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Employee Popularity Mediates the Relationship Between Political Skill and Workplace Interpersonal Mistreatment

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Interpersonal mistreatment is a common and often devastating occurrence in the workplace. Although victim characteristics are an important determinant of who is targeted, research examining the link between target characteristics and interpersonal mistreatment is limited. Researchers have not considered employees' interpersonal style as an antecedent of the mistreatment they experience from others. Further, very few studies have attempted to understand the mediating processes underlying the relationships between victim characteristics and workplace interpersonal mistreatment. The current study addresses these needs by examining employee popularity as a mediator of the relationship between political skill and two forms of interpersonal mistreatment: workplace interpersonal conflict and workplace ostracism. Results indicate that the political skill–interpersonal mistreatment relationships were mediated by employee popularity.

Keywords: *political skill; popularity; ostracism; conflict; social influence*

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Social interactions are ubiquitous components of many work environments. The transition to a knowledge-based and service economy, as well as the prevalent use of work teams, has increased the importance of effective workplace relationships. However, social interactions also have the potential to deteriorate into interpersonal mistreatment resulting in detrimental consequences for employees and organizations (e.g., Cortina & Magley, 2003; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Liu, Nauta, Spector, & Li, 2008; Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001). Research attempting to explain why interpersonal mistreatment occurs has generally focused on characteristics of the perpetrator (e.g., Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2009; Reio & Ghosh, 2009) but has also begun to investigate characteristics of the target (victim).

Researchers have identified several dispositional characteristics that predispose individuals to experience mistreatment from others (e.g., negative affectivity, agency, cognitive ability, submissiveness, conflict avoidance, and quietness; Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Kim & Glomb, 2010; Milam, Spitzmueller, & Penney, 2009). It has been speculated that negative affectivity leads employees to engage in annoying behaviors (Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001; Milam et al., 2009; Zapf, 1999), whereas submissiveness, conflict avoidance, and quietness lead employees to behave in ways that identify themselves as easy targets for interpersonal mistreatment (Aquino & Bradfield, 2000; Harvey, Blouin, & Stout, 2006). Kim and Glomb (2010) recently demonstrated that self-striving tendencies (i.e., agency traits) strengthen the positive relationship between cognitive ability and victimization, while communion-striving personality characteristics weaken the same relationship. Other scholars have also identified personality traits that protect individuals from being mistreated, including emotional stability, agreeableness, self-esteem, and positive affectivity (e.g., Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Bowling, Beehr, Bennett, & Watson, 2010; Milam et al., 2009; Vartia, 1996).

Therefore, emerging empirical evidence indicates that target characteristics are important antecedents of others' uncivil actions; however, the existing literature has been described as "far from complete" (Bowling & Beehr, 2006: 1000) and warranting future research (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Lamertz & Aquino, 2004; Milam et al., 2009). For instance, the examination of broad, stable personality traits that predispose individuals to workplace mistreatment has prompted criticism that this research may lead to blaming the victim (e.g., Leymann, 1990, 1996). However, research designed to locate narrower, more malleable target characteristics that protect individuals from mistreatment may provide opportunities to improve employees' work experiences. Furthermore, most studies have used single-source data and thus may suffer from the common method variance problem. Finally, researchers have generally failed to examine how and why target characteristics predict mistreatment. As the one exception, Milam et al. (2009) reported that coworker-rated provocative behaviors mediated the positive relationship between neuroticism and incivility and the negative relationship between agreeableness and incivility.

The current study addresses the limitations of previous research and advances the investigation of target characteristics by proposing political skill (a narrower, more malleable, work-specific target characteristic; Ferris et al., 2005) as an antecedent of workplace interpersonal mistreatment. Previous theory and research has demonstrated that politically skilled employees are effective at implementing social influence, which we propose is likely to

enhance the acceptance of these employees by their coworkers (i.e., lead to their popularity). Workplace popularity, in turn, is associated with many desirable outcomes, which we argue include protection from interpersonal mistreatment. In sum, we propose a model in which popularity mediates the relationship between political skill and the employee's experience of two forms of interpersonal mistreatment: conflict and ostracism (discussed subsequently).

Due to the scarcity of organizational research linking political skill, popularity, and interpersonal mistreatment, our study addresses gaps in several different literatures. First, we expand the limited nomological network of popularity by identifying political skill as an antecedent. We also contribute to the underdeveloped literature linking popularity and interpersonal mistreatment and heed the recommendation of mistreatment researchers to examine narrow as opposed to broad forms of mistreatment (Ferris, Brown, Berry, & Lian, 2008). Finally, we address needs in both the political skill and workplace mistreatment literatures to examine mediating variables (Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011; Milam et al., 2009).

Theoretical Development

Workplace interpersonal mistreatment refers to the termination of normative positive interactions or the engagement in counternormative negative actions toward an employee (Cortina & Magley, 2003). This broad term refers to a variety of behaviors including impolite social interactions (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina et al., 2001), exclusionary behaviors (Ferris, Brown, et al., 2008), harassment (Aquino & Thau, 2009), bullying (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996), and mobbing (Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996). Interpersonal mistreatment is prevalent in the workplace, comes from a variety of sources (e.g., peers and supervisors), and results in negative consequences for employees, including decreased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and self-esteem, as well as increased turnover intentions, anxiety, depression, and physical symptoms (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Cortina et al., 2001; Ferris, Brown, et al., 2008; Hitlan, Kelly, Schepman, Schneider, & Zarate, 2006; Liu et al., 2008; Porath & Pearson, 2010; Williams & Sommer, 1997). In the current study, we attempt to provide insight into how employees can avoid becoming victims of interpersonal mistreatment.

Researchers have acknowledged a proliferation of broad interpersonal mistreatment constructs within the organizational literature and have expressed concern regarding the conceptual and empirical distinctiveness of these measures (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Broad measures encompass a variety of behaviors, and thus the interpretation of relationships between broad measures and other variables is unclear. The clarity of relationships between antecedents and interpersonal mistreatment can be improved when narrow, distinct forms of mistreatment are assessed (Ferris, Brown, et al., 2008; Martin & Hine, 2005). In the current study, we examine workplace ostracism and workplace interpersonal conflict. Workplace ostracism is the experience of being rejected, excluded, ignored, or isolated by others at work (e.g., avoiding talking or being in the same location as someone; Ferris, Brown, et al., 2008). Workplace interpersonal conflict is the experience of negative exchanges with others at work, involving anger, hostility, and verbal aggression (e.g., insults, rudeness; Jex, 2001). We adopted Bowling et al.'s (2010) conceptualization of interpersonal conflict, which, based on

a review of the interpersonal conflict literature, concluded that interpersonal conflict scales assess a one-directional interaction (e.g., How often do other people yell at you at work?) and thus measure the interpersonal mistreatment a victim experiences from perpetrators. Ferris, Brown, et al. (2008) suggest that these experiences should be examined as separate constructs because exclusion (e.g., being given the "silent treatment" or avoided at work) is a very different experience from mistreatment occurring during social interactions (i.e., the victim at least feels acknowledged and knows when conflict is occurring; Williams, 2001). Previous research using broad scales confounds these two experiences (Martin & Hine, 2005); however, in the current study, we examine ostracism and interpersonal conflict as separate constructs to establish unambiguous relationships with antecedents of each form of interpersonal mistreatment.

Political Skill and Interpersonal Mistreatment

Social influence theory (Levy, Collins, & Nail, 1998) provides a framework for understanding how and why some individuals avoid workplace interpersonal mistreatment. As applied to the workplace, social influence theory proposes that employees use influence behaviors to achieve positive workplace outcomes, including higher compensation, better performance appraisals, and promotions. Many business environments require frequent interpersonal interactions (Ferris, Perrewé, Anthony, & Gilmore, 2000), and workplace outcomes are often based on subjective evaluations. The social nature of the workplace and the subjectivity involved in workplace decision making provide opportunities for those who are good at using interpersonal influence to improve their workplace outcomes, including avoiding negative outcomes that result from a decision or opinion (e.g., demotions, punishments). Interpersonal mistreatment occurs when one person decides to harm another person; thus, it may be possible for individuals to use social influence to avoid workplace interpersonal mistreatment.

Political skill is defined as "the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (Ferris et al., 2005: 127). Thus, individuals who differ in their political skill also differ in their ability to influence others to achieve workplace outcomes. Politically skilled employees have a better understanding of social interactions, including what others want or need and how others will react to their behavior (Ferris et al., 2005). Politically skilled employees are also better at adjusting their behavior in order to receive favorable responses from others. In support of these claims, politically skilled individuals are more likely to choose social and enterprising careers (Kaplan, 2008) and are more successful in environments that provide opportunities to exercise interpersonal influence (Blickle et al., 2009).

Extensive research has established that political skill allows employees to obtain desirable workplace outcomes that are in some part subjective and socially contingent (e.g., performance and promotability ratings, career success, promotions; Ferris, Blickle, et al., 2008; Gentry, Gilmore, Shuffler, & Leslie, 2012; Todd, Harris, Harris, & Wheeler, 2009). For example, supervisors rated the performance of politically skilled employees higher than the performance of politically unskilled employees when they engaged in impression

management techniques (e.g., ingratiation; Harris, Kacmar, Zivnuska, & Shaw, 2007). Supervisors also viewed the influence tactics of politically skilled employees as sincere and the influence tactics of politically unskilled employees as manipulative (Treadway, Ferris, Duke, Adams, & Thatcher, 2007). These studies demonstrate that political skill allows employees to influence others' perceptions of their actions and achieve desired outcomes without appearing calculating or devious. As a logical extension of previous research, we propose that the social understanding and regulated actions of politically skilled employees allow them to avoid workplace interpersonal mistreatment.

Hypothesis 1: Political skill will negatively relate to reported experiences of two forms of interpersonal mistreatment: (1a) workplace interpersonal conflict and (1b) workplace ostracism.

In the following sections, we argue that employee popularity is a mechanism underlying the political skill–interpersonal mistreatment relationship. We first focus on the political skill–popularity link and then on the popularity–mistreatment link.

Political Skill and Popularity

Attaining acceptance by one's social group is a primary goal for most individuals (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005). At the workplace, popularity is defined as "generally being accepted by one's peers" (Scott & Judge, 2009: 21). In other words, workplace popularity is the consensus of an individual's peers regarding the individual's level of social acceptance within the office, company, or work team. Social influence theory (Levy et al., 1998) suggests that influence behaviors are essential to achieving workplace objectives, and thus, political skill researchers have proposed that those individuals who are able to use influence tactics appropriately within the dynamics of their workplace relationships are likely to experience success (e.g., higher performance ratings; Harris et al., 2007). Harris et al. (2007) suggest that simply using influence tactics is not enough: individuals have to do so in a socially appropriate manner. The ability to execute interpersonal influence while maintaining favorable interactions with others is critical because social relationships are one way individuals obtain desired outcomes (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Treadway et al., 2007). We propose that political skill aids employees in obtaining general acceptance by coworkers (i.e., popularity) by allowing them to (a) develop extensive networks within the workplace and (b) create enjoyable social interactions for others.

Politically skilled employees have the ability to build friendships, networks, alliances, and coalitions easily (Ferris et al., 2005; Ferris, Treadway, Perrewé, Brouer, Douglas, & Lux, 2007). Scott and Judge (2009) proposed that a central location within a company's communication network leads to frequent interaction with others, and because of this frequent interaction, central employees become accepted by many people in their workplace. They found support for this relationship as network location predicted an individual's popularity. Politically skilled employees view social interactions as opportunities because network connections provide access to valuable assets. Thus, they tend to use interpersonal influence to expand their network and improve their network position (Ferris et al., 2007; Perrewé, Ferris, Frink, & Anthony, 2000), which leads to frequent interaction with others.

Employees' social skills influence the way they interact with others. People prefer enjoyable social interactions; thus, employees with qualities that facilitate social interactions are more likely to be accepted by their coworkers (e.g., core self-evaluations positively predict workplace popularity; Scott & Judge, 2009). Baumeister et al. (2005) suggest that to obtain social acceptance individuals must have the ability to regulate their actions to meet others' social standards. Politically skilled employees are more likely to understand social interactions in terms of others' needs; they are better equipped to adjust their behavior accordingly; and they use an interpersonal style that is confident, controlled, and comforting to others (Ferris et al., 2005; Ferris et al., 2007). In summary, political skill helps employees to develop a network of enjoyable workplace relationships that allows them to obtain popularity among their peers. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2: Political skill will positively relate to ratings of popularity by coworkers.

Popularity and Interpersonal Mistreatment

Popularity has been associated with positive outcomes both in organizations and in other social settings (Scott & Judge, 2009). Due to the limited research examining workplace popularity, we utilize relevant research on adolescent popularity in education settings to support the proposed relationships further. In school, popular adolescents have frequent social interactions and develop positive relationships with their peers (e.g., receiving help and admiration; Adler & Adler, 1998; Raviv, Bar-Tal, Ayalon, & Raviv, 1980). Popular children are also happier (Coleman & Holder, 2008) and report greater personal well-being (Ostberg, 2003). At work, employee popularity positively predicts job satisfaction (Van Zelst, 1951) and individual performance (Bass, 1962; Hollander, 1965). Leader popularity also positively predicts the performance and cohesiveness of the work group (Lodahl & Porter, 1961).

As suggested by Tesser, Millar, and Moore's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance model, people prefer to bask in the reflected glory of others. Having close relationships with popular employees helps individuals enhance their own self-evaluation. Thus, according to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), individuals look for ways to initiate a series of positive interactions in order to develop close personal relationships with popular employees, with the expectation that popular employees will feel indebted and will look for ways to repay this treatment, including sharing the benefits of popularity.

To develop high-quality relationships with popular employees, Scott and Judge (2009) proposed that others in the workplace will (a) direct positive actions toward popular employees and/or (b) avoid directing negative actions toward popular employees. In line with the second strategy, our theoretical model proposes that popularity protects individuals from ostracism and interpersonal conflict. As previously mentioned, popular adolescents are likely to have frequent, positive interactions with their peers (Adler & Adler, 1998; Raviv et al., 1980). We expect that individuals in the workplace want to interact with popular employees, and thus, popular employees are less likely to report experiencing exclusionary behaviors (i.e., ostracism). Further, not only would others at work want to interact with popular employees, but based on the theories described in the preceding paragraph, they would want these

interactions to be positive in order to share in the benefits of popularity (by initiating reciprocal exchanges with the popular employee). Thus, popular employees are less likely to report experiencing others' arguing with them, yelling at them, or being rude to them (i.e., interpersonal conflict).

Scott and Judge (2009) found support for the first strategy (i.e., a significant and positive relationship between popularity and interpersonal organizational citizenship behaviors toward the target employee); however, empirical support for the second strategy is mixed. For instance, Mitchell and Liden (1982) found that supervisors gave less severe punishments to popular employees. Further, Scott and Judge (Study 1) found a significant and negative relationship between popularity and interpersonal counterproductive workplace behaviors (CWB-I) toward the target employee in a sample of working college students. However, Scott and Judge (Study 2) failed to replicate this finding in a sample of employees from one hospital. The reasons for the inconsistent findings by Scott and Judge (2009) regarding the relationship between popularity and CWB-I are unclear. However, one contributing factor may be the broad nature of the CWB-I scale. The use of clearly defined and narrow constructs should improve our prediction and understanding of workplace mistreatment (Bennett & Robinson, 2003; Ferris, Brown, et al., 2008; Martin & Hine, 2005). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3: Popularity will negatively relate to the reported experience of workplace (3a) interpersonal conflict and (3b) workplace ostracism.

Based on our general theoretical framework, we propose that politically skilled employees will be more successful at obtaining popularity and their popularity will protect them from ostracism and interpersonal conflict—two clearly defined and narrow mistreatments. From these relationships, it follows that popularity is a potential mediator of the relationship between political skill and forms of interpersonal mistreatment. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 4: Popularity will mediate (4a) the relationship between political skill and interpersonal conflict and (4b) the relationship between political skill and ostracism.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We asked graduate and undergraduate students at a Northeastern private university and a Southeastern public university in the United States to help with data collection by giving survey packages to one or two full-time employees. Full-time employees were instructed to complete a self-report questionnaire and then to distribute another survey to up to five coworkers, who provided peer ratings independently. The self-report questionnaire and peer-rating surveys were returned separately by mail to the researchers. We collected participants' contact information to verify that full-time employees and not the student assistants completed the survey. All surveys were anonymous. Self-report and peer-rating surveys were

linked through preassigned numbers. In exchange for the students' data collection efforts, they received extra course credit. This method of data collection has been used by other organizational researchers (e.g., Harris, Harris, & Brouer, 2009; Liu, Perrewé, Hochwarter, & Kacmar, 2004). The full-time employees and their coworkers recruited by the students at the Northeastern university did not receive incentives for participating. The full-time employees and their coworkers recruited by the students at the Southeastern university had the opportunity to enter a raffle for 1 of 10 $20 gift cards.

We cannot calculate exact response rates due to our recruitment procedure, but we can estimate response rates based on the 393 self-report surveys given to student recruiters. Self-report surveys were returned by 221 full-time employees; thus, we estimate a 56% response rate for target participants. If each participant distributed peer surveys to five coworkers, then 1,105 peer surveys were distributed. Surveys were returned by 676 coworkers; thus, we estimate a 62% response rate for coworkers. These are conservative estimates of the actual response rates because it is unlikely that all surveys were distributed to target participants or their coworkers.

Employees worked in a wide range of industries, including health care (16%), education (15%), retail/sales (8%), financial services (8%), and a variety of other jobs. Of employees who provided self-report data, 51% were male and 67% had some college education. The mean age was 42 (SD = 20) years, and the average position tenure was 102 (SD = 103) months. On average, participants knew the coworkers who provided popularity ratings for 55 (SD = 49) months. Participants recruited by students at each university did not statistically differ in gender, age, or education level. However, participants recruited by students at the Southeastern university knew their coworkers longer—66 months versus 50 months, $t(190) = -2.03$, $p < .05$—and had longer organizational tenure—132 months versus 88 months, $t(205) = -2.87$, $p < .01$.

Measures

Political skill. The 18-item Political Skill Inventory (Ferris et al., 2005) was used to measure each target employee's self-reported level of political skill (i.e., networking ability, interpersonal influence, social astuteness, and apparent sincerity). An example item is "I try to show a genuine interest in other people." Responses were made on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

Workplace ostracism. The 10-item Workplace Ostracism Scale (Ferris, Brown, et al., 2008) was used to measure the extent to which target employees experience ostracism from others at work. An example item is "Others at work shut you out of the conversation." Employees responded using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 7 = *always*).

Interpersonal conflict. The four-item Interpersonal Conflict at Work Scale (Spector & Jex, 1998) was used to measure the extent to which target employees reported engaging in conflict with others at work. An example item is "How often do people yell at you at work?" Employees responded using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*).

Popularity. Employee popularity was measured by coworkers' responses to the eight-item Popularity Scale (Scott & Judge, 2009). An example item is "The person for whom I am completing this survey is well-known." Participants were instructed to solicit responses from three to five coworkers. Coworkers responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = s*trongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) to each of the popularity items. Because popularity is a consensus-based concept (Scott & Judge, 2009), we calculated interrater agreement (r_{wg}) for the 165 participants who received at least two peer ratings (James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984). The r_{wg} value was within the acceptable range (.70-1.00) for 161 participants. We removed 12 participants who had missing self-report data and thus used a final sample of 149 participants to test the proposed mediation model. On average, 3.9 (*SD* = 1.1) coworkers completed the peer survey for each participant.

Control variables. Target employees' tendency to engage in *socially desirable responding* when completing self-report surveys was included as a control variable due to concern that this tendency may bias self-reports of political skill, ostracism, and conflict. The 12-item short version (Delroy Paulhus, personal communication, October 27, 2009) of Impression Management from the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (Paulhus, 1988) was used to measure socially desirable responding. One sample item is "I have never dropped litter on the street." Employees responded using a 7-point scale (1 = *not true* to 7 = *very true*).

A limitation of the current data collection technique is that employees may have given peer-rating surveys only to people who like them. It is easier to recruit a small number of people who like you; thus, we included the *number of peer raters* as a control variable to help account for the possibility that interpersonal liking may bias peer ratings of popularity. We discuss the implications of our data collection method further in the Discussion section.

Researchers have proposed that demographic characteristics may make some individuals likely targets of interpersonal mistreatment (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Lagerspetz, 1994). Although meta-analytic correlations are small (ρ ranged from –.05 to .02; Bowling & Beehr, 2006), there is considerable variability in the relationships between demographic characteristics and interpersonal mistreatment across individual studies. Thus, to provide a conservative test of the proposed model, we included demographic characteristics that had significant bivariate relationships with popularity and the mistreatment outcomes (see Table 1) as control variables.

Analytic Strategy

To test the proposed mediation model, we used the sample of 149 participants who were not missing self-report data, received two or more peer ratings, and had acceptable r_{wg} values indicating agreement between the raters. We first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2010) to establish the validity of the measurement portion of the model and then tested the hypotheses using a full structural equation model (SEM). We tested Hypothesis 1 by estimating the significance of the total effect of political skill on workplace interpersonal conflict and ostracism. We estimated the direct

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alphas, and Correlations

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	–	–	–									
2. Age	42.54	12.77	–.05	–								
3. Education	–	–	.08	.16	–							
4. Tenure	111.23	105.64	–.07	.60**	.11	–						
5. Number of peer raters	3.91	1.09	.02	.12	.18*	.20*	–					
6. Socially desirable responding	4.28	0.99	.06	.36**	.15	.31**	.12	.74				
7. Political skill	5.53	0.70	.12	–.02	.14	.06	–.07	.17*	.90			
8. Employee popularity	4.29	0.43	–.15	.13	.17*	.16	–.13	.14	.35**	.90		
9. Workplace ostracism	1.49	0.69	.04	.06	–.10	–.02	.07	–.05	–.16	–.29**	.94	
10. Workplace conflict	1.46	0.44	.03	.06	–.31**	–.04	–.09	–.15	–.12	–.39**	.16	.73

Note: These descriptive statistics are based on the 149 participants included in the final sample that was used for hypothesis testing. The Cronbach's alphas are presented on the diagonal. For gender, 0 = *male* and 1 = *female*. For education, 1 = *less than high school* to 6 = *doctorate degree*.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

effect of political skill on popularity to test Hypothesis 2 and the direct effect of popularity to each of the mistreatment outcomes to test Hypothesis 3.

Current approaches to mediation no longer require a significant total effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable (i.e., support for Hypothesis 1) to establish mediation (Hayes, 2009; MacKinnon, Krull, & Lockwood, 2000; Shrout & Bolger, 2002).[1] Instead, these approaches emphasize empirically estimating and testing the significance of the indirect effect. We used the model indirect command and the bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrapping procedure in Mplus to test the two hypothesized indirect effects (Hypothesis 4; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The bootstrapping method uses a resampling procedure to create confidence intervals for the indirect effects. In the current study, confidence intervals were estimated using 5,000 bootstrapped samples. As explained by Preacher and Hayes, this approach for testing the significance of the indirect effect (i.e., mediation) is a more appropriate and more powerful test (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004) than the traditional causal steps (Baron & Kenny, 1986) and product-of-coefficients (i.e., the Sobel test; Sobel, 1982) approaches.

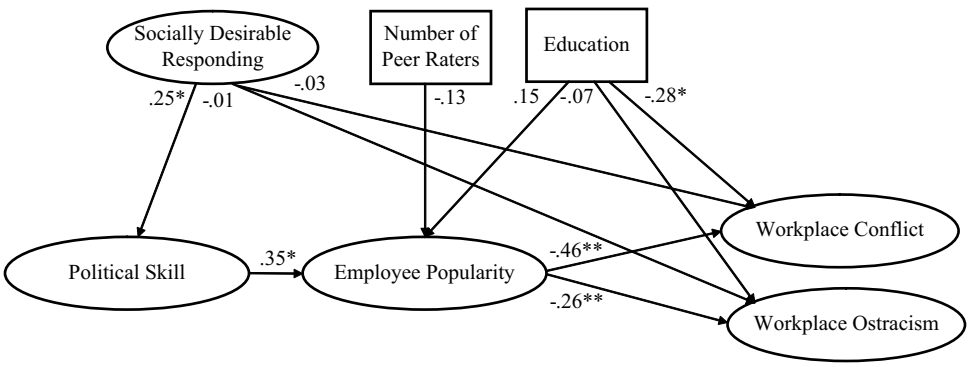
Results

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations. Cronbach's alphas (on the diagonal of Table 1) are above accepted reliability standards.

To estimate the CFA, we used domain-representative parceling (Williams & O'Boyle, 2008) to create four parcels as indicators of the political skill construct. Each parcel consisted of the items from one of the political skill dimensions (i.e., networking ability, interpersonal influence, social astuteness, and apparent sincerity). We also followed Scott and Judge's (2009) procedure to create indicators for the latent popularity construct by using the average rating across raters for each popularity item. Finally, we used the 10 ostracism items and the 4 interpersonal conflict items as indicators of their respective latent variables. The CFA results indicated that all factor loadings were significant (M = .73, SD = .12) and that the overall model fit was satisfactory: $\chi^2(293) = 473.73$, $p < .01$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .06 (90% confidence interval [CI] [.05, .08]), comparative fit index (CFI) = .92, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .91, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .06. In the current study, we were concerned with using narrow and distinct measures of interpersonal mistreatment; thus, we tested an alternative model in which ostracism and interpersonal conflict loaded onto a single latent construct. A chi-square difference test revealed that the model fit was significantly worse for the three-factor model, $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 133.47$, $p < .01$. These results support the distinctiveness of the workplace conflict and workplace ostracism measures.

After validating the measurement model, we added structural pathways to the measurement portion of the SEM using Mplus.[2] These pathways were from political skill to popularity, interpersonal conflict, and ostracism and also from popularity to interpersonal conflict and ostracism. To conduct a rigorous test of the proposed hypotheses, we included pathways from education and socially desirable responding[3] to political skill, ostracism, and interpersonal conflict and also from number of peer raters to popularity. The fit statistics for

Figure 1
Standardized Results for the Mediation Model With Covariates



Note: The mediation model controls for possible contamination due to the tendency of target participants to engage in socially desirable responding, the education of target participants, and the number of peer raters. For the sake of simplicity, the measurement portion of the model is not included in the figure. Standardized path coefficients are presented; however, the significance of the path coefficients was determined using the unstandardized estimates.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

this model indicated acceptable fit, $\chi^2(365) = 577.56$, $p < .01$, RMSEA = .06 (90% CI [.05, .07]), CFI = .91, TLI = .90, and SRMR = .07. Hypothesis 1 predicted significant total effects of political skill on the two forms of mistreatment. The total effect of political skill on conflict ($\beta = -.10$, *ns*) and ostracism ($\beta = -.16$, *ns*) was not significant. Thus, Hypotheses 1a and 1b were not supported. Further, the direct pathways from political skill to ostracism ($\beta = .08$, *ns*) and political skill to interpersonal conflict ($\beta = -.06$, *ns*) were not significant. We thus tested a more parsimonious model in which the link between political skill and ostracism and the link between political skill and interpersonal conflict were removed. The fit statistics for this alternative model also indicated acceptable fit, $\chi^2(367) = 578.49$, $p < .01$, RMSEA = .06 (90% CI [.05, .07]), CFI = .91, TLI = .90, and SRMR = .07. The fit statistics for both models were nearly identical, and the chi-square difference test did not indicate a significant difference in the models' fit, $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 0.93$, *ns*. Thus, we used the more parsimonious model to test the remaining hypotheses.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the standardized path coefficient from political skill to popularity was significant ($\beta = .35$, $p < .05$), supporting Hypothesis 2. The standardized path coefficients from popularity to conflict ($\beta = -.46$, $p < .01$) and ostracism ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .01$) were significant, thus supporting Hypotheses 3a and 3b, respectively. The model accounted for 15.4% of the variance in popularity, 32.6% of the variance in conflict, and 7.9% of the variance in ostracism.

When using the bootstrapped confidence interval procedure, mediation is indicated by the exclusion of zero from the confidence interval for the unstandardized indirect effect. The indirect effects of political skill–popularity–conflict (unstandardized indirect effect estimate = –.08, 95% CI [–.17, –.03]) and political skill–popularity–ostracism (unstandardized indirect effect estimate = –.08, 95% CI [–.21, –.01]) were significant (i.e., the 95% confidence

intervals do not contain zero), supporting Hypotheses 4a and 4b, respectively. Following the recommendations of Spector and Brannick (2011) we also examined the results without the control variables included in the model. The magnitudes of the results were similar and the conclusions regarding the hypotheses were identical when the control variables were not included in the model. Further, we would like to note that the same conclusions regarding Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 were obtained when the original model (i.e., the model containing pathways between political skill and the mistreatment outcomes) was tested.

Discussion

The only previous research examining the relationship between target characteristics and interpersonal mistreatment (Milam et al., 2009) hinted at the importance of interpersonal relationships to understanding interpersonal mistreatment at work. Our results suggest that social influence theory is a promising framework for understanding the outcomes of workplace relationships, including the extent to which individuals achieve workplace popularity and are the targets of interpersonal mistreatment. The current study expands the nomological network of workplace popularity (i.e., core self-evaluations and network centrality; Scott & Judge, 2009) by identifying political skill as an antecedent. It appears that politically skilled individuals (i.e., those good at using social influence) are able to achieve popularity among their peers. Further, the significant mediation model indicates that this popularity represents one possible way politically skilled employees influence their workplace outcomes, as popular individuals were less likely to experience conflict and ostracism from others. Employee popularity may more broadly explain the ability of politically skilled individuals to achieve positive workplace outcomes, including assistance from others and career success. As suggested by our theoretical framework, the actions of others toward popular employees are likely designed to develop close relationships with popular employees. The mediating role of popularity suggests an indirect mechanism by which political skill affects workplace outcomes and expands the very limited literature examining how politically skilled employees achieve workplace success.

The current study found a significant, negative relationship between popularity and two narrow, distinct forms of interpersonal mistreatment (i.e., ostracism and interpersonal conflict). This consistent negative relationship is in contrast to the mixed findings reported by Scott and Judge (2009). The use of narrow measures as opposed to broad measures of mistreatment is a promising approach for establishing the distinctiveness of mistreatment constructs, as it allows researchers to determine whether the antecedents and consequences of interpersonal mistreatment constructs differ (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Ferris, Brown, et al., 2008; Martin & Hine, 2005). By using two narrow, distinct forms of mistreatment, we were able to measure participants' experiences of ostracism and interpersonal conflict separately, and consistent with the predicted negative relationships, we conclude that popular individuals are less likely to experience both ostracism (aversive social exclusion) and interpersonal conflict (aversive social interaction). In any developing area of research, the results from a small number of studies should be interpreted with care. Further replication and extension is needed to evaluate the proposed relationships, including potential boundaries on the protective utility of workplace popularity. In addition to containing items that refer to ostracism and

interpersonal conflict, the items on the CWB-I measure used by Scott and Judge (2009) vary in other ways, including the severity of the mistreatment behaviors and whether the actions were overt (e.g., face-to-face insults) or subvert (e.g., spreading rumors or talking behind someone's back). Researchers may examine a wider range of narrow constructs to provide more clarity regarding the relationship between popularity and different types of interpersonal mistreatment.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of the current study is our inability to examine different sources of mistreatment (e.g., supervisor, subordinate, coworker, and customer). Researchers in other areas have demonstrated the importance of specifying the source of an action. For example, employees hold distinct fairness perceptions related to both the organization and their supervisor (e.g., Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002). Thus, an important direction for research is to disentangle these source effects. Although we expect popular employees to receive fewer mistreatments from multiple sources, the magnitude of this relationship may differ.

A second limitation is that participants were asked to distribute a survey containing the popularity measure to up to five of their coworkers; thus, a potential concern is that employees may have given the surveys to friends in the workplace, which could lead to inflated popularity ratings. Scores may be particularly biased when ratings were provided by fewer coworkers, as it should be easier to find a fewer number of people who like you. An ANOVA with multiple comparisons indicated that mean popularity ratings differed significantly only between the two-peer group and the four-peer group. This one difference does not support a general trend indicating inflation in ratings provided by fewer coworkers. Further, the conclusions were identical when we retested the model after removing data associated with the two-peer group. Although it does not appear that this concern unduly influenced our results, we controlled for the number of peer raters to help account for this possibility.

The number of peer raters is only a proxy for interpersonal liking, and its use does not completely eliminate the potential for bias in our data. For example, two employees may have chosen to give surveys to 3 of their coworkers who like them; however, if the first employee only has 4 coworkers and the second employee has 20 coworkers, then the contamination (bias) in the second employee's ratings would likely be larger.[4] However, if participants chose only employees who like them to provide ratings of popularity, the bias in the ratings would likely restrict the variance in popularity scores, thereby making it more difficult to obtain significant relationships. Thus, the current study may offer conservative tests of the hypotheses. We encourage future researchers to use more rigorous methods to obtain peer ratings of popularity, for instance, surveying all coworkers, random selection of coworkers, and directly measuring and controlling for interpersonal liking.

Our sample was drawn from a wide range of industries; thus, our findings are not limited to a particular job or company. However, a third limitation is the geographic restriction of our sample to the Northeastern and Southeastern United States; thus, future replications are needed to determine if our findings generalize to employees in other cultures and geographic

locations. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the study prevents us from ruling out the reversed causality direction. Future research manipulating political skill is needed to establish causality fully.

Somewhat surprisingly, we did not obtain support for the total effect of political skill on the two forms of interpersonal mistreatment. The nonsignificant total effect and the significant indirect effects indicate that popularity is likely a partial mediator of the political skill–interpersonal mistreatment relationships. Other mediators (related to political skill) may increase an individual's experience of mistreatment and thus would explain the nonsignificant total effect. Identifying these mediating processes is an interesting direction for future research, as political skill has been linked mainly to positive outcomes in the organizational literature. For example, politically skilled individuals appear sincere during individual social interactions; however, they may change how they present themselves in order to act this way with many people. This chameleon-like behavior may appear disingenuous when individuals observe multiple interactions by politically skilled employees and may lead to mistreatment. The extent to which politically skilled employees deliver on the promises they make may also explain whether others mistreat them. The organizational literature has widely documented the negative effect of broken promises. For example, Bordia, Restubog, and Tang (2008) demonstrated that individuals responded to psychological contract breach by engaging in deviant workplace behaviors. Future research should examine the long-term and unintended consequences of political skill, including whether politically skilled individuals are able to maintain their positive reputations throughout their careers.

Organizational factors (e.g., organizational culture, training practices, and reward systems), environmental stressors (e.g., role conflict, ambiguity, and overload; Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Hauge et al., 2009), and perpetrator and victim characteristics contribute to the complex problem of workplace mistreatment (cf. Aquino & Thau, 2009). Further, these factors likely interact to predict outcomes. For example, politically skilled employees are likely to engage more often in influence tactics, and these tactics are likely to be especially influential when the organization does not follow systematic rules to distribute outcomes (Andrews, Kacmar, & Harris, 2009). Similarly, political skill is likely more important when strong norms do not exist to protect employees from interpersonal mistreatment. Interpersonal mistreatment is more likely to occur in organizations that are stressful and competitive and that require social interaction (Aquino & Thau, 2009). These same situations provide opportunities for interpersonal influence; thus, political skill is likely especially important in these environments (Blickle et al., 2009). Previous research has also found that the interaction between political skill and the use of influence tactics predicted supervisor performance ratings (Harris et al., 2007). Future research may expand on this work by examining directly whether politically skilled individuals use influence tactics to obtain workplace popularity and whether the tactics used to manage perceptions of job performance are also effective for obtaining social acceptance. In general, the examination of more complex models (i.e., those that incorporate different types of factors) may improve our understanding of the relative contributions of these factors and help organizations determine where to target workplace interventions.

Practical Implications

Organizations have several options for addressing workplace interpersonal mistreatment. By instituting grievance policies, organizations may try to prevent perpetrators from engaging in mistreatment. As another option, organizations may identify at-risk employees and provide training to help employees avoid becoming targets of mistreatment. Assuming that future research is able to establish causal relationships between political skill, popularity, and interpersonal mistreatment, we suggest that malleable characteristics, including political skill, are appropriate content for training because they may be enhanced through developmental experiences (e.g., instruction, experiential exercises, mentoring; Ferris et al., 2000; Ferris et al., 2007). Ferris and colleagues suggest that training should incorporate self-assessments and feedback from others (e.g., supervisors, coworkers, subordinates) to improve employees' awareness of their interpersonal style and how others perceive their actions. Experiential exercises, case studies, role-playing, and communication training may all be used to help employees develop political skill. Mentoring represents another important avenue for developing political skill, as those individuals who reported receiving mentoring demonstrated higher levels of political understanding and networking ability (Blass, Brouer, Perrewé, & Ferris, 2007). The use of subjective decision making and interdependent work structures will only increase the potential for interpersonal mistreatment and the importance of political skill. Training and mentoring programs designed to enhance employee political skill may represent a way for organizations to promote workplace effectiveness and personal well-being by helping employees improve the interpersonal style they use during workplace interactions.

Notes

1. Shrout and Bolger (2002) reasoned that complex and distal meditational processes result in a smaller relationship between the independent and dependent variables due to multiple links in the mediation path, competing pathways (i.e., those that operate in opposite directions), or random factors.
2. Mplus automatically correlates the error terms of dependent variables, which may inflate model fit results; thus, we constrained this covariance between the error terms to be zero.
3. To account for measurement error in the socially desirable responding scale, we set the error variance equal to the observed variance of the scale multiplied by 1 minus the observed reliability of the scale (see Kline, 2011).
4. We would like to thank the editor and an anonymous reviewer for bringing this issue to our attention.

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