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Social Exchange and Knowledge Sharing among Knowledge Workers: The Moderating Role of Perceived Job Security

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ABSTRACT Drawing on perceived organizational support (POS) theory and employee–organizational relationship theories, this research investigated the association between POS and knowledge sharing as well as the potential moderating effects of perceived job security. Study participants were 255 information technology professionals and their supervisors working in the information technology industry in China. Findings showed that POS was positively related to knowledge sharing, and, as expected, perceived job security moderated the association. More specifically, the positive association between POS and employee knowledge sharing held only for employees who perceived higher job security from their organization. In contrast, POS was not significantly associated with knowledge sharing when employees perceived their job security to be relatively low. This latter result is consistent with contentions from employee–organizational relationships theories that limited investment by employers is likely to lead to lower contributions from employees. The findings are also congruent with arguments from social exchange theory that meaningful reciprocity is built on a history of open-ended exchanges whose development may be inconsistent with a shorter-term employment horizon.

KEYWORDS China, employment relationship, knowledge sharing, perceived job security, perceived organizational support (POS), social exchange

INTRODUCTION

Management and management scholars alike increasingly recognize knowledge sharing as an important element in gaining a competitive advantage. An organization's ability to encourage knowledge sharing among its employees is critical to innovation, which underlies organizational effectiveness and survival (Argote, 1999). In knowledge-intensive professions, sharing knowledge is especially critical.

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Yet our understanding of the factors that contribute to employees' propensity to share knowledge continues to lag (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002). Given China's rapidly growing importance as a global information services hub, employers in China have a particularly acute need to find ways through which to encourage knowledge sharing among professional workers.

Although scholars are focusing an increasing amount of research on factors that influence the knowledge sharing of employees (e.g., Quigley, Tesluk, Locke, & Bartol, 2007), they have not yet directed sufficient interest toward the potentially promising link between social exchange and knowledge sharing (see Lu, Leung, & Koch, 2006, for an exception). Social exchange theory emphasizes the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and posits that social exchanges entail unspecified obligations in which a party who receives favourable treatment from another party tends to return the favour. Organizational support theory (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986) applies the reciprocity norm to employee–employer relationships and holds that employees' perceptions of support from an organization will lead them to recompense by acting in ways valued by that organization (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). Although there are strong theoretical reasons to expect a connection between perceived support, as delineated by organization support theory, and knowledge sharing, research has yet to verify this important linkage. Hence, the first purpose of the present article is to apply perceived organizational support (POS) theory directly to the knowledge sharing domain.

While one can make strong arguments for the likelihood of a positive connection between POS and knowledge sharing, employee–organizational relationship theories (e.g., Rousseau, 1995; Shore & Barksdale, 1998; Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997) suggest that alternative forces influencing the employee–organizational relationship may have the capacity to undermine or at least modify the nature of the connection. For instance, Tsui et al. (1997) have developed four types of inducement-contribution relationships between employers and employees, representing two balanced employment relationships and two unbalanced ones. Of particular interest here is a form of unbalanced relationship in which employer inducements do not correspond to needed and desired contributions from employees (termed 'underinvestment' in the Tsui et al. taxonomy, 1997: 1093). The question, thus, is 'How would such an employment relationship influence knowledge sharing even when employees perceive a high level of organizational support?'

In today's business world, an underinvestment form of employee–organizational relationship can easily arise. Downsizing, restructuring, and outsourcing of non-core activities have become commonplace. The nature of the employment relationship is changing such that many employees can no longer expect lifetime employment if they simply do their jobs well (Dexter, 2006; McLean Parks & Kidder, 1994). This is especially true in China where expectations of an 'iron rice

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bowl' encompassing lifetime employment and many entitlements have been disrupted by economic reforms injecting market mechanisms (Dong & Xu, 2008). Such changes in the employment landscape in China and more globally are making job duration more uncertain, even among regular employees. The subsequent relatively low job security perceptions on the part of employees then have the potential to create significant risks for employers in terms of important outcomes (Von Hippel, Mangum, Greenberger, Heneman, & Skoglind, 1997), particularly in critical knowledge work areas such as knowledge sharing. As a result, the second purpose of this paper is to draw on employee–organization relationship theories to investigate the potential moderating influence of perceived job security on the relationship between POS and knowledge sharing. As such, we expect employee–organization relationship theories to provide boundary conditions on the applicability of POS theory.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) and Knowledge Sharing

According to organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Shore & Shore, 1995), employees develop higher levels of POS when the organization cares about their well-being and values their contributions. Based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), POS is theorized to indirectly impact employee attitudes and behaviours by creating a sense of obligation within individuals, resulting in reciprocation (Eisenberger et al., 1986, 2001). Such reciprocation, especially in knowledge-intensive organizations, can be critical to helping organizations reach their objectives. This is because such organizations depend heavily on the generation of new ideas that often emanate from sharing and also benefit greatly from reusing knowledge gained in one venue by applying it in another, a process facilitated by knowledge sharing (Majchrzak, Cooper, & Neece, 2004; Walsh, Bhatt, & Bartunek, 2009; Wilson, Goodman, & Cronin, 2007).

Knowledge sharing is 'individuals sharing organizationally relevant information, ideas, suggestions, and expertise with one another' (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002: 65). Because it is largely discretionary, knowledge sharing can be considered as fitting into a category often termed extra-role behaviours—that is, positive behaviours that are helpful but are not specified in advance as a formal job requirement (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). One reason to consider knowledge sharing as discretionary is that it is generally not obvious exactly what knowledge individuals have to share, particularly with respect to new and novel problems. Another reason is that a considerable portion of knowledge can be tacit—i.e., expertise acquired by a person that cannot be easily coded into words or symbols for use by others (Polanyi, 1966). Therefore, it is warranted to view knowledge

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sharing among a work group as an outcome that is largely discretionary and needs to be encouraged.

Research generally supports the notion that POS will influence both employee in-role performance (Armeli, Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Lynch, 1998; Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990) and extra-role or organizational citizenship behaviours (OCBs) (Eisenberger et al., 1990; Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996; Shore & Wayne, 1993; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). Because they often participate in projects that require teamwork, individual knowledge workers can face dilemmas of sharing some of their knowledge with their colleagues to effectively accomplish their work or of hoarding knowledge to enhance their own knowledge assets and power (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Szulanski, 1996). Thus, knowledge sharing can often entail considerable sacrifice on the part of the sharer. As such, actively encouraging knowledge sharing can be important for organizations.

Companies with successful experience in motivating knowledge sharing acknowledge treating employees well and recognizing their contributions as important approaches to encouraging knowledge sharing among employees (Stevens, 2000). This is in line with the arguments of POS theory regarding reciprocity. Lu et al. (2006) have also argued for the positive impact of a related variable, POS *for* knowledge sharing, measured by employees rating such conditions as management's attitude toward knowledge sharing and knowledge sharing–oriented training. They found mixed results across two studies. Building on their logic, however, we expect the connection between POS and knowledge sharing to surface when employees report directly on their perceptions of organizational support.

Hypothesis 1: Perceived organizational support (POS) will relate positively to knowledge sharing behaviours.

Moderating Effects of Perceived Job Security

Although social exchange theories (Blau, 1964; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Shore & Shore, 1995) indicate that POS should lead to an employee's felt obligation to reciprocate, literature considering employment relationships suggests that the nature of such associations may actually be more complex. At issue is the broader notion of balance between the inducements offered by the organization and what might be expected from employees given those inducements. For example, Rousseau (1995) proposed the psychological contract as a lens through which to consider employer and employee perceptions of their mutual obligation. Her intention was not to propose an actual contractual arrangement, but rather to emphasize that employees do consider the nature of their exchange with their organization and that such perceptions are likely to have implications with respect to attitudes

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and contributions. In support of this notion, Shore and Barksdale (1998) have provided evidence that balance in exchanges is preferred and that employee perceptions of mutually high obligation lead to the most positive outcomes for the organization in terms of higher outcomes, such as affective commitment, more positive perceptions of a career future with the organization, and lower turnover intentions.

In considering the nature of employment relationships, one consistently cited and important component is the extent to which employees perceive their organization as willing to provide job security that is relatively long- versus short-term. For instance, Rousseau (1995) has called time frame horizon one of the basic dimensions of the employment relationship. Shore, Tetrick, Lynch, and Barksdale (2006) consider employee expectations regarding the length of the exchange to be a critical element in employee–organizational relationships. Similarly, McLean Parks, Kidder, and Gallagher (1998) have identified the anticipated time frame as a differentiating feature of employment relationships. Part of the reason for this emphasis on employment time frame emanates from the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) contention that exchanges take place over a period of time and, thus, are somewhat open-ended agreements, with reciprocation also taking place over time as a 'history of beneficial acts by both parties' (Shore & Barksdale, 1998: 733) is established. With a relatively short time horizon and the associated decrement in job security, reciprocity mechanisms may not be enabled sufficiently to lead to the desired levels of reciprocation.

Among knowledge workers, the job security component may be especially important. In an era characterized by increasingly volatile, competitive environments and rapid advancement of information technology (IT), outsourcing knowledge-related services, particularly in the information services arena, has become an important strategy for many organizations (Ang & Slaughter, 2001; Clark, Zmud, & McCray, 1998; Loh & Venkatraman, 1992). This factor, in addition to the general erosion of job security, has made knowledge workers vulnerable to concerns about the security of their jobs. Tsui et al. (1997: 1093) have pointed out specifically the unbalanced relationship that can result when employers want full commitments from employees yet simultaneously wish to retain the 'flexibility to lay off employees at will'. Employers may not realize the potential negative implications in terms of lower employee contributions that they could unwittingly set in motion. Because of the potential for such negative conditions, McLean Parks et al. (1998) have argued that it would be fruitful to focus on employees' beliefs about the organization's inclinations with respect to job security.

Of particular interest in doing so is the typology of exchange relationships advanced by Tsui and colleagues (1997). As mentioned previously, their employee–organizational relationship theory argues that there are four types of inducement-contribution categories, depending on the degree to which employer inducements

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are high or low and employer expectations of employees are high and low. Two types of relationships are balanced. With 'quasi-spot contracts' (Tsui et al., 1997: 1092), employers provide low or narrow inducements and expect rather narrow contributions in return. With 'mutual investment' relationships (Tsui et al., 1997: 1093), employers provide higher or broader inducements with corresponding high and broader expectations of contributions. The two other types are unbalanced, with either high employer inducements and low contribution expectations ('over-investment') or low employer inducements and high contribution expectations ('underinvestment') (Tsui et al., 1997: 1093).

Drawing on the Tsui et al. (1997) framework, it is reasonable to expect that professional employees who view their employers as providing them with relatively low job security would be less likely to have a longer-term perspective on reciprocity and, hence, would be less affected by POS in conjunction with knowledge sharing. Such a perspective would also be a way for employees to maintain a balance in the employment relationship, which employees tend to prefer (Shore & Barksdale, 1998). On the other hand, perceptions that their employer has provided prospects for greater job security represents a broader horizon against which to build a history of inducements and contributions—a prerequisite for stable social exchange (Blau, 1964). In this situation, higher levels of POS are likely to be associated with higher levels of knowledge sharing. Aselage and Eisenberger (2003) also have noted the potential for reciprocation of POS to be moderated by employee–organizational relationships.

Hypothesis 2: Knowledge workers' perceived job security will moderate the positive effects of perceived organizational support (POS) on knowledge sharing, such that (a) the relationship will be stronger when perceived job security is high and (b) the relationship will be weaker when perceived job security is low.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

We collected data from a sample of IT professionals and their supervisors in twelve domestic Chinese companies located in Beijing, China. We administered the survey at the company locations, and participants returned their questionnaires directly to one of the investigators. We assured participants that all responses would be kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

Among the 360 employees surveyed, 272 returned completed questionnaires (a response rate of 75 percent). We then contacted the immediate supervisors of the respondents and asked them to rate each of their employees on knowledge sharing and send their responses directly to one of the investigators in stamped envelopes provided. The supervisors provided ratings for 255 employee respondents. The 36 supervisors rated an average of seven employees, with the range from four to ten

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employees. The final sample of employees was 68.7 percent male. Most of the employees (92.3 percent) had at least some college education, and among them, 56.5 percent had a bachelor's degree and 11 percent had a master's degree or higher. The mean age, organizational tenure, and job tenure were 26.7, 1.4, and 1.1 years, respectively, with standard deviations of 4.27, 1.34, and 0.8 years, respectively.

Measures

Following the back translation procedures suggested by Brislin (1980), the questionnaire items were first developed in English and then translated into Chinese by one bilingual individual with graduate training and experience living in both China and the United States. The resulting questionnaire was then back translated into English by a different individual with a similar background. The two translators met to discuss and resolve any discrepancies. Their work was reviewed by two other bilingual individuals to double check that discrepancies had been resolved satisfactorily.

Except where otherwise indicated, employees completed the measures using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The specific measures are described below.

We used the eight-item scale from Lynch, Eisenberger, and Armeli (1999) to measure POS. A sample item is: 'My organization really cares about my well-being.' The Cronbach's alpha measure of reliability was 0.79.

For job security, we adapted three relevant items from the psychological contract inventory developed by Rousseau (1998). The items were: 'My organization has made a commitment to me for only short-term employment' (reverse scored); 'My organization has given me the impression that I am welcome to remain as part of the organization on a long-term basis if I want'; and 'My organization can terminate my employment any time' (reverse scored). Cronbach's alpha was 0.72.

Confirmatory factor analyses supported the convergent and discriminant validity of the POS and job security measures. A two-factor model indicated good fit for the data ($\chi^2(40) = 244.969$, $p < 0.001$; CFI (Comparative Fit Index: Bentler, 1990) = 0.948; GFI (Jöreskog-Sörbom Goodness of Fit Index: Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1988) = 0.948; RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) = 0.063). CFI and GFI values ≥ 0.90 are considered indicative of good fit (Medsker, Williams, & Holahan, 1994). A favourable value of RMSEA is ≤ 0.08, and values ≤ 0.10 are considered 'fair' (Browne & Cudeck, 1989). A model considering the data as a single factor showed a significantly worse fit ($\Delta \chi^2 = 164.327$, $p < 0.001$) than the two-factor model.

Supervisors assessed their subordinates' knowledge sharing on an eight-item measure, which was patterned after the extra-role helping measure of Van Dyne and LePine (1998) but developed for this study to reflect the sharing of both explicit

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and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966). A pilot study with 289 US junior and senior business students supported the one-factor structure of this measure. Items for this measure are provided in the Appendix. Cronbach's alpha was 0.95.

To rule out the possibility that employee perceptions of their work relationships with leaders and the organization might differ depending on the length of time they have worked in the organization, we controlled for employee organizational tenure. We also controlled for education and age because these factors could influence the amount of information and knowledge individuals had to convey. We controlled for gender because women tend to be underrepresented in the IT field and may have differing views that could impact the independent and moderating variables of interest (Bartol & Aspray, 2006).

Analysis

As mentioned previously, multiple participants reported to the same supervisor and, hence, were nested in the same work group, with supervisors rating more than one employee with respect to knowledge sharing. These multiple ratings from supervisors and the associated nesting of individuals within work groups violate the data independence assumptions of ordinary least squares regression models (Bliese, 2000; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). Hierarchical linear modelling (HLM) is a useful method of analysis in such situations because it provides a more appropriate estimate of standard errors than other analytic methods when data are nested in groups and assumptions of independence are not warranted (Bliese, 2002; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). The analyses used here are also sometimes referred to as random coefficient modelling and are explained further by Bliese (2000, 2002), Hofmann (1997), and Raudenbush and Bryk (2002).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the study variables. The correlation analyses do not account for individual level relationships that might be affected by the non-independent nature of the data due to nesting. Therefore, the relationships among the study variables shown and the associated significance tests should be viewed with caution until properly modelled in the HLM analyses. Before conducting our main analyses, we conducted a one-way ANOVA. Results indicated that the levels of variables of interest here (POS, perceived job security, and knowledge sharing) did not differ significantly across companies, and, therefore, we combined the responses in conducting our further analyses.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities for study variables

Variables	*M*	*SD*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*
1. Sex	1.31	0.46							
2. Education	4.67	0.94	−0.09						
3. Age	26.60	4.27	0.10	0.11					
4. Organizational tenure	1.41	1.34	−0.08	0.01	0.19*				
5. Perceived organizational support (POS)	4.58	0.74	−14*	0.07	0.00	0.18*	(0.79)		
6. Perceived job security	4.29	0.92	−0.09	0.05	0.04	0.14*	0.31***	(0.72)	
7. Knowledge sharing behaviour	4.97	0.93	−0.09	0.15*	0.07	0.01	0.16**	0.07	(0.95)

Notes:
* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.
N = 255. Scale score correlations are given below the diagonal and scale reliabilities (Cronbach's alphas) are shown in parentheses on the diagonal.
Sex is coded as 1 = female, 2 = male.
M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM) Model Testing

As a prelude to our further analyses, we obtained ICC(1) values for our variables of interest. ICC(1) represents the proportion of variance in the variables of interest that is attributable to the data's within group nesting. The ICC(1) values were: 0.13 for POS, 0.09 for perceived job security, and 0.24 for knowledge sharing, suggesting the usefulness of conducting HLM analyses (Bliese, 2000, 2002).

We hypothesized that POS and knowledge sharing would be positively related but that the relationship would be moderated by perceived job security. To test our specific hypotheses, we first estimated a null HML model that contained the dependent variable and level 1 random intercept. We next estimated a model that included the individual level control variables at level 1, with group specified at level 2 to control for group and supervisor multiple rating effects. None of the individual level control variables were significant at the 0.05 level or below. Finally, we included the independent variables of interest at level 1. As indicated in Table 2, there was a main effect for POS ($\gamma = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$) on knowledge sharing in support of Hypothesis 1. There was also a significant interaction between POS and perceived job security ($\gamma = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$), supporting our contention in Hypothesis 2 that the relationship between POS and knowledge sharing is qualified by perceived job security.

Figure 1 shows the plot of the interaction. We followed Aiken and West's (1991) guidance that predicted values be exhibited at one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean for the independent variables. Simple slope tests for HLM data (Bauer & Curran, 2005; Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006)

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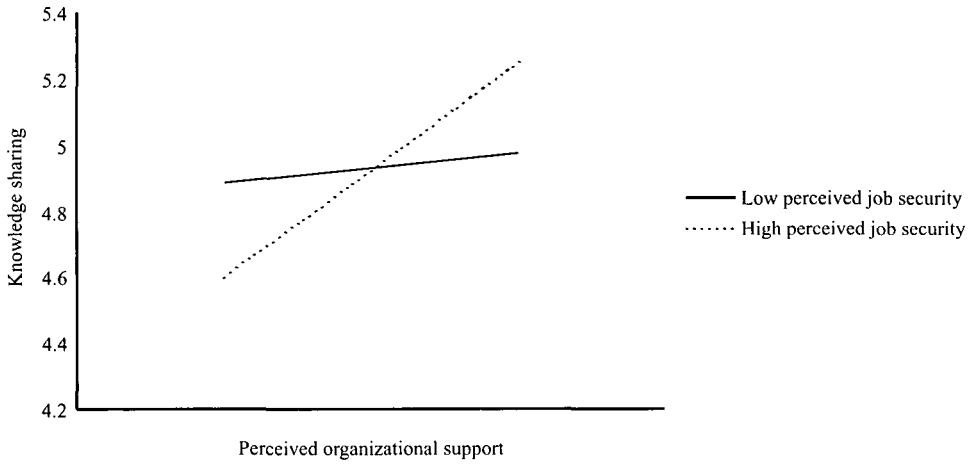
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Table 2. Hierarchical linear modelling (HLM) results for predictors of knowledge sharing

Predictor variables	*Null model*	*Adding demographic controls*	*Adding predictor variables*
Intercept	4.98*** (0.09)***	5.23*** (0.19)***	5.19*** (0.21)***
Sex		−0.19 (0.13)	−0.16 (0.13)
Education		0.12 (0.06)	0.09 (0.05)
Age		0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)
Organization tenure		0.04 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
POS			0.28** (0.09)**
Perceived job security			0.05 (0.04)
POS * perceived job security			0.21** (0.07)**
Proportional change in variance explained over null		0.02	0.20
Model deviance	662.46	660.30	656.79

Notes:
** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.
Entries are estimations of the fixed effects (γs) with robust standards errors. Estimations of the standard errors are in parentheses.
POS, perceived organizational support.

Figure 1. Interaction effects of perceived organizational support (POS) and perceived job security on knowledge sharing



indicated that, in support of Hypothesis 2a, the relationship between POS and knowledge sharing was strengthened when job security was perceived to be higher ($t = 4.32$, $p < 0.001$). Simple slope tests also supported Hypothesis 2b in that the relationship between POS and knowledge sharing was weaker when job security was perceived to be lower. In fact, POS made little difference in knowledge sharing when job security was perceived to be relatively low ($t = 0.90$, n.s.).

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DISCUSSION

Drawing on POS theory and employee–organization relationship theories, this paper makes two major contributions. First, it demonstrates that, as predicted by POS theory, POS was positively associated with knowledge sharing; however, also as anticipated here, this relationship held only for employees who perceived their job security to be relatively high.

Second, and in contrast to what perceived organization theory would normally predict (Eisenberger et al., 1986), there appeared to be little association between POS and the propensity to share knowledge for employees who perceived their job security to be relatively low. Thus, this research points to a critical boundary condition with respect to POS and knowledge sharing, namely that the relationship between POS and knowledge sharing is contingent upon employee levels of perceived job security.

The identification of this important boundary condition supports the relevance of employee–organizational relationship theory in general and the Tsui et al. (1997) taxonomy of employment relationships in particular for advancing understanding regarding the relationship between POS and knowledge sharing. According to the Tsui et al. taxonomy, employers need to be prepared to provide high inducements if they expect high contributions from employees (mutual investment). Otherwise, employees may perceive the employment relationship as an underinvestment relationship or a quasi-spot contract, in which employers provide low or narrow inducements, including a low degree of job security.

In such situations, employees are likely to comply with lower contributions. In the case of POS, one might normally expect that employees would reciprocate when organizational support is high. However, precisely because POS theory is based on notions of reciprocity and social exchange, perceived job security is a particularly important consideration in conjunction with POS. A central premise in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) is that reciprocity takes place over time and that a positive benefit provided by one party will not necessarily be reciprocated immediately. Rather, over time, temporary imbalances will be redressed and trust will be built. Lower perceptions of job security, on the other hand, are unlikely to allow this process to adequately unfold. Hence, as we found here, perceived lower employer investments in the form of lower job security appeared to preclude a positive impact of POS on knowledge sharing, whereas, for high job security, POS was important. Employees prefer balance in their employment relationship and are likely to seek means of redressing balance in situations of underinvestment (Shore & Barksdale, 1998). As expected, employee–organizational theories provide boundary conditions on the applicability of POS theory. Thus, our findings support arguments by Aselage and Eisenberger (2003) that employee–organizational relationship perceptions could partly guide POS reciprocity mechanisms.

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Directions for Future Research

Future research might longitudinally track job security perceptions to learn more about the factors that create changes in perceptions and their impact on patterns of reciprocity. It would also be helpful to learn more about how employees think about relevant timelines with respect to reciprocity from employers, particularly in this era of ebbing guaranteed employment. Future research could also productively investigate types of inducements that might help counterbalance job security issues when factors, such as extreme competition or poor economic conditions, make it difficult for employers to solidly convey reasonable levels of job security. Possible counterbalances might be interesting work (Brown, 1996), flexible schedules and venues (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), empowering leaders (Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006), or trust (Li, 2008). Another area for research is in exploring the possibility that social exchange and reciprocity from coworkers may at least partially overcome underinvestments by employers, particularly when the work is interdependent (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008).

In our research, we focused on a variable, perceived job security, which is particularly important in its potential impact on the timeline for reciprocity within the context of employment relationships. We took the initial step in demonstrating a moderating effect for perceived job security on the POS-outcomes relationship. A fruitful research direction would be to investigate potentially similar effects on other aspects of the employment relationship that might induce employees to think about leaving and, thus, instigate a limited employment timeframe from the employee's point of view. Potential variables for knowledge workers might be relatively low access to training (Chay & Aryee, 1999) and limited eligibility for monetary incentive programs available to others in the organization or in the marketplace (Gerhart & Rynes, 2003).

The results in this article are not strictly comparable to those of Lu et al. (2006) because their measure was oriented to POS for knowledge sharing rather than POS in the general sense encompassed by POS theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986). POS theory calls for measuring the extent to which the organization is perceived as valuing the employee's contribution and caring about his/her welfare. Lu et al.'s Study 1 with part-time MBA students and middle-level managers as participants did not show a relationship between POS for knowledge sharing and self-reported knowledge sharing. However, Study 2 with part-time MBA students found that the utilization of information technologies (such as organizational databases, bulletin boards, email, etc.) mediated the relationship between POS for knowledge sharing and tacit and implicit knowledge sharing as measured by merging reactions to two scenarios and self-reports of sharing frequency. Future research might assess the extent to which both general POS and POS for knowledge sharing specifically could potentially operate together to support knowledge sharing in organizations.

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Limitations

It should be noted that this research is not without limitations. As with any cross-sectional investigation, the findings of this study do not fully explicate the theoretical perspectives advanced. The study also focused on a particular category of knowledge workers, namely IT professionals, which may limit the generalizability of the results. However, the IT field represents an appropriate arena in which to carry out this research because it constitutes a microcosm of the shifting and more tentative nature of employment relationships (Ang & Slaughter, 2001; Corbett, 1995; Hu, Saunders, & Gebelt, 1997; Von Hippel et al., 1997). Restricting participants to IT professionals had the advantage of targeting a population operating in the same overall occupational job market. Related research by King and Bu (2005) indicates that IT professionals in China and the United States are similar in their concern for long-term employment stability. Future research might extend this research to other occupations, perhaps those with less volatility than the IT field.

While we have considered its limitations, a major strength of this study is that we were able to collect data from two different sources—the employees and their supervisors—thus reducing the threat of single-source bias. We also note that China was a particularly appropriate venue in which to conduct the present research. China's emergence as a major player in global knowledge-based industries has made it more important for managers in China to be concerned with knowledge sharing. At the same time, the disappearing 'iron rice bowl' makes workers particularly vulnerable to perceptions of lower job security (Dong & Xu, 2008; Hui, Lee, & Rousseau, 2004; Westwood, Sparrow, & Leung, 2001), a key focus of the present research.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study demonstrates the value of using employee–organizational theory to inform boundary conditions for POS theory. In this case, our results demonstrate that POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986) is positively related to employee knowledge sharing but only to the extent that employees perceive themselves as having job security. In contrast, POS is unrelated to employee knowledge sharing when employees perceive that their job security is relatively low. It appears that the reciprocity and exchange mechanisms that underlie POS theory may have difficulty developing sufficiently when there is an uncertain time horizon or the perception of such in operation. Thus, these results point to perceived job security as an important boundary condition for POS theory with respect to knowledge sharing.

While these findings have important implications for POS theory and employee–organizational relationship theories, they have major practical implica-

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tions for managers as well. The findings here elucidate that employers face a dilemma when they allow relatively low employee perceptions of job security to persist—at least with jobs in which the sharing of knowledge is critically important. Although employers may benefit from reduced outlays when making relatively low investments in employees, they are apt to suffer serious negative consequences in terms of lower knowledge sharing by employees. As more and more employment relationships divert from the 'traditional' life-long employment mode (McLean Parks et al., 1998), such perceptions on the part of employees are increasingly likely. Thus, our results support Schwarzkopf, Mejias, Jasperson, Saunders, and Gruenwald (2004), who contend that, rather than approaching employees as essentially expendable in the face of shifting conditions, managers may benefit considerably in terms of positive outcomes by taking a longer-term view of staffing requirements and making greater efforts to support and develop employees on an ongoing basis to meet changing needs.

NOTE

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APPENDIX (KNOWLEDGE SHARING MEASURE COMPLETED BY SUPERVISORS)

Supervisors responded using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

1. This employee readily passes along information that may be helpful to the work of the group.
2. This employee keeps others in the work group informed of emerging developments that may increase their work effectiveness.
3. This employee actively seeks helpful information to share with the group.
4. This employee shares information that he/she has when it can be beneficial to others in the work group.
5. This employee readily shares his/her expertise to help resolve work group problems.
6. This employee willingly aids others in the group whose work efforts could benefit from his/her expertise.
7. This employee offers innovative ideas in his/her area of expertise that can benefit the group's work.
8. This employee frequently shares his/her expertise by making helpful suggestions that benefit the work group.

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