thus engage in continuous learning to update their skills, abilities, and competences at work or even in their daily life, so as to improve their competitiveness (Nóvoa & de Jong-Lambert, 2003).

This constant learning style sometimes is referred to as lifelong learning (Centeno, 2011), and has been widely used in various fields. Learning may bring employees confidence, gratification, and self-esteem, given that people might feel their achievements in the process of learning. As an important part of one's life, the workplace experience might greatly contribute to his or her life experience. Thus, continuous learning may not only affect employees' psychological states at the workplace, but also influence their judgments and perceptions of life quality or satisfaction. However, studies that address the link between learning-related characteristics and life satisfaction are very rare. Employees today have shown increasing enthusiasm to the participation in learning and development (Noe & Wilk, 1993).

This trend further warrants research into the question whether and when learning-related attributes may relate to life satisfaction. In response to this gap, the present study examines the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction under a Chinese context. Additionally, numerous human connections and mutual interactions interweave together in one's daily life, which, in a Chinese context, is defined as a phenomenon of guanxi (Chen & Chen, 2004). There have been substantial studies showing how guanxi affects people's life (Fei, 1992; Xin & Pearce, 1996), which suggest a research avenue of the relation between guanxi and life satisfaction. As mentioned, this study will investigate learning orientation, whether guanxi has impact on the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction remains an unexplored question. In conclusion, focusing in a Chinese context, the present study aims to explore the relationships of life satisfaction with learning orientation and Chinese guanxi, and also the moderating effect of guanxi on the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction.

2. Hypothesis Development

2.1 Learning orientation and life satisfaction

Life satisfaction is generally defined as person's overall evaluation of their life (Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010), which is often measured by four specified four domains including satisfaction regarding oneself, family, friends, and finance (Diener & Diener, 1995).

The literature suggests that life satisfaction contributes to subjective well-being (SWB) greatly (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Individuals with high levels of SWB have higher life satisfaction and experience higher levels of happiness (Suldo & Huebner, 2006).

Previous research has shown that individuals' positivity quality can significantly predict life satisfaction (Diener, Napa-Scollon, Oishi, Dzikoto, & Suh, 2000). Learning orientation is suggested to be a positive motivation to learn new knowledge and master technical skills (Colquitt & Simmering, 1998). According to Diener et al. (2000), individuals with higher learning orientation tend to have higher life satisfaction due to their tendency to go through positivity construction (Diener et al., 2000). This might be because people with strong learning orientation may be good at repelling negative affective feeling and experience. Over time, people may accumulate positive affective experiences and pleasure feelings when they focus on leaning and acquiring new things.

In addition, people with high learning motivation generally pursue a variety of ways or methods to solve problems or issues emerging in their daily life. They are more likely to be all-round individuals facing difficulties and less likely to be affected by anxiety, which consists of unpleasant cognitive and affective and physiological states (Fischer & Boer, 2011; Lazarus & Averill, 1972). Anxious experiences and feelings are probable to directly or indirectly impact subjective well-being or life satisfaction. Highly learning-oriented persons, who tend to be better at dealing with life or work related difficulties, might not be too anxious and thus may hold more positive psychological attribute in life. Accordingly, I conjecture that

Hypothesis 1: Learning orientation is positively related to life satisfaction.

2.2 Guanxi and Life Satisfaction

Since the investigation objects are Chinese employees, it is valuable to consider the influence of Chinese traditional culture. Guanxi is defined as personal connections between two or more individuals (Chen & Chen, 2004). Guanxi is the cornerstone of the Chinese society and can be regarded as a component of traditional Chinese culture. Reciprocity of favorable exchanges involved in guanxi is the most pervasive rule guiding Chinese social and economic interactions (Chen & Chen, 2004). Regardless of different theoretical bases, Guanxi mainly contains three types: ties with family, familiar persons, and strangers (Jacobs 1982). In reality, individuals' guanxi can be any one or two types or the mixture of the three. In the developmental process of guanxi, exchanges of both feelings and benefits can appear based on these three bases. People having high levels of guanxi usually establish a larger network with colleagues and other people associated with their work and life. They are more likely to obtain social support from multiple sources, and thus tend to experience greater satisfaction with their life. Therefore, I hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2. Guanxi has a positive correlation with life satisfaction.

2.3 Guanxi as a Moderator in the Learning Orientation–Life Satisfaction Relationship

Guanxi is one of the most typical and complex factors in Chinese traditions, which affect a wide range of aspects of an individual, wherever in life, study, or work (e.g., Chen & Chen, 2004; Farh, Tsui, Xin, & Cheng, 1998; King, 1991). As mentioned previously, the exchange of feeling and materials involved in guanxi exists in various settings such as family, school, and workplace (Yang, 2001a, 2001b). Since such settings are essential sources of life experience, as suggested in the literature, guanxi may have a significant effect on individuals' life satisfaction. However, it is unclear whether guanxi could produce influences when life satisfaction is also affected by some other factors. In this paper, I argue that guanxi may play a moderating role in the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction. For example, people with high learning orientation are good problem solvers (Colquitt & Simmering, 1998), and they may seek all kinds of possible sources and methods to solve the problem happened both in life and work. For those people who own higher-quality guanxi, they may have more resources and approaches, which provide them more support to strength the advantages acquired in learning activities. From this perspective, they might have a higher level of life satisfaction than those who own lower-quality guanxi, given that the positive outcomes from both learning and guanxi may jointly promote positive life experiences. Thus, I purposed that:

Hypothesis 3. Guanxi moderates the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction.

In summary, this paper explores the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction as well as between guanxi and life satisfaction. Additionally, I will step further to examine whether guanxi plays a moderating role in the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction, using a sample from Chinese full time employees.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

Full time employees from China were invited to complete an online survey published on a professional survey website, on a voluntary and confidential basis. A total of 319 surveys were obtained. Thirty-nine invalid questionnaires were excluded, as these questionnaires did not match the “full time employee” condition. The remaining 280 questionnaires made of the final sample for the study. Demographic information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Description

Category		Frequency	Percentage
Gender:	Male	140	50
	Female	140	50
Marriage status:	Single	33	11.8
	De facto	34	12.1
	Married	212	75.7
	Others	1	0.4
Age:	18–20	0	0
	21–25	23	8.2
	26–30	89	31.8
	31–40	113	40.4
	41–50	47	16.8
	51–60	6	2.1
	60 or over	2	0.7
Education:	High schoolor below	8	2.9
	Diploma or bachelor (ongoing)	6	2.1
	Diploma or bachelor	241	86.1
	Graduate degree (ongoing)	10	3.6
	Graduate degree	15	5.4
Work experience:	Less than 1year	1	0.4
	1–2 years (excluding 2 years)	14	5.0
	2–3years (excluding 3 years)	16	5.7
	3–5years (excluding 5 years)	44	15.7
	5–10years (excluding 10 years)	94	33.6
	10–20years (excluding 20 years)	74	26.4
	20 years or over	37	13.2

3.2 Measures

The measures used in this study were adapted from previously developed scales. Some modifications were made to reflect the specific context of this study. Responses to times were scored on a seven-point scale measuring the respondents' degree of agreement or disagreement with each item (1= strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree).

The questionnaire was originally in English. Since our participants were Chinese employees, the questionnaires were necessary to be translated to ensure the understand ability among them. One researcher doing psychological research finished the English-to-Chinese translation, and the other expert in organizational psychology back translated the Chinese version into English. The two translators discussed these versions and decided the final translation after minor revisions.

3.2.1 Learning Orientation

The measure for learning orientation included three items describing the extent to which an individual values learning at work in the present and for the future (e.g., “I am learning in my job”; “It is important to me to learn on the job”; and “On the job I am developing the skills I need for the future”) (D'Amato & Herzfeldt, 2008). Participants indicated the extent of their agreement to the survey items on a scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability measure was adequate; the Cronbach's alpha was 0.900.

3.2.2 Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was assessed by the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The SWLS is a five-item scale, which asks respondents to rate their global life satisfaction from their subjective judgments. Sample items include “I am satisfied with my life” and “The conditions of my life are excellent.” The response ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The SWLS involves adequate psychometric properties possession and has demonstrated good validity in mainland China samples (Shao, 1993). The Cronbach’s alpha for life satisfaction in this study was 0.927.

3.2.3 Guanxi

Guanxi was assessed by a 6-item instrument developed and validated by Law, Wong, Wang, and Wang (2000). This measure assessed the degree to which the subordinates and the supervisor have mutual guanxi. Example items include “During holidays or after office hours, I would call my supervisor or visit him/her” and “I care about and have a good understanding of my supervisor’s family and work conditions.” In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha estimate for guanxi was 0.922.

3.3 Data Analysis Techniques

First, standard procedures were followed for the preliminary analyses. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used in this process to test the validity. The EFA results clearly showed three factors. As expected, all items were loaded on the predicted factors (i.e., learning orientation, life satisfaction, and guanxi). Most factor loadings were greater than 0.700, with the minimum over 0.500.

4. Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for all variables are reported in Table 2. From the table, life satisfaction is correlated to learning orientation and guanxi, and guanxi is also correlated to learning orientation.

Table2. Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Correlational Matrix

Variables	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	0.500	0.500								
2. Age	3.750	0.951	0.143*							
3. Education	3.060	0.619	-0.081	-0.046						
4. Work years	5.090	1.297	0.121*	0.762	-0.106					
5. Marriage Status	2.650	0.688	0.057	0.511	-0.047	0.543***				
6. Learning orientation	5.727	0.939	-0.048	0.075	0.112	0.037	0.003			
7. Life satisfaction	4.166	1.435	-0.108	-0.062	0.120*	-0.077	-0.007	0.326***		
8. Guanxi	4.170	1.340	0.035	-0.109	0.030	-0.186**	-0.126*	0.319***	0.556***	1

Notes: * $p < 0.050$; ** $p < 0.010$; *** $p < 0.001$. Gender: 0 = female; 1 = male. Age: 18–20 = 1; 21–25 = 2; 26–30 = 3; 31–40 = 4; 41–50 = 5; 51–60 = 6; 60 or over = 7. Education: high school or below = 1; diploma or bachelor (ongoing) = 2; diploma or bachelor = 3; graduate degree (ongoing) = 4; graduate degree = 5. Work years: less than 1 year = 1; 1–2 years (excluding 2 years) = 2; 2–3 years (excluding 3 years) = 3; 3–5 years (excluding 5 years) = 4; 5–10 years (excluding 10 years) = 5; 10–20 years (excluding 20 years) = 6; 20 years or over = 7. Marriage status: single = 1; de facto = 2; married = 3; others = 4.

Hierarchical regression analyses were run to test the hypotheses: the relationships between learning orientation and life satisfaction (Hypothesis 1) and between guanxi and life satisfaction (Hypothesis 2), and the moderating effect of guanxi on the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction (Hypothesis 3).

In the hierarchical regression, demographics (i.e., gender, age, working years, education, and marriage status) were controlled in the first step. In the second step, learning orientation and guanxi were entered. In the last step, the interaction item of learning orientation and guanxi were added. To reduce the possibility of multicollinearity, learning orientation and guanxi were centered to calculate the interaction term and before entering the regression. Results of these analyses are presented in Table 3.

Table3. Results of the Moderated Regression Analysis for Learning Orientation and Life Satisfaction

	Life Satisfaction		
	β	R2	$\Delta R2$
<i>Step 1</i>		0.011	0.029
Gender	-0.920		
Age	-0.018		
Education	0.106		
Work years	-0.067		
Marriage status	0.049		
<i>Step 2</i>		0.344***	0.332***
Learning orientation	0.149**		
<i>Guanxi</i>	0.521***		
<i>Step 3</i>		0.344***	0.002
LO× <i>Guanxi</i>	-0.050		

Note. Standardized regression coefficients are reported. * $p < 0.050$; ** $p < 0.010$; *** $p < 0.001$.

LO = Learning orientation

As presented in Table 3, learning orientation ($\beta = 0.149$, $p < 0.005$) was positively and significantly related to life satisfaction. Guanxi ($\beta = 0.521$, $p < 0.001$) was also positively and significantly associated with life satisfaction. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were supported. However, interaction between learning orientation and guanxi was not significant in predicting life satisfaction. That is, guanxi did not moderate the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction. Hence, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

5. Discussion

The current study was designed to examine the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction, the relationship between guanxi and life satisfaction, and the moderator role of guanxi in the learning orientation–life satisfaction linkage. As expected, regression results showed that life satisfaction had a significant relationship with learning orientation. That is, employees with high motivation to learning new skills and knowledge have higher satisfaction about their life. This result suggests that learning is a source of high-quality life experience for Chinese employees. Employers might be useful to create learning opportunities to help with employees' personal development, which may contribute to their life experiences. At the same time, guanxi also has a positive relation with life satisfaction, which means that practically people use guanxi to obtain advantages for themselves, and then achieve better life quality and also higher levels of life satisfaction (Yeung & Tung, 1996). This result has replicated the findings of Taormina and Gao (2009), which state that guanxi helps people to gain higher satisfaction in life.

Contrary to the original expectation, guanxi has no moderating effect on the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction. The failure of detecting significant interaction effect of guanxi and learning orientation indicates that these two variables function, to a great extent, independently of each other. Even though theoretically they may interact to generate effects, this interaction appears to be very weak.

Some potential limitations in the current study should be considered. One of the limitations is that the survey used in this study to test the research model did not separate the employees' professional backgrounds. This design defect may miss some interesting findings that characterized by differences among professional groups.

Future research may test relationships using samples from one or more specific professions, and better yet distinguishing employees from state-own enterprises, private enterprises, and foreign-found companies, which are three typical types of business in mainland China. The second limitation is that survey only collected cross-sectional data using the online-questionnaire method. The causal explanations and inferences about the findings might be cautious. The generalizability of the findings is also limited whether the results would change when paper survey is used is unknown. Future research should replicate this research using longitudinal design and paper survey or mix paper and online surveys. Despite its limitations, the current study provides an empirical framework for the researcher through testing guanxi as a moderator of the relationship between learning orientation and life satisfaction in a sample of Chinese employees. Although the global guanxi did not produce influences, future research may draw on different theoretical bases to investigate whether the learning–satisfaction link is influenced by some specific components of guanxi.

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