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**REPRESENTATIONAL PREDICAMENTS AT WORK: HOW THEY ARE
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REPRESENTATIONAL PREDICAMENTS AT WORK: HOW THEY ARE EXPERIENCED AND WHY THEY MAY HAPPEN

ABSTRACT

Representational predicaments reflect unfavourable perceptual or attributional incongruence between subordinates and superiors about the employees' work, and adversely affect morale. Critical incident interviews were held with 63 Hong Kong Chinese employees from over 50 organizations. Stories about undervaluation of contextual performance were compared with stories about duly appreciated contextual performance, and stories about negative spotlighting (disproportionate emphasis on shortcomings or mistakes) were compared with stories about fair treatment of mistakes. Subordinates attributed undervaluation of contextual performance to: the superior's unfamiliarity with the employee's work, the superior's perception that the work was of marginal importance, the subordinate's lack of empowerment to report contextual performance, the lack of considerate attention by the superior, and the subordinate's felt need to keep a low profile. Underlying factors were inhibitions against employee voice, leadership styles characterised by lack of benevolence and lack of individualized consideration, and absence of close subordinate-superior relationships. Subordinates attributed negative spotlighting to: the superior's abusive behaviour, prejudicial and hostile attitudes, or insistence on one 'right way'; rivalry between the superior and the subordinate; and the absence of legitimate channels for upward feedback. Underlying factors were absence of just grievance procedures, and leadership styles characterized by authoritarianism, which could be compounded by lack of benevolence and lack of moral restraint, leading to abusive supervision. Cross-cultural research could establish whether large power distance and other cultural and institutional factors render Asian employees especially vulnerable to representational predicaments.

Keywords: representational predicaments; invisibility; justice; leadership; qualitative.

INTRODUCTION

An employee with a representational predicament believes that an immediate line manager or other key authority has a mental picture of that employee's work demands, work performance or work circumstances, which is incongruent with the employee's own perceptions or attributions and has unfavorable ramifications. Representational predicaments arise if there is perceptual incongruence (Graen & Schiemann, 1978; White, Crino, & Hatfield, 1985) or attributional conflict (Wilhelm, Herd, & Steiner, 1993) between employees and key authorities about employees' work, and if the employees also regard the apparent oversights or misconceptions as sources of adversity.

Representational predicaments can involve unfavorable invisibility, where the employee believes that a key authority is not aware of important aspects of the employee's work or work situation or does not recognize their value or salience. Alternatively, or in addition, representational predicaments can involve unfavorable visibility, where the employee believes that a key authority is over-emphasizing a particular issue regarding the employee or his or her work, or holds mistaken assumptions about that issue.

There has been very little prior research into representational predicaments vis-à-vis direct line superiors. Snell & Wong (2009) investigated representational predicaments among Hong Kong employees, but most examples in their study involved key authorities that were remote in terms of location and job nature, and who were not direct line superiors. For example, life insurance agents at one company reported representational predicaments vis-à-vis specialists and high-ranking administrators at the head office, who legislated on clients' insurance claims and calculated the agents' commission-based salaries and benefits. Snell & Wong (2009) found that while representational predicaments tended to have an adverse impact on employee morale, other factors, such as good relationships with colleagues, could

compensate for this. With reference to Withey & Cooper's (1989) EVLN framework, Snell & Wong (2009) found that Hong Kong employees seldom responded to representational predicaments by exercising voice. They typically responded with loyalty, but if there were no offsetting factors and morale was badly damaged, they tended to respond with neglect or exit.

Besides the adverse impact of representational predicaments on employee morale and the dearth of research into their antecedents, another reason for studying them, with a view to identifying practical steps to resolve them, is that they can give rise to a sense of unfairness (Snell et al., 2009). The current research sought to identify, from the employee's point of view, the perceived characteristics and antecedents of two types of representational predicament for employees vis-à-vis their line superiors, and sought insights into why employees may be unable or unwilling to resolve them through symbolic negotiation.

One type of representational predicament in the current study entails the perceived undervaluation of contextual performance. Contextual performance contributes to the organizational, social, and psychological context of work performance (Dalal, 2007; Motowidlo & van Scotter, 1994), but if employees perceive that their contextual performance is being undervalued, they may lose motivation to undertake it. The other type of representational predicament in this study involves negative spotlighting, i.e., perceived exaggeration of the gravity or significance of the employee's mistakes and downplaying of any acts of merit. As discussed later, if employees feel that they are being subjected to negative spotlighting, they may regard this as a form of abusive supervision.

Representational predicaments can also involve other types of issue. They may, for example, entail the perceived neglect of workplace stressors (Brown & Brooks, 2002; Korzynski, 2003; Runcie, 2000). Or they may concern misattributed culpability (Martinko & Gardner, 1987), where employees feel wrongly blamed and not at fault (Bell & Tetlock,

1989). Such stress-related or blame-related issues also warrant in-depth analysis, but are not examined here because of space limitations.

Qualitative research was undertaken to address the following research question: as perceived by subordinates, what are the main factors that lead to the undervaluation of contextual performance and to negative spotlighting by line superiors? The insights arising from the research evolved into two sets of propositions, which crystallized into two conceptual models.

In the next section, for the purpose of orientation we present the emergent propositions and models up-front, in conjunction with our literature review. We then explain our qualitative methodology, and how this linked with the processes of reviewing literature and developing propositions. In the research findings section, we identify the key factors that distinguished stories about the undervaluation of contextual performance from stories about the due recognition of contextual performance, and the key factors that distinguished stories about negative spotlighting from stories about the fair and proportionate handling of shortcomings or mistakes. Besides matching these factors with our propositions, we present three illustrative stories about undervalued contextual performance and two illustrative stories about negative spotlighting. Our final section highlights our theoretical contributions, notes some limitations, suggests some practical implications and directions for further research, and provides a summary conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Analyses of the undervaluation of contextual performance and of negative spotlighting have been presented in diverse fields and have been theorized in various ways. Most have involved key authorities, who were distant from the respective employees in terms of job position and geographical location. Relatively few studies or reviews have addressed employees'

representational predicaments vis-à-vis their immediate line superiors (Boje, 1999; Fletcher, 1995, 1998; Gabriel, 1998; Halcrow, 2002; Leung, 2008; McKenna, 2005; Snell & Wong, 2009; Swierczek & Onishi, 2003). In reviewing the literatures we shall present one set of propositions about the undervaluation of contextual performance by immediate line superiors in Hong Kong, and another set about negative spotlighting. These form two conceptual frameworks, which encompass a mixture of structural, behavioural and cultural antecedents, and involve individual, inter-individual, organizational and societal levels of analysis.

Undervalued contextual performance

Studies have established that four types of contextual performance – relational practices, compassion work, embedded knowledge work, and articulation work – are prone to undervaluation by key authorities, if they are undertaken by relatively junior employees, lacking the power of command, and without professional mystique (Star & Strauss, 1999). Relational practices include smoothing interpersonal conflicts, empathic listening, and shouldering unpopular tasks (Fletcher, 1995, 1998). Compassion work involves attending to and alleviating others' psychological suffering (Kanov, Maitlis, Worline, Dutton, Frost, & Lillius, 2004; O'Donohoe & Turley, 2006). Embedded knowledge work entails nuanced judgment calls and conceptual puzzle solving in jobs with otherwise routine elements (Barley, 1996; Hamilton & Manias, 2007; Orr 1996; Star & Strauss, 1999). Articulation work involves coordinating and integrating work flow from an 'underdog' position (Hampson & Junor, 2005).

Such activities tend to be undertaken unobtrusively, and do not lend themselves to systematic codification and analysis (Fletcher, 1995, 1998). Because of this, while they comprise a substantial part of the domain of contextual performance, they are prone to be 'invisible' to key authorities, and tend not to feature in their conceptual maps of salient and

valuable work contributions (Star & Strauss, 1999; Suchman, 1995). Such invisibility is especially likely to arise if the key authority has a different occupational background from that of the subordinate undertaking the contextual performance, if the key authority is typically absent from the sites where the contextual performance is being undertaken, and if the key authority does not allocate time to observing and inquiring into the work that the subordinate is undertaking (Suchman, 1995; Suchman, Blomberg, Orr, & Trigg, 1999). In such cases, the key authority may have stereotypical views about the subordinate's work activities and may underestimate the necessity, intensity, demandingness, sophistication, and value of the contextual performance undertaken by that subordinate. Hence:

Proposition 1a. Contextual performance is prone to undervaluation if the contextual demands are unfamiliar to the superior.

Proposition 1b. Contextual performance is prone to undervaluation if the superior does not regard the contextual performance as salient to the organization.

Some organizations have adopted formal performance management systems that incorporate contextual performance as well as core job task activities (Cascio, 2006), but such arrangements are by no means universal. Hence:

Proposition 1c. Contextual performance is prone to undervaluation if the right to provide self-reports on contextual performance is not built into performance review procedures.

Most of the above-mentioned literature refers to the invisibility and undervaluation of contextual performance vis-à-vis remote key authorities. However, Snell & Wong (2009) found some cases where employees believed that their immediate line superiors were undervaluing their contextual performance, despite having the same occupation and working

in relatively close proximity. Two factors pertaining to the leadership style of the line superior may have an impact on whether contextual performance is duly recognized. The first of these is individualized consideration. If a leader is high in individualized consideration, he or she may be inclined to take account of the needs and preoccupations of subordinates (Bass & Avolio, 1990, 1994; Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990) and to take a personal interest in subordinates' development (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). We infer that superiors with that leadership style would be likely to seek opportunities to observe and appreciate the contextual performance of their subordinates. Conversely, if superiors are low in individualized consideration, and are therefore indifferent to the needs and aspirations of their subordinates, they would be unlikely to focus on or appreciate the contextual performance of their subordinates. Hence:

Proposition 2a. Contextual performance is prone to undervaluation if the superior's leadership style is characterized by a low level of individualized consideration.

For Chinese employees, benevolence may also be a salient dimension of a superior's leadership style. Superiors with a benevolent leadership style make an effort to take care of subordinates, and express kind concern about the latter's daily lives (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004; Fahr & Cheng, 2000). Because benevolent superiors are approachable and responsive, we consider them likely to recognize and appreciate their subordinates' contextual performance. By contrast, we anticipate that superiors that are low in benevolence would be unlikely to recognize and appreciate their subordinates' contextual performance, and that if called upon to attend to subordinates' concerns about contextual demands and contextual performance, they would be unresponsive and even impatient. Hence:

Proposition 2b. Contextual performance is prone to undervaluation if the superior's leadership style is characterized by a low level of benevolence.

Large power distance (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Leung, 2002; Wong & Birnbaum-Moore, 1994) discourages Chinese employees from expressing ideas and concerns to their superiors, and inclines them to avoid saying anything that risks implying that their superiors are inadequately informed (Gladwell, 2008; Merritt, 2000). Voice behavior is also deterred by related cultural norms that require subordinates to be humble, modest, quiet and polite (The Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Lai, Lam, & Liu, 2010; Pan, 2000; Terpstra-Tong & Ralston, 2002).

This culturally-driven tendency for a Chinese subordinate to avoid exercising voice vis-à-vis his or her superior can include reluctance to report, explain and justify his or her own contextual performance (Huang, 2010). If, for example, an employee, through job-crafting, has created opportunities to undertake discretionary work activities that he or she finds intrinsically satisfying (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, & Tighe, 1994; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), he or she may prefer to keep these off the ‘radar screen’, in case the superior has different priorities, rejects the employee’s justifications, and regards the crafted work as a sign of slackness or diversion. Similarly, if a Chinese employee needs to address a troublesome micro-political problem, he or she may prefer not to disclose the associated contextual performance to his or her superior, lest the superior’s perspective clashes with that of the subordinate, since judgements about contextual performance in such situations tend to be subjective (Eastman, 1994). Hence:

Proposition 3. Cultural norms inhibit Hong Kong employees from using voice against the undervaluation of their own contextual performance.

In Chinese organizations, if a subordinate is regarded by the superior as a member of that superior’s in-group, he or she may be afforded more opportunities than other

subordinates to participate in decision making, and may be treated as a confidant (Cheng, Huang, Lu & Huang, 2004; Chi 1997). A close, supportive and trusting working relationship with the superior may reduce a subordinate's reluctance to report and justify contextual performance (Atwater, 1988, Snell & Wong, 2009), but this may be unusual among Hong Kong employees, who tend to have relatively unsatisfactory relationships with their superiors (Leung & Rensvold, 2002). Hence:

Proposition 4. A Hong Kong subordinate without a close, supportive and trusting relationship with his or her superior will be inhibited from using voice to prevent or rectify the undervaluation of his or her own contextual performance.

If an employee is silent about his or her contextual performance, the respective superior is denied a key channel for obtaining information about its existence and possible value. Thus we also propose the following:

Proposition 5. Inhibition against using voice to call attention to one's own contextual performance renders it prone to undervaluation by the superior.

Figure 1 summarizes propositions 1-5, and some of their likely interrelationships.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Negative spotlighting

Providing corrective feedback to subordinates is a normal task for a line superior. However, negative spotlighting entails disproportionate emphasis on a subordinate's errors, misdeeds, and shortcomings, and the downplaying of virtues or achievements that might otherwise be

praised. In such cases, an employee is likely to feel that his or her performance is being represented in an unbalanced, distorted, hostile, and/or prejudicial manner.

From prior literature we can identify three types of negative spotlighting. Idiosyncratic spotlighting by a superior entails the absence of praise combined with frequent reprimands and reminders (Leung, 2008; McKenna, 2005; Swierczek & Onishi, 2003). Invasive spotlighting breaches the employee's dignity and privacy expectations, and can involve the delivery of harsh reprimands in front of an audience, ridicule, threatening behaviour, and even corporal punishment (Boje, 1999; Snell, 1999). Persecutory spotlighting involves a focus on some attribute of the subordinate that is unrelated to competence or performance, as a pretext for labeling and stigmatizing that individual as being prone to misdeeds or misdemeanors (Halcrow, 2002). Negative spotlighting by a line superior thus involves the use of coercive power to disparage a subordinate and to impose a 'pecking order' (Gabriel, 1998), and can be regarded as a form of abusive supervision (Aryee, Sun, Xiong, Chen, & Debrah, 2008; Tepper, 2007). Hence:

Proposition 6a. Negative spotlighting reflects abusive power assertion by a superior.

In Chinese societies, negative spotlighting may reflect leadership styles that are characterized by a combination of authoritarianism, absence of benevolence, and lack of moral restraint (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004). Superiors with authoritarian leadership styles expect absolute obedience from subordinates. If they are also benevolent and moral leaders, they are likely to deliver any reprimands in a proportionate and non-abusive manner, in order to role-model personal virtue and self-control. However, if an authoritarian leader is not also a benevolent and moral leader, we would expect him or her to punish subordinates harshly and angrily, without self-restraint. Hence:

Proposition 6b. Some cases of negative spotlighting as abusive supervision reflect the superior's authoritarian leadership style, combined with the relative absence of benevolent leadership and moral leadership.

Another manifestation of authoritarian leadership is the use of authority and control to impose rules, decisions and preferences. Authoritarianism is closely related to dogmatism (Duckitt, 2009), i.e., a tendency to focus closed-mindedly on what the leader considers, without reasonable justification, to be the only right way to do things. Hence:

Proposition 7a. Some cases of negative spotlighting reflect a superior's preoccupation with the need to eliminate deviations from what the superior regards as the one right way to do things.

Proposition 7b. Such cases, in turn, reflect an authoritarian leadership style.

Some cases of negative spotlighting may involve disparaging a particular subordinate, whom the superior regards as a rival in terms of career progression. According to the theory of cooperation and competition, if two parties assume that the goals of one party are competitively related to the goals of the other party, they will tend to get involved in win-lose conflicts with one another (Snell, Tjosvold & Fang, 2006; Tjosvold, 1985; Wang, Chen, Tjosvold, & Shi, 2010). If there is career rivalry between a superior and a subordinate, the superior may seek to highlight the mistakes, omissions or misdeeds of the subordinate as evidence of that subordinate's inferiority. Hence:

Proposition 8. Some cases of negative spotlighting reflect the superior's attempt to belittle a subordinate, owing to career rivalry.

As discussed above in relation to Proposition 3, voice behaviour by subordinates in Hong Kong is inhibited by large power distance (Leung, 2002; Wong & Birnbaum-Moore, 1994) and by the imperatives of humility and modesty (Lai, Lam, & Liu, 2010). Just as subordinates may be reluctant to challenge superiors about the undervaluation of their contextual performance, they may also refrain from challenging superiors about negative spotlighting. Moreover, similarly as in Proposition 4, the presence or absence of a close, supportive and trusting working relationship with a superior is a factor that influences a subordinate's readiness to remonstrate against negative spotlighting. Hence:

Proposition 9a. Cultural norms inhibit Hong Kong subordinates from using voice against negative spotlighting.

Proposition 9b. A Hong Kong subordinate without a close, supportive and trusting relationship with his or her superior will be inhibited from using voice against negative spotlighting.

Organizations can adopt formal upward feedback channels (van Dierendonck, Haynes, Borrill, & Stride, 2007) and grievance procedures that are based on restorative justice (Bemmels & Foley, 1996; Bemmels, Brown & Read, 2009). Although Snell & Wong (2009) found that the grievance procedure in one Hong Kong based organization appeared to have played a role in preventing negative spotlighting, this may be an exceptional case (Entrekin & Chung, 2001). Reflecting the comparatively weak legal rights for Hong Kong employees in industrial disputes (Ngo et al., 2002; Chiu, So, & Tam, 2008), most existing arrangements have been introduced without employee consultation (Ng, 2010), and are being operated in a manner that fails to inspire employee trust (Olson-Buchanan, 1997). Hence:

Proposition 10. The absence of legitimate channels and just procedures for upward feedback or employee grievances inhibits Hong Kong subordinates from using voice against negative spotlighting.

Similarly to Proposition 5, it follows that:

Proposition 11. Inhibition from using voice against negative spotlighting allows negative spotlighting to persist.

Figure 2 summarizes Propositions 6a-11, and some of their likely interrelationships.

Insert Figure 2 about here

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In order to gain clearer insights into the very complex individual, interpersonal and organizational processes that are associated with representational predicaments, we chose a qualitative approach (Creswell, 1994, 1998) that was based on interviewing. Within this approach, we opted for a research design based on storytelling (Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 2000), that would focus on critical incidents (Bitner et al., 1990, 1994; Flanagan, 1954), and would embrace a phenomenological perspective (Conklin, 2007; Spiegelberg, 1978).

We sought to analyze the subjective perceptions, beliefs and attributions of individual employees (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). We chose not to attempt to establish inter-subjective or objective reality by triangulating interviewees' accounts with those of superiors and others mentioned in their stories. Our main reason for not incorporating this into our research design is that we considered that doing so would jeopardize confidentiality and deter potential informants from participating in the research.

Recruiting Interviewees and Collecting Data

Although it is possible to recruit interviewees through formal organizational channels to study representational predicaments (Snell & Wong, 2009), we anticipated that the sensitivity of the subject matter would constitute a barrier to access (Brannen, 1988). Furthermore, Chinese informants tend to be concerned with 'face' (Bond & Hwang, 1987) and they can be reluctant to disclose personal viewpoints and experiences to strangers (Shenkar, 1994).

Because of these considerations, we reassured all prospective participants about confidentiality and tried to build a convenience sample through snowballing. We began by interviewing people who knew one or more of the authors, and after interviewing them we asked them to nominate other potential informants (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Hornby & Symon, 1994: 169-170).

There were two main rounds of data collection. Every interview was conducted in Cantonese, lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours and focused on 4-8 critical incidents. In the first round, one author interviewed 55 informants (27 males, 28 females), occupying various levels of seniority and based at 54 different sites in 45 different organizations. To facilitate generalizability, the first round interviewees were diverse in terms of occupation, industry sector, organization size, age and educational background. At the time of the interviews, 5 were employed in different departments of the Hong Kong Government; 6 worked for different public sector organizations; 21 worked for multinational corporations; 2 worked for Western-invested joint venture companies; and 15 worked for locally-owned companies with headcounts of 200 or less. Industry sectors included: construction; financial services; garment sourcing, distribution and retail; printing; legal services; logistics; manufacturing; post-compulsory education; property leasing, sales and management;

supermarkets; trading and sourcing; and utilities. All informants except one were Hong Kong Chinese and all spoke fluent Cantonese.

The first round interviews probed into the quality and character of interpersonal encounters at work. Descriptions of 4 types of critical incident were directly solicited: a difficult interaction with a service recipient or supplier regarding a sensitive issue that the other party appeared to feel strongly and badly about; an important contribution at a workplace meeting; a difficult interaction with a supervisor or subordinate; and a difficult interaction with a co-worker or colleague. Some informants spontaneously described other types of critical incident, involving, for example, the need to resolve technical and/or procedural problems by performing embedded knowledge work (Barley, 1996; Orr, 1996). As agreed among the research team, the interviewer treated such incidents as being of equal importance to the research as the directly solicited types of critical incident. Sense-making of earlier interviews thus informed subsequent interviews (Kvale, 1996).

Open-ended questioning was used to encourage descriptive narration about each critical incident (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and to obtain rich and detailed descriptions of the associated subjective experiences. Interviewees were asked to explain their perceptions, attributions, and assumptions regarding superiors' responses to their own actions, and were also asked to explain their own reactions to their superiors' responses. The interview process was open to critical incidents that did not entail representational predicaments.

Second round interviews were conducted after the first round analysis indicated the need for more data to address the emergent propositions. They involved 5 females and 3 males from diverse functions and organizations and sought critical incident accounts about undervaluation of contextual performance, fair recognition of contextual performance, negative spotlighting of mistakes or misdeeds, and fair treatment of mistakes or misdeeds.

Data Processing and Analysis

Near-verbatim transcripts of the interviews were produced, in English, and steps were taken to preserve anonymity. Identities of the interviewees were coded F1-F33 for females and M1-M30 for males. As portrayed in Figure 3, the research propositions stated earlier in this paper evolved through ongoing discussions among the authors, in tandem with data gathering, data analysis, and reviewing relevant literatures, as we discovered the complexity of representational predicaments and their diverse manifestations.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Allowing the research questions to emerge and adopting the critical incident and open-ended questioning approaches may have helped to counter acquiescence effects (Kunda & Fong, 1993). However, since the storytelling accounts were socially constructed during the interviews, were subject to the risk of selective recall and self-serving bias (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977, Suls, Lemos, & Stewart, 2002), and were not triangulated with other accounts, we suspended judgment on whether the interview data reflected objective reality. We did not assume that they were necessarily true and accurate accounts of actual behaviours, motives and feelings (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Gabriel, 1995; Spiegelberg, 1978). We nonetheless expected that the patterns emerging from multiple accounts of similar phenomena would yield meaningful and compelling insights by representing otherwise marginalized voices (Hyde, 2008; Koch, 1998).

Analysis proceeded through many steps involved in process explication (Conklin, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; van Kaam, 1969). We made continuous efforts to ensure that category and subcategory labels and descriptions reflected attributes that were significant for employees. As in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), each critical incident transcript was

constantly compared with descriptions of the subcategory under which it was provisionally subsumed. Re-categorization, relabeling and modification of the descriptors and category systems were continually undertaken, as appropriate, until a point of saturation was reached. After we had exhaustively compared and contrasted the stories of the undervaluation of contextual performance with stories about the due recognition of contextual performance, and after we had exhaustively compared and contrasted the stories about negative spotlighting with the stories about just approaches to handling employees' mistakes or acts of omission, we concluded that the final set of inter-related categories and subcategories had crystallized. These accommodated all relevant data, and were consistent with the findings of exhaustive literature reviews.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section identifies and illustrates the main factors that employees perceived as contributing to the undervaluation versus due recognition of contextual performance, or to negative spotlighting versus the fair and proportionate handling of shortcomings or mistakes. Given our focus on representational predicaments, we shall devote more space to story extracts about undervalued contextual performance than about duly recognized contextual performance and more space to story extracts about negative spotlighting than about fair and proportionate treatment of mistakes. In our discussion of the stories, the propositions are referred to as P1a for Proposition 1a, and so on.

Undervalued Versus Duly Valued Contextual Performance

We identified 33 critical incident stories about the undervaluation of contextual performance, and compared and contrasted this set of stories with 21 stories about contextual performance that had been duly recognized by the respective superior. The two sets of stories were broadly

similar in terms of the content of the contextual performance that had been undertaken, and all the stories involved relational practices, compassion work, embedded knowledge work, articulation work, or combinations thereof.

Comparisons suggested that employees attribute the undervaluation by superiors of their contextual performance to five situational features. The first factor is micro-context unfamiliarity to the superior, corresponding to P1a. The second is peripherality to organizational values or goals, as assumed by the superior, corresponding to P1b. The third is lack of connection to systematic monitoring routines, corresponding to P1c. The fourth is lack of empathy and attention by superiors, corresponding to P2a and/or to P2b, depending on the nuances of the employee's account. The fifth is undertaking the contextual performance discreetly and keeping it low-profile, corresponding to P4 and P5. These factors are elaborated in Table 1. We shall next provide extracts of Stories 1-3, to illustrate how, as perceived by subordinates, each of the five situational features can contribute to the undervaluation of their contextual performance.

Insert Table 1 about here

Story 1

Story 1 was narrated by M29, teacher-cum-administrator occupying a relatively junior rank at a Hong Kong secondary school. M29 described a 10 year history of performing a blend of embedded knowledge work, articulation work, and 'dogsbody' or 'shouldering' work (a type of relational practice, see Fletcher, 1998). M29 felt trapped in a role that was sapping his energy to excel at teaching, and was beginning to face the realization that promotion was unlikely. He left the school voluntarily a few weeks after the research interview.

'The school board, the school supervisor and the principal decide on staff promotion matters. Yet they do not know what we are doing and how we are performing. They

focus on whether your students performed well in the public examinations, as shown in the statistics. They are not interested in whether you take up any administrative work, and they do not give credit to you if you do.

All the administrative work is shouldered by teachers, but is unevenly distributed. I am responsible for a great many administrative tasks, including lunch arrangements [etc., etc.]... The school board, school management and the current principal do not regard such duties as important ones. Some teachers told me that they had the impression that the current principal had deliberately given them opportunities to show their talent and had put them on a fast track for promotion. I once asked the former principal why I have been unable to get promoted and he told me that I had not performed well in the interview.

I have been spending a great deal of my time on matters that the management regards as unimportant, and I have relatively less time to spend on what they think are the more important activities, such as teaching. The quality of my teaching, as a result, has been adversely affected. For example, I have had comparatively less time available for marking my students' assignments. I am the chairman of life-care education, yet the other committee members are of higher rank than me. How can I chair a meeting in this setting? How can I allocate duties to them? This is embarrassing. I don't have any authority to ask them to do anything, so I will do all the related duties by myself.

Sometimes, I feel that the management doesn't know how difficult it is to handle certain operations. They consider that handling lunch arrangements is easy. Please don't think that the students will hand in their money on time.... I end up handling these matters all day, and I am short of time to prepare for classes. During lunch time, basically, I have no time for my own lunch.

I once tried to voice out my thoughts to the former principal, and he found some newly-joined colleagues to help me with various duties. Some of them were able to play an assisting role, but in most cases I was the only one who was clear about what was going on and what needed to be done. I wanted to hand over the tasks to these colleagues, and I tried to train them up, but this proved to be futile as the turnover rate was seriously high and one by one they left the school.

You know how sad it is! ... I could just head to the principal's office and tell him that I don't want to work on my administrative duties anymore, but I don't want to do that. You do want to get promoted and earn more, right? I really don't want to beg the principal to allow me to take up fewer duties. I have been taking up the duties for so many years, and I don't want to waste the effort that I have put in for so many years!'

In Story 1, M29 expresses frustration about what he sees as the current school principal's lack of insight into his contextual performance and the associated workload. He laments that his efforts appear to be regarded as peripheral to institutional priorities. M29 also implies that some other colleagues have a much closer relationship with the current principal than he does. In relation to the propositions, our analysis of Story 1 is that, as perceived by M29, four factors are rendering his embedded knowledge work and articulation work

activities prone to undervaluation. These factors are the unfamiliarity to the principal of the micro-context within which M29's work is being undertaken (supporting P1a), the peripherality of M29's work to the organizational values and goals as framed by the principal (supporting P1b), the lack of close relational ties between M29 and the principal (supporting P4), and M29's reluctance to draw attention to his own contextual performance (supporting P5) because of the lack of such ties.

Story 2

Story 2 described compassion work and was narrated by M3, an insolvency officer in a department of the government of the Hong Kong SAR, where he had worked for over 20 years. M3 indicated that it was not unusual for him perform compassion work, but that this was never mentioned or noted by his superiors.

‘More than once a month, I get tough cases like this. An Indian man telephoned for information to help his friend, a Hong Kong Chinese lady, who didn't know what to do about her debts. He wanted to know how she could apply for bankruptcy. I said that she could call me directly. She called, and I explained how to apply for bankruptcy to solve her debts, ignoring her creditor's petition against her. I reassured her that there was no need to contemplate suicide. I used empathy. I took her angle to look at things and I told her the options because she didn't know what she could do. In cases like this, I take helping people as my guiding principle and ensure that they understand their options. I regard this as is my duty, and I can personally interpret my department's role as helping people find alternatives to killing themselves.

The Indian man later called me to thank me for helping his friend solve her case, but I received no other recognition, nothing from my boss, because I didn't tell anyone else about what I had done. Interpersonal skills are not recognized here, and the organization doesn't care if you have done a good job in this respect, as long as you avoid complaints. Anyway, although applying for bankruptcy helps the applicants, this just creates more workload for the organization, because of the need to handle all these bankruptcy applications from both the initial applicants and their creditors. You only get your own private satisfaction from helping other people solve their issues.’

In Story 2, M3's compassion work is congruent with his personal value system, and is an appropriate response to clients with insolvency issues and at high risk of suicide (see also Money Matters, 2001). M3 believes, however, that the organization regards such work as

unnecessary, and since there is no encouragement to report compassion work, he does not report it in his performance review. The compassion work goes undetected by the rest of the organization, and might only come to light if a service recipient were to write a letter of commendation. In relation to the propositions, our analysis of Story 2 is that, as perceived by M3, two factors, the assumed peripherality of the compassion work to organizational values and goals (supporting P1b), and its lack of connection to systematic monitoring routines (supporting P1c) are predisposing the compassion work to undervaluation.

Story 3

Story 3 featured undervalued articulation work and relational practices associated with handling interpersonal conflict. This was undertaken by F7, a human resource administrator in a local office of a Western-headquartered OEM company, which was employing 50 staff. F7 indicated that similar episodes occurred more than once a month, and tended to upset her.

‘The IT manager needs a kidney operation. He assumed that this was 100% covered by the medical insurance provided by the company, but because of some special equipment, he has to bear additional cost, about HK\$10,000. The case is dragging on and he has not yet had the operation.

He puts on a nice face when he meets my boss, but scolded me harshly when he was complaining about the policy. He told me to consult him when we shop around for next year’s policy. I apologized, but actually it’s my boss, who decides on our medical insurance. I was quite upset but I suppressed my emotions because I need to survive in the company. I then found out that the IT manager had called the insurance supplier direct, and had yelled at him. This guy called me afterwards to tell me about the bad words. I need to maintain a good relationship with the insurance guy, as he knows my boss well, and might complain about this case to him, so I apologized to the insurance guy. However, I did ask him if he could do something to help the IT manager’s case, I tried to put myself in the IT Manager’s shoes and explained to the insurance guy why the IT Manager was so upset. But the insurance guy could not help in this case.

I need to be a middleman between my colleagues and outside suppliers. I sometimes have to placate everybody, including my boss. I got no recognition for handling this matter. My boss doesn’t care about me or for the feelings of the other staff, and on one occasion he used me as a scapegoat for his own mistake. He only cares about his own benefits, and he takes my efforts too much for granted. He seems to think that the salary alone is sufficient reward. I have a good relationship with the external suppliers, which helps to improve work efficiency and to avoid complaints. I don’t want this case to

worsen. I've worked here for 3 years and I have seen the company fire 8-9 people so far. So I feel very insecure.

In Story 3, F7 is apprehensive because the IT manager, the insurance company representative, or both, might complain to her superior, and she tries to appease both of them. Another implied threat for F7 is that her superior might react defensively and blame her for failing to negotiate a special concession for the IT manager. In relation to the propositions, our analysis of Story 3, as perceived by F7, is as follows. The leadership style of her superior is characterized neither by individualized consideration nor by benevolence, and F7 holds out no hope that he would express sympathy or appreciation about her handling of the case (supporting P2a and P2b). The absence of a close relationship with her superior inhibits F7 from informing him about the need to undertake the contextual performance (supporting P4), and because of this it remains invisible to him (supporting P5).

Duly-valued contextual performance

Based on the stories of duly-valued contextual performance and their differences from the stories of undervalued contextual performance, the third column of Table 1 identifies five inter-related situational factors that appear to increase the likelihood that contextual performance is duly acknowledged and appreciated.

One factor is that the employee and the superior share experientially grounded meanings (supporting P1a). For example, M17, an operational officer in a property management company, said that he was praised by his superior after they worked closely together as go-betweens to help a client obtain prompt approval from an outside authority for an urgent project.

The second factor entails agreement by the employee and superior that the contextual performance is salient to organizational values and goals (supporting P1b). For example,

M26, a placement officer at an industry training centre, said that just after his appointment, he discovered that his superior was ashamed about the internship placement statistics, and was even considering ‘massaging’ the figures. M26 was sure that his superior would prefer more constructive action, and devoted extra time and effort to visit local employers within the industry, which earned him the approval, trust and respect of his superior.

Third is the presence of systems that encourage and empower employees to report their contextual performance (supporting P1c). For example, F13, a manager in a policy section of an insurance company, said that the standard performance appraisal proforma and protocol includes an item on ‘people management’, providing the opportunity to report various types of relational practices and articulation work that she has undertaken.

Fourth is the concern and responsiveness of the respective superior, in taking an interest in the subordinate’s experiences of doing the work, and in being available to help whenever necessary (supporting P2a and P2b). For example, F32, office administrator in a large, Western-invested engineering company, characterized her superior as someone to whom she could go to at any time for information and kind, non-dogmatic, guidance.

The fifth factor involves a relationship with a superior that is sufficiently close to allow open consultation, through which the superior may come to notice and value the subordinate’s contextual performance (supporting P4 and P5). For example, F3, an assistant unit manager in an insurance agency, reported that her superior treated her as a confidant, sounding board, and advisor about staff matters, and that he had praised her for her suggestions.

Negative Spotlighting Versus Fair and Proportionate Treatment

We identified 9 critical incident stories about negative spotlighting. Among these were examples of idiosyncratic spotlighting, invasive spotlighting and persecutory spotlighting. No

other types of negative spotlighting were found. We compared and contrasted the 9 stories about negative spotlighting with 7 stories in which shortcomings or mistakes were handled in a fair and proportionate manner.

Comparisons between the two sets of stories suggested that employees attribute negative spotlighting to five interrelated factors. The first of these is the superior's abusive and insensitive behavior, corresponding to P6a and P6b. The second involves prejudicial and hostile attitudes held by the superior, again corresponding to P6a and P6b. The third is authoritarian insistence on one 'right way', corresponding to P7a and P7b. The fourth involves rivalry between the employee and the superior, corresponding to P8. The fifth is employee silence, reflecting the absence of fair and legitimate upward feedback channels, corresponding to P10 and P12. These factors are elaborated in Table 2. Next, we shall present and discuss extracts of Stories 4 and 5 in order to illustrate how, as perceived by subordinates, the five factors can precipitate negative spotlighting or allow it to continue.

Insert Table 2 about here

Story 4

Story 4 was narrated by F31, who was working as an assistant manager in a small department of a media and publishing company that employed around 500 staff in Hong Kong. F31 described her experience of idiosyncratic spotlighting, which entailed undue emphasis on criticism rather than praise by her superior, and having her mistakes reported to a higher authority. It appeared that rather than using voice against negative spotlighting, F31 was trying to understand and adapt to her superior's views about the right way to work.

'I had a boss who was very picky. If he saw anything I did that he thought was in the slightest way inappropriate, he would not only tell me about it, but he would also complain about it in front of the boss above him, the general manager. I felt that whenever I made a little mistake, it would be discovered, and that if he didn't like the

way I was dealing with something, he would complain about me in front of his boss, even about minor incidents. I was a bit dismayed about that, to be honest.

I realized that this was really micro-management. He wanted me to report to him every little thing that I had done, who I had contacted, and to whom I had promoted our products. That made me more careful and I would think things through beforehand and if I thought it might cause a problem, I would talk to him about it first. Maybe he did this because he was so inexperienced. And I had to adjust to his working style, figuring out how I could do things in a ways that he would like. We always had different opinions about how to tackle a situation. He would very occasionally give me recognition when I did something really helpful, but he didn't do this very often.

Our age difference was only a year or two, and we were both nervous of one another. If the difference in our experience had been larger, it might have made him feel more at ease, with no need to feel threatened. He was too sensitive. It isn't that this will definitely happen when the difference in experience is so little. There was also the factor of personality. There are some people with a lot of confidence in leadership even when he/she is the same age as you. This shows the effect of individual personality.'

In relation to the propositions, our analysis of the idiosyncratic spotlighting in Story 4, as perceived by F31, is that it is underpinned by two main factors. First, the superior assumes an authoritarian leadership style (supporting P7b). Thus he treats even minor disagreements as if they are mistakes, and asserts that F31 must do things exactly his way (supporting P7a). The second factor is rivalry (supporting P8).

Story 5

Story 5 was narrated by M23, formerly an assistant foreman at a Chinese-owned construction company that employed 650 site workers in Hong-Kong. He had taken an active role in expediting the dismissal of a poorly performing laborer, but eventually left the firm himself because of the events related below.

'Mr. A was one of the labourers under my supervision. He was very lazy and couldn't provide the requisite quality and amount of work. My supervisor, the Foreman, Mr. F, was dissatisfied with Mr. A's performance. Mr. F wanted to dismiss Mr. A, but didn't want to do this himself, so he gave the lousy task of dismissing Mr. A to me. He kept on blaming and chastising me concerning my failure to put pressure on Mr. A to achieve the required standards of work performance. I subsequently discovered that I had no authority to dismiss anyone. But at the time Mr. F lied to me and told me that I could dismiss Mr. A. He wanted me to undertake this unpleasant task, instead of having

to do it himself.... He treated me very shabbily. I realize now that his game plan was to get me to fire Mr. A and then find someone to replace me.

Eventually I told Mr. A that Mr. F found his work unsatisfactory and explained to him that there would be serious consequences if he did not improve. Mr. A responded unhappily and gave me the excuse that other people were too picky about his work. He didn't recognize or reflect upon his shortcomings. Mr. F summoned me twice or three times each week to reprimand me for not getting Mr. A to do the required amount of work. Mr. F kept on reprimanding me. I explained to him that I had already talked to Mr. A about his performance but that he hadn't heeded my warning. It appeared that Mr. A was suffering from a psychological illness, so Mr. F avoided confronting him directly and used me as a tool. Mr. F then spoke to me, as if in confidence, and implied to me that if Mr. A continued to underperform, I could dismiss him, so that he wouldn't continue to delay the progress of our work.

Shortly after that, I spoke to Mr. A again but he kept on rebutting me. He became very angry and told me that in future, if I ever were to ask him to undertake overtime work, he would refuse to do any. I became so upset with him that I exercised what I thought was my right and told him that if he wasn't happy working here, he could get his wages and leave the company. Mr. A continued to respond very angrily, and began to wave a hammer in front of my face.

He refused to go to the site office and said I should find Mr. F to come to talk to him. So I telephoned Mr. F, telling him that Mr. A's behaviour was out of control and that he wasn't following my instructions. I asked Mr. F to come to talk to Mr. A, but Mr. F never showed up. Eventually, with the help of others, I managed to get Mr. A to go the site office and Mr. F finally appeared. He took the role of the good guy, but also explained to Mr. A that if he wasn't happy, he could choose to resign. At that moment, Mr. A was so angry that he decided to quit.

In due course, the Site Agent, Mr. S, asked me to explain how I had caused such a scene. When I explained what had happened, Mr. S told me that I had no power to dismiss Mr. A. That was when I realized that I had been manipulated by Mr. F. Shortly afterwards, Mr. F came to me and said, jokingly, that I should have fired Mr. A early in the morning, not after he had worked for a whole day. He laughed and walked away. He had set a trap for me. He had used me to remove someone he wanted to get rid of but was afraid of. After that, my relationship with Mr. F became sour and from then on I would never speak to him about anything unless it was a formal reporting matter.

Mr. S subsequently treated me as a laughing stock... Both Mr. S. and Mr. F constantly laughed at me and teased me about having overstepped my authority. I felt very distressed about having allowed Mr. F to manipulate me into dismissing Mr. A.

With hindsight, I should have clarified whether I had the authority to dismiss anyone, but my actions benefitted the company, in that I dismissed an unproductive and disobedient labourer, who had been hindering the work. Yet I received no recognition for this. In fact the opposite happened and the outcome was very negative for me.'

For M23, Story 5 involves both idiosyncratic spotlighting and invasive spotlighting by his superiors, Mr. F and Mr. S. Their idiosyncratic spotlighting frames M23 as gullible in falling for Mr. F's trickery, and as procedurally incorrect in overstepping his authority, and

fails to acknowledge that M23's actions can be considered as brave, and as having resolved a problem for the company. The invasive spotlighting entails public ridicule.

In terms of the propositions, as perceived by M23, the idiosyncratic and invasive spotlighting reflect abusive managerial behaviour (supporting P6a). The superiors' apparent insensitivity and indifference concerning M23's need for dignity imply leadership styles that are authoritarian, devoid of benevolence, and lacking in moral restraint (supporting P6b). M23's relationship with his immediate superior had deteriorated to such an extent that he was unwilling to talk to him (consistent with P9b). We can also infer that there was no other legitimate channel available for M23 to convey upward feedback about the behaviour of his superiors (supporting P10). Faced with workplace norms that were indifferent to the negative spotlighting and allowed it to continue, M23 had nowhere to turn and remained silent until his exit (supporting P12).

Handling shortcomings or mistakes fairly and proportionately

Based on the stories of fair and proportionate treatment of subordinates' mistakes and their differences from the stories of negative spotlighting, the third column of Table 2 identifies five inter-related situational factors that appeared to increase the likelihood that any mistakes shortcomings or would be treated fairly and proportionately.

One factor is the superior's interpersonally mature, respectful, and sensitive approach (supporting P6a and P6b). For example, F32, referring to the same superior mentioned earlier, said that he also responds to her mistakes in a manner that respects her dignity, and that while he alerts her to mistakes, he never rebukes her for making them.

The second factor is the superior's constructive and supportive attitude, in focusing on helping the employee to face difficulties and develop competencies (also supporting 6a and 6b). This does not require there to be a close relationship between the superior and the

employee. For example, in another story narrated by F31 (who narrated Story 4), a different superior, with whom F31 typically interacts in a formal and somewhat apprehensive manner, responds systematically and impartially to a complaint about F31 by coaching her, helping her to gain insight into a particular interpersonal episode, and offering suggestions about alternative ways to solve the problem.

Third is the superior's flexible mindset (supporting P7a and P7b). For example, M28, who worked for several Western-owned technology companies, said that his superiors there focused on employees' strengths rather than on their mistakes. He said that they understood that in the context of technological innovation and change, employees inevitably make mistakes when improvising solutions and learning through trial and error, and that focusing on mistakes and weaknesses would erode employee trust and commitment.

A fourth factor entails a fair, cooperative and pragmatic approach, through which the superior emphasizes partnership and cooperation with the employee as means to achieve organizational goals (supporting P8). For example, M30, a junior administrator in a large technology company, characterizes his superior as being ready to solve problems together with him, to correct his mistakes or inappropriate behaviour in a matter-of-fact rather than aggressive manner, and to acknowledge and praise his good performance.

Fifth is the presence of legitimate upward feedback channels, which empower people to report problematic behaviour by a superior (supporting P10 and P12). M18, who works in an educational institution, reports that he complained to the chair of his institution's performance review committee about negative spotlighting in an appraisal interview by his department head. He said that the chair took into account that numerous complaints about the department head through other channels had damaged his credibility, and disregarded the department head's negatively biased assessments of M18's performance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Contributions

Our research study makes two broad theoretical contributions. The first of these provides overall support for the model of the antecedents of the undervaluation of contextual performance, given in Figure 1. With the exception of P3, all our propositions about the factors that can lead to or perpetuate undervalued contextual performance were supported by evidence, coming both from stories about undervalued contextual performance and from contrasting stories about duly-valued contextual performance. Since all the interviewees were Hong Kong Chinese, and nearly all their stories referred to their experiences in Hong Kong, we had insufficient data about employee experiences in low power distance cultures to address P3.

As suggested in Story 3, some instances of the undervaluation of contextual performance were attributable to leadership styles that were lacking individualized consideration and/or benevolence. Other stories suggested, however, that the undervaluation of contextual performance could also reflect other factors. For example, in Story 1, as perceived by M29, the superior's preoccupation with mission-related performance indicators entailed the relative neglect of the concerns of employees such as M29, who had been assigned 'life support' roles that were embedded in the organizational background, and which did not show up in the measures. The reminder here for strategic leaders concerns the need to bear in mind that the organization depends on diverse employee contributions that may not be sustained over time, unless they are appreciated in their own right. Comparisons between stories of undervalued contextual performance and stories of duly valued contextual performance suggested that structural arrangements, such as an appropriately designed appraisal form, could substitute for close relationships with superiors in empowering employees to report and justify their contextual performance.

The second broad theoretical contribution provides overall support for the model of the antecedents of negative spotlighting, given in Figure 2. With the exception of P9a and P9b, all our propositions about negative spotlighting were supported by evidence, coming both from stories about negative spotlighting and from stories about fair and proportionate handling of mistakes. These stories indicated that, as perceived by subordinates, the superior's authoritarianism, sometimes compounded by lack of benevolence and moral restraint and leading to abusive behaviour, was a major antecedent of negative spotlighting, but that procedurally just channels for grievances or appeals could serve to intercede.

Our explanation for the lack of support for P9a is identical to the one given above for the lack of support for P3 (insufficient comparative data). Regarding P9b, while none of the stories about negative spotlighting referred to close relational ties between the employee and the superior, and some, like Story 5, explicitly referred to their absence, few, if any, of the stories of fair and proportionate handling of mistakes featured close relational ties between the employee and the superior, and there was no sign that any such relationship played a role in preventing or rectifying negative spotlighting. Instead, what tended to make a difference between negative spotlighting and the fair and proportionate handling of mistakes was whether or not the superiors were inclined to treat subordinates in a mature, respectful, sensitive and supportive manner, and whether or not they were inclined to assume a constructive and cooperative approach in working together with subordinates toward shared organizational goals.

Practical implications

The third column in both Table 1 and Table 2 suggest practical directions for remedying and preventing representational predicaments for employees vis-à-vis their line superiors.

One step in remedying and preventing the undervaluation of contextual performance can be to introduce ‘Managing by Wandering About’ (Baron & Kreps, 1999: 38). This may help to familiarize superiors with the concerns and contributions of those subordinates, who are performing duties that differ from their own work, and may help to cast light on the salience, however indirect, of such duties to the achievement of organizational goals. As noted earlier, another step can entail designing appraisal forms and procedures that empower employees to report on and justify items of contextual performance (Cascio, 2006). These steps may encourage and facilitate open discussion between superiors and subordinates about the latter’s contextual performance. Agreement may not necessarily ensue, but at least the employee’s concerns could be noted for subsequent revisiting and reviewing. Beyond this, we encourage organizations to provide training and development programmes with the aims of helping leaders at all levels to recognize and understand this phenomenon (and negative spotlighting), to practice individualized consideration, to empower their subordinates to exercise voice, and to respond appropriately to employee voice (Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004). Organizations may also provide training for employees on how to tailor their recognition requests so that, as far as possible, these address their superiors’ concerns (Grant & Hofmann, 2011).

In order to prevent negative spotlighting, organizations can screen candidates for future advancement as leaders. Such screening can look beyond technical competence and even beyond charisma, to focus on personal characteristics that might signal predisposition to adopt leadership styles that are characterized by authoritarianism, lack of benevolence and lack of moral restraint. Character ‘red flags’ may include displays of arrogance, unfair treatment of subordinates, unfair discrimination, denigrating others, diminishing others’ dignity, and holding grudges (Sankar, 2003). Screening particular leaders may require several years of monitoring (Posner, 1997). In addition, procedures for channelling grievances and

upward feedback, if perceived by employees as in accordance with restorative justice principles (Bemmels & Foley, 1996; Bemmels, Brown & Read, 2009) can alert organizations to cases of negative spotlighting, and can inform development plans for, and personnel decisions about, the respective leaders.

Limitations and directions for further research

Since the sample of 63 respondents was heterogeneous in terms of age, educational background, position level, occupation type, industry sector, and organization size, we regard it as representative of the Hong Kong workforce as a whole. We are confident that our findings encapsulate the nexus of antecedents of the undervaluation of contextual performance and of negative spotlighting in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, since the current research was limited to a single Asian city, caution needs to be exercised if generalizing to other locations.

Our study adopted the perspective of subordinates. In order to expedite data collection we made no attempt to obtain the views of their superiors for the purpose of triangulation. In the light of our own definitions of representational predicaments, we acknowledge that superiors might well have provided a different picture if we had been in a position to interview them. A qualitative study of how leaders perceive their own roles in understanding and appreciating the contextual performance of their subordinates, and of how leaders perceive themselves going about handling employee mistakes and shortcomings in a fair and proportionate manner would complement the present one.

The conceptual frameworks in Figure 1 and Figure 2 assume that representational predicaments vis-à-vis immediate line superiors are underpinned by large power distance and by relatively weak institutions for employee rights. We anticipate that this would also be the case in many other Asian locations. We recommend further qualitative and quantitative cross-

cultural comparative research to test the proposed conceptual models in various cultural and institutional contexts. For example, we would expect a relatively high incidence of representational predicaments in high power distance, low employment protection contexts, and a relatively low incidence in low power distance, high employment protection contexts, where we would expect greater willingness for employees to use voice against representational predicaments and thereby reduce their incidence. Studies involving cross-country comparisons could, using regression analysis or other statistical techniques, attempt to distinguish the relative impact of power distance and (International Labour Organization, 2012) various aspects of employment protection security.

Measuring the relative impact of the various antecedents, measuring the relative incidence of the undervaluation of contextual performance and of negative spotlighting, and gauging the impact of these two types of representational predicaments on overall job satisfaction (Bruch & Walter, 2007; Griffith, 2004; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006), organizational commitment (Price, 1997) and turnover intention (Lyons, 1971) would require survey-type research. The research reported here provides a basis for developing scales to measure employees' experience of the undervaluation of contextual performance and of negative spotlighting. Further qualitative studies may further illuminate how subordinates can take effective action to prevent or rectify representational predicaments, and how their strategies for doing this may vary according to the interpersonal, cultural and institutional context.

Summary conclusion

We analysed the antecedents of two types of representational predicament from the subordinates' perspective. Undervaluation of contextual performance reflected the superiors' unfamiliarity, lack of benevolence and lack of individualized consideration, the absence of close subordinate-superior relationships, the subordinates' reluctance to voice their concerns,

and the absence of appropriate reporting structures. Negative spotlighting reflected the superiors' authoritarianism, lack of benevolence, lack of moral restraint, abusiveness, and rivalry with the subordinate, and the subordinates' reluctance to voice grievances without procedural guarantees.

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Table 1. Situational factors making a difference in stories of undervalued versus duly-valued contextual performance

Questions about antecedents	Situational factors contributing to the undervaluation of the contextual performance	Situational factors contributing to the due recognition of contextual performance	Corresponding propositions
How readily is the contextual performance accounted for within the superior's own occupational language or mindset?	<i>Context unfamiliarity to superiors.</i> The associated activities constitute niches that the superior finds somewhat alien. The amount of effort or sophistication that is required may accordingly be underestimated	<i>Shared meanings.</i> The superior and the employee share a conceptual space within the same occupational world. They may even conduct the contextual performance in collaboration with one another	P1a
Does the superior assign high salience to a particular item of contextual performance?	<i>Assumed peripherality.</i> The superior does not consider that a particular item of contextual performance is salient to organizational values and goals	<i>Agreed salience.</i> The superior and employee agree that that a particular item of contextual performance is salient to organizational values and goals	P1b
Are there review or feedback systems connected to the contextual performance?	<i>Lack of connection to systematic monitoring routines.</i> Without information being fed in a timely manner through formal routines into performance review processes, the superior may not know about the employee's related efforts or achievements	<i>Empowerment to report.</i> Formal routines or systems provide opportunities for the employee to report the contextual performance to the superior as a legitimate part of the performance review process	P1c
How much considerate attention does the superior devote to the associated problems or challenges faced by the employee?	<i>Lack of empathy and attention.</i> The superior does not put himself or herself in the shoes of the employee, and may not focus attention on the specific problems or situational demands faced by the employee.	<i>Concern and responsiveness.</i> The superior shows an interest in the processes and problems entailed by the contextual performance, actively checks out the employee's related experiences, and is available to give support where necessary	P2a, P2b
Are the employees' actions deliberately discreet or low profile?	<i>Operating discreetly, keeping low profile.</i> The associated activities are kept secret in order to maintain confidentiality or to avoid blame or defensive reactions, so the superior may not know about them	<i>Open consultation or discussion.</i> A high degree of trust between the superior and employee empowers the latter to raise potentially delicate issues for open discussion	P4, P5

Table 2. Situational factors making a difference in stories of negative spotlighting versus fair and proportionate handling of shortcomings or mistakes

Questions about antecedents	Situational factors contributing to negative spotlighting	Situational factors contributing to fair and proportionate handling of shortcomings or mistakes	Corresponding propositions
Does the superior assert power sensitively or abusively?	<i>Abusive and/or insensitive behaviour.</i> The superior asserts superiority over others by putting them down through behaviour seen as derogatory or abusive	<i>Interpersonally mature, respectful and sensitive.</i> The superior attempts to uphold interactive justice when dealing with employees	P6a, P6b
Is the superior's perspective on the employee's performance distorted by prejudice?	<i>Prejudicial and hostile attitudes.</i> The superior seeks excuses to discriminate against the employee	<i>Constructive and supportive attitude.</i> The superior looks for ways to help employees cope with difficulties and improve their performance	P6a, P6b
How open-minded is the superior to alternative approaches to the work?	<i>Insistence on one right way.</i> The superior has fixed ideas about the task and regards alternatives as deviations	<i>Flexible mindset.</i> The superior is willing to entertain alternative approaches and allows them to be tried out	P7a, P7b
Is the superior's perspective on the employee's performance distorted by rivalry?	<i>Rivalry.</i> The superior regards the employee as a competitor and is motivated to put the employee down	<i>Fair, co-operative, pragmatic approach.</i> The superior focuses on how s/he can cooperate with the employee to achieve organizational goals	P8
Is the employee protected by organizational structures?	<i>Absence of legitimate upward feedback channels.</i> The employee has nowhere to turn if he or she feels demoralized by negative spotlighting	<i>Presence of legitimate upward feedback channels.</i> The employee is empowered to voice objections	P10, P12

Figure 1. Posited factors contributing to undervaluation of contextual performance

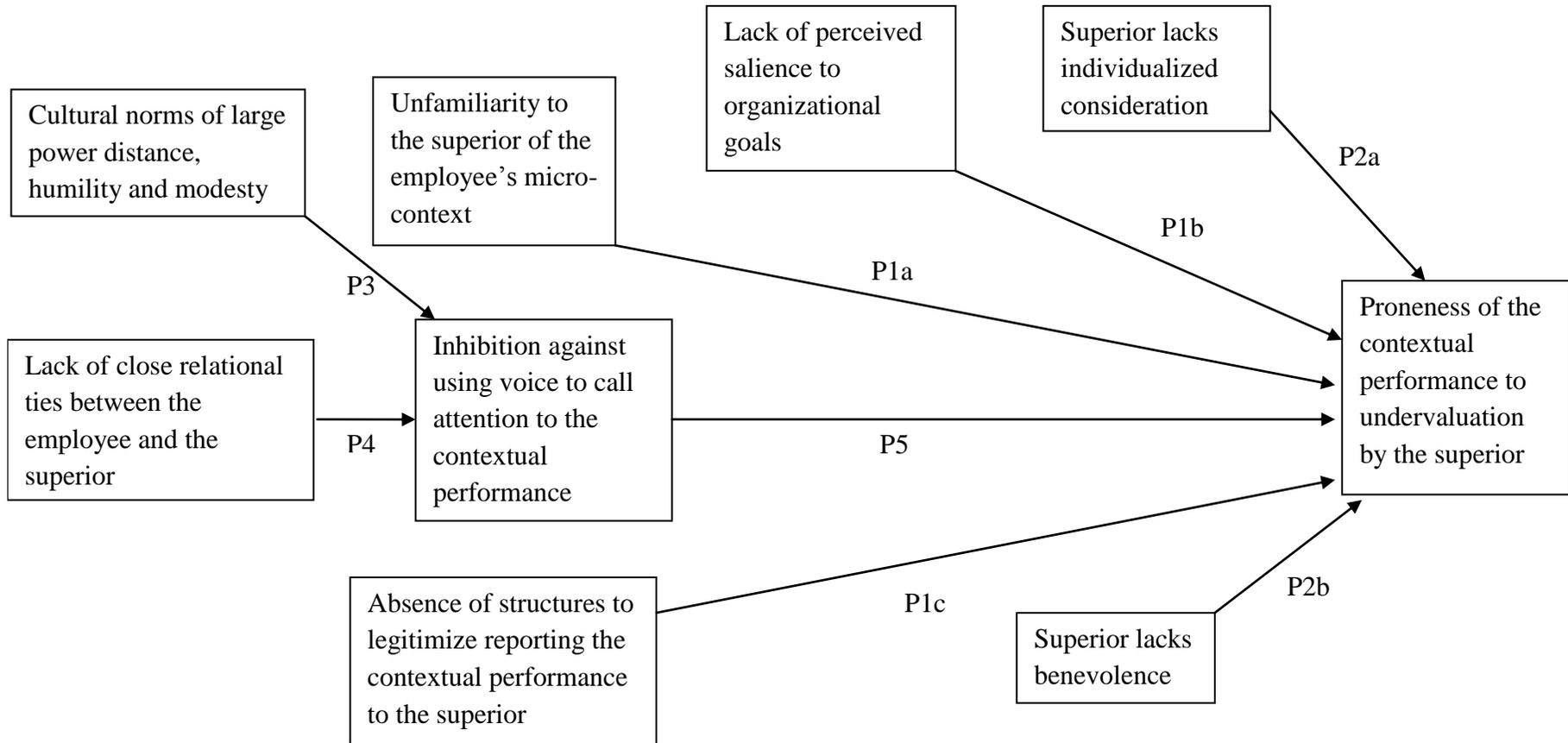


Figure 2. Posited factors contributing to the negative spotlighting of employees' mistakes or shortcomings

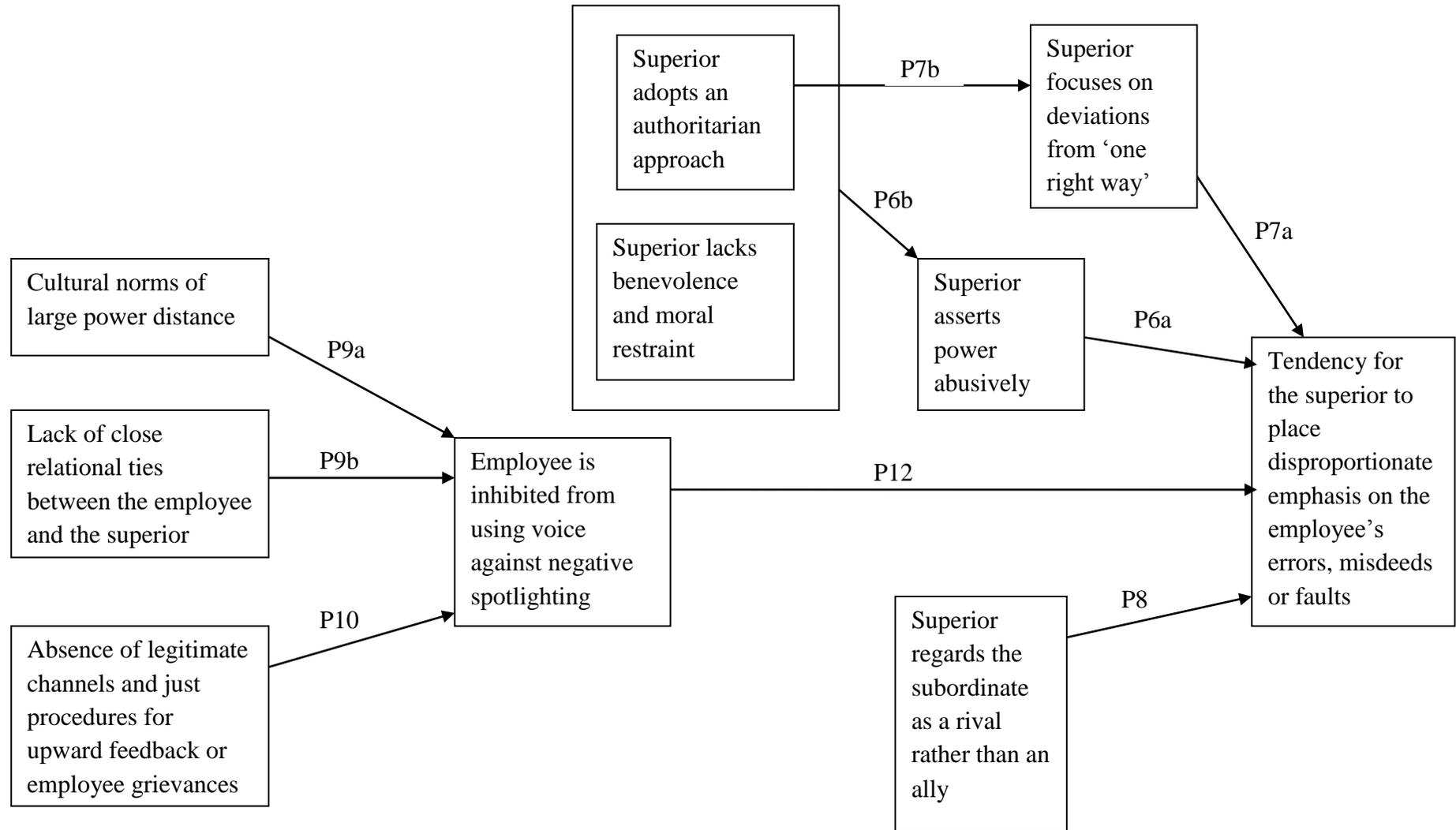


Figure 3. Co-evolution of data gathering, research propositions, review of the literatures, and data analysis

