

## An identification perspective of servant leadership's effects

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### Abstract:

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to reveal the identification-based mechanisms through which servant leadership affects desired outcomes (organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) toward coworkers and turnover intention) in the service industry in China.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The data of 293 pairs of valid subordinate-supervisor dyads were collected from the hospitality industry in China with a time lag of 30 days to reduce common method bias. Hypotheses were tested by a bootstrapping method and rival model comparisons.

**Findings:** The authors demonstrate that both the subordinate's identification with the supervisor and identification with the organization play crucial roles in translating servant leadership's effects to subordinate's coworker-oriented OCBs and turnover intention. However, the occurrence of the two identifications seems to be not parallel but in sequence (i.e. pointing from identification with the supervisor to identification with the organization). In addition, results show that servant leadership's ability to reduce subordinate's fear of being close to the immediate supervisor is an equally significant route through which subordinate's identification with the organization can be established.

**Originality/value:** The research has extended the literature and provided a nuanced explanation of the identification processes underlying servant leadership. The differentiation between relational identification with supervisor and collective identification with organization has shed light on a socialization mechanism through which subordinates come to demonstrate other-oriented service behavior and choose not to leave the organization. Additionally, the way that servant leadership helps eliminate subordinate's fear in a supervisory relationship has proved to be in-negligible in enhancing organizational identification.

**Keywords:** servant leadership | turnover intention | identification with the organization | identification with the supervisor | OCB toward workers

### Article:

High-quality service delivered by front-line employees is considered a major source of a service company's competitive advantage (Babakusa *et al.*, 2010); thus, much attention has been paid to understand how to boost the motivation of front-line service workers to serve external customers (e.g. Raub and Liao, 2012). However, although studies have extensively focussed on

organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) in general and helping behavior in particular, the serving behavior of front-line workers, which is intended to benefit coworkers as internal customers, has been less known. The service industry is characterized by a high turnover rate (Babakusa *et al.*, 2010). For instance, the turnover rate in the Chinese traditional service industry in 2013 is 19.4 percent, and this rate reached as high as 30 percent in the hospitality industry, compared with an average of 16.7 percent across all industries. The growing cost caused by employee turnover has placed a heavy burden to service companies. Moreover, employees in the service industry are normally undereducated and have not received sufficient on-the-job training. This phenomenon imposes difficulty in personnel management in the sense that the supervisors, promoted from below, lack necessary leadership so as to successfully carry out their responsibilities.

In this study, supervisors with servant leadership style are expected to retain subordinates in the organization and enable them to better serve internal customers because servant leadership is characterized by an emphasis on serving others and promoting others' interests ahead of his own (Liden *et al.*, 2008). Research effort has been conducted to determine the underlying mechanisms linking servant leadership to subordinates' attitudinal and behavioral reactions (e.g. Liden *et al.*, 2014). Servant leadership is more likely to be seen in the West, where power is less centralized and people are more equal (van Dierendonck, 2011). However, servant leadership has deep ideological roots and rich practical applications in China, despite China being conceived as very high on power distance. For example, "Serving the People," a political slogan in China, has been considered a fundamental principle for the cadres of the Chinese Communist Party. Therefore, servant leadership research should be extended to the Chinese context, and the impact mechanisms of servant leadership in the service industry in China should be revealed.

In this study, social identity theory (SIT, Tajfel and Turner, 1979) has been drawn upon to explicate an identification-based mechanism through which servant leadership influences subordinates' OCB toward coworkers and their turnover intention. SIT and its further extension to the organizational context have identified two basic forms of identification: organizational identification and relational identification (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). In the servant leadership literature, some scholars have paid attention to the mediating role of followers' organizational identification in the relationship between servant leadership and outcomes (e.g. Zhang *et al.*, 2014; Liden *et al.*, 2014). However, relationships among servant leadership, organizational identification, and relational identification with servant leaders remain unclear. To display a more complete picture of the servant leadership processes and consequences from an identification perspective, two types of identification are considered because both of them can be influenced by supervisors' servant leadership style and help to reduce employees' uncertainty in the workplace.

Specifically, one of the central tenets of servant leadership is a spirit of serving others, which is reflected in the behavioral dimensions such as creating value for the community, and helping subordinates grow and succeed. These values can be transmitted from servant supervisors to their subordinates (Greenleaf, 1970). However, the transmission depends on whether supervisors are recognized and accepted by their subordinates in the first place. If subordinates recognize and accept the style of their supervisors, a sense of security would be obtained through interactions with supervisors (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). By contrast, a lack of security can result in a high

level of uncertainty, which contradicts the reason why people join an organization as a social group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). When the environment is filled with uncertainty, employees will strive to seek information from various available sources to reduce uncertainty (Rosen *et al.*, 2011).

As one of the most accessible sources, high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationship can create such an environment for subordinates to reduce uncertainty (He and Brown, 2013). Supervisor-specific relational models have been proposed to depict the subordinates' perceptions of specific relationships with their immediate supervisors (Pierce and Lydon, 2001). Supervisor-specific avoidance, considered as subordinates' felt discomfort with the closeness with the supervisor and their reluctance to depend on the supervisor, is one type of relational model (Game, 2008). In the Chinese service industry, the avoidance that front-line employees show to their immediate supervisors due to their high-power distance orientation is more pronounced because most supervisors are promoted from the bottom in a relatively short period. Consequently, front-line employees are likely to experience a high level of negative emotions brought by their immediate supervisors. Studies have proposed that an emotional element is an integral part of one's identification (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Thus, employees' identification can be enhanced by mitigating the negative emotions associated with supervisor-specific avoidance, and supervisor-specific avoidance plays a key role in explaining the mechanism linking servant leadership to subordinates' outcomes from an identification perspective.

The purposes of this research are threefold. First, grounded in SIT and identification literature, we aim to explicate the impact mechanism of servant leadership on employees' relational identification with the supervisor and collective identification with the organization. Second, we reveal the mediating role that supervisor-specific avoidance may play in inducing employees' identifications. Third, we distinguish the roles of the two types of identification in the relationships among servant leadership, supervisor-specific avoidance, OCB toward coworkers, and turnover intention.

## **Theory and hypotheses**

### Servant leadership and subordinate's identification

As proposed by Kark and Shamir (2002), different aspects of leadership can prime relational self and collective self of followers and thereby activate relational and collective aspects of followers' identification, respectively. Subordinates' relational identification can be activated by servant supervisors' behaviors associated with their role- and person-based identities. On the one hand, servant supervisors' role-based identities (i.e. serving behaviors) are in accordance with organizational expectations because they believe in the principle of leading by serving followers (Liden *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, servant supervisors are usually viewed as role models by their subordinates especially in the workplace featured mainly by service. On the other hand, the person-based identities of servant supervisors (i.e. humility, dedication, and empowerment) not only can set behavioral standards for subordinates to imitate but also exert great appeal to subordinates (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). Thus, we expect a positive relationship between servant leadership and subordinates' identification with supervisors.

According to SIT, uncertainty reduction is one of the major motives why people join in and identify with an organization (Reid and Hogg, 2005). When subordinates perceive high level of uncertainty, particularly about who they are, what they are expected to do and how should they act in specific social contexts, they are in need of a set of clear prototypes (e.g. perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors) to define their identities. This need can be satisfied by servant supervisors because they possess more knowledge of these expectations, and this knowledge can be transmitted to subordinates (Liden *et al.*, 2008). In addition, servant supervisors can help organizations build a good employer reputation by setting the stage for subordinates' growth and in turn reduce their job-related uncertainty (Rosen *et al.*, 2011). Thus, we expect a positive relationship between servant leadership and subordinates' identification with their organizations. Taken together, we propose the following:

*H1.* Servant leadership is positively related to subordinate's identification with the supervisor (a) and identification with the organization (b).

Supervisor-specific avoidance as a mediator linking servant leadership and subordinate's identification

Supervisor-specific avoidance represents subordinate's negative interpretation of supervisor's behavior due to the negative experiences in the history of relationship episodes with the supervisor. The leadership style of supervisors plays an essential role in shaping the supervisor-subordinate relationship and thus can be considered one of the influential determinants of subordinate's supervisor-specific avoidance. Generally, since servant supervisors are always placing subordinates' interests ahead of their own, a secure attachment bond develops between them and their subordinates. This bond, characterized by subordinates' trust and belief in the dependability of supervisors (Game, 2008), usually helps to reduce subordinates' negative interpretation of their supervisors' behaviors and therefore might lead to the decrease of their supervisor-specific avoidance. Thus, subordinates might show a low level of supervisor-specific avoidance when they are supervised by servant supervisors because they tend to believe that their servant supervisors are trustworthy and dependable due to the fair and beneficiary treatments from supervisors (Game, 2008).

Furthermore, subordinates' low level of supervisor-specific avoidance indicates that they have already attributed their supervisors as trustworthy and dependable. This attribution usually comes from the subordinates' interpretation of the servant supervisors' role- and person-based identities and thus might lead to high level of identification with their supervisors (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). By contrast, when supervisors lack necessary managerial skills, subordinates will show high level of supervisor-specific avoidance. This situation means that their psychological attachment to supervisors has been breached. Accordingly, they no longer want to define themselves with reference to relationships with supervisors because they attribute supervisors to be untrustworthy and undependable (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). Thus, we expect that the subordinate's supervisor-specific avoidance result in the decrease of identification with the supervisor:

*H2a.* Supervisor-specific avoidance mediates the relationship between servant leadership and subordinate's identification with the supervisor.

Aside from being an indicator of the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship (Game, 2008), supervisor-specific avoidance is also expected to be associated with organizational identification. Previous research has revealed that self-enhancement and uncertainty reduction are two important motives for organizational identification (He and Brown, 2013). Subordinates' supervisor-specific avoidance indicates a loose relationship with their supervisors (Game, 2008) and thereby leads to difficulties in obtaining not only sufficient opportunities for self-enhancement but also necessary assistance from supervisors to reduce uncertainty. Thus, higher supervisor-specific avoidance might result in the lower identification with the organization. By combining the possible mitigating effect of servant leadership on supervisor-specific avoidance as analyzed before, we hypothesize that:

*H2b.* Supervisor-specific avoidance mediates the relationship between servant leadership and subordinate's identification with the organization.

#### Roles of identification with the supervisor and identification with the organization

Subordinate's identification with the supervisor mirrors subordinate's positive attitude toward the relationship established with the supervisor in their daily mutual interactions (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). Given its contagious nature (Barsade, 2002), this positive attitude might spill over to the relationship with coworkers, and a subordinate would most likely display a high level of OCBs toward coworkers. Meanwhile, given that subordinates who strongly identify with the servant supervisor tend to define themselves by both his/her role-based (e.g. providing high-quality service) and person-based identities (e.g. selfless, prosocial, and responsible), they are more willing to stay with him/her and enhance their self-esteem by sharing his/her criticism and pride (Chen *et al.*, 2002). By combining the indirect effect of servant leadership on the identification with the supervisor via supervisor-specific avoidance, we thus predict that:

*H3.* Identification with the supervisor transmits the indirect effect of servant leadership via supervisor-specific avoidance primarily to OCB toward coworkers and secondarily to turnover intention.

The more subordinates identify with the organization, the more salient positive organizational attributes (e.g. attractiveness, distinctiveness, prestige, and construed external image) are to one's self-concept (Smidts *et al.*, 2001). Thus, a subordinate would like to stay in and enjoy the prestige associated with the organization. Moreover, the higher the subordinate's identification with the organization, the more he/she may care about the organization's effectiveness (He and Brown, 2013). As a way to promote an organization's effectiveness (Organ, 1988), a subordinate's OCBs toward coworkers might result from his/her identification with the organization. By combining the indirect effect of servant leadership on subordinate's identification with the organization via supervisor-specific avoidance, we thus hypothesize the following:

*H4.* Identification with the organization transmits the indirect effect of servant leadership via supervisor-specific avoidance primarily to turnover intention and secondarily to OCB toward coworkers.

## **Methods**

### **Sample and procedure**

Data were collected from five small- to medium-sized companies (with full-time employees ranging from 61 to 198) in the hospitality industry in Beijing, Shandong, and Henan in China. These companies provide hospitality services such as lodging, dining, recreation, and travel planning. Two separate questionnaires for supervisors and subordinates were used. The questionnaire administered to the subordinates contained questions measuring subordinates' perceptions of their direct supervisor's servant leadership behaviors, supervisor-specific avoidance, identification with this supervisor, identification with the organization, turnover intention, and demographic information. The supervisor survey was composed of supervisor's demographic information and questions evaluating each direct subordinate's OCBs toward coworkers.

The survey in each company was conducted with the help of the staff from the HR department or the executive office. Subordinate survey and supervisor survey were distributed with a time lag of 30 days. The company coordinators helped identify subordinates who were on duty on the date the subordinate survey was administered. First, 330 sets of subordinate questionnaire and a cover letter in a sealed envelope were distributed. Survey was not anonymous for the purpose of matching subordinates' data with their direct supervisors'. To ensure confidentiality and to reduce subjects' uncertainty about the consequences of participating in the survey, they were told that only the research team would have access to the data, that their names would be removed once the data had been matched, and that they could seal the envelope again when returning the questionnaire. The research team stayed on the spot when surveys were filled out and answered comprehension questions raised by subjects. Complete questionnaires were directly returned to researchers. Next, the company coordinators compiled a list of supervisors whose direct subordinates had participated in the survey. Supervisors then received a sealed envelope containing a cover letter, rating forms for each of their direct subordinates, and a short survey soliciting their demographic information. This procedure resulted in 61 supervisors filling out questionnaires for 305 subordinates. Finally, after discarding incomplete, careless, and unmatched questionnaires, a total of 293 pairs of valid subordinate-supervisor dyads were obtained. The average subordinate-supervisor ratio was 4.8:1.

Among the subordinates, 40.6 percent were male, 80.5 percent were born after the year 1980 (a new generation called post-1980s in China, equivalent to the millennial generation), 71.0 percent did not have a college degree, and 89.1 percent were low-level employees without a managerial role. Among the supervisors, 62.3 percent were male, 78.7 percent were post-1980s, and 57.4 percent held a college degree.

### **Measures**

Five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), were used for all the measures. All the instruments were adapted from existing scales, and were translated and back-translated into Chinese by two assistant professors and two doctoral students to ensure translation equivalence.

### *Servant leadership*

A seven-item shortened version of the servant leadership scale was used. The original scale was developed by Liden *et al.* (2008), including 28 items loaded on seven dimensions. This shortened seven-item scale was composed of items that had the highest loading on each dimension and was validated by Liden *et al.* (2014) following rigorous procedures. A sample item is “My supervisor makes my career development a priority.” The reliability was 0.71.

### *Supervisor-specific avoidance*

Three items were adapted from Game’s (2008) avoidance subscale of the measure of supervisor-specific relational model. The original scale contains six items including both items capture the discomfort with closeness in the relationship and items capture the reluctance to depend on the supervisor. In our sample, this six-item scale suggested a very poor reliability and factor analyzing them resulted in a three-factor solution. We used the first three items which were loaded on one factor with the highest eigenvalue. A sample item is “I prefer not to show my supervisor how I feel deep down.” They capture the discomfort with closeness in the relationship with the supervisor – a typical phenomenon in China due to its high power distance culture. The reliability was 0.65.

### *Identification with the supervisor*

Subordinate’s identification with the supervisor was measured with three items drawn from Chen *et al.* (2002). A sample item is “When someone praises my supervisor, I take it as a personal compliment.” The reliability was 0.71.

### *Identification with the organization*

Subordinate’s identification with the organization was measured with three items drawn from Smidts *et al.* (2001). A sample item is “I feel proud to work for (organization name).” The reliability was 0.87.

### *Turnover intention*

Turnover intention captures both the thoughts of quitting and the intention to find another job (Chen *et al.*, 2011). Two items (i.e. “I frequently think of quitting my job” and “I am planning to search for a new job during the next 12 months”) from Chen *et al.* (2011) were used. The reliability of this short scale was 0.74.

### *OCBs toward coworkers*

Subordinate's OCBs toward coworkers were assessed with six items drawn from the scale of OCB for individuals developed by Williams and Anderson (1991). The original scale contains seven items with one of them assessing the extent to which an employee assists the supervisor (i.e. "Assists supervisor with his/her work (when not asked)") instead of coworkers. The behavioral targets of the remaining six items are coworkers explicitly. A sample items is "Helps coworkers who have heavy workloads." The reliability was 0.83.

### Analytic strategy

Given the multilevel nature of our data (multiple subordinates nested in supervisors), we first calculated the intra-class correlation coefficients (ICC1) for turnover intention and OCBs toward coworkers to determine whether non-independence would be a concern and the appropriate level of analysis. Small ICC1s (0.06 for turnover intentions and 0.07 for OCBs) suggested that there was no substantial variance attributed to the supervisor level, and therefore analysis at the individual (subordinate) level would be appropriate. This is also consistent with our theoretical framework and operationalization of servant leadership where we expect that an individual's perception of his/her supervisor's behavior toward him/her affect the subsequent outcomes.

## Results

### Confirmatory factor analyses

We performed CFAs with Mplus 6.12 to assess the measurement model of the six study variables and to ensure discriminant validity of our measures: servant leadership, supervisor-specific avoidance, identification with supervisor, identification with organization, turnover intention, and OCB toward coworkers. The resultant six-factor solution, with correlated factors and uncorrelated error, provided a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2(237)=418.34$ , CFI=0.92, TLI=0.90, RMSEA=0.05, SRMR=0.06). In addition, the statistically significant factor loadings of each item were observed to indicate convergent validity. Then, this six-factor model was compared with four alternative models to demonstrate good discriminant validity among the measures. The four alternative models were shown in Table I. As all of these alternative models have shown significantly worse model fit, it is empirically impossible that any measurement model with fewer factors would produce better fit than the baseline model.

**Table I.** Results of confirmatory factor analyses

Models	$\chi^2$	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Six-factor model: SL, SA, IDS, IDO, OCB, TI	418.34	237	0.92	0.90	0.05	0.06
Five-factor model (a): SL, SA, IDS + IDO, OCB, T	566.16	242	0.85	0.83	0.07	0.07
Five-factor model (b): SL, SA + IDS, IDO, OCB, TI	540.90	242	0.86	0.84	0.07	0.07
Five-factor model (c): SL + SA, IDS, IDO, OCB, TI	500.20	242	0.88	0.86	0.06	0.06
Four-factor model (d): SL + SA + IDS, IDO, OCB, TI	587.90	246	0.84	0.82	0.07	0.07

**Notes:** SL, servant leadership; SA, supervisor-specific avoidance; IDS, identification with supervisor; IDO, identification with organization; OCB, organizational citizenship behavior toward coworkers; TI, turnover intention

### Hypotheses tests

We report means, standard deviations, bivariate zero-order correlations, and reliabilities of the study variables in Table II.

**Table II.** Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Servant leadership	_(0.71)					
2. Supervisor-specific avoidance	-0.35**	(0.65)				
3. Identification with supervisor	0.41**	-0.23**	(0.71)			
4. Identification with organization	0.31**	-0.33**	0.35**	(0.87)		
5. Turnover intention	-0.12*	0.19**	-0.14*	-0.49**	(0.74)	
6. OCB-coworker	0.27**	-0.35**	0.25**	0.38**	-0.14*	(0.83)
Mean	3.22	2.31	3.34	3.57	2.94	3.92
SD	0.59	0.72	0.76	0.80	0.91	0.50

**Notes:**  $n = 293$ . SD, standard deviation; OCB-coworker, organizational citizenship behavior toward coworkers. Cronbach- $\alpha$  coefficients were reported in the parentheses in the diagonal. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed test)

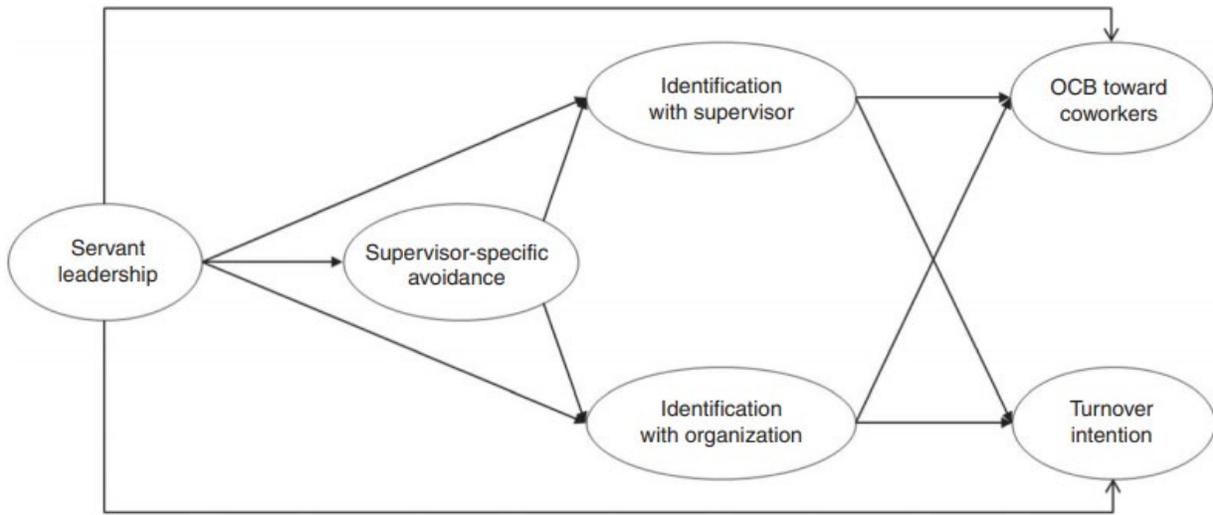
*H1a* and *H1b* proposed that servant leadership is positively related to subordinate's identification with the supervisor (*H1a*) and identification with the organization (*H1b*). Significant zero-order correlations provided support for these two hypotheses. To demonstrate that the significant relationships are not due to measurement error, we further tested a structural model where two types of identification were regressed on servant leadership. This model provided good fit to the data ( $\chi^2(62)=132.68$ , CFI=0.93, TLI=0.91, RMSEA=0.06, SRMR=0.05), and the two paths linking servant leadership and identification with supervisor ( $\beta=0.56$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and linking servant leadership and identification with organization ( $\beta=0.39$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) were statistically significant, providing further support to *H1a* and *H1b*. *H2-H4* were tested simultaneously by estimating the structural model shown in Figure 1. This model was estimated using Mplus 6.12 to obtain the overall model fit indices, point estimations of all the indirect effects as well as their standard errors, and 95 percent bias-corrected bootstrapping confidence intervals (95 percent CIs) for these indirect effects based on 5,000 resamples (MacKinnon *et al.*, 2004). This model also provided good fit to the data ( $\chi^2(239)=430.47$ , CFI=0.91, TLI=0.90, RMSEA=0.05, SRMR=0.06). *H2a* and *H2b* proposed that the relationships between servant leadership and subordinate's identification with the supervisor (*H2a*) and between servant leadership and subordinate's identification with the organization (*H2b*) are mediated by supervisor-specific avoidance. As seen in "Step 1" in Table III, estimations of these two mediating effects suggested that only *H2b* was supported (point estimate=0.34, 95 percent CI (0.08, 0.81)). Supervisor-specific avoidance did not mediate the relationship between servant leadership and identification with supervisor (point estimate=-0.03, 95 percent CI (-0.47, 0.22)). *H3* predicted that identification with the supervisor transmits the indirect effect of servant leadership via supervisor-specific avoidance primarily to OCB toward coworkers and secondarily to turnover intention. Since the indirect effect linking servant leadership and identification with supervisor via supervisor-specific avoidance was not shown in our sample, servant leadership was not able to exert influence on either subordinate's OCB or turnover intention indirectly through specific avoidance and identification with the supervisor in a sequence. Thus, *H3* was not supported. *H4* predicted that identification with the organization transmits the indirect effect of servant leadership via supervisor-specific avoidance primarily to turnover intention and secondarily to OCB toward coworkers. This hypothesis was supported by significant indirect effects shown in "Step 2" in Table III (point estimate=-0.20, 95 percent CI (-0.51, -0.05) for

turnover intention and point estimate=0.08, 95 percent CI (0.01, 0.22) for OCB). Figure 2 presents a summary of the unstandardized path coefficients and their standard errors for the hypothesized model.

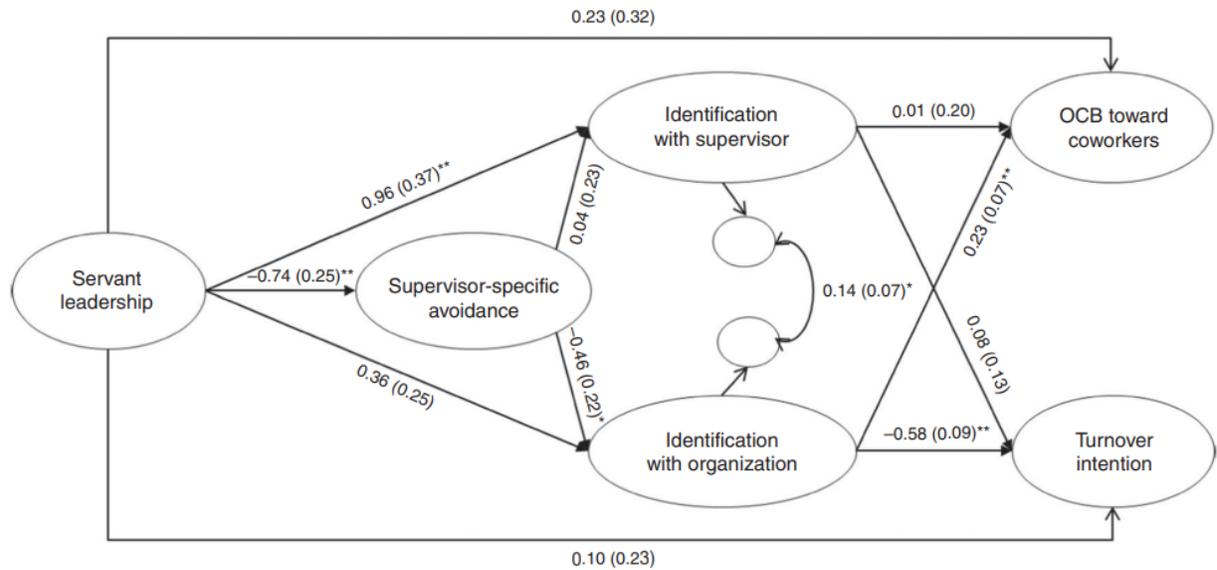
**Table III.** Mediating effects of servant leadership on two types of identification, OCB, and turnover intention

	Point estimate	95% bias-corrected bootstrapping CI		Point estimate	95% bias-corrected bootstrapping CI	
		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper
Step 1	Identification with supervisor			Identification with organization		
	Indirect effects			Indirect effects		
SL → SA	-0.03	-0.47	0.22	0.34	0.08	0.81
Step 2	OCB-coworker			Turnover intention		
	Indirect effects			Indirect effects		
SL → SA → IDS	0.00	-0.04	0.01	0.00	-0.09	0.03
SL → SA → IDO	0.08	0.01	0.22	-0.20	-0.51	-0.05
Supplemental analysis	OCB-coworker			Turnover intention		
	Indirect effects			Indirect effects		
SL → SA → IDO	0.10	0.03	0.23	-0.18	-0.39	-0.07
SL → IDS → IDO	0.10	0.04	0.22	-0.18	-0.41	-0.06
Total indirect effect	0.20	0.10	0.39	-0.37	-0.70	-0.20

**Notes:** SL, servant leadership; SA, supervisor-specific avoidance; IDS, identification with supervisor; IDO, identification with organization; OCB-coworker, organizational citizenship behavior toward coworkers. Unstandardized coefficients are reported



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized model



**Figure 2.** Results for the hypothesized model

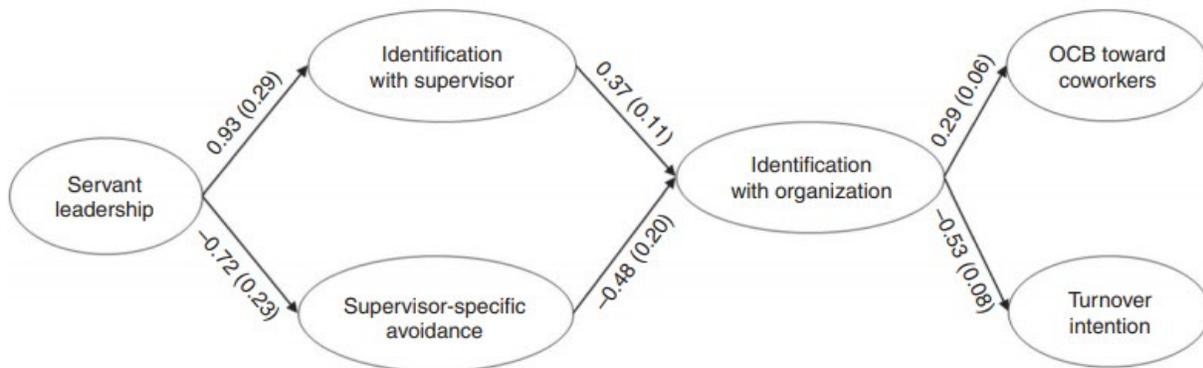
**Notes:** Unstandardized coefficients and their standard errors (in the parentheses) are reported. Residuals of identification with supervisor and identification with organization are correlated as recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

### Supplemental analyses

Our results shown in Figure 2 failed to support the mediating role of supervisor-specific avoidance in the relationship between servant leadership and subordinate's identification with the supervisor. Rather, the direct effect of servant leadership on identification with supervisor ( $b=0.96$ ,  $SE=0.37$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) remained very strong. Additionally, when the effects of identification with organization on turnover intention and OCB toward coworkers were controlled for, identification with supervisor did not explain additional variances, evidenced by two non-significant path coefficients. These may suggest that identification with supervisor is more of a proximal consequence of servant leadership, whereas identification with organization is more of a proximal antecedent of turnover intention and OCB. Suggested by the significant correlated residuals of identification with supervisor and identification with organization, it seems plausible that there is a sequential causal relationship between the two types of identification, with a direction pointing from identification with supervisor to identification with organization. In fact, previous research, using a time-lagged research design, has shown that there involves a generalization process where it is subordinates identification with the leader that further generalizes to their identification with the organization (Sluss *et al.*, 2012).

To empirically test this plausibility, we compared two models where the sequence linking two types of identification was reverse-ordered (Jermier and Schriesheim, 1978). First, we constructed the baseline model (see Figure 3) by removing all the non-significant paths in Figure 2 and replacing the correlated residuals with a direct link pointing from identification with supervisor to identification with organization. This step was to test whether a simpler model, compared with the one having more paths to estimate (the model in Figure 2), would fit equally well. Results have shown that this modified model did not fit worse ( $\chi^2(244)=441.40$ ,  $CFI=0.91$ ,  $TLI=0.90$ ,  $RMSEA=0.05$ ,  $SRMR=0.07$ ,  $\Delta\chi^2(5)=10.94$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) and, since it is simpler, should

be considered a preferred model. Next, we constructed an alternative model by reversing the order between two types of identification. Such a change not only altered the directionality between the two variables, but also imposed the need to estimate two additional parameters (correlated residuals between identification with supervisor and turnover intention and between identification with supervisor and OCB). This model, fit worse ( $\chi^2(242)=444.27$ ) and being more complex, failed to be a more plausible one. Looking into the model fit index Akaike information criterion has also suggested that the baseline model, as shown in Figure 3, fit better to our data. This modified model explicates the effects of servant leadership on turnover intention and OCB toward coworkers through supervisor-specific avoidance and identification with supervisor in the first place, and subsequently identification with organization. As seen in the rows under “supplemental analysis” in Table III, we report the estimated indirect effects of servant leadership on OCB toward coworkers and turnover intentions through different mechanisms, as well as the total indirect effects.



**Figure 3.** Results for the modified model

**Notes:** All the paths are significant at the  $\alpha = 0.05$  level. Unstandardized coefficients and their standard errors (in the parentheses) are reported

Our modified model differs from the hypothesized one. Specifically, the hypothesized model proposes that supervisor-specific avoidance mediates the relationship between servant leadership and both types of identification, placing both identifications as parallel mechanisms that further influence two subordinate outcomes. The modified model, however, suggests that there appears a sequential relationship between identification with supervisor and identification with organization, and that both supervisor-specific avoidance and identification with supervisor may precede identification with organization. Therefore, we provide a theoretical account for why this may be the case.

First, the sequential ordering between relational identification and organizational identification can be empirically supported and theoretically explained by Sluss *et al.*'s (2012) extension of SIT. Recognition of the role that relational identification plays in eliciting organizational identification has challenged the depersonalization argument in the organizational identification literature (i.e. for someone to identify with an organization, a depersonalization process needs to occur first, Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Instead, a personalized facet may not or should not be removed in understanding the issue of organizational identification (Sluss *et al.*, 2012). Second, supervisor-specific avoidance and identification with supervisor are two psychological states and they manifest themselves as the fear of being close to the supervisor and the pride of being a subordinate to the supervisor, respectively. They are likely to be driven by separate processes,

one being more emotional, and the other being more cognitive (Millar and Tesser, 1986). On the one hand, supervisor-specific avoidance describes an affective process. Subordinates with high supervisor-specific avoidance do not feel comfortable getting close to their supervisors and they feel awkward or even ashamed to express their true thoughts or feelings (Collins, 1996; Game, 2008). On the other hand, identification with supervisors describes a cognitive process where subordinates use this supervisor-subordinate role-relationship to define themselves (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). It has been highlighted that both the affective and the cognitive processes are non-negligible mechanisms through which identification with an organization occurs (He and Brown, 2013). Therefore, it makes most sense to believe that supervisor-specific avoidance and identification with supervisor play as two such processes that precede identification with organization.

## **Discussion**

This study demonstrates several identification-related psychological mechanisms through which servant leadership exerts its influence on subordinate's turnover intention and OCB toward coworkers, two outcomes that are crucial for the service industry in general and hospitality industry in particular. In specific, we found that supervisor's servant leadership elicits subordinate's identification with the supervisor and reduces subordinate's supervisor-specific avoidance, both of which in turn influence subordinate's identification with the organization. Organizational identification directly helps reduce subordinate's turnover intention and facilitate coworker-oriented serving behaviors (i.e. OCB toward coworkers).

### Theoretical implications

First, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the servant leadership process. Specifically, our model delineates how subordinates become identified with their organization when they are exposed to a servant supervisor. The sequential identification process pointing from relational identification with supervisor to generalized organizational identification has suggested that servant leadership may directly establish subordinates' relational self that is associated with their servant role identity first and then indirectly activate subordinates' identification with the organization. Although prior research has investigated the role of organizational identification in transmitting the effect of servant leadership to subordinate outcomes (Zhang *et al.*, 2012; Liden *et al.*, 2014), the present research compliments previous work by adding a personalized and a relational self into the picture (Sluss *et al.*, 2012), better capturing the one-on-one supervisory relationship in the servant leadership process.

Second, our emphasis on the mediating roles of identification with the supervisor and supervisor-specific avoidance has enriched our understanding of the relationship between servant leadership and identification with organization. Although the relational identification with supervisor characterizes a cognitive mechanism (i.e. the development of a relational self), supervisor-specific avoidance, denoted as an important supervisor-subordinate relations type (Game, 2008), may capture an emotional process through which subordinate's supervisor-specific distress and hence work-related uncertainty can be largely reduced. In fact, our results have shown that these two mediating effects are equal in magnitude. Such empirical findings

underscore the uniqueness of supervisor-specific avoidance in explaining the effects of leadership in general and servant leadership in particular.

Third, servant leadership is more likely to be developed in a low-power distance culture (van Dierendonck, 2011). However, culture should matter not only in terms of how servant leadership emerges but also in terms of how culture affects outcomes. This study examines the effects of servant leadership in China, a country characterized by a high-power distance culture. Given that equality is not as much expected as in a Western culture, servant leadership may be more powerful in exerting positive effects. By demonstrating servant leadership behaviors, a supervisor is acting in a way that is beyond the subordinate's expectations and thus likely produces more favorable outcomes. This speculation is consistent with our finding that servant leadership can reduce a subordinate's supervisor-specific avoidance, serving as a key intervening mechanism that further translates servant leadership's effects.

Finally, serving others and turnover intentions are two important subordinate outcomes in a service industry and that servant leadership is powerful in influencing both (Hunter *et al.*, 2013). This study strengthens these arguments by providing a theoretical account for how it occurs from a social identity perspective, and sheds light on the value of servant leadership behaviors in servant personnel management.

#### Strengths, limitations, and future research

This study is featured by a research design where we collected data in several real organizations in the same industry (i.e. hospitality), obtained information from two sources, and introduced a time lag between the two waves of data collection. Our test of mediation hypotheses was performed with an advanced analytical approach (i.e. bootstrapping) to provide a more accurate estimation of the indirect effects. Model comparisons (i.e.  $\chi^2$  difference tests) were performed to lead to our final model, and the empirical results were backed up with theoretical explanations.

One of the weaknesses of this study was the use of cross-sectional design in making causal inferences among servant leadership, the three mediators, and turnover intention, all of which were rated by the same subordinate at once. However, servant leadership is unlikely to be caused by subordinates' psychological states, both in theory and in practice. Meanwhile, the model comparisons have allowed us to elucidate the most plausible sequence among the three mediators. A preferred way would be to use a cross-lagged panel design to rule out alternative explanations, or to use a pure longitudinal design to examine changes in variables over time. Another weakness is the issue of nested data structure (i.e. subordinates are nested in supervisors). However, we have empirically shown that non-independence is not a concern in our sample due to very small portions of variance in the outcome variables (6-7 percent) explained by a between level. We encourage future research to examine the non-independence issue whenever there appears concern, but more ideally, to perform sampling at the level where analysis is to be conducted.

#### Implications for practice

Several practical implications for managing service personnel can be drawn from our research findings. First, our results indicate that servant leadership is powerful in encouraging subordinate's other-oriented behaviors and reducing their turnover intentions. Thus, supervisors should practice these servant leadership behaviors to better serve their subordinates and help them realize their full potential. Second, this study shows that servant leadership elicits a subordinate's integrated self, encompassing role identity, relational identity, and organizational identity, centered on a spirit of serving. Supervisors should use a symbolic management strategy to make individual subordinate's role identity salient and to provide compelling images of what the organization represents (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). In doing so, once the serving spirit has been incorporated as a defining characteristic of the self, we would expect more other-oriented serving behaviors or more broadly prosocial behaviors. Third, supervisors should be cautious about employees' emotional experience in the supervisory relationship and the potential negative effects of negative affectivity, especially of individuals who have a dispositional avoidance orientation (Collins, 1996). Finally, this study has provided insights concerning how to manage Chinese post-1980s, the majority of our sample employees. Their values have been said to be different from older generations, that is, they are more self-centered and afraid of hardship. To change their work attitude, leadership can play an important role, and servant leadership, as far as this research is concerned, has shown its great utility.

## Conclusion

With an increasing interest in the study of servant leadership, this study has extended the literature and provided a nuanced explanation of the identification processes underlying servant leadership. Our differentiation between relational identification with supervisor and collective identification with organization has shed light on a socialization mechanism through which subordinates come to demonstrate other-oriented service behaviors and choose not to leave the organization. Additionally, the way that servant leadership helps eliminate subordinate's fear in a supervisory relationship has proved to be in-negligible in enhancing organizational identification. We encourage future research to delve into various phenomena associated with servant leadership, service industry, and service behaviors at large.

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