

## The Impact of Relational Human Resource Management Practices on Beneficiaries' Altruistic Behavior: A Moral Compensation Perspective

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### Abstract

Relational human resource management (HRM) practices are prevalent in numerous organizations and institutions. While scholars have devoted considerable attention to their negative impacts on society, organizations, and individuals, prior research has overlooked the other side of relational HRM practices. This study examines the positive effect of relational HRM practices on the altruistic behavior of relationship beneficiaries from a moral compensation perspective, testing the research hypotheses through four experimental designs. The findings demonstrate that relational HRM practices motivate relationship beneficiaries to engage in altruistic behavior as a form of moral compensation. The moral self-image and guilt emotions of relationship beneficiaries mediate the relationship between relational HRM practices and altruistic behavior (Studies 1 and 2). Furthermore, the relationship closeness between beneficiaries and non-beneficiary colleagues positively moderates this chain mediation effect (Study 3). Compared with low levels of relationship closeness, the indirect effect of relational HRM practices on altruistic behavior through moral self-image and guilt emotions is stronger under high levels of relationship closeness. This research contributes to expanding theoretical perspectives on relational practices and provides recommendations for corporate managers to balance the negative impacts of relational HRM practices.

### Full Text

## The Impact of Guanxi Human Resource Management Practices on Beneficiaries' Altruistic Behavior: A Compensatory Ethics Perspective

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## Abstract

Guanxi human resource management (HRM) practices are prevalent across numerous organizations and institutions, and scholars have devoted considerable attention to their negative consequences for society, organizations, and individuals. However, prior research has overlooked another dimension of guanxi HRM practices. Drawing on compensatory ethics theory, this paper investigates the positive effect of guanxi HRM practices on beneficiaries' altruistic behavior, which stems from a motivation to compensate for unfair advantages. Across four experimental studies, we find that guanxi HRM practices prompt beneficiaries to engage in altruistic acts as a form of moral reparation. Specifically, beneficiaries' moral self-image and guilt serially mediate the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and altruistic behavior (Studies 1 and 2). Furthermore, the closeness of the relationship between beneficiaries and non-beneficiary colleagues positively moderates this serial mediation effect (Study 3). The indirect effect of guanxi HRM practices on altruistic behavior through moral self-image and guilt is stronger under high relationship closeness than under low relationship closeness. These findings expand the theoretical perspective on guanxi practices and provide recommendations for managers seeking to mitigate the negative effects of guanxi HRM practices.

**Keywords:** guanxi human resource management practices, guanxi beneficiary, moral self-image, guilt, altruistic behavior, relationship closeness, compensatory ethics theory

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Since ancient times, Chinese society has placed great emphasis on “guanxi” (personal relationships). Idioms such as “inheriting father’s business,” “nepotism through marital connections,” and “shielding relatives from punishment” all reflect the potential benefits derived from personal relationships. In contemporary organizations, leaders with unique resources continue to favor employees with whom they have pre-existing personal relationships—such as friends or relatives—in HR decisions involving promotion, resource allocation, performance evaluation, and compensation. Scholars have collectively termed this phenomenon guanxi-based human resource management (HRM) practices. Guanxi HRM practices fundamentally violate organizational regulations, leading to unfair resource distribution and reducing employees’ perceived justice [?, ?]. They also exert numerous negative effects on employee emotions and behaviors [?, ?, ?]. Given the prevalence and inherent unfairness of guanxi HRM practices, under-

standing how organizations can respond to and mitigate their negative consequences has become critically important. Previous research has predominantly examined the negative effects of guanxi HRM practices from the perspective of non-beneficiaries, while largely neglecting how stakeholders might address these negative impacts. When we shift our perspective to the beneficiaries of guanxi HRM practices, we discover that these practices may trigger self-reflection among beneficiaries, subsequently motivating them to exhibit compensatory intentions and behaviors toward other colleagues.

When leaders implement guanxi HRM practices, they violate principles of organizational justice by allocating resources originally belonging to other colleagues to guanxi beneficiaries [?, ?], thereby making non-beneficiary colleagues victims of these decisions. In organizational settings, individuals tend to maintain a positive moral self-image [?, ?], yet guanxi HRM practices violate organizational norms [?, ?]. These practices not only strip beneficiaries of symbols of moral selfhood but also activate their motivation to repair their moral image. Compensatory ethics theory posits that after engaging in unethical behavior or obtaining unethical benefits, individuals experience guilt due to damage to their moral image [?, ?], and this guilt further motivates them to engage in altruistic behavior to compensate those who have suffered losses. However, in organizational contexts, whether and how beneficiaries repair their moral image through moral emotions and behaviors remains an unanswered question in existing research.

Additionally, according to the principle of renqing (human sentiment), people are reluctant to harm close relationships. Guanxi HRM practices essentially cause beneficiaries to indirectly touch upon and deprive non-beneficiary colleagues of their interests, potentially leading beneficiaries to believe they have violated renqing principles. The closer the relationship between beneficiaries and non-beneficiary colleagues, the more clearly beneficiaries recognize the harm that guanxi HRM practices inflict upon non-beneficiaries. Under such circumstances, the damage to moral image caused by guanxi HRM practices may trigger stronger guilt among beneficiaries [?, ?], which in turn motivates their self-regulation and altruistic intentions. Therefore, in Chinese organizational contexts, the closeness of relationships with non-beneficiary colleagues may constitute an important boundary condition for beneficiaries' moral compensation behaviors resulting from guanxi HRM practices. Based on this reasoning, this paper constructs a theoretical model of how guanxi HRM practices positively influence employee behavior through compensatory ethics theory, examining the roles of moral self-image, guilt, and non-beneficiary coworker relationship closeness, as illustrated in Figure 1.

### Figure 1. Theoretical Model

This research makes three primary contributions. First, it enriches the theoretical understanding of guanxi HRM practices by adopting the beneficiary perspective. Second, it examines both the mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions through which guanxi HRM practices promote beneficiaries' altruistic

tic behavior, thereby demonstrating the existence of a self-balancing mechanism within guanxi HRM practices. Finally, it provides practical recommendations for managers on how to mitigate the negative effects of guanxi HRM practices through beneficiaries' moral compensation behaviors.

### 1.1 Guanxi HRM Practices and Beneficiary Altruistic Behavior

Guanxi HRM practices refer to leaders' favoritism toward guanxi beneficiaries—individuals with whom they share personal relationships—when making HR decisions regarding recruitment, performance, compensation, and other matters [?]. This favoritism often involves allocating resources originally belonging to non-beneficiaries to guanxi beneficiaries and is widely regarded as an unethical decision. First, according to compensatory ethics theory, individuals associated with unethical behavior may engage in moral compensation, regardless of whether they directly participated in the decision-making process [?]. Although beneficiaries do not actively make guanxi HRM practice decisions, they nevertheless benefit from these unethical decisions. The benefits they receive cause losses for some team members, thereby motivating beneficiaries to compensate the disadvantaged parties in response to the negative feedback generated by guanxi HRM practices. Second, guanxi HRM practices prompt beneficiaries to compare their current behavior with past moral conduct and heighten their awareness of having harmed other team members, leading them to compensate for their wrongdoing through subsequent altruistic behavior [?]. Altruistic behavior offers numerous benefits to beneficiaries [?], not only helping them atone for their faults but also restoring their moral image within the organization [?]. Finally, people generally internalize morality as their behavioral code, yet guanxi HRM practices violate not only organizational norms but also personal principles, causing beneficiaries to develop compensatory motivation when their behavior fails to meet organizational expectations [?, ?]. The altruistic behavior triggered by this compensatory motivation can balance the tension between beneficiaries' self-interest and their desire to maintain a positive moral image [?]. Therefore, to compensate for the harm that guanxi HRM practices inflict upon disadvantaged parties, beneficiaries will proactively engage in altruistic behavior until they perceive their moral level to be balanced, thus forming a continuous compensation process. We therefore propose Hypothesis 1:

**Hypothesis 1:** Guanxi HRM practices positively influence beneficiaries' altruistic behavior.

### 1.2 The Mediating Role of Beneficiaries' Moral Self-Image and Guilt

#### Figure 2. Beneficiary Moral Compensation Process Model

Based on compensatory ethics theory, previous research has found that employees' unethical behavior induces psychological distress and shame [?]. To

protect themselves from threat, individuals engage in emotional self-regulation to mitigate the negative reactions caused by unethical behavior [?], and guilt represents precisely such an emotion that emerges to regulate one's moral level. Guilt functions as a "moral barometer," enabling individuals to evaluate whether their behavior aligns with their own moral standards and those of others, and is therefore termed a moral emotion [?, ?]. Consequently, beneficiaries may experience guilt to alleviate the psychological pressure caused by guanxi HRM practices.

Literature review reveals that individuals experience guilt even when they have not engaged in unethical behavior themselves but merely believe they have done something wrong or are indirectly associated with unethical actors [?, ?], subsequently undergoing moral compensation processes [?]. Therefore, as an unethical decision [?], guanxi HRM practices may cause both leaders and beneficiaries to feel guilt toward disadvantaged parties. Due to the power gap between disadvantaged parties and leaders [?], disadvantaged parties typically do not directly convey negative feedback to leaders nor openly express dissatisfaction with their decisions [?]. In contrast, beneficiaries generally share the same rank as disadvantaged parties and have opportunities to receive negative feedback from them, which may cause reputational damage to beneficiaries. Thus, compared to leaders, beneficiaries have a greater need to compensate for the reputational losses caused by guanxi HRM practices and eliminate negative consequences for themselves. In summary, we argue that when beneficiaries experience unfair guanxi HRM practices, they perceive themselves as the trigger for unethical decisions and develop intense guilt to regulate their psychological pressure. Research has confirmed that guilt serves as an internal mediator of the moral compensation mechanism, motivating beneficiaries to engage in positive behaviors to maintain their self-image, such as donating [?], green consumption [?], and repairing interpersonal relationships [?]. We therefore propose Hypothesis 2:

**Hypothesis 2:** Beneficiaries' guilt mediates the positive relationship between guanxi HRM practices and altruistic behavior.

Although numerous scholars have demonstrated that norm violations trigger guilt [?, ?], potential mediating mechanisms may exist [?]. In moral compensation research, moral self-concept plays an important buffering role in linking unethical behavior with compensatory behavior, as unethical behavior typically threatens moral self-concept, thereby generating guilt and compensatory behavior [?]. Moral self-concept is typically reflected through moral self-image and moral self-regard. Moral self-image represents a dynamic and malleable moral self-concept that reflects both individuals' moral self-perceptions based on internal standards and the influence of external standards (others' evaluations) on their moral self-assessment [?]. Unlike moral self-image, moral self-regard focuses solely on self-perceived morality while neglecting others' evaluations. Recent research indicates that guilt does not always originate from self-perception but may also stem from others' perceptions and evaluations. For example, negative feedback from others regarding one's unethical behavior can trigger guilt

[?], subsequently prompting compensatory behavior [?].

Based on this logic, we argue that moral self-image is more appropriate than moral self-regard for explaining the buffering mechanism between guanxi HRM practices and guilt. From the perspective of guanxi HRM practices' mechanism, beneficiaries are not the direct decision-makers. Therefore, beneficiaries' moral judgments stem from both self-perception and, more likely, from surrounding people and external factors. In guanxi HRM practices, beneficiaries often receive favoritism and care from decision-makers while non-beneficiary colleagues suffer losses, potentially leading to negative evaluations of beneficiaries from non-beneficiaries [?]. These third-party negative evaluations threaten beneficiaries' moral self-image and deepen their recognition of the unethical nature of guanxi HRM practices. Thus, on one hand, guanxi HRM practices constitute an unethical decision [?], leading beneficiaries to negatively evaluate their moral self-image based on internal standards, which further triggers guilt to alleviate psychological pressure. On the other hand, guanxi HRM practices directly harm non-beneficiary colleagues, prompting beneficiaries to attend to others' moral evaluations. Negative moral evaluations from others threaten beneficiaries' moral self-image [?], thereby motivating guilt to regulate moral imbalance and 倾向于采取一定的修复行为来弥补对非受益同事的伤害. Therefore, we propose that moral self-image and guilt serially mediate the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and altruistic behavior, leading to Hypothesis 3:

**Hypothesis 3:** Guanxi HRM practices positively influence altruistic behavior through the serial mediation of beneficiaries' moral self-image and guilt.

### 1.3 The Moderating Role of Non-Beneficiary Coworker Relationship Closeness

Compensatory ethics theory suggests that personal factors such as moral identity and moral awareness can strengthen or weaken the moral compensation process [?, ?]. However, based on renqing principles, interpersonal relationship closeness also influences moral judgment, and interpersonal relationships continue to play an irreplaceable role in Chinese organizational contexts. People establish personal relationship networks based on two motivations: instrumental and affective [?]. Instrumental motivation primarily aims at obtaining benefits or achieving specific goals, whereas affective motivation seeks no return and emphasizes establishing and maintaining intimate relationships [?]. In workplace settings, coworker and supervisor-subordinate relationships typically serve as the foundation for beneficiaries to obtain psychological and material resources. While beneficiaries may establish relationships with leaders for instrumental returns [?], relationships between beneficiaries and non-beneficiary colleagues may be built on affective motivations [?, ?]. Beneficiaries receive biased decisions from leaders by exchanging material and spiritual resources [?], yet this instrumental motivation often damages original affective relationships. Consequently, beneficiaries must balance instrumental and affective relationships. To accommodate both, beneficiaries accept their investment returns (i.e., biased decisions

from leaders) while simultaneously engaging in compensatory behavior to balance the damage their gains cause to intimate relationships with non-beneficiary colleagues.

When relationship closeness between beneficiaries and non-beneficiary colleagues is high, beneficiaries receive support and assistance from non-beneficiary colleagues and consequently experience stronger moral violation from having deprived these colleagues of resources through guanxi HRM practices. Beneficiaries must bear the risk of ostracism caused by guanxi HRM practices and become more concerned about their moral image in the eyes of non-beneficiary colleagues. Once beneficiaries feel that their gains have harmed long-maintained intimate relationships, their attention to moral self-image further triggers guilt and motivates positive actions to repair the damaged moral self-image in the eyes of non-beneficiary colleagues, such as reconciliation and prosocial behavior [?]. As intimacy between beneficiaries and non-beneficiary colleagues increases, the perceived moral violation caused by guanxi HRM practices becomes more intense. Under these conditions, beneficiaries' cognition regarding the deprivation of non-beneficiary colleagues' resources may result in more severe damage to moral self-image and stronger guilt [?, ?]. To compensate for the losses inflicted upon non-beneficiary colleagues and restore moral self-image, guilt motivates beneficiaries to exhibit more altruistic behavior toward non-beneficiary colleagues in subsequent work.

When relationship closeness between beneficiaries and non-beneficiary colleagues is low, beneficiaries have more distant relationships with non-beneficiary colleagues, characterized by reduced interaction and exchange. Consequently, beneficiaries do not receive much support or trust from non-beneficiary colleagues [?]. Therefore, as intimacy with non-beneficiary colleagues decreases, beneficiaries' perceived moral violation resulting from guanxi HRM practices may decline, their concern for moral self-image in the eyes of non-beneficiary colleagues diminishes, the serial mediating effect of moral self-image and guilt weakens, and compensatory altruistic behavior decreases accordingly.

We therefore propose Hypothesis 4:

**Hypothesis 4:** Non-beneficiary coworker relationship closeness moderates the serial mediating effect of moral self-image and guilt on the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and altruistic behavior, such that the serial mediating effect is stronger when the beneficiary-non-beneficiary coworker relationship closeness is high rather than low.

Experimental methods can exclude confounding factors and enable more accurate causal inferences [?]. Therefore, this research conducted three studies using experimental methods. Study 1 examined the mediating mechanism of beneficiaries' guilt in the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and altruistic behavior through two experimental scenarios: performance evaluation and bonus allocation. Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 using a promotion scenario and further tested the serial mediating role of moral self-image



and guilt in the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and altruistic behavior. Study 3 employed a 2×2 between-subjects factorial design to test the moderating effect of non-beneficiary coworker relationship closeness in the serial mediating mechanism within a bonus allocation scenario.

## Study 1a

### Method

**Participants.** This experiment used a between-subjects design. Study 1a recruited 124 undergraduate and graduate students from a university, with 61 participants in the high guanxi HRM practice condition and 63 in the low guanxi HRM practice condition. The sample comprised 39.5% males and 60.5% females, with a mean age of 20 years ( $SD = 2.9$ ). Since the questionnaire was distributed under instructor supervision, no duplicate or careless responses were identified. Using G\*Power 3.1 to calculate effect size, with a sample size of 124,  $\alpha = 0.05$ , and power = 0.95, the effect size  $f^2 = 0.11$ . According to established guidelines where  $f^2$  values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 correspond to small, medium, and large effects respectively [?], the obtained effect size in this study falls within the small-to-medium range.

**Manipulation and Measures.** We adapted experimental materials from Blader and Chen (2012) and Chen et al. (2004) to design a performance evaluation scenario. Participants first received instructions about the experiment and were informed that they would assume a role in the scenario.

Participants read the following scenario: “In your team or department, you and your colleague Zhang Qing completed a task together. After task completion, your supervisor Zhao Zi will evaluate your performance, with only one ‘excellent’ rating available. The employee receiving an excellent rating will obtain a substantial year-end bonus. You have a very close friendship with supervisor Zhao Zi and communicate frequently in private, whereas colleague Zhang Qing has no other relationship with supervisor Zhao Zi. During task completion, colleague Zhang Qing exceeded task requirements, whereas you did not.”

High (low) guanxi HRM practice condition: “The final performance evaluation result is that supervisor Zhao Zi gave the only ‘excellent’ rating to you (colleague Zhang Qing), with colleague Zhang Qing (you) receiving a ‘satisfactory’ rating.”

Finally, participants completed the following measures:

*Manipulation check:* We assessed guanxi HRM practices using two items from Chen (2004) on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). A sample item is: “Your friendship with supervisor Zhao Zi determined the outcome of this performance evaluation” ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ).

*Mediator:* We measured guilt using Watson and Clark’s (1994) scale on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all guilty, 7 = very guilty). The scale comprised



two items, including: “Please rate the degree of guilt you experienced in this performance evaluation” ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

*Dependent variable:* We measured altruistic behavior using Williams and Anderson’s (1991) scale on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The scale contained six items, such as: “When Zhang Qing takes leave, you would proactively assume some of Zhang Qing’s work responsibilities” ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ).

## Results

**Manipulation Check.** Independent samples t-test results confirmed the effectiveness of our guanxi HRM practice manipulation. A significant difference emerged between the low guanxi HRM practice condition ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ) and the high guanxi HRM practice condition ( $M = 5.51$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ),  $t(122) = 9.95$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 1.79$ , indicating successful manipulation.

**Hypothesis Testing.** Beneficiaries’ altruistic behavior in the high guanxi HRM practice condition ( $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) was significantly higher than in the low guanxi HRM practice condition ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ),  $t(122) = 3.44$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.61$ , supporting Hypothesis 1. Similarly, guilt in the high guanxi HRM practice condition ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) differed significantly from guilt in the low condition ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ),  $t(122) = 5.98$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 1.07$ .

To test the mediating effect of guilt, we used Hayes’s (2013) PROCESS macro Model 4. We conducted bootstrapping path analysis with 5,000 random samples from the full dataset to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals. Results showed that the indirect effect of guanxi HRM practices on altruistic behavior through guilt was 0.37 ( $SE = 0.12$ ), with a 95% confidence interval of [0.15, 0.61] that excluded zero, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2.

## Study 1b

### Method

**Participants.** We recruited 185 working employees online for this between-subjects experiment. After excluding participants with excessively short response times who failed to identify the scenario design, we obtained 184 valid samples, with 95 in the high guanxi HRM practice condition and 89 in the low guanxi HRM practice condition. The sample comprised 70.7% males and 29.3% females, ranging in age from 18 to 50 years ( $M = 25$ ,  $SD = 5.41$ ). Using G\*Power 3.1, with a sample size of 184,  $\alpha = 0.05$ , and power = 0.95, the effect size  $f^2 = 0.07$ , which falls within the small-to-medium range.

**Manipulation and Measures.** We adapted experimental materials from Blader and Chen (2012) and Chen et al. (2004) to design Study 1b materials. Participants first read instructions and were informed they would assume

a role in the scenario, then were randomly assigned to either the high or low condition.

Participants read the following scenario: “Imagine you are an employee in the sales department of M Company, and Zhang Qing is your colleague. During this year’s annual review, your supervisor, General Manager Zhao, will allocate an additional 10,000 RMB bonus to an individual with outstanding performance.”

High (low) guanxi HRM practice condition: “General Manager Zhao has a nephew relationship with you, whereas colleague Zhang Qing has no other relationship with General Manager Zhao. During the year-end performance evaluation, colleague Zhang Qing exceeded task requirements, whereas you did not. General Manager Zhao ultimately allocated the additional 10,000 RMB bonus to you (colleague Zhang Qing).”

Finally, participants completed measures similar to Study 1a, all using 7-point Likert scales. The internal consistency coefficients for guanxi HRM practices, guilt, and altruistic behavior were 0.88, 0.92, and 0.94, respectively. Participants received a small cash reward after completing the experiment.

## Results

**Manipulation Check.** Independent samples t-test results showed a significant difference between the low guanxi HRM practice condition ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ) and the high guanxi HRM practice condition ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ),  $t(182) = 6.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.96$ , confirming successful manipulation.

**Hypothesis Testing.** Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive effect of guanxi HRM practices on beneficiaries’ altruistic behavior. Independent samples t-test results revealed that beneficiaries’ altruistic behavior in the high guanxi HRM practice condition ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) was significantly higher than in the low condition ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ),  $t(182) = 2.61$ ,  $p = 0.01$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.38$ , supporting Hypothesis 1. Additionally, guilt in the high guanxi HRM practice condition ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) differed significantly from guilt in the low condition ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ),  $t(182) = 5.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.78$ .

Hypothesis 2 predicted that beneficiaries’ guilt mediates the positive effect of guanxi HRM practices on altruistic behavior. To test this mediating effect, we again used Hayes’s (2013) PROCESS macro Model 4, conducting bootstrapping path analysis with 5,000 random samples to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals. Results showed that the indirect effect of guanxi HRM practices on altruistic behavior through guilt was 0.33 ( $SE = 0.08$ ), with a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval of [0.19, 0.51] that excluded zero, thereby replicating support for Hypothesis 2.

## Study 2

### Purpose

Studies 1a and 1b, using different samples, demonstrated that guanxi HRM practices positively influence beneficiaries' altruistic behavior in both performance evaluation and bonus allocation scenarios, with guilt mediating this relationship. However, these studies did not test the serial mediating effect of moral self-image and guilt. Additionally, both studies shared a common feature: the experimental design was based on scenarios where beneficiaries failed to complete tasks, leaving untested whether guanxi HRM practices would still influence the moral compensation process when both beneficiaries and colleagues completed tasks successfully. Therefore, Study 2 employed another between-subjects experimental design to test whether guanxi HRM practices would heighten attention to moral self-image, thereby promoting guilt and increasing altruistic behavioral intentions. Study 2 also considered a promotion scenario in HRM to more comprehensively examine the generalizability of our research model.

### Method

**Participants.** We recruited 220 participants from Credamo, primarily working employees. Two participants failed attention check items, one did not complete all measures, and six failed to identify the scenario design, resulting in 211 valid participants, with 105 in the high guanxi HRM practice condition and 106 in the low condition. Each participant received a 1 RMB cash reward. The sample included 90 males (42.7%) and 121 females (57.3%), ranging in age from 19 to 58 years ( $M = 30$ ,  $SD = 6.5$ ). One hundred seventy-five participants held bachelor's degrees or higher (82.9%), with an average tenure of 6 years ( $SD = 5$ ) and 67.8% in frontline positions. Using G\*Power 3.1, with a sample size of 211,  $\alpha = 0.05$ , and  $f = 0.25$ , statistical power reached 0.951 ( $> 0.8$ ), indicating adequate sample size [?].

**Manipulation and Measures.** We again adapted materials from Blader and Chen (2012) and Chen et al. (2004) to design Study 2 experimental materials, following procedures similar to Studies 1a and 1b.

Participants read the following scenario: "Imagine you are a regular employee in the sales department of M Company, and Zhang Qing is your colleague. During this year's annual review, your supervisor, General Manager Zhao, will appoint one of you as the department's sales manager based on performance."

High (low) guanxi HRM practice condition: "General Manager Zhao has a very close friendship with you, whereas colleague Zhang Qing has no other relationship with General Manager Zhao. During the year-end performance evaluation, both colleague Zhang Qing and you completed the tasks successfully. General Manager Zhao rated your performance as 'excellent' ( 'satisfactory' ) and colleague Zhang Qing's performance as 'satisfactory' ( 'excellent' ), and ultimately appointed you (Zhang Qing) as sales manager."

After reading the scenario, participants completed manipulation checks for guanxi HRM practices ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ), and measures of the mediator guilt ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ), moral self-image ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ), and dependent variable altruistic behavior ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). Participants then provided demographic information and received compensation. We assessed moral self-image using two items from Shnabel and Nadler (2008) on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = immoral, 7 = moral). A sample item is: “How do you think you are perceived by other colleagues?” ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ). Other measures were similar to those in Study 1.

## Results

**Manipulation Check.** In the high guanxi HRM practice condition, participants’ perceived guanxi HRM practices ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ) were significantly higher than in the low condition ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ),  $t(209) = 8.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 1.12$ , indicating successful manipulation.

**Hypothesis Testing.** Independent samples t-test results revealed that participants in the high guanxi HRM practice condition exhibited higher altruistic behavioral intentions ( $M = 5.6$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ) than those in the low condition ( $M = 5.25$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ),  $t(209) = 2.55$ ,  $p = 0.01$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.35$ , supporting Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that beneficiaries’ guilt mediates the positive effect of guanxi HRM practices on altruistic behavior. Using Hayes’ s (2013) PROCESS macro Model 4, we conducted bootstrapping path analysis with 5,000 random samples. Results showed that the indirect effect of guanxi HRM practices on altruistic behavior through guilt was 0.13 ( $SE = 0.06$ ), with a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval of [0.02, 0.27] that excluded zero, thereby replicating support for Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that beneficiaries’ moral self-image and guilt would serially promote altruistic behavior. We used Hayes’ s (2013) PROCESS macro Model 6 for bootstrapping path analysis ( $N = 5,000$ ). With guanxi HRM practices as the independent variable, altruistic behavior as the dependent variable, and moral self-image and guilt as serial mediators, the overall regression equation was significant,  $R^2 = 0.03$ ,  $F(1, 209) = 6.53$ ,  $p = 0.01$ . Path coefficients are illustrated in Figure 3.

### Figure 3. Study 2: Serial Mediation Results

Results indicated that the indirect effect through moral self-image alone was -0.18 (95% CI = [-0.36, -0.04]), the indirect effect through guilt alone was 0.08 (95% CI = [0.01, 0.18]), and the serial indirect effect through both moral self-image and guilt was 0.13 (95% CI = [0.05, 0.26]). Since the 95% confidence interval for the serial mediation did not include zero, the serial mediating effect of moral self-image and guilt was supported, confirming Hypothesis 3.

## Study 3

### Purpose

Studies 1a and 1b validated Hypotheses 1-2, and Study 2 validated Hypothesis 3, but none tested the moderation effect. Additionally, experimental mediation analyses have many alternative models, and other potential mediators may exist. For instance, beneficiaries might feel gratitude toward leaders who make guanxi HRM practice decisions and consequently engage in positive behavior based on reciprocity principles. Only by ruling out alternative mediators can we ensure the robustness of our findings [?]. Studies 1 and 2 did not test for other potential mediators or control for them. Therefore, Study 3 aims to test the moderated serial mediation effect and examine other potential mediators.

### Method

**Participants.** Using G\*Power 3.1 for a priori sample size calculation, with  $\alpha = 0.05$ , power = 0.95, and a medium effect size of  $f = 0.25$ , the required sample size was 210. To facilitate participant assignment to conditions, we recruited 220 participants from Credamo, primarily working employees. After excluding two questionnaires with response times under 50 seconds and seven participants who failed to identify the scenario design, we obtained 211 valid participants, each receiving a 1.5 RMB cash reward. The sample included 86 males (40.8%) and 125 females (59.2%), with 72.5% in frontline positions. Ages ranged from 18 to 59 years ( $M = 30$ ,  $SD = 6.9$ ).

**Manipulation and Measures.** Similar to Study 2, Study 3 employed a 2 (guanxi HRM practices: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (coworker relationship closeness: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, read different experimental scenarios while assuming a role, and answered identical questions. The experimental materials were as follows:

High (low) coworker relationship closeness condition: “Imagine you are an employee in the sales department of M Company, and Zhang Qing is your colleague. Zhang Qing frequently collaborates with you in work (never collaborates with you), communicates openly with you (does not communicate openly with you), never (frequently) speaks negatively about you behind your back, and you often (never) dine and chat together during non-work hours. During this year’s annual review, your supervisor, General Manager Zhao, will allocate an additional 10,000 RMB bonus to an individual with outstanding performance.”

High (low) guanxi HRM practice condition: “General Manager Zhao has a nephew relationship with you, whereas colleague Zhang Qing has no other relationship with General Manager Zhao. During the year-end performance evaluation, both colleague Zhang Qing and you completed the tasks successfully. General Manager Zhao rated your performance as ‘excellent’ (Zhang Qing’s performance as ‘excellent’) and colleague Zhang Qing’s performance as ‘sat-

isfactory' (your performance as 'satisfactory' ), and ultimately allocated the additional 10,000 RMB bonus to you (Zhang Qing)."

After reading the materials, participants responded to measures similar to Study 2. To test for potential alternative mediators and ensure that the effect of guanxi HRM practices on beneficiaries' altruistic behavior remained significant after controlling for these alternatives, Study 3 measured not only guanxi HRM practices ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ), moral self-image ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ), guilt ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ), and altruistic behavior ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ), but also gratitude ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ) [?]. All items used 7-point Likert scales with satisfactory Cronbach's alpha coefficients. After completing these measures, participants answered manipulation check questions for non-beneficiary coworker relationship closeness ( $\alpha = 0.98$ ) [?] and provided demographic information.

## Results

**Manipulation Checks.** In the high guanxi HRM practice condition, participants' perceived guanxi HRM practices ( $M = 4.96$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ) were significantly higher than in the low condition ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ),  $t(209) = 11.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.55$ , indicating successful manipulation. Additionally, guanxi HRM practice scores did not differ significantly between the high coworker closeness condition ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ) and low coworker closeness condition ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ),  $t(209) = 0.24$ ,  $p = ns$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.03$ .

Furthermore, participants in the high relationship closeness condition perceived significantly greater intimacy ( $M = 6.02$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) than those in the low closeness condition ( $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ),  $t(209) = 23.81$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen's  $d = 3.00$ . Relationship closeness scores did not differ significantly between the high guanxi HRM practice condition ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ) and low guanxi HRM practice condition ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 2.18$ ),  $t(209) = -0.81$ ,  $p = ns$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.11$ . These results confirm successful manipulation of both guanxi HRM practices and relationship closeness.

**Hypothesis Testing.** Independent samples t-test results showed that beneficiaries' altruistic behavior in the high guanxi HRM practice condition ( $M = 5.1$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ) was significantly higher than in the low condition ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ),  $t(209) = 3.44$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.47$ , supporting Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that guilt mediates the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and altruistic behavior. To better verify the mediating role of guilt, we used Hayes' s (2013) PROCESS macro Model 4 to conduct bootstrapping tests ( $N = 5,000$ ) for potential alternative mediators. Results indicated that gratitude might serve as a potential mediator, with an indirect effect of  $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ , 95%  $CI = [0.16, 0.59]$ . Therefore, to properly test Hypothesis 2, we controlled for gratitude and conducted another bootstrapping test ( $N = 5,000$ ). Results showed that the mediating effect of guilt remained significant, with an indirect effect of  $\beta = 0.39$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ , 95%  $CI = [0.21, 0.61]$ , supporting Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 predicted a serial mediating effect of moral self-image and guilt on the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and altruistic behavior. Using Hayes' s (2013) PROCESS macro Model 6, we conducted bootstrapping path analysis ( $N = 5,000$ ) with guanxi HRM practices as the independent variable, altruistic behavior as the dependent variable, moral self-image and guilt as serial mediators, and gratitude as a control variable. The overall regression equation was significant,  $R^2 = 0.28$ ,  $F(4, 206) = 20.44$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Results showed that the indirect effect through moral self-image alone was  $-0.21$  (95% CI =  $[-0.43, 0.00]$ ), the indirect effect through guilt alone was  $0.23$  (95% CI =  $[0.08, 0.42]$ ), and the serial indirect effect through both moral self-image and guilt was  $0.26$  (95% CI =  $[0.14, 0.44]$ ). The total indirect effect was  $0.28$  (95% CI =  $[0.06, 0.52]$ ). Consistent with Study 2 results, the serial mediation of moral self-image and guilt was supported, confirming Hypothesis 3.

**Table 1. Serial Mediation of Moral Self-Image and Guilt Between Guanxi HRM Practices and Altruistic Behavior**

| Path  | Indirect Effect | 95% CI          |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|
| Guanxi HRM Practices → Guilt → Altruistic Behavior                    | 0.23            | $[0.08, 0.42]$  |
| Guanxi HRM Practices → Moral Self-Image → Altruistic Behavior         | -0.21           | $[-0.43, 0.00]$ |
| Guanxi HRM Practices → Moral Self-Image → Guilt → Altruistic Behavior | 0.26            | $[0.14, 0.44]$  |
| Total Indirect Effect   | 0.28            | $[0.06, 0.52]$  |

To test Hypothesis 4, we incorporated guanxi HRM practices (independent variable), moral self-image and guilt (mediators), altruistic behavior (dependent variable), coworker relationship closeness (moderator), and gratitude (control variable) into Hayes' s (2013) PROCESS macro Model 83. Results are presented in Table 2.



**Table 2. Study 3: Comparison of Serial Mediation Effects Across Conditions**

| Condition                            | Indirect Effect | 95% CI       |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| High Coworker Relationship Closeness | 0.55            | [0.28, 0.92] |
| Low Coworker Relationship Closeness  | 0.30            | [0.11, 0.57] |
| Difference (High - Low)              | 0.25            | [0.05, 0.54] |

The serial mediating effect of moral self-image and guilt on the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and altruistic behavior was significant under low coworker relationship closeness,  $\beta = 0.30$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ , 95% CI = [0.11, 0.57]. This effect was also significant under high coworker relationship closeness,  $\beta = 0.55$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ , 95% CI = [0.28, 0.92]. The difference between these serial mediation effects across conditions was significant,  $\beta_{\text{high-low}} = 0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ , 95% CI = [0.05, 0.54]. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported: coworker relationship closeness moderates the serial mediating effect of moral self-image and guilt on the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and altruistic behavior.

## General Discussion

Drawing on compensatory ethics theory, this research examined the positive effect of guanxi HRM practices on beneficiaries' altruistic behavior and its underlying mechanisms. Across four experimental studies, we found that although beneficiaries are not the decision-makers in guanxi HRM practices, they nevertheless experience diminished moral self-image due to these practices depriving other colleagues of resources. To regulate the pressure caused by this moral deficit, beneficiaries experience guilt and engage in compensatory altruistic behavior to balance their moral standing. We also found that coworker relationship closeness serves as a boundary condition for beneficiaries' compensatory behavior. These findings expand the theoretical perspective on guanxi HRM practices and offer practical implications for managers.

## Theoretical Implications

First, stakeholders in guanxi HRM practices include leaders, beneficiaries, and non-beneficiaries [?, ?], yet few studies have examined the effects of guanxi HRM practices from the beneficiary perspective. As the Chinese proverb states, "one can make amends for past faults with future merits." Our findings reveal that guanxi HRM practices cause beneficiaries to feel they have deprived others of benefits, thereby motivating them to engage in positive behavior to compensate for their moral imbalance. Previous research has primarily focused on the negative effects of guanxi HRM practices, such as increasing perceived unfairness, reducing trust, and decreasing work engagement and performance, while overlooking the compensatory mechanism that beneficiaries activate in response to guanxi HRM practices. Thus, this research not only explores the dual nature of

guanxi HRM practices and supplements the literature on their positive effects but also shifts the research perspective from non-beneficiaries to beneficiaries, providing a theoretical foundation for future research on this population.

Second, we further investigated the underlying mechanism linking guanxi HRM practices and altruistic behavior, successfully validating the serial mediating role of moral self-image and guilt, thereby enriching research on the internal mechanisms of guanxi HRM practices. This research also represents the first application of compensatory ethics theory to explain how guanxi HRM practices influence beneficiaries' altruistic behavior. Previous research on compensatory ethics theory has primarily focused on moral identity, moral maturity, and moral decision-making. Our study extends the application of compensatory ethics theory to guanxi practices and corresponding management decisions. Guanxi HRM practices exist outside formal systems and are often defined as unethical. When individuals become beneficiaries of guanxi HRM practices, they may fall into a moral dilemma. While these practices bring beneficiaries additional bonuses and benefits, they also create moral imbalance. Beneficiaries become aware that their gains are positively associated with harm to others. According to compensatory ethics theory, when individuals harm others or even contemplate such harm, they feel their moral image is damaged and experience a moral emotion—guilt—that motivates them to engage in more prosocial behavior. Previous research has rarely connected guanxi HRM practices with beneficiaries' moral image, emotions, and altruistic motivation from a compensatory ethics perspective. Our research, grounded in compensatory ethics theory, explores the roles of beneficiaries' moral image and guilt in linking guanxi HRM practices with altruistic behavior.

Finally, relationship closeness has long been important in everyday life, as reflected in Chinese idioms such as “close as brothers,” “intimate as family,” and “devoted friends.” In Chinese organizational contexts, incorporating relationship closeness as a factor that strengthens or weakens the positive effects of guanxi HRM practices is essential for expanding the boundary conditions of these practices' positive influence. In workplace settings, coworker relationship closeness within a team can influence individuals' emotions, work motivation, and behavior. Previous research has also found that when perpetrators have close relationships with victims, they experience higher levels of guilt [?, ?]. Our findings align with this conclusion, demonstrating experimentally that when beneficiaries have closer relationships with non-beneficiary colleagues, guanxi HRM practices cause beneficiaries to experience greater moral self-image deficit and guilt, leading to more altruistic behavior. Conversely, when beneficiaries have more distant relationships with non-beneficiary colleagues, the moral self-image damage caused by guanxi HRM practices decreases, along with guilt and compensatory behavior. Therefore, examining how relationship closeness moderates the effects of guanxi HRM practices on the moral compensation process holds significant meaning for understanding this mechanism in workplace contexts.

## Managerial Implications

Beyond theoretical contributions, this research offers recommendations for mitigating and balancing the negative effects of guanxi HRM practices. First, our findings confirm from the beneficiary perspective that guanxi HRM practices can promote altruistic behavior, but this does not imply that managers can use these practices without restraint. In any team, employees without guanxi connections constitute the majority, and the positive effects of guanxi HRM practices only occur among specific stakeholders. Therefore, the occurrence of guanxi HRM practices remains more harmful than beneficial for the entire team. On one hand, managers should prevent guanxi HRM practices at the source by avoiding working in the same department as relatives and friends. On the other hand, when guanxi HRM practices do occur, managers must recognize their dual nature, rationally understand their differential effects on beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, and leverage beneficiaries' moral compensation behavior to mitigate negative impacts.

Second, many enterprises have implemented formal and strict recruitment, promotion, and compensation systems to control guanxi HRM practices. However, China is a renqing society, and we cannot completely eliminate resource acquisition through guanxi in workplace settings. When guanxi cannot be avoided, how to properly manage this practice becomes a key consideration for managers. Our findings indicate that, based on compensatory ethics theory, beneficiaries' attention to moral self-image and their experience of guilt are important mediators linking guanxi HRM practices to altruistic behavior. Precisely because of the negative effects of guanxi HRM practices, beneficiaries feel their moral self-image is damaged and experience guilt, which activates their repair mechanism and leads to altruistic behavior to compensate for moral imbalance. Therefore, managers should clearly make beneficiaries aware of the unethical nature of guanxi HRM practices and use training and communication methods to enhance employees' moral standards and organizational identification, thereby stimulating beneficiaries' moral emotions and focusing their attention on the organizational environment and performance improvement.

Finally, the positive effects of guanxi HRM practices do not apply to all beneficiaries. In teams with high coworker relationship closeness, beneficiaries have trusting and supportive relationships with other team members, making them more attentive to their moral standing after harming non-beneficiary colleagues. To regulate the pressure caused by moral imbalance, beneficiaries experience guilt and subsequently engage in positive behavior that benefits others. Once team members have distant relationships, beneficiaries perceive weaker negative effects of guanxi HRM practices because they do not feel their moral self-image is damaged, do not experience guilt, and do not engage in compensatory behavior. Therefore, managers need to foster good and harmonious corporate culture, enhance employee cohesion, and cultivate harmonious atmospheres among colleagues to inhibit interpersonal conflicts. A positive team climate can mitigate the negative effects of guanxi HRM practices.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Although we validated our findings across four experimental studies, several limitations remain. First, all experimental scenarios used between-subjects designs. While different scenarios enhanced robustness and external generalizability, the external validity of experiments has inherent limitations. Some scholars have used questionnaires to examine differences between interpersonal and team-level guanxi practices [?] but have not clearly distinguished between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. Future research could develop well-validated scales to re-examine the relationships among variables. Our studies primarily designed experimental materials from the employee perspective; for the leader perspective, the moral compensation mechanism may operate differently when guanxi HRM practices occur. Future research could use different samples and designs to test the robustness of our model.

Second, our findings indicate that under high coworker relationship closeness, beneficiaries experience damaged moral self-image and stronger guilt due to guanxi HRM practices, leading to altruistic behavior. Previous research has also confirmed that individuals with high moral identity are more likely to engage in moral compensation behavior, but other boundary conditions of the moral compensation mechanism exist. Each individual possesses unique personal characteristics. For example, narcissistic individuals, who are overly concerned with self-interest, are less likely to perceive their behavior as involving moral image and less likely to feel guilt. Additionally, individuals high in moral disengagement tend to rationalize their unethical behavior, thereby hindering the moral compensation process. Future research could explore other boundary conditions of the moral compensation mechanism to better understand how to strengthen or weaken this process.

Third, our research implies that after benefiting from relationship-based resource allocation, beneficiaries are affected by the unethical nature of guanxi HRM practices, representing a useful extension of compensatory ethics theory. Previous research in the moral compensation domain has primarily focused on decision-makers who engage in unethical behavior [?, ?]. However, our findings reveal that beneficiaries of unethical decisions also experience moral compensation motivation. This motivation may involve a self-attribution process whereby beneficiaries indirectly attribute the occurrence of guanxi HRM practices to themselves, thereby feeling their moral self-image is damaged. Although we controlled for reciprocal mechanisms such as gratitude and tested the serial mediating effect of moral self-image and guilt, research has identified other drivers of moral compensation, including feelings of immorality, desire for purification, and self-blame [?]. Moral self-regard is also conceptually similar to moral self-image in reflecting moral image evaluation, yet we did not extensively explore moral self-regard. Therefore, other potential self-attribution-related mediating mechanisms remain for future research to investigate.

Finally, based on compensatory ethics theory, our findings confirm that indi-

viduals who benefit from guanxi HRM practices also engage in compensatory behavior, demonstrating that compensatory ethics theory can explain management practices. However, it remains unknown whether other behaviors with unethical characteristics also trigger compensatory behavior. Future research could investigate whether the moral compensation mechanism applies to other norm-violating behaviors, such as rule-breaking, gossiping, and abusive supervision.

## Conclusion

This research examined the effect of guanxi HRM practices on beneficiaries' altruistic behavior and its underlying boundary conditions and mechanisms. Results demonstrate that guanxi HRM practices promote beneficiaries' altruistic behavior, which is serially mediated by beneficiaries' moral self-image and guilt. The closeness of the relationship between beneficiaries and non-beneficiary colleagues moderates this serial mediation effect, such that the serial mediating effect of moral self-image and guilt on the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and altruistic behavior strengthens as relationship closeness increases. This research expands the theoretical perspective on guanxi HRM practices by adopting a beneficiary viewpoint and provides recommendations for managers on how to mitigate the negative effects of guanxi HRM practices through beneficiaries' compensatory behavior.

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