Organizational career growth and subsequent voice behavior: The role of affective commitment and gender

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Although research has established a connection between career growth and turnover intentions, there continues to be a need to study how employee career growth contributes positively to organizations. In the present research, we studied in particular how employees' organizational career growth is related to voice behavior. Employing theories of social exchange, organization-based self-esteem, and psychological attachment, we developed six hypotheses pertinent to this relationship, including the mediating role of affective organizational commitment and the moderating effect of gender. We tested our hypotheses using data from 328 employees in Mainland China over three time periods. As we hypothesized, we found positive relationships between the three dimensions of organizational career growth and subsequent voice behavior. Our results also verified that these relationships are partially mediated by affective organizational commitment and partially moderated by gender.

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Lifetime employment in the same organization was once considered normal, but job mobility and career change are becoming increasingly more common (Weng & McElroy, 2010). In this regard, Savickas (2011) notes that, whereas in the past an individual's career rested in the hands of an organization, today individuals own their own careers. In assuming greater control over their careers, however, workers need to develop skills that will ensure their employability, in effect, requiring them to be lifelong learners (Savickas, 2012). Individuals who lack career development opportunities within their current organization are left with little choice but to look to other organizations as a means for personal career growth. This suggests that employees who perceive their organization to be interested in their career growth respond positively on behalf of their organization. Indeed, recent research (Weng & McElroy, 2012; Weng, McElroy, Morrow & Liu, 2010) affirms that employees experiencing high levels of career growth within their current employment express more organizational commitment and less intention to leave. Nonetheless, the question remains as to whether organizational career growth has other positive effects on employee behavior.

In this regard, Morrison (2011) identified employee voice behavior as possessing potential to make a positive impact on organizational functioning. Morrison defines employee voice behavior as the "discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning" (p. 375). As such, voice behavior is not part of an individual's prescribed role, nor is it typically recognized by the formal reward system as extra-role behavior (Van Dyne & Lepine, 1998). The degree of interest in voice behavior and its effects in organizations has increased

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markedly in the past 20 years, with over 200 manuscripts published on the topic since 1994 (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014). In spite of the wealth of research identifying the antecedents and consequences of employee voice, however, there is an absence to date of work on the role of organizational career growth, which has also been identified as a critical factor affecting employee attitudes and behavior today.

1. Organizational career growth

Career development researchers (e.g., see Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001) have tended to focus on objective and subjective measures of career success over an individual's work life, across organizations. More recently, Weng and McElroy (2012) shifted the focus to *organizational* career growth, or the degree to which employees experience career growth within their current organization (rather than the assessment of career outcomes across their total work career). This is an important distinction insofar as career development of employees over their total work life is more unpredictable and independent of individual organizational outcomes; while organizational career growth is more regular and more closely associated with individual attitudes and behavior (Weng & Xi, 2010). Research on organizational career growth, therefore, has greater implications and is more relevant to understanding the employee–employer relationship than is career development over an employee's total working career.

Organizational career growth was originally measured using four dimensions: (1) career goal progress, (2) professional ability development, (3) promotion speed, and (4) remuneration growth (Weng et al., 2010). This multi-dimensional conceptualization implies that career growth is both a function of the employees' efforts and the organization's willingness and ability to reward such efforts. More recently, Weng and McElroy (2012) collapsed these four dimensions to three, because promotion speed and remuneration growth were highly correlated, particularly for employees in managerial positions.

2. Voice behavior

In a recent review of the literature on employee voice, Morrison (2011) identified three sets of predictors: (1) individual level factors, (2) contextual factors, and (3) supervisor behavior. Individual level antecedents include personality (Lepine & Van Dyne, 2001) and general-efficacy (Lepine & Van Dyne, 1998); individual attitudes such as job satisfaction (Tornau & Frese, 2013); perceptions of psychological safety (Detert & Burris, 2007); organizational identification (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008); and individual demographics including gender, ethnicity, tenure, and hierarchical position (Detert & Burris, 2007; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). Research on context identified additional predictors, such as organizational culture (Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence & Miner-Rubino, 2002), group size and functioning (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998), and perceived organizational support (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998). Finally, researchers identified the behavior of immediate supervisors as an important motivational cue for employee voice behavior (e.g. Liu, Zhu, & Yang, 2010). Employees are more likely to engage in voice behavior when they believe that their immediate supervisor values and is open to such behavior (Detert & Burris, 2007).

3. Hypothesis development

In this research, we aimed to relate career growth to employee voice behavior. As such, we sought to fulfill three objectives: (1) to investigate the role of organizational career growth on employee voice behavior; (2) to test whether affective organizational commitment mediates the relationship between career growth and voice behavior; and (3) to investigate whether gender differences exist in the relationship between organizational career growth and employee voice behavior. The second objective is based on previous research that has found a relationship between organizational career growth and organizational commitment (Weng et al., 2010) and between affective commitment and employee voice behavior (Tornau & Frese, 2013). Our third objective derives from the work of Morrison (2011), who identified gender as a possible individual level antecedent of voice behavior but with mixed results.

3.1. Organizational career growth and voice behavior

Three theoretically based arguments support a positive relationship between organizational career growth and voice behavior. First, social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958), which states that people feel obligated to reciprocate when they receive benefits from others, provides an appropriate underlying rationale. In this case, organizations that provide their employees with opportunities for career growth create a desire on the part of those employees to give something in return. Consistent with this notion, Weng et al. (2010) and Crawshaw, Dick, and Brodbeck (2012) found that employees with better career growth opportunities exhibit higher levels of commitment to their organizations and engage in more proactive work behavior. In this respect, Morrison (2011) has argued that the motive behind engaging in voice behavior is the desire on the part of the individual to help the organization. Consequently, employees perceiving organizational support for their career growth are more apt to reciprocate and therefore to engage in voice behavior.

The second theoretical basis for our research is derived from organization-based self-esteem (OBSE). Pierce and Gardner (2004) define OBSE as "the degree to which an individual believes him/herself to be capable, significant, and worthy as an organizational member" (p. 593). Employees who experience higher levels of self-expression and success in an organization are likely to manifest higher OBSE, which serves to reinforce their positive self-image (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). In this case, it seems

reasonable to conclude that individuals experiencing successful organizational career growth should perceive higher levels of OBSE, leading them to voice ideas and information which further enhances their value to the organization. More specifically, since Lepine and Van Dyne (1998) demonstrated that self-esteem is an important predictor of voice behavior, we conclude that organizational career growth should therefore enhance employees' willingness to engage in voice behavior.

The third theoretical basis for our research is psychological attachment theory (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). In line with this theory, Weng et al. (2010) found that employees' organizational career growth is associated with greater psychological attachment toward their employing organizations. Psychological attachment is especially important to voice behavior since it influences both the positive and negative consequences of engaging in voice behavior. As noted by Morrison (2011), a decision to speak up is a function of both the employee's perception of how effective it will be and her or his perception of safety in doing so. In terms of empirical support for this idea, Detert and Burris (2007) and Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008) found that positive forms of psychological attachment, such as organizational identification and psychological safety, are associated with increased voice behavior.

Taking into account the foregoing arguments across three theoretical perspectives, our first hypothesis is therefore:

Hypothesis 1. Organizational career growth (career goal progress, professional ability development and organizational rewards growth) is positively associated with subsequent voice behavior.

3.2. The mediating role of affective commitment

Affective commitment refers to employees' psychological attachment to their organizations, through their identification with the objectives and values of their organizations (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). This is in contrast to continuance commitment, which is based on "side bets" (Becker, 1960, p. 32) and normative commitment, which is based on a moral obligation. In the present study, we deal specifically with affective organizational commitment, on the basis that this type of commitment is connected with employee perceptions of the ability of organizations to satisfy their needs at work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). We argue here that organizational commitment mediates the relationship between organizational career growth and voice behavior. To establish this, and consistent with Baron and Kenny (1986), we posit three hypotheses as outlined below.

3.2.1. Organizational career growth and affective organizational commitment

Organizational career growth encapsulates need satisfaction, both intrinsically and extrinsically (Weng et al., 2010). Organizational career growth occurs when employees experience work tasks that are related to their career goals, helpful to their professional skill development, and recognized by their organization. Accordingly, when employees perceive successful career growth, they become psychologically attached to their organizations, since their needs are satisfied. On the basis of previous research that career growth and affective commitment are related to one another at the same point in time (Weng et al., 2010), we test the relationship between career growth and subsequent affective commitment. Thus:

Hypothesis 2. Organizational career growth (career goal progress, professional ability development, and organizational rewards growth) is positively associated with subsequent affective organizational commitment.

3.2.2. Affective organizational commitment and voice behavior

Meyer and Allen (1991) pointed out that employees with high levels of affective commitment are characterized by their identification with the organization's objectives and values, a feeling of pride in their organization, and a strong desire to remain a member of the organization. Psychologically attached employees are thus more likely to uphold their organizations' values and goals, even when these require behaviors that extend beyond in-role responsibilities (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Specifically, highly committed employees have a strong sense of ownership and regard the organization's interests as their own. Such employees will be less likely to give up when problems arise and be more likely to share creative ideas voluntarily, to give warnings, or to encourage constructive changes (Liu et al., 2010; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). Furthermore, employees with high levels of affective commitment have been shown to exert more effort on behalf of their organizations in order to improve organizational functioning, even when such improvements face difficulty and run against the status quo (Lepine & Van Dyne, 1998).

The connection between affective commitment and voice behavior, coupled with the expected relationships posited in Hypotheses 1 and 2, suggests a mediating role of affective organizational commitment on the relationship between organizational career growth and employees' voice behavior (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Previous research verifies the mediating role of affective commitment on the relationship between high-involvement human resource practices and employees' citizenship behaviors (Paré & Tremblay, 2007). High involvement human resource practices encompass a variety of organizational practices, but Paré and Tremblay's finding suggests that affective commitment may very well mediate the effects of organizational career growth on voice behavior. Thus:

Hypothesis 3. Affective organizational commitment is positively associated with subsequent voice behavior.

Hypothesis 4. Affective organizational commitment mediates the effects of organizational career growth (career goal progress, professional ability development, and organizational rewards growth) on subsequent voice behavior.

3.3. The moderating role of gender

Role theory (Eagly & Wood, 1991) assumes that gender-role expectations affect the behavior of men and women in social situations. For example, males are thought to be more competent than females (Correll, 2004), especially in the workplace. In this respect, Simpson and Lewis (2005) found that ideas forwarded by men attract greater attention than ideas proffered by females. When this notion is internalized by women it leads to lower self-assessment of their abilities (Correll, 2001) and lower motivation to contribute ideas because of a lack of confidence (Greene & DeBacker, 2004). In short, women are likely to remain silent when they are not confident, or when they assume their opinions are not appreciated.

In addition, the pursuit of a career for men is different than that for women. In support of this idea, Greene and DeBacker (2004) found that men seem to have a higher motive to succeed than women and more definite career goals. Moreover, men are often driven to pursue a career by a need for power and achievement, while women are driven more by intrinsic values such as autonomy and learning possibilities (Sortheix, Dietrich, Chow, & Salmela-Aro, 2013). In this case, it seems reasonable to conclude that males are more likely than females to value career goal progress related to their future achievement; conversely, females appear to care more about the professional ability development which can improve self-competence and inherent value (Sortheix et al., 2013). Therefore, we expect that males are more willing to engage in voice behavior when they perceive their career goals are progressing well, and females are more inclined to express their constructive ideas when they perceive their ability is advancing. Thus:

Hypothesis 5. The positive relationship between employees' career goal progress and subsequent voice behavior is moderated by gender such that the relationship for males is stronger.

Hypothesis 6. The positive relationship between employees' professional ability development subsequent and subsequent voice behavior is moderated by gender such that the relationship for females is stronger.

4. Method

4.1. Procedure and sample

We collected our data in three waves to alleviate concerns about common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). At Time 1, we distributed 400 surveys measuring organizational career growth to twenty companies in Mainland China; we also distributed another 200 surveys to employed part-time MBA students from two Universities in Eastern China. We selected twenty respondents from each organization. On the basis that a minimum of one year is necessary for employees to make an accurate assessment of their career growth (Weng & McElroy, 2012), we ensured that all respondents had been employed for more than one year in their current organization. In total, 443 surveys were returned, of which 163 were from the MBA student groups.

Three months later (Time 2), we sent a second questionnaire measuring affective organizational commitment to the first wave respondents. Of these, 412 were returned, of which 152 came from the MBA sample. At Time 3, a further three months later, we sent out a third questionnaire to assess employee voice behavior. In this instance, 367 surveys were returned, of which 148 came from the MBA sample. In total, after eliminating data from any respondent who failed to complete all three questionnaires, or who had left her or his initial organization, we received three waves of usable surveys from 328 respondents. There were no significant differences for the characteristics (gender, education, position, age) between participants who completed the whole questionnaires and those who chose not to continue.

The three-month interval between waves of data collection was chosen to provide enough time to minimize common method error variance, yet not so long a time period as to make recall of events that affect one's perceptions difficult. Churchill and Iacobucci (2005) noted that recall is affected by importance and frequency of events. Assessments of affective commitment and voice are important perceptions, ones not likely to be clouded by everyday events. In addition, three months is enough time for a sufficient degree of frequency to occur to make such an assessment. The three-month time lag is also consistent with prior research involving time-lag data collection (Chen, Ployhart, Thomas, Anderson, & Bliese, 2011; Weng & McElroy, 2012). Finally, collecting all data within a six-month time horizon helped us to minimize the effects of other influences such as employee turnover.

Females comprised 42.8% of the respondents, who were employed in a variety of positions, with 42.7% general staff, 32.3% frontline managers, 22.0% middle managers, and 3.0% senior managers. With respect to education, 11.0% had graduate degrees, 66.8% had bachelor degrees, 18.3% had 3-year diplomas, and 4.0% had an education below the 3 year diploma level. In addition, 16.2% of our sample had 1–2 years with the same organization, while 40.8% had 3–5 years, 24.7% had 5–10 years and 18.3% had more than 10 years of experience within their current employer.

4.2. Measures

Our instruments were designed to capture the three concepts being investigated in this research: (1) organizational career growth, (2) affective organizational commitment, and (3) voice behavior. All of the items measuring these three concepts were responded by using five-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

4.2.1. Organizational career growth

Following Weng and McElroy's (2012) research, we assessed organizational career growth at Time 1 using 15 items measuring the three dimensions of career goal progress (4 items), professional ability development (4 items), and organizational rewards growth (7 items). Sample items include "My present job moves me closer to my career goals", "My present job encourages me to continuously gain new job-related skills," "My promotion speed in my present organization is fast," and "My salary is growing quickly in my present organization". Alphas for ratings on career goal progress, professional ability development and organizational rewards growth were good (.86, .90 and .87, respectively).

4.2.2. Affective organizational commitment

We measured affective organizational commitment at Time 2 with Meyer et al.'s (1993) six-item scale. Sample items include "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization," and "I really feel as if this organization's problems are my problems" ($\alpha = .78$).

4.2.3. Employee voice behavior

We adopted Van Dyne and LePine's (1998) six-item scale to measure employee voice behavior at Time 3. This scale is frequently used and shows strong reliability (Ng & Feldman, 2012). Sample items are "I develop and make recommendations concerning issues that affect this workgroup," and "I communicate my opinions about work issues to others in this group even if my opinion is different and others in the group disagree with me" ($\alpha = .89$).

4.2.4. Control variables

We also collected data at Time 1 on four demographic variables: age, gender, education level, and position. These variables were chosen because they reflect individual-level factors related to voice behavior (Morrison, 2011). Age was divided into five categories: under 20 years, 21–30, 31–40, 41–50, and over 50. Education was grouped into four categories: no college, some college, a bachelor's degree, and master's degree or above; while position in the organization was grouped according to whether the participant occupied a general staff, frontline, middle, or senior management position.

5. Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations, while Tables 2 and 3 report the results of our hypothesis testing.

5.1. Tests of hypotheses

We employed hierarchical regression and bootstrapping (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) to establish the impact of the three dimensions of career growth on employees' voice behavior and the mediating role of affective commitment.

Models 2–1 and 2–2 (Table 2) report the relationships between organizational career growth and voice behavior. We entered control variables in Step 1, finding that age and position were positively related to voice behavior. Results of Step 2 show that all three dimensions of organizational career growth were significant predictors, explaining an additional 27% of the variance in voice behavior. These results support Hypothesis 1.

Models 1–1 and 1–2 report the relationships between organizational career growth and affective organizational commitment. At Step 1, we entered demographic control variables and found that gender and age were positively related to affective commitment. At Step 2, we entered the three dimensions of organizational career growth and found them to be positively related to affective organizational commitment, explaining an additional 29% of the variance. These results support Hypotheses 2.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations matrix of study variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1-Gender[a]	1.42	.49								
2-Education level[b]	2.85	.70	−.26**							
3-Age[c]	2.35	.57	−.09	−.00						
4-Position[d]	1.85	.87	−.24**	.23**	.33**					
5-Career goal progress	3.36	.80	−.00	−.02	.16**	.26**				
6-Prof. ability development	3.50	.81	−.07	.03	.15**	.19**	.63**			
7-Organizational rewards growth	2.97	.81	−.13*	.16**	.10	.34**	.51**	.43**		
8-Affective commitment	3.20	.69	.10*	−.07	.26**	.14*	.54**	.50**	.36**	
9-Voice behavior	3.43	.74	−.14*	.08	.24**	.24**	.53**	.51**	.38**	.44**

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.
[a] 1-male, 2-female.
[b] 1-no college, 2-some college, 3-bachelor's college, 4-master's degree or above.
[c] 1-under 20 years old, 2-21–30 years old, 3-31–40 years old, 4-41–50 years old, 5-over 50 years old.
[d] 1-general staff, 2-frontline manager, 3-middle manager, 4-senior manager.

Table 2
The regression of organizational career growth on affective commitment and the voice behavior.

Predictor variables	Affective commitment			Voice behavior					
	Model 1–1	Model 1–2	Model 1–3	Model 2–1	Model 2–2	Model 2–3	Model 2–4	Model 2–5	Model 2–6
Constant	2.58***	.10***	.89***	2.62***	.98***	.96**	1.48***	.81**	.76*
Control variables									
Gender	.12*	.12*	.10	−.08	−.09	−.07	−.08	−.11	−.07
Education level	−.07	−.05	−.04	.02	.04	.05	.05	.05	.06
Age	.23***	.20***	.20***	.18**	.14**	.14**	.08	.11*	.11*
Position	.10	−.05	−.06	.16**	.01	.01	.11*	.02	.03
Org. career growth									
Career goal progress		.32***	.32***		.30***	.28***		.24***	.23***
Prof. ability development		.19**	.20**		.22**	.22**		.19**	.19**
Org. rewards growth		.14**	.15**		.14**	.14**		.12*	.12*
Interaction									
Career goal progress × gender			.00			−.15*			−.18*
Prof. ability development × gender			−.05			.15*			.15*
Org. rewards growth × gender			−.08			−.01			−.04
Affective commitment × Gender									.09
Mediator: Affective commitment							.42***	.16**	.16**
R^2	.09	.38	.38	.09	.36	.38	.25	.38	.40
Adjusted R^2	.08	.36	.36	.08	.36	.36	.24	.38	.38
F	8.132***	27.750***	19.60***	8.33***	44.01***	3.58***	21.44***	23.94***	17.12***
△F		49.08**	.74		50.72***	2.45*	67.07***	8.57***	2.56*
△R^2		.29	.00		.27	.02	.16	.02	.02

Notes: △F and △R^2 report change from the prior model, except for Model 2–4 and 2–5, which report changes from Model 2–1 and 2–2.
  * $p < 0.05$.
  ** $p < 0.01$.
  *** $p < 0.001$.

We tested the relationship between affective commitment and voice behavior in Model 2–4. Results show that affective commitment was positively related to voice behavior, explaining an additional 15% of the variance. This finding supports Hypothesis 3.

As shown in Model 2–5, the presence of affective commitment reduced but did not eliminate the relationships between organizational career growth and voice behavior. We further assessed the mediation using the bootstrapping procedure by SPSS Macro Syntax file, since it is more powerful than the causal steps approach using hierarchical regression (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We estimated 2000 bootstrap samples; independent variables comprised the three dimensions of organizational career growth, the mediator was affective organizational commitment, and the dependent variable was voice behavior. The indirect effect of career goal progress on voice behavior was 0.05 ($p < .01$), with a 95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI of [.01, .10]; the indirect effect of professional ability development on voice behavior was 0.03 ($p < .01$), with a 95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI of [.01, .07]; and the indirect effect of organizational rewards growth on voice behavior was 0.02 ($p < .01$), with a 95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI of [.01, .05]. This provides support for Hypothesis 4.

Consistent with Hypothesis 5, gender and career goal progress showed a significant interaction on voice behavior (see Models 2–3 and 2–6). As seen in Fig. 1A, the effect of career goal progress on voice behavior is stronger for males ($r = .37$, $p < .001$) than for females ($r = .05$, ns). Consistent with Hypothesis 6, gender and professional ability development showed a significant interaction on voice behavior. As seen in Fig. 1B, the effect of professional ability development on voice behavior is stronger for females ($r = .32$, $p < .01$) than for males ($r = .04$, ns). However, the interaction of gender and organizational rewards growth did not significantly affect voice behavior. As shown in Models 1–3, 2–3, and 2–6, gender did not moderate the relationship between the three dimensions of career growth and affective commitment, as well as between affective commitment and voice behavior.

Table 3
Dominance analysis: importance of factors predicting voice behavior and affective commitment.

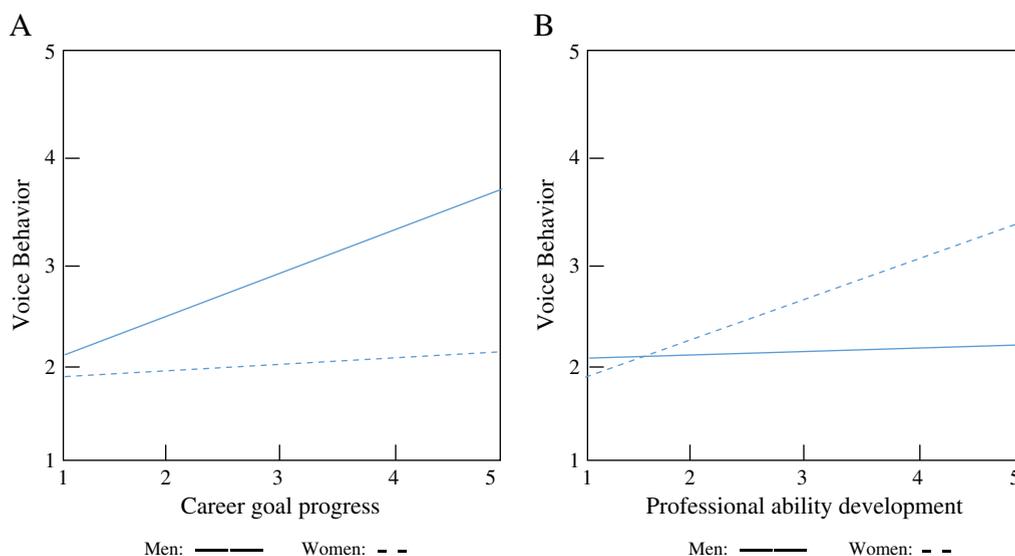|	Voice behavior				Affective commitment	
	General dominance	Relative weight of R^2	General dominance	Relative weight of R^2	General dominance	Relative weight of R^2
Career goal progress	.14	.44	.11	.33	.16	.49
Prof. ability development	.11	.34	.09	.27	.11	.34
Org. rewards growth	.07	.22	.05	.15	.05	.17
Affective commitment			.08	.24		

Fig. 1. Gender as the moderator of the relationship between career growth and voice behavior.

5.2. Supplementary analysis

Regression analysis does not enable us to assess the relative importance of the predictor variables in the regression equation because the size of a regression coefficient is affected by both its relative importance and its intercorrelations with the other predictor variables. Therefore, we examined the relative contributions of the predictor variables using dominance analysis (Johnson & LeBreton, 2004). The general dominance coefficients reflect the amount of variance attributable to each specific predictor variable, and the relative weight coefficients reflect the percentage of total explained variance attributable to each specific predictor. As reflected in the aggregate relative weights (Table 3), the career goal progress dimension accounted for the most explained variance for both voice behavior (44%) and affective commitment (49%), followed by professional ability development (34%, 34%), and then organizational rewards growth (22%, 17%). Compared to affective commitment (24%), career goal progress (33%) accounted for more explained variance in voice behavior than either professional ability development (27%) or organizational rewards growth (15%).

6. Discussion

6.1. Organizational career growth and voice behavior

Drawing on theories of social exchange, OBSE, and organizational attachment, we investigated employees' organizational career growth as a predictor of voice behavior. Our findings suggest that building organizational career growth makes employees more likely to share creative ideas with, to give warnings to, or to encourage constructive changes to the organization. This result is analogous to Crawshaw et al.'s (2012) finding that career development is related to proactive work behavior, but extends these findings specifically to voice behavior. This connection between organizational career growth and voice behavior fits the theory of social exchange and the norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964) in that employees who perceive that their organization is concerned about their career reciprocate by providing suggestions and ideas about organizational problems (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008).

While all three forms of organizational career growth are important, the dominance analyses affirmed that career goal progress had the greatest effect on voice behavior. It is possible that meeting career goals gives the employee the confidence to offer suggestions and information as well as a sense that their opinions will matter. It is also possible that career goal progress makes the employee feel more secure in their position within the organization, which reduces the negative consequences associated with voice behavior.

6.2. Organizational career growth and affective organizational commitment

Weng et al. (2010) established a positive association between organizational career growth and affective organizational commitment using cross-sectional data. Our results demonstrate that this holds across time and extends both Meyer and Herscovitch's (2001) finding that affective commitment is influenced by employees' perception of task identity and how their work is valued and Ng, Butts, Vandenberg, DeJoy, and Wilson's (2006) work showing that opportunities for learning are related to affective commitment.

Dominance analyses also affirmed that career goal progress exhibits the greatest effect on affective commitment. This suggests that intrinsic aspects of career development may be more meaningful than extrinsic aspects and that progress toward goal accomplishment (an end) is more important than the means associated with career growth, such as skill acquisition. It also suggests that organizational rewards are less influential because they are more at the mercy of economic considerations facing organizations.

Note, however, that we are not suggesting that professional ability development and organizational rewards are unimportant, rather that, in terms of building affective commitment, it is the meaningful progress made toward career goals that has the greatest impact on employee affective commitment to their employing organization. In this respect, Weng et al. (2010) suggested that extrinsic awards might be more salient to other forms of organizational commitment, such as continuance and commitment.

6.3. The role of affective organizational commitment

Our finding of partial mediation by affective commitment speaks directly to the importance of an emotional and psychological connection between employees and organizations. Compared to Tornau and Frese's (2013) research, the results of our time-lag study tell us that the role of affective commitment extends to subsequent voice behavior. While time-lag research cannot demonstrate a causal relationship per se, our results do bolster the case for the existence of a causal relationship. Future experimental research will be needed to replicate these results and to confirm the causal nature of the relationship.

In addition, our finding of a partial mediating role for affective organizational commitment on the relationship between organizational career growth and voice behavior, suggests that, in terms of voice behavior, providing opportunities for organizational career growth are more important for employees who exhibit lower levels of affective commitment. Highly committed individuals, who identify with the goals and values of their organization, are more likely to engage in voice behaviors anyway. On the other hand, providing organizational career growth opportunities for employees low in affective commitment may not only increase voice behavior leading to improving the products, services and functioning of the organization (Lepine & Van Dyne, 2001), but build affective commitment as well.

6.4. Gender differences

The field of organizational behavior has seen considerable research on the effect of gender on prosocial and antisocial behaviors (Eagly & Wood, 1991). The results of gender differences on voice behavior are mixed (Morrison, 2011), however. A few studies (Detert & Burris, 2007; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998) found that males exhibit greater levels of voice behavior than females, while other studies (e.g. Anderson & Martin, 1995) stated that women have higher rates of communication with their coworkers and supervisors than men. In this respect, our research offers a new understanding of the role of gender as an antecedent of voice behavior. Our results show that career goal progress is more important to men as a determinant of voice behavior perhaps because they pay closer attention to career achievement. Men who are successful in meeting their career goals within their current organization are more likely reciprocate to their organization by speaking up, offering suggestions and opinions in an effort to improve the organization's functioning. Women, on the other hand, see professional ability development as a more salient aspect of organizational career growth than career goal progress. For them, professional ability development may make them more competent and more confident about speaking up. This speculation is in line with prior research (Greene & DeBacker, 2004) demonstrating that the main obstacle to voice behavior on the part of women is a lack of efficacy.

6.5. Limitations

Our findings must be viewed in light of four limitations. First, all our data were self-reported. Although a majority of the studies on employee voice rely on self-report measures, alternative forms of data collection using supervisor and peer ratings could further minimize common method bias (Ng & Feldman, 2012). Nonetheless, self-report data may be more subtle than that observed by others because leaders and peers may capture only those gestures intended to impress, resulting in an underreporting of voice behavior. Future researchers would be advised to consider use of self- versus other-reports of voice behavior.

Second, we utilized Chinese samples, making it unclear whether our results are generalizable to other cultures. Previous research (e.g. see Friedman, Chi, & Liu, 2006; Venkataramani & Tangirala, 2010) has suggested that the mean and variance levels in voice behaviors may be lower in China because higher levels of power distance and collectivism make the Chinese people more hesitant to engage in voice behaviors out of a fear that engaging in voice behavior may engender more social costs than in western cultures. Future research on the role of culture as a contextual predictor of voice is warranted.

Third, because participants were from many different organizations, we were unable to control other contextual factors that might affect the relationships uncovered in this study. For example, organizational culture, leadership style and leader trust associated with voice behavior (Liu et al., 2010; Morrison, 2011) may shape the magnitude and nature of the effects of employee career growth on voice behavior. Moreover, other individual difference variables may also affect the relationship between career growth and voice behavior. In this respect, previous research (e.g., see Lepine & Van Dyne, 2001; Lepine & Van Dyne, 1998) has shown personality and general-efficacy to be related to voice behavior. Clearly, research on how these and other individual level factors affect the organizational career growth–voice behavior relationship is another avenue for future research.

Fourth, we examined the role of affective organizational commitment as a mediator of the relationship between organizational career growth and employee voice behavior. While affective organizational commitment is a logical measure of psychological attachment, there are other forms of psychological attachment, such as organizational-based self-esteem and interpersonal climate that may enhance or substitute for the role played by affective organizational commitment. For example, Parker, Bindl, and Strauss (2010) found that employees who have the support of their peers are more likely to engage in voice behavior, but it remains to be seen whether interpersonal climate would mediate or moderate the relationship between organizational career growth and voice behaviors.

6.6. Future research directions

Our findings highlight a previously unexamined relationship between organizational career growth and voice behavior. Organizational career growth is not a static concept; one might expect the relationship between it and voice behavior to be affected by career stage. Moreover, although we demonstrated a relationship between organizational career growth and subsequent voice, it would be interesting to examine whether that relationship is reciprocal in nature. That is, does an increase in employee voice behavior lead to increased opportunities for career growth? If the organization truly benefits from increased employee voice behavior, it may reciprocate by offering such opportunities to employees whose voice behavior benefits the organization, as suggested by social exchange theory.

6.7. Implications

This research suggests five important implications on how organizations should adapt their practices to better deal with the changing patterns of career management in today's organizations. First, our findings suggest that organizational career growth is a viable subset of practices that should be considered by managers seeking to increase employees' willingness to provide comments or suggestions on improving organizational competitiveness. In this respect, it is important for organizations to assess the fit between new employees' career goals and organizational development opportunities. Doing so should enable employees to connect their career goals with the organization's development opportunities.

Second, professional ability development not only can help employees acquire new skills but also should give them a broader competency base from which to offer a wider array of information, ideas, and suggestions, particularly among women. In short, professional ability development enhances the potential of employees to improve the functioning of their organization and or work unit through voice behavior.

Third, our findings imply that organizations must have a reward system that recognizes the contribution of employees. Organizations should investigate the satisfaction of employees with their organization's reward system and work to improve it in a manner that rewards citizenship behaviors and encourages employees to engage in voice behavior (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007).

Fourth, our finding that affective commitment is related to increased voice implies that organizations need to build and to maintain a committed workforce. Hence, managers who want to encourage voice can take steps to promote high levels of affective commitment through effective recruitment, employee involvement mechanisms (Crawshaw et al., 2012) and organizational career management (Weng et al., 2010). In short, we have demonstrated that building organizational career growth is one avenue for increasing the contribution of employees toward organizational success through employee voice behavior.

Fifth and finally, our results regarding the moderating role of gender suggest that different organizational growth paths may be necessary for men and women in order to maximize the impact of organizational career growth on voice behavior. The finding of a mediating effect for affective commitment suggests that it is more important to provide opportunities for organizational career growth for less committed individuals, such as those new to the organization. Providing opportunities for organizational career growth should not only enhance employee affective commitment to the organization, but also work to enhance their voice contributions to the welfare of the organization.

Acknowledgments

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