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Subordinates' Competence: A Potential Trigger for Workplace Ostracism

ABSTRACT

While the competence of subordinates is considered desirable in the workplace, it may create challenges in managing people in organizations. This study examines why subordinates' competence triggers ostracism within the workplace based on social comparison theory and previous insecurity studies. Data from both managers (N=130) and their subordinates (N=231) provided findings which affirm that, first, some managers regard competent subordinates as potential challengers and thus develop a feeling of insecurity, which creates motivation for the ostracism of those competent subordinates. Second, those subordinates who feel ostracized by managers, may show less commitment towards their managers, feel less confident and engage in negative gossip about their managers. The implications of competence triggered ostracism for management include that competent subordinates require active management and development to avoid potentially damaging relationships between managers and subordinates emerging which would be detrimental to the organization.

Keywords: Competence; Employees; Managers; Ostracism; Relationship; Subordinates.

INTRODUCTION

In an ideal workplace, employees work together to support each other for mutual benefit and for the benefit of the workplace, they are socially bound to work together and contribute to the same goals through their competent work. Competence and performance in the work place has frequently been linked in the research literature to both wages and work practices and systems (e.g. Liu *et al*., 2009; Sgobbi & Caincari, 2015) but scant research attention has been paid to the response of others in the workplace to competent employees, excepting the work of Artz *et al*. (2017) and the implications of this for employee management and labor relations. Despite demonstrating competence at work, some individuals may be excluded by their colleagues, and one party may neglect the other party. These phenomena form the basis of workplace ostracism, which describes an individual neglecting to engage with another organizational member when it would be customary or appropriate to do so.

Ostracism affects both employees and their organizations. Ostracism has been found to cause distress, pain and to threaten some fundamental human needs such as belonging, self-esteem, control and meaningful existence (Williams, 2009). Ostracism over a long period of time also deprives individuals of the resources necessary for fortifying needs, resulting in alienation, depression and helplessness (Balliet & Ferris, 2013). Moreover, ostracism has detrimental effects on the success of the organization, such as anti-performance behavior (Duffy *et al*., 2002), lower group commitment (Hitlan *et al*., 2006), frequent staff turnover (O'Reilly, Robison, Berdahl & Banki, 2015) and poor psychological well-being (Tepper & Henle, 2011). Recent research has identified the triggers (Hitlan, Kelly, Schepman & Scheneider, 2006), mediators (O'Reilly *et al*., 2015) and consequences of ostracism (Ahmed, Ismail, Amin & Nawaz, 2013). While most authors consider ostracism

less harmful than bullying, feeling excluded is significantly more likely to lead to job dissatisfaction, minimal engagement and commitment, and health problems (O'Reilly *et al*., 2015).

Whilst previous studies have centered on ostracism and its influence on employees and organizations, little empirical evidence exists to help explain how subordinates feel ostracized by their managers and how they respond to the organization as a result of this. Thus, the understanding of the manager-subordinate relationship during the formation of ostracism remains under-researched. Despite the ubiquity of ostracism and its implications both for employees and organizations (Mok & De Cremer, 2016), studies on ostracism remain sparse and scholars have called for further research to better understand how ostracism affects employees, their organizations and labor relations (Wu *et al*., 2015).

In response to this call and as ostracism can be viewed as not only potentially undermining to the individual but also to the success of the organization, in this paper we aim to develop understanding of ostracism in order to better manage ostracism in the workplace. To address this knowledge gap, therefore, our study proposes a new perspective of ostracism, which is informed by prior insecurity and social-comparison studies (e.g. Festinger, 1954; Mok & De Cremer, 2016; Williams, 2007). The main proposition of our new perspective is: some managers may regard subordinates' competence as a challenger, rather than an asset, to themselves, and thus they may develop a feeling of insecurity about their own abilities and career, which subsequently turns into the motive for ostracizing their competent subordinates. The central themes of workplace ostracism, triggers of ostracism, and ostracism's consequences are now outlined in the sections below.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Ostracism in the workplace

Ostracism occurs within all types of organizations and its influence affects both individuals and organizations (Williams, 2007). The nature of ostracism has been described by two characteristics: *omission of behavior* and *diverse motives*. The former describes showing no intention or directional behavior towards the target, whereas the latter describes a variety of motives underlying ostracism, such as obliviousness or oversight on the part of the actor (Ferris *et al*., 2008; Williams, 2007). O'Reilly *et al*. (2015) state that both characteristics jointly disconnect the victim of ostracism from general social activities and restrain the victim from responding to this form of mistreatment.

Following the logic of O'Reilly *et al*., therefore, we define workplace ostracism as an individual employee neglecting to take actions to engage with another organizational member when it would be customary or appropriate to do so. And in the current study, we have developed a new research proposition and chosen general employees (subordinates) as the research sample, as this group of people often experience ostracism (e.g. DeWall *et al*., 2009; Williams, 2007).

Ostracism is ubiquitous, for instance, a top salesman may be isolated by other salespeople from the same department, a sluggish staff member may be excluded from social activities in a company, and a whistle-blower may be neglected by the manager. Ostracism can also be subtle, intangible and occur for no particular reason, for example, being excluded from invitations to either meetings or social events, having one's views be ignored, being neglected from team conversations, or even noticing others go silent when one tries to participate in a discussion (Ferris *et al*., 2015). Ostracism has been analyzed using different perspectives, including: social exclusion (DeWall *et al*., 2009), temporal need-threat model (Williams, 2009), out of the loop (Jones & Kelly, 2010) and the integrative model (Robinson *et al*., 2013) (See Table 1 for

comparison for different perspectives).

<Insert Table 1 About Here>

Regardless of how ostracism is analyzed, to date almost all studies suggest that ostracism leads to greater distress than other types of social exclusion (*see full review in:* Williams, 2007). Ostracism initially appears relatively insignificant when compared to other forms of mistreatment such as bullying, shouting and slandering (Balliet & Ferris, 2013). People regard ostracism as innocuous and hardly detectable, so it makes ostracism an easy and expedient way to mistreat someone at work, without the worries of punitive actions being taken (Björkqvist *et al*., 1994). For instance, O'Reilly *et al*. (2015) claim that "*one is less likely to be seen as a bad person for ignoring or excluding someone than for openly insulting or yelling someone …. one is less likely to be caught or reported for ostracizing someone and can more easily claim a lack of intent, e.g., being too busy to respond, forgetting to include someone*…" (p.3). Yet, although ostracism is common and looks harmless, it is a powerful and malign experience associated with detrimental psychosomatic consequences. Empirical studies actually suggest that ostracism damages an individual's sense of well-being and negatively impacts on their commitment toward their work and organization (Ferris *et al*., 2008; Hitlan *et al*., 2006).

Yet despite the devastating impact of ostracism in the workplace, what causes individuals to ostracize one another has been largely ignored (for exceptions, see: Wu *et al*., 2015). This omission in the ostracism literature is particularly important given the numerous negative effects associated with being the target of ostracism in organizations; a better understanding of the situational and individual influences that causes individuals to be ostracized can thus be practical in eliminating a detrimental behavior. In the present research, we attempt to address this problem via use of social comparison theory.

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Potential trigger of ostracism: Insecurity of the managers in coping with equally or more competent subordinates

The feeling of insecurity is an individual's evaluation and perception of unease, which may be triggered by perceiving oneself to be vulnerable, unsafe or inferior (Arendt, 1958) and this can undermine their self-image and confidence (Solantaus, 1987). Following this line of research, we believe that competent subordinates may be perceived by their managers as possessing the same or higher level work- related abilities as their managers. To our knowledge, these abilities may include, subject knowledge (e.g. job-related knowledge and experience), employability (e.g. vocational skills, educational qualifications and professional body memberships), personal capital (e.g. interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence) or business acumen (e.g. knowledge of potential risks and profits in the specific business market). Following this logic, competent employees who possess these abilities are likely to be great assets because they can contribute to overall organizational performance (Ismail & Abidin, 2010).

Festinger (1954) indicates through social comparison theory, that there is a drive within individuals to gain accurate self-evaluation. Festinger explains how individuals evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others in order to reduce uncertainty, and define the self. Following this line of research, having competent subordinate may be a double-edged-sword in the eyes of managers. On the one hand, competent subordinates help to achieve the business targets and mission of an organization, which is a critical factor for business maintenance, development and success (Ismail & Abidin, 2010). On the other hand, such competence is also likely to undermine a manager's sense of importance and credibility. For example, competent subordinates may say 'I have more knowledge and skills in this than my managers', or that 'my manager knows nothing about the project', or that 'I am doing my manager's job, with double the work but no

extra pay'. Very likely, when working with competent subordinates, some managers may view their subordinates as future competitors for promotion opportunities. These managers may regard their subordinates as potential challengers, creating a sense of insecurity about their own role and career progression (Solantaus, 1987). In a similar vein, self-evaluation maintenance theory (Tesser, 1988) suggests that determining personal growth and progress can be raised or lowered by the behavior of a close other (e.g., people are more threatened by friends than strangers). Thus, a manager may feel threatened by his/her competent subordinates, as both parties share the same workplace, i.e. to the manager, his/her competent subordinate is a person that is psychologically close. Hence, the first research hypothesis follows:

H1. When managers perceive their subordinates to be competent, they feel insecure.

For the sake of clarity, a conceptual framework (Figure 1) is developed to illustrate the research hypotheses.

< Insert Figure 1 about here >

Furthermore, based on the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), managers may evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to their competent subordinates. Following this logic, when managers feel themselves to be inferior to their subordinates and feel insecure, there are three courses of action available to them: i). *Avoidance*. To escape from an uneasy situation and counter-balance the feeling of insecurity, people may adopt avoidance as an expedient coping strategy (Ballesteros & Whitlock, 2009). Managers may reduce the chance of physical contact with competent subordinates, such as keeping a distance from the subordinates or communicating with subordinates only via emails. In extremes, people may even deny the source of the pressure (Ballesteros & Whitlock, 2009); e.g. managers may neglect or even refute the existence of competent subordinates; ii). *Reframing*. The reframing technique trains people to think differently

about difficulties that they cannot actually change (Stoltz, 2002). If working with the competent subordinates is unpleasant, from a manager's perspective, reframing the problem may help to reduce their feeling of insecurity. Managers may choose to think that the competent subordinates are simply working for them (e.g. to maintain a sense of superiority), and that managers are still in charge (e.g. the subordinates are under my management and hence inferior to me). Although managers cannot change the fact of the existence of competent subordinates, they can adopt reframing strategy to counter-balance any unpleasant feelings; and, iii). *Reinforcement*. Reinforcement strengthens the association between stimulus and responding behavior (Schwartz & Reisberg, 1991), which may help to explain the formation of ostracism. When managers feel insecure (e.g. when subordinates speak up and challenge a manager), managers may under-value or isolate those subordinates (Burris, 2012). Following this logic, the more a manager feels insecure, the more likely they are to repeat the undervaluing- and isolating- behavior towards their competent subordinates. Perhaps by doing so, managers can counter-balance their feelings of insecurity.

Although different in nature, the three identified courses of action not only help managers to cope with the feeling of insecurity, but also become the motives for ostracism of competent subordinates. Specifically, when adopting *avoidance*, managers may neglect or deny the existence of their competent subordinates. When adopting *reframing*, managers may regard their subordinates as inferior to themselves. When adopting *reinforcement*, managers may repeatedly under-value and isolate their competent subordinates. In sum, managers may ostracize their competent subordinates when they feel insecure.

To further examine the relationship between managers and their competent subordinates, we propose that managers may ostracize subordinates in order to buffer the impact of feeling insecure; that is, feeling insecure

on the part of the managers may affect the relationship between the perception of competent subordinates and the occurrence of ostracism. This relationship can be clarified from prior studies on employee voice and status; specifically, Burris (2012) who suggests that, when subordinates speak up and challenge managers, managers tend to view those subordinates as worse performers and endorse their ideas less than those who engage in supportive behaviors. In a similar vein, Jensen *et al*. (2014) and Khan *et al*. (2016) indicate that higher performers are a type of outlier, and this outlier behavior (even those that have the potential to help rather than harm organizational performance) tends to be socially punished, and both studies suggest that competent subordinates may threaten the social system in which they are embedded (e.g. managers and their management styles). Another viewpoint of relevancy to our research indicates that, as managers have higher positions than that of subordinates, managers can more easily ignore their subordinates (a typical type of ostracism), and these behaviors are hardly noticed or sanctioned by the organization (Kernan *et al*., 2011). To summarize, prior studies have provided preliminary credence of our view that managers' perception of competent subordinates n may affect the way they treat the subordinates, as well as whether subordinates feel ostracized by those managers. Hence, here we propose:

H2. Feeling insecure about competent subordinates (from managers' perspective) mediates the relationship between managers' perception of competent subordinates and subordinates' feelings of ostracism.

Ostracised subordinates and their response to managers

Prior studies have indicated that ostracism affects performance (Duffy *et al*., 2002), staff turnover (O'Reilly *et al*., 2015) and well-being (Tepper & Henle, 2011). Yet, beyond these outcomes, little is currently known about how competent subordinates feel ostracized by their managers and how they respond to such

ostracism. To respond to this knowledge gap, *Conservation of Resources* theory (CoR; Hobfoll, 1989) is introduced. CoR explains that people are inclined to acquire and maintain resources, including physical goods (e.g. house, food), conditions (e.g. feeling accepted and supported from the cohabitants) and energies (e.g. time, knowledge). CoR also suggests that people may feel stressed if there is a likelihood of losing resources, or a threat of loss. Following this logic, when subordinates feel ostracized by their managers (e.g. when managers do not share knowledge with subordinates, or when managers do not support subordinates and ignore their needs), subordinates may feel stressed; and, following the influence of stress, we assume that subordinates are then less likely to show commitment to their managers (*c.f.* stress-commitment nexus; Clugston *et al*., 2000) and self-empowerment at work (*c.f.* stress-empowerment nexus; Spreitzer, 1995). The rationale underlying our assumption is discussed below.

Previous studies have indicated that ostracism affects individuals' self-esteem, dissatisfies their need for belonging and creates a detrimental effect on their self-value (Ferris, Lian, Brown, & Morrison, 2015; Hitlan *et al*., 2006). More specifically, such experience is upsetting to employees (Wu *et al*., 2012) and can be accompanied with loneliness and depression (Leary, 1990). When feeling ostracized, subordinates may feel anxious and stressed (O'Reilly & Robinson, 2009) and thus have a reduced sense of achievement and happiness in the workplace, leading to the phenomenon of career withdrawal, i.e. a desire to run away from their jobs (Renn, Allen & Huning, 2013). Moreover, scholars have suggested that, when feeling ostracized, subordinates may transfer their attention to the interpersonal relationship and examine whether they have been treated fairly at work; if not, they may exhibit negative behaviour towards their managers, such as engaging in negative gossip about their managers (Chang *et al*., 2015; Kuo, 2014).

In addition, when feeling ostracized, subordinates may re-evaluate their relationship with managers as compromised – the psychological linkage between managers and subordinates is likely to become damaged to such an extent that subordinates may form a negative attitude or behavior toward their managers (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Following our assumption above and based on the earlier discussion of ostracism (*c.f.* the section of ostracism and its nature), we propose the third research hypothesis:

H3. When subordinates feel ostracized by their managers, they show less commitment towards their managers (H3a); engage in negative gossip about their managers (H3b); and feel lower self-empowerment (H3c).

During the development of Hypothesis 3, we have assumed that, when subordinates feel ostracized by their managers, they will show less commitment to their managers, engage in negative gossip about their managers and feel less self-empowerment. We acknowledge that our assumption only covers three research variables (i.e. commitment, gossip & empowerment), which cannot represent all types of behaviors and attitudes to ostracism. Yet, as commitment, gossip and empowerment are popular and studied in previous ostracism-related projects (e.g. Clugston *et al*., 2000; Ferris *et al*., 2008; Tepper *et al*., 2011; O'Reilly *et al*., 2015), the development of our assumption is logical. More specifically, we are interested in understanding how ostracised subordinates feel at work and what might be their response to managers. Although, there is limited research analyzing how ostracised subordinates interact with managers other cognate studies have shed some light, providing mixed results about how subordinates react to ostracism in the workplace. Specifically, some subordinates may interpret ostracism negatively and attribute it to personal factors, resulting in alienation, depression and helplessness (Balliet & Ferris, 2013), whilst others may take a more neutral position and refrain from contributing to group work (Hitlan *et al*., 2006), whereas others may detach themselves from the

organization and then suffer from reduced well-being (Tepper & Henle, 2011). Based on above reasoning, we propose that, when feeling ostracised by managers, subordinates are likely to have different responses to managers, subject to their interpretation of ostracised experience. As such, we propose:

H4. Feeling ostracized by managers (from subordinates' perspective) mediates the relationships between managers' perception of competent subordinates and commitment towards the managers (H4a); negative gossip about managers (H4b); and self-empowerment (H4c).

METHODOLOGY

Sample and procedure

The research project was conducted in Taiwan *as per* grant criterion. We recruited sample organizations from the North Business Zone (NBZ), as NBZ covers two main business parks (Neihu Science Park, Nankang Software Park) in Taiwan and plays a decisive role in the economic development of Taiwan (Perng, 2015). The participating organizations include: *general manufacturing, hi-tech manufacturing, financial services, telecoms, IT providers, retailers* and *general services*. Although these organizations are different in nature, they all have a structured personnel system (e.g., Zhao, Xia, He, Sheard, & Wan, 2016) and provide researchers good opportunities to observe the interaction between managers and subordinates (e.g., Xu, Xu, & Robinson, 2015). These characteristics affirm that the participating organizations were suitable and met research needs.

To facilitate successful data collection, we first contacted the organisations, explaining our research aim, data collection method and research confidentiality policies. With the approval of organisations, we posted our research invitation on their internal bulletins, so all employees (both managers and subordinates) could contact us to participate in the research. Book vouchers were used as incentives to stimulate the participation rates.

To prevent sampling bias, we approached managers and subordinates via a random sampling technique,

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and both parties (managers, subordinates) had no knowledge of who had been invited to take part in the research. The unit of analysis was determined as the managers and subordinates being one dyad set (i.e. managers and their corresponding subordinates), as this method allows closer examination on dynamics within the dyad and follows similar prior studies (e.g., Liu, Hui, Lee, & Chen, 2013). To ensure the ecological validity of data collection, only dyad sets with longer working relationship were recruited, i.e. managers and their corresponding subordinates had worked together more than six months (or equal to six months). Any dyad sets with less than six months working relationship were not recruited, and any dyad sets with partial consent (i.e. only managers or subordinates gave consent) were not recruited either. We then coded managers and subordinates for the sake of confidentiality and future statistical analysis.

To avoid social desirability effect in the questionnaire data, we adopted several strategies (Arnold & Feldman, 1981; Arnold, Feldman, & Purbhoo, 1985). Specifically, once participants agreed to participate, we mailed questionnaires, and made explicit our research aim, research team (inc. contact details), confidentiality policy, and emphasised the voluntary nature of participation in a covering letter. Participants were then advised to return their completed questionnaires to the research team directly to ensure anonymity of responses to further reduce avoid social desirability effect (Nederhof, 1985).

Data were collected at two time points. At the first time point, 358 survey questionnaires were distributed to managers, including: 308 dual sets (1 manager with 2 subordinates) and 50 mono sets (1 manager with 1subordinate). At the second time point (one month after the first) we collected questionnaires from managers and subordinates separately. Book vouchers were enhance response rate. In total, 274 sets of questionnaires were returned across both time points, including: 234 dual sets and 40 mono sets. All sets of the questionnaires

were checked for completeness which resulted in 231 usable sets. Finally, as we aimed to examine the relation between managers and their subordinates, we merged the dual sets with the mono sets (130 managers and 231 subordinates) for the purpose of data analysis. The demographic profiles of the 130 managers were: average age (43.05 years old), average tenure (13.06 years), education levels (67.19% graduate) and gender ratio (63.57% male). The demographics of 231 subordinates were: average age (34.94 years old), average tenure (7.19 years), education levels (78.51% graduate) and gender ratio (45.65% male). Full demographics of both managers and subordinates are presented in Table 2.

< Insert Table 2 About Here >

Measures

Seven standardized scales and one self-developed scale were used in the survey (see Appendix 1 for all scales). Mangers responded to: *Competence of subordinates* and *feeling insecure about competent subordinates*. Subordinates responded to: *Ostracism* (feeling ostracized by the managers), *negative gossip* (about the managers), *commitment* (toward the managers), and *self-rated empowerment*. The details now follow:

Perception of competent subordinates. As social comparison theory played a key role in the research rationale and hypotheses, we proposed to measure the performance and competence difference between subordinates using performance ratings. Yet, this proposal was rejected due to the ethical concerns and hence terminated. To rectify the lack of direct comparison data, we adopted an expedient strategy to gather indirect comparison data; that is, when measuring the competence of subordinates, we asked managers to compare their existing subordinates against ex-subordinates. The focal point of comparison was set between existing subordinates (supervised currently) and ex-subordinates (supervised in the past). Specifically, the perceived competence of subordinates was measured by having each subordinate's manager to evaluate his or her

competence, using the employee competence and performance scale (4 items; Liden *et al*., 1993) and employee performance scale (4 items; Podsakoff *et al*., 1982). For parsimony and due to overlapping nature of the two constructs, we merged them to form one new scale and renamed is as *competence of subordinates* for the purpose of our study. This merging procedure helped to alleviate the impact of potential response bias in self-rated scales (8 items; α= 0.95). Responses were recorded using a six-point *Likert* scale (1= extremely disagree, 6= extremely agree). Higher scores represent a higher level of competence.

Feeling insecure about competent subordinates. The literature review supports the view that managers may feel insecure if they perceive their subordinates as competent. Following this logic, relevant studies (e.g. Arendt, 1958; Ballesteros & Whitlock, 2009; Solantaus, 1987) were revisited to develop a new scale, in line with Hinkin's (1995) three-staged scale development process. This process included: item generation (n_1= 12 managers and experts; 15 items), scale development (n_2= 121 employees; EFA Eigenvalues= 4.45; factor loadings of six principal items= .78 to .91; variance percentage= 72.29%; α= .93), and scale evaluation (n_3= 12 scholars; 6 items; α= 0.96). Responses were recorded using a six-point *Likert* scale (1= extremely disagree, 6= extremely agree). Higher scores represent a higher level of feeling insecure.

Feeling ostracized by the managers. We revised the ostracism scale (Ferris *et al*., 2008; 13 items; α= 0.92) and made minor revisions to suit the research purpose. Responses were recorded using a six-point *Likert* scale (1= extremely disagree, 6= extremely agree). Higher scores represent a higher level of feeling ostracised.

Negative gossip about the managers. The gossip scale (Chang *et al*., 2015) was adopted in this survey (6 items; α= 0.89). Responses were recorded using a six-point *Likert* scale (1= extremely disagree, 6= extremely agree). Higher scores represented a higher frequency of participation in negative gossip.

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Commitment toward the managers. We adopted an affective commitment scale (Clugston *et al*., 2000) and made minor revisions to suit the purpose of this study (5 items; α= 0.79). Responses were recorded using a six-point *Likert* scale (1= extremely disagree, 6= extremely agree). Higher scores represent a higher level of commitment toward the managers.

Self-rated empowerment. Psychological empowerment in the workplace (Spreitzer, 1995) was adopted (12 items; α= 0.87). Responses were recorded using a six-point *Likert* scale (1= extremely disagree, 6= extremely agree). Higher scores represented a higher level of self-rated empowerment at work.

In addition, as some scales (e.g. Liden *et al*., 1993; Podsakoff *et al*., 1982; Ferris *et al*., 2008) were originally written and validated in English, so the questions (scale items) were translated into Chinese for the purpose of this study which took place in a non-English speaking country, with a back-translation procedure to ensure language equivalence and appropriateness. We invited three bilingual experts in management science to examine the validity and clarity of scale items, and revisions were made accordingly.

Control variables. Prior studies have found sporadic relationships between demographic characteristics and workplace attitudes/behaviors (e.g., Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004; Ellwardt, Wittek, & Wielers, 2012; Hui & Lee, 2000; Loi, Mao, & Ngo, 2009; Zhao, Xia, He, Sheard, & Wan, 2016). At the early stage of data analysis, we attempted to control gender, age, job tenure and educational levels of both managers and subordinates. Specifically, we found that managers' age, job tenure and educational levels were correlated with feeling insecure about competent subordinates (r_s = .18*, .24*** and -20**, respectively), and that subordinates' gender, age, job tenure and educational levels were correlated with feeling ostracized by the managers (r_s = -.14*, .18**, .19** and -25***, respectively). Based on these statistical findings, we decided to

control demographic characteristics during the examination of research hypothesis, so we researcher could accurately estimate the interaction between research variables (*see further discussion of control variables in*: Podsakoff *et al*., 2000, *pp*. 530-531; Meyer & Allen, 1997, *pp*. 43-44). For the sake of parsimony and clarity, the control variables were thus omitted from the analysis reported below.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

During the data mining, some subordinates were nested into the same group as they shared the same managers. To examine the potential nesting effect bias, both intra-class correlation coefficient 1 (*ICC1, the proportion of between-manager variance in the total variance*) and intra-class correlation coefficient 2 (*ICC2, the reliability of manager mean*) were calculated. The ICC1s for all research variables were small (i.e. *perception of competent subordinates* = .03; *feeling insecure about competent subordinates* = .02; *feeling ostracized by the managers* = .06; *negative gossip about the managers* = .04; *commitment toward the managers* = .02; *self-rated empowerment* = .02). As all coefficients were lower than the effect threshold (.12), the chance of nesting effect bias was unlikely (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). Next, the ICC2s for all research variables were limited (i.e. *perception of competent subordinates* = .33; *feeling insecure about competent subordinates* = .31; *feeling ostracized by the managers* = .61; *negative gossip about the managers* = .34; *commitment toward the managers* = .35; *self-rated empowerment* = .19). As all coefficients were lower than the effect threshold (.70), the chance of nesting effect bias was unlikely (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000).

Further ANOVAs were implemented to examine the variables' variances between samples and only one variable showed significance, i.e. ostracism ($F(129, 230) = 2.01$, $p < .001$). To simplify, these initial statistics jointly affirmed that the nesting effect bias was very slim and the data were appropriate for further analysis.

Descriptive statistics, correlations and reliability coefficients of all research variables are shown in Table 3.

<Insert Tables 3 & 4 About Here>

Analysis of the conceptual framework

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to all research variables. The hypothetic model (6-factor model; Figure 1) was compared with alternative models, including one 5-factor model, one 4-factor model, one 2-factor model and one 1-factor model (see Table 4). CFA revealed that the 6-factor model provided a sound fit to the data; specifically, it had a significantly better fit than the 5-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1712.21$, $p < .001$), 4-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 2282.83$, $p < .001$), the 2-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3174.48$, $p < .001$) and the 1-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3977.31$, $p < .001$). Taken together, the hypothetic model represented the best fit to the data ($\Delta\chi^2$ (506) $= 901.24$, $p < .001$, RMSEA $= .06$, CFI $= .94$, IFI $= .94$).

With respect to reliability, the composite reliability (CR) of research variables ranged from 0.75 to 0.97 (See Table 5). All coefficient figures were equal or higher than .75, indicating that the composite reliability of all variables was satisfactory (Fornell & Larker, 1981). Regarding validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) of all measured variables ranged from 0.49 to 0.85. Almost all AVEs of research variables were equal or higher than 0.50, indicating that the convergent validity of all variables was satisfactory (Fornell & Larker, 1981). The AVE of feeling ostracized by the managers was 0.49, which was extremely close to the threshold (0.50) and therefore accepted for further analysis.

To tackle the influence of common method variance (CMV), we adopted a two stage time-lagged data collection. After collection, further analyses were also conducted to scrutinize CMV influence. We first adopted Harman's single factor test to examine the influence, in which all variables were merged into one

factor. Results showed poor fit, i.e. one single factor of merging all variables was inappropriate for data analysis (χ^2 (527) = 4878.55, p < .001, RMSEA = .19, CFI = .30, IFI = .31). Yet, due to the insensitivity of Harman's test in CMV examination (*see further discussion in*: Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012), we then adopted an Unmeasured Latent Construct Method (ULCM) to examine the potential influence of CMV. ULCM indicated no change in any of the correlative path coefficients or significance levels, and the *Chi-square* difference test was not significant ($\Delta\chi^2$ (1) = 3.64, p > .05). To conclude, we conducted a series of analyses to inspect the influence of CMV and results suggested a very slim chance of influence.

<Insert Tables 5 & 6 About Here>

Analysis of the research hypotheses

We applied a Stata (ver. 14) to adjust the potential non-independence issue of subordinates' competence rated by the managers (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). The conventional confidence level (95% CI) was set to examine the significance of direct effects and indirect effect. Table 5 summarizes the results of testing the hypotheses. As shown in Table 6, perception of competent subordinates predicts the feeling of insecurity about competent subordinates (Direct effect = .22, p < .001), implying that, when managers perceive their subordinates to be competent, the majority of them feel insecure (S.E. = .05). Hence, the first hypothesis is supported.

Next, feeling insecure about competent subordinates (from managers' perspective) predicts feeling ostracized by managers (Direct effect = .20, p < .001) (from subordinates' perspective). That is, when managers feel insecure because of their competent subordinates, the majority of subordinates feel ostracized by those managers too (S.E. = .05). These findings imply that managers may ostracize their subordinates if they perceive their subordinates to be competent. Further analysis indicates that feeling insecure because of

competent subordinates significantly mediates the relationship between perception of competent subordinates and those subordinates feeling ostracized by the managers (Indirect effect = .04, p < .001). Taken together, the second hypothesis is supported.

Table 5 indicates that feeling ostracized by the managers predicts negative gossip about the managers (Direct effect = -.14, p < .05), self-rated empowerment (Direct effect = .23, p < .001), commitment toward the managers (Direct effect = -.28, p < .001). These findings suggest that, when subordinates feel ostracized by managers, they may gossip negatively about their managers, feel lower self-empowerment at work, and show less commitment towards their manager. To summarize, H3a, H3b and H3c are supported.

Finally, feeling ostracized by the managers significantly mediates the relationship between feeling insecure because of competent subordinates and the commitment towards the managers (Indirect effect = -.06, p < .001), negative gossip about the managers (Indirect effect = .04, p < .001) and self-empowerment (Indirect effect = -.03, p < .001). To summarize, H4a, H4b and H4c are supported.

DISCUSSION

Ostracism has become a common challenge to employee well-being, teamwork efficiency and organizational performance (*c.f.* Mok & De Cremer, 2016; O'Reilly *et al.*, 2015; Tepper & Henle, 2011). Scholars have also examined the nature of ostracism (e.g. Jones & Kelly, 2010; Robinson *et al.*, 2013) and discussed its influence (e.g. Ahmed *et al.*, 2013; Wu *et al.*, 2012). Continuing in this line of research, we proposed a new perspective of ostracism (i.e. subordinates' competence leads to ostracism), implying that managers may ostracize subordinates if they perceive their subordinates to be competent. The new perspective has received statistical support and hence makes a contribution to knowledge, the interpretation of research

findings have implications for management of manager-subordinate relationships, and both the contribution and implications are outlined below.

Although, recent research has discovered that a manager's level of liking of an employee is related to level of abusive supervision, which in turn affects performance (e.g. Walter *et al*., 2015), and whilst we appreciate that this view has added insight to the knowledge of employee performance and contributed to the conventional perspective that ostracism may be triggered by abusive supervision (Tepper *et al*., 2011), our findings provide alternative insights. Our findings do not intend to challenge the current human resource focus on anti-bullying and harassment policies, but they do lend support to the idea of competence-triggered ostracism as a distinct form of workplace mistreatment meriting further study.

More specifically, we are of the viewpoint that competence-triggered ostracism comprises two elements: i). the subordinates must be competent (see definition of competent subordinates in *Introduction*); and, ii). managers interpret such competence as a challenger to their own roles/career and hence feel insecure. That is, when managers feel insecure in working with their competent subordinates, they may demonstrate different courses of action (e.g. *avoidance*, *reframing* and *reinforcement*), in order to overcome and counter-balance their feelings of insecurity.

Moreover, as outlined in the earlier literature review, scholars have identified a variety of triggers of ostracism (e.g. DeWall *et al*., 2009; Hitlan *et al*., 2006). However, unlike prior studies which focused on management and leadership issues which lead to ostracism (e.g. Williams, 2007), our research has scrutinized the interaction between subordinates and their managers, and we proposed a new perspective on ostracism which was supported by the subsequent statistical analysis. Our findings are thus meaningful and have

contributed to knowledge of workplace ostracism. Specifically, prior studies indicate that, when people experience ostracism, the role of self is like psychological buffer in dealing with ostracism (e.g. Ferris *et al*., 2015; Smart-Richman & Leary, 2009). These prior findings are informative and our findings have discovered that the role of self is twofold in ostracism. First, when working with competent subordinates, not all managers feel insecure, so these managers may not necessarily ostracize their employees to balance the feeling of insecurity. Our proposition is that a manager with a stronger sense of self may not regard competent subordinates as challengers to their own roles and career and therefore the likelihood of engaging in ostracizing behavior towards the subordinates is relatively slim. Second, not all subordinates feel ostracized by their managers. Our proposition is that a competent subordinates may have a stronger sense of self and higher confidence in their job attitude and ability, so they may not necessarily feel ostracized by their managers. Our two propositions are plausible and require further examination.

Managerial implications

Unlike observable behaviors (e.g. verbal, physical) which can be recorded and managed in line with personnel policies, ostracism by managers towards their subordinates appears subtle and difficult to recognize, although its influence affects all employees and organizations (DeWall *et al*., 2009; Robinson *et al*., 2013). Our research findings have affirmed the influence of competence-triggered ostracism, suggesting that organizations should take competence-triggered ostracism at least as seriously as other, more obvious and explicit acts of mistreatment in the work environment.

As all employees (both managers and subordinates) have a strong need to belong in their organizations, ostracism manifested by social comparison and exclusion can be more threatening than harassment (*c.f.*

Williams, 2009; Wu *et al*., 2012), and our research results suggest that managers should be aware that they may, even inadvertently, become the source of ostracism and affect their subordinates. Managers are thus encouraged to conduct self-reviews and engage in regular reflexive practices to monitor whether they feel insecure or even threatened by their competent subordinates. Reflective managerial practice could include, the creation of a series of questions that a manager could ask of themselves during a self-review and which could then be discussed with senior management mentors to encourage a more transparent recognition of ostracism. Other anti-ostracism strategies include the communication to managers of all the developmental opportunities and training within the organization to mitigate the feeling of competent subordinates having stronger specific workplace abilities than themselves.

Inspired by our research findings which highlighted the influence of competence-triggered ostracism, we suggest that managers should promote the value of social inclusion in their management practice (e.g. inviting their subordinates to social activities from time to time), as a complementary strategy to alleviate any more general sense of ostracism. Pursuant to this, organizations are advised to offer training to managers, helping them to develop specific skills in managing their relationship tensions with their subordinates, e.g. training on collaborative communication (Boyle & Kochinda, 2004) and inclusiveness (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

Acknowledging the research findings which highlighted the manager-subordinate relationship, we advocate that, beyond the enhancement of manager awareness and actions to minimize ostracism, greater sensitivity towards the subordinates' perspective should be built into systems and practices in the workplace. Mechanisms encouraging the identification of feelings of ostracism and a system of reporting to a third party (e.g. union or staff rep) within the organization could be implemented. Although complex in delivery, the

possibility of working with more than one manager may limit the potential for competence-triggered ostracism. Accessible training and career development information should also be made widely available via internal communications such as intranet newsletters to provide opportunities to extend competent subordinates. We are of the view that competent subordinates require active management and development to avoid potentially damaging relationships between managers and subordinates emerging which would be detrimental to the organization.

Limitations and future research directions

The current research has defined ostracism as an individual neglecting to take actions to engage with another member when it would be customary or appropriate to do so. Critics may argue that our definition has under-estimated the subtle influence of organizational level ostracism. We acknowledge this limitation and suggest that organizational ostracism which might be linked to organizational culture is also worthy of further research. It is also plausible that subordinates who feel ostracized may show other types of behavior, but which were not measured in the current study. For instance, if subordinates are not aware that the ostracism comes from a higher level of competence, they may take it personally and think themselves not good enough. They may try even harder to become part of the group by overachieving, which could create a downward spiral. We suggest future studies to investigate these types of behaviour.

There is a possibility that ostracism may be interpreted differently across cultures, but the current research did not incorporate cultures into the research framework or measure their potential influence on ostracism. Future studies are encouraged to consider cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1991) and its relationship with ostracism, e.g. individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance and masculinity-femininity, long-term orientation and indulgence versus self-restraint (Hofstede, 2011). Scholars may wish to conduct a

longitudinal research to further scrtunize the relationship between culture and the emergence of ostracism. As the current research adopts a quantitative approach, future studies may consider qualitative or mixed-method approach for a more critical and in-depth understanding of competence-triggered ostracism.

Whilst our new and validated perspective of competence-triggered-ostracism clarifies the phenomenon that competent subordinates feel ostracized by their managers, it does not investigate the likelihood that managers may feel ostracized by their subordinates. Future research efforts are therefore encouraged to provide a deeper understanding of the different dimensions of ostracism between both parties. Subordinates, as individuals, may have different responses to manager ostracism and hence different psychological buffering may occur and the outcomes for the individuals may differ. Future studies could investigate these individual differences (e.g., age, gender, job tenure, educational levels) and, provide strategies to help managers and organizations to minimize the occurrence of ostracism.

Finally, this study has demonstrated that some managers regard competent subordinates as potential challengers and subsequently ostracize those subordinates as a counterbalance to their feelings of insecurity. As competence-triggered-ostracism has significant consequences for the workplace, we suggest that competent subordinates require active management and development to avoid potentially damaging relationships between managers and subordinates emerging which would be detrimental to the organization.

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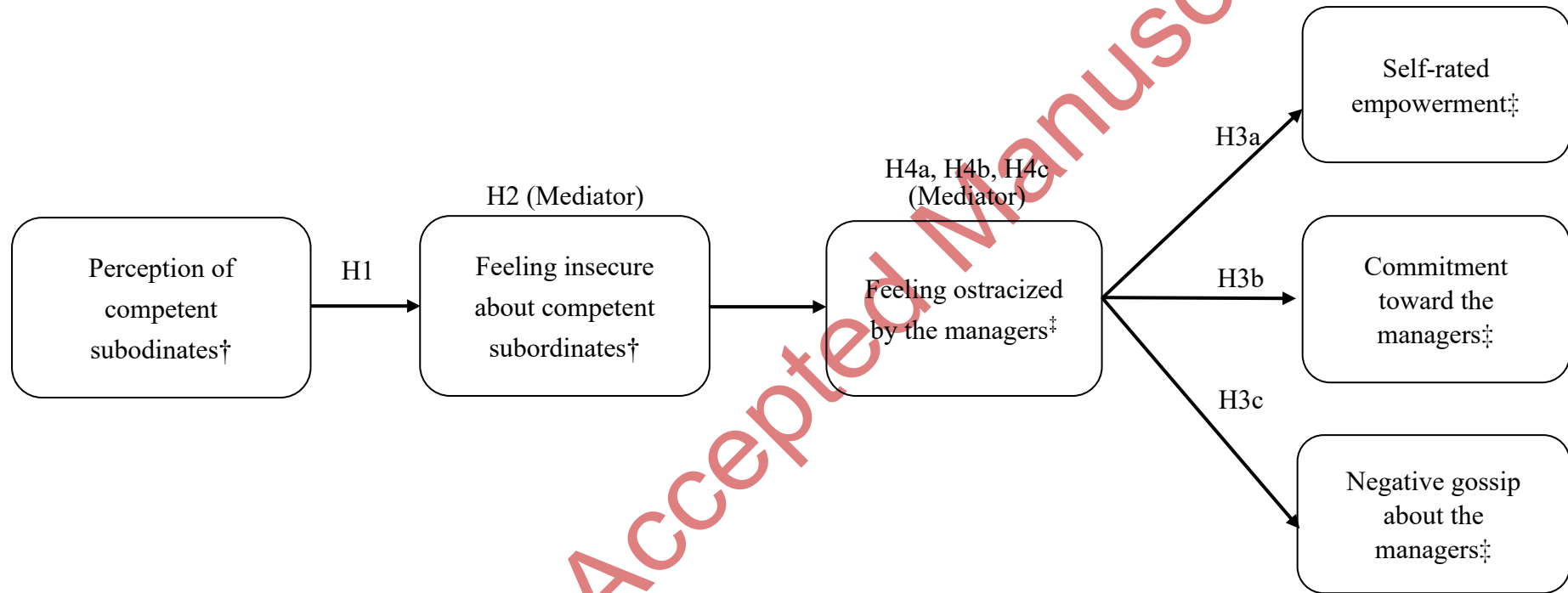
Figure 1. Research Conceptual Framework.

Note. Variables with † sign were responded by the managers, whereas variables with ‡ were responded by the subordinates.
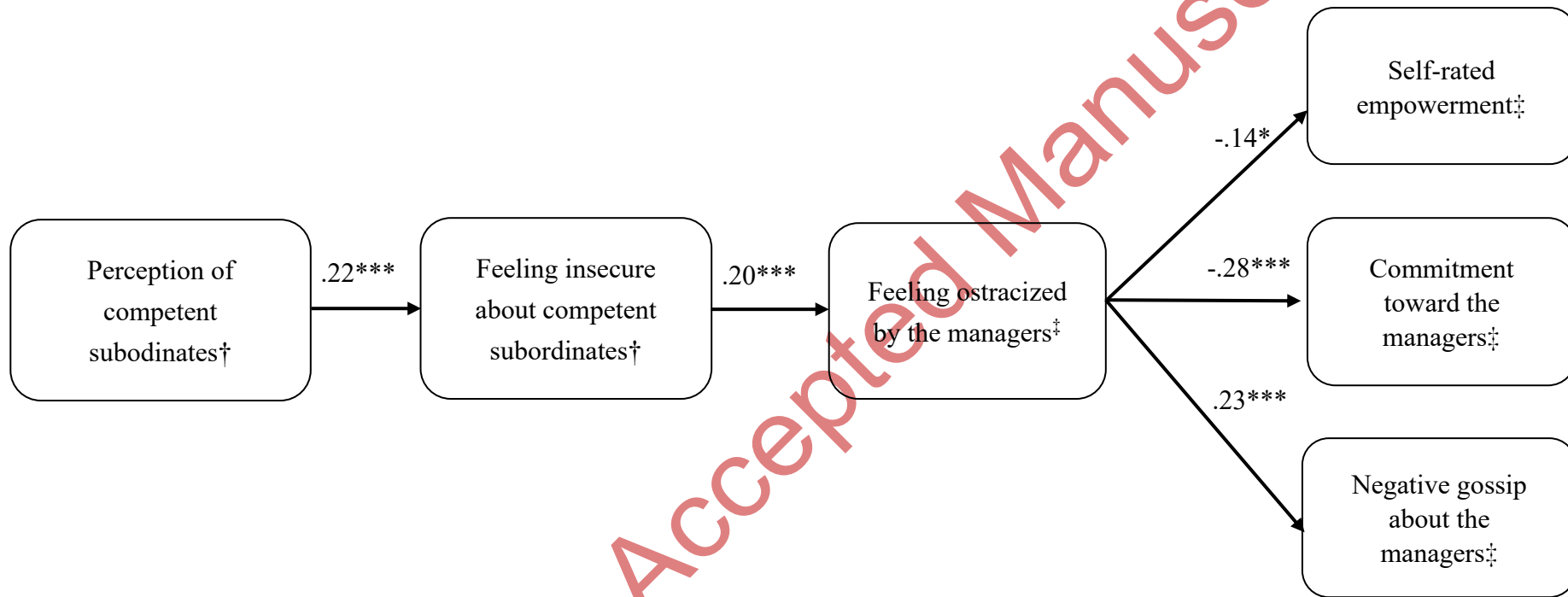
Figure 2. Path Analysis Diagram.

Note. Variables with † sign were responded by the managers, whereas variables with ‡ were responded by the subordinates.
(Standardized β coefficients reported; * p < .05; *** p < .001).

Table 1. Concept of Ostracism.

Analytic perspective†	Authors	Main arguments
Social exclusion	DeWall *et al*. (2009)	Social exclusion increases the inclination to perceive neutral information as hostile, which has implications for further aggression behavior.
Temporal need-threat model	Williams (2009)	Persistent exposure to ostracism over time depletes the resources necessary to motivate the individual to fortify threatened needs, thus leading eventually to resignation, alienation, helplessness, and depression.
Out of the loop	Jones & Kelly (2010)	Information exclusion, particularly when ill intentioned or preventable, signals poor group standing, leading to deleterious psychological effects.
Integrative model	Robinson *et al*. (2013)	Organizationally relevant factors that may cause different types of ostracism, moderate the experience of ostracism at work, and moderate the reactions of targets.

Note. †. Ostracism has been analyzed using different perspectives. Regardless of how ostracism is analyzed, to date almost all studies suggest that ostracism leads to greater distress than other types of social exclusion.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of participants.

	Managers	Subordinates
Sample size	130	231
Gender†		
Male	82	105
Female	47	125
Education levels†		
High schools	11	26
Graduate	86	179
Post graduates	31	23
Average age (years old)	43.05 (SD: 8.02)	34.94 (SD: 8.38)
Average tenure (years)	13.60 (SD: 9.15)	7.19 (SD: 7.38)

Note. †. Due to the missing values in gender and education levels, the total counts of sub categories may not equate the overall sample size.

Table 3. Summary of descriptive statistics.

Variables	Means	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5
Responded by managers								
1. Perception of competent subordinates	4.27	.94	.95					
2. Feeling insecure about competent subordinates	2.17	1.07	.96	.18**				
Responded by subordinates								
3. Feeling ostracized by the managers	2.43	.79	.92	-.05	.26***			
4. Negative gossip about the managers	3.45	.99	.89	.01	.12	-.18**		
5. Commitment toward the managers	4.22	.73	.79	.11	-.08	-.30***	.09	
6. Self-related empowerment	4.18	.61	.87	.18**	-.04	-.18**	.09	.56***

Note. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Table 4. Comparison of hypothetical model and alternative models.

Model	Factor†	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	CFI	IFI	RMSEA
Hypothetical Model	6-factor model	901.24	506		.94	.94	.06
Model 1	5-factor model	2613.45	512	1712.21	.67	.67	.13
Model 2	4-factor model	3184.07	517	570.62	.57	.58	.15
Model 3	2-factor model	4075.72	526	891.65	.43	.43	.17
Model 4	1-factor model	4878.55	527	802.83	.30	.31	.19

Note. †. The hypothetic model : 6-factor model (as shown in Figure 1);

5-factor model: Percepton of competent subordinates and feeling insecure about competent subordinates are merged as one factor;

4-factor model: Perception of competent subordinates, feeling insecure about competent subordinates and feeling ostracized by the managers are merged as one factor;

2-factor model: Perception of competent subordinates, feeling insecure about competent subordinates and feeling ostracized by the managers are merged as the first factor, and the remaining variables are merged as the second factor;

1-factor model: All variables are merged as one factor.

Table 5. Summary of the validity and reliability analysis.

Research variables	Composite reliability	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Perception of competent subordinates	0.95	**0.72**	*0.03*	*0.00*	*0.04*	*0.02*	*0.00*
2. Feeling insecure about competent subordinates	0.97	0.17	**0.85**	*0.08*	*0.01*	*0.03*	*0.02*
3. Feeling ostracized by the managers	0.92	-0.05	0.28	**0.49**	*0.07*	*0.14*	*0.04*
4. Self-rated empowerment	0.96	0.20	-0.11	-0.27	**0.59**	*0.46*	*0.00*
5. Commitment toward the managers	0.80	0.13	-0.17	-0.37	0.68	**0.50**	*0.00*
6. Negative gossip about the managers	0.86	0.02	0.13	0.21	0.07	0.01	**0.59**

Note. Bold diagonal data represent the AVE of variables (AVE = Average Variance Extracted, AVE);

Italic data (upper-right triangle) represent the shared variances of variables;

Underlined data (lower-left triangle) represent the correlation coefficients (F) of variables.

Table 6. Summary of hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Path analysis	Direct effect (S.E.)	Indirect effect (S.E.)	Bootstrapping 95% CI
1	PC → FI	.22 (.05)***	--	[.12, .31]***
2	FI → FO	.20 (.05)***	--	[.10, .30]***
2	PC → FI → FO	--	.04 (.02)***	[.01, .08]***
3a	FO → Negative Gossip	-.14 (.06)*	--	[-.26, -.02]*
3b	FO → Commitment	-.28 (.07)***	--	[-.41, -.15]***
3c	FO → Empowerment	.23 (.09)**	--	[.06, .41]**
4a	FI → FO → Negative Gossip	--	.04 (.01)***	[.02, .06]***
4b	FI → FO → Commitment	--	-.06 (.01)***	[-.08, -.03]***
4c	FI → FO → Empowerment	--	-.03 (.01)***	[-.04, -.01]***

Note. PC = Perception of competent subordinates; FI = Feeling insecure about competent subordinates; FO = Feeling ostracized by the managers; Gossip =

Negative gossip about the managers; Commitment = Commitment toward the managers; Empowerment = Self-related empowerment. (* p < .05; ** p < .01;

*** p < .001).

Appendix 1: List of scales (Questionnaire).

Mangers responded to: *perception of competent subordinates* and *feeling insecure about competent subordinates*, whereas subordinates responded to: *feeling ostracized by the managers, negative gossip about the managers, commitment toward the managers* and *self-rated empowerment*. In addition, as some scales (e.g. Liden *et al.,* 1993; Podsakoff *et al.*, 1982; Ferris *et al.*, 2008) were originally written and validated in English, so the questions (scale items) were translated into Chinese for the purpose of this study owing to the location of the study, with a back-translation procedure to ensure language equivalence and appropriateness. For this reason, some questions may be different from the original version.

Scale	Description
Perception of competent subordinates (α= 0.95)	Prelude: How do you compare your existing subordinates to previous subordinates? The focal point of comparison is between existing subordinates (supervised currently) and ex-subordinates (supervised in the past): 1. My existing subordinate is superior (e.g. knowledge, business acumen). 2. My existing subordinate's performance is outstanding (e.g. vocational skills, employability). 3. My existing subordinate is excellent in his/her responsibility (e.g. proficiency, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence). 4. My existing subordinate is effective in fulfilling his/her role. 5. My existing subordinate is doing more work than is required. 6. My existing subordinate is setting high goals for himself/herself. 7. My existing subordinate is attaining the goals s/he has set. 8. My existing subordinate is time-effective in doing his/her work.
Feeling insecure about competent subordinates (α= 0.96)	Prelude: I feel insecure if… 1. competent subordinates influence my reputation in the team. 2. competent subordinates influence my credibility in the team. 3. competent subordinates influence my significance to the team. 4. competent subordinates influence my reputation in the organization. 5. competent subordinates influence my credibility in the organization. 6. competent subordinates influence my significance in the organization.
Feeling ostracized by the managers (α= 0.92)	Prelude: I feel my managers… 1. ignored me at work. 2. left the area when I entered. 3. did not answer my greetings at work. 4. avoided me at work.

	5. would not look at me at work. 6. shut me out of the conversation. 7. refused to talk to me at work. 8. treated me as if I wasn't there. 9. would not invite me or ask me if I wanted anything when they went out for a coffee break. 10. stopped talking to me. 11. would not start a conversation in order to be social at work. 12. would not know that I involuntarily sat alone in a crowded lunchroom at work. 13. included me in conversations at work (*reverse coding*).
Negative gossip about the managers (α= 0.89)	Prelude: Have you recently gossiped about x of your managers (x= specific type of gossip): 1. carelessness and poor performance. 2. poor attitude and work engagement. 3. inexperience and poor job knowledge. 4. poor interpersonal relationship. 5. lack of demonstration of job morality. 6. poor emotional management ability.
Commitment toward the managers (α= 0.79)	1. I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with my manager. 2. I enjoy discussing my manager with people outside of my organization. 3. I really feel as if my manager's problems are my own. 4. My manager has a great deal of personal meaning for me. 5. I feel emotionally attached to my manager.
Self-rated empowerment (α= 0.87)	1. The work I do is very important to me. 2. My job activities are personally meaningful to me. 3. The work I do is meaningful to me. 4. I am confident about my ability to do my job. 5. I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities. 6. I have mastered the skills necessary for my job. 7. I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job. 8. I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work. 9. I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my job. 10. My impact on what happens in my department is large. 11. I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department. 12. I have significant influence over what happens in my department.

Appendix 2: Data Transparency Explanation Sheet.

Some of the data reported in the current manuscript have been previously published and were collected as part of a larger data collection. The table below displays how the data (research variables) appear in each study, as well as the status of each study.

Data Transparency Table

Research variables in the complete dataset.	Manuscript 1 Current Manuscript	Manuscript 2 Accepted for publication†
Perception of competent subordinates	X	
Feeling insecure about competent subordinates	X	
Self-reported empowerment	X	
Commitment toward the managers	X	
Negative gossip about the managers	X	

Feeling ostracized by the managers‡
  10 item edition (simplified version)
  13 item edition (full version)
	
	X
		
		X

Managers' engagement in negative gossip		X
Supervisors' engagement in negative gossip		X
Supervisor-subordinate relationship		X

Note:

†. "Manuscript 2" has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Managerial Psychology*;

‡. Source: Ferris, D.L., Brown, D.J., Berry, J.W., & Lian, H. (2008). The development and validation of the workplace ostracism scale. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *93* (6): 1348-1366.