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Workplace status differences and proactive behaviours: The role of perceived insider status and promotion criterion

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Abstract

Status difference is prevalent within working groups, profoundly influencing employees' perceptions and behaviours towards coworkers and their groups. Despite this ubiquity, exploring the effects of status difference within groups remains relatively underexamined. Drawing on social identity theory, this study examined how and when horizontal status difference (i.e., status comparison between a focal employee and his/her peers) and vertical status difference (i.e., status comparison between a focal employee and his/her leader) influence employees' perceived insider status and proactive behaviour. Results from 421 employees across 113 working groups indicated that horizontal status difference was positively related to perceived insider status, but vertical status difference had a curvilinear effect on perceived insider status. Furthermore, perceived insider status significantly mediated the impact of horizontal and vertical status differences on proactive behaviour. We also demonstrated that promotion criteria significantly moderated the relationship between horizontal status difference and perceived insider status; in particular, this relationship was stronger when organizations used a relative rather than an absolute promotion criterion.

K E Y W O R D S

proactive behaviour, promotion criteria, social identity theory, status difference

INTRODUCTION

Individuals often strive to attain higher status at work, and the status difference between employees is ubiquitous (Groysberg et al., 2011). Workplace status is defined as the respect, prominence, and prestige that the focal employee possesses within his/her work group (Djurdjevic et al., 2017). It is determined via group members' evaluations of certain recognized status characteristics, such as personality, physical attractiveness, education level, performance, and valued task-related skills and competencies (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Piazza & Castellucci, 2014). Researchers have noted that status hierarchy in groups has important implications for employee outcomes: higher-status (vs. lower-status) employees have greater autonomy (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013), higher job satisfaction, and higher quality relationships with others (Smith et al., 2012).

Although extant research has advanced understanding of the effects of status hierarchy on employees' cognition and behaviour, two especially important research issues have been overlooked. One pertains to how workplace status relative to other group members affects employee outcomes. This omission is a significant shortcoming because most organizations use groups to structure work (Shin et al., 2012), so the effects of an employee's workplace status on his/her subsequent outcomes cannot be examined in isolation from other individuals in the work group (Doyle et al., 2016; Greenberg et al., 2007). Moreover, high and low status within-group relationships exist in relative terms, and variations exist in the status difference among members within a group (Doyle et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2009). Thus, understanding workplace status in terms of social comparison processes makes this an area worthy of future research and theory development.

The second issue concerns the scant attention scholars have given to the status difference between employees and their leaders within a group. Workplace status differs from a formal hierarchical rank (i.e., position) in that it develops informally through group members' evaluations of individual attributes (Djurdjevic et al., 2017; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). As a result, subordinates may have a higher workplace status than their supervisors (Triana et al., 2017). In such cases, interactions between employees and their supervisors and subsequent employee outcomes may differ from cases where employees have a lower than or similar workplace status to their supervisor.

To address the foregoing two issues, we first distinguish between horizontal and vertical status differences. We do so because status differences based on diverse dyadic relationships exert differential impacts on individual outcomes (Phillips et al., 2009) and because disparities between peers and leaders may lead to different social comparison processes (Greenberg et al., 2007). Horizontal status difference is a focal employee's status relative to his/her group peers' status, while vertical status difference refers to a focal employee's status relative to his/her leader's status. We then examine the mechanism through which status differences influence proactive behaviour and its boundary conditions. Proactive behaviour is defined as "taking initiative in improving current circumstances or creating new ones; it involves changing the status quo rather than passively adapting to present conditions" (Crant, 2000: 436).

Our study focuses on proactive behaviour for two reasons. First, given that engaging in proactive behaviour is a challenging, risky, and exhaustive endeavour with no guarantee of success (Bindl & Parker, 2011; Kim & Liu, 2017), a relatively higher status within a group that can ignite a sense of responsibility for the organization (cf. Brown et al., 2005) motivates employees to engage in proactive behaviour. In addition, the status literature has shown that an absolute level of status has no uniformly positive relationship with proactive behaviour (Kim et al., 2022; Sekiguchi et al., 2017). This non-significant positive result might occur because high status for an individual in a group where the status of most group members is equally high would not be as favourable as high status in other types of status hierarchy. That is, the psychological experiences of high-status (or low-status) individuals may vary depending on the magnitude of their status relative to others. As a result, proactive behaviour is an especially relevant outcome for illustrating the distinction between status and status differences related to employee outcomes.

Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we propose that horizontal and vertical status differences are indirectly related to proactive behaviour via perceived insider status (i.e., the extent to which one feels to be an insider within an organization; Chen & Aryee, 2007; Stamper & Masterson, 2002).

Workplace status is built on social consensus regarding respect, prominence, and prestige (Djurdjevic et al., 2017); as such, status comparison can facilitate the formation of social identity. For example, Hogg and Terry (2000) found that the status difference between a leader and his/her employees punctuates the uniqueness of the leader in contrast to others, thereby strengthening the leader's social identity in a group. Extrapolating from this, a favourable status comparison allows employees to feel a keen sense of being an insider within an organization (i.e., enhancing perceived insider status). Status difference likewise prompts employees to recognize that "groups are internally structured with respect to prototypicality" (Hogg, 2000: 413). That is, employees with a structurally advantageous position in status comparison are more prototypical than others and are thus more likely to categorize themselves as an insider (rather than an outsider) within the organization (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). Such a high perceived insider status, in turn, could serve as a compelling "reason to" motivational state (Bindl & Parker, 2011). This denouement can stimulate employees' proactive behaviour, as insiders would feel obligated to take self-initiated and future-focused efforts to benefit their groups (Cai et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2015).

We further propose that an organization's promotion criteria moderate the effects of vertical and horizontal status differences on perceived insider status. Promotion criteria refer to the rules by which employees can be selected for advancement and seek higher formal positions (Phelan & Lin, 2001). Status scholars have noted that the role of formal hierarchy (i.e., an employee's position) should not be ignored when discussing the social relationships and processes in the informal hierarchy (i.e., status, Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Accordingly, we expect that promotion criteria that can determine individuals' mobility in the formal hierarchy (Ferris et al., 1992) affect the relationship between status difference and employee outcomes. Although research on the establishment of promotion criteria is limited (De Souza, 2002; Ferris et al., 1992), absolute and relative promotion criteria are conventional common types (Ghorpade & Chen, 1995). In a promotion system with *absolute criteria*, any employee performing above the fixed (i.e., managerially-set) standards is qualified for promotion. In a promotion system using *relative criteria*, however, employees whose performance ranks high relative to others can be promoted (Phelan & Lin, 2001). Relative promotion criterion can enhance employees' sensitivity to the self versus others' social comparison. The criteria send social cues to employees that status difference is closely associated with prospects about their future in an organization. As a result, the effects of status differences on perceived insider status could be more pronounced under a promotion system based on relative rather than absolute criteria.

Our study contributes to current research and practice in several ways. First, we expand on extant work that has predominantly concentrated on the direction or magnitude of status by examining both horizontal and vertical workplace status difference. Accordingly, this investigation offers fresh perspective on the ongoing discourse surrounding the relationship between status and proactive behaviour (Kim et al., 2022; Sekiguchi et al., 2017). Second, we answer the call to uncover psychological mechanisms that status difference triggers (Doyle et al., 2016). Guided by the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), our research enhances the understanding of workplace status by elucidating how perceived insider status mediates the indirect effects of status differences on proactive behaviour. Third, through exploring the critical role of promotion criteria, we aver that employees' behaviours towards informal hierarchy should be observed in conjunction with the rules associated with the formal hierarchy. We facilitate practitioners' comprehension of the interactive influence between promotion criteria, a crucial facet of human resource management, and workplace status on employee outcomes.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Workplace status difference

Workplace status is the degree to which one is granted esteem, respect, prestige, prominence, or admiration from other group members (Bendersky & Shah, 2012; Groysberg et al., 2011; Perretti & Negro, 2006). Group members' evaluation of certain status characteristics during interpersonal

interactions can naturally lead to the formation of workplace status differences among them. The status difference captures employees' relative status compared to the referent others in a status hierarchy (Doyle et al., 2016; Harari et al., 2022). Scholars have proposed that status difference can affect both interpersonal relationships among group members (Keltner et al., 2003) and team performance (Mitchell et al., 2015).

Our review of current research on workplace status difference led us to identify several important issues that merit attention. First, most studies have focused on the absolute level of individual status but failed to consider the social comparison of group members' status levels in a group (i.e., horizontal status difference). There is also a lack of investigations examining the effects of status comparison between subordinates and a supervisor (i.e., vertical status difference) on employee outcomes. We thus propose a theoretical framework that discusses how horizontal status difference and vertical status difference relate to employees' perceptions of insider status and proactive behaviour.

Horizontal status difference and perceived insider status

When an individual's status is higher than that of his/her peers, s/he can readily gain access to valuable resources, enjoy more chances to speak and act (Willer, 2009), obtain support, and gain fair treatment (Ravlin & Thomas, 2005). All these factors contribute towards shaping the confidence and sense of security of higher-status individuals, making them feel that they have earned their place within the group (Parker et al., 2006). Meanwhile, a higher horizontal status difference amplifies the intragroup prototypicality gradient (cf. Hogg & Terry, 2000), such that someone who owns a much higher status than their peers will be considered more prototypical than others. Hence, individuals with higher status may receive high expectations from their coworkers (Jensen et al., 2012) and generally be characterized as having "excellent job performance" or a charming personality (Anderson et al., 2001; Perretti & Negro, 2006). The perspective of self-reinforcement (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), which states that individuals will reinforce those expectancy-consistent behaviours, suggests that higher-status employees will behave in accordance with their superior status and try to maintain it. The process of self-reinforcement can also stimulate higher-status individuals' sense of "we-ness" and group identity. This psychological state can be described by the concept of perceived insider status, which reflects the extent of perceiving their entrance into the "inner circle" of a particular organization or group (Stamper & Masterson, 2002). In sum, compared to their coworkers, high-status employees are more likely to attain higher perceived insider status. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

> **Hypothesis 1.** Horizontal status difference has a positive effect on employees' perceived insider status.

Vertical status difference and perceived insider status

In addition to the horizontal status difference, employees might experience a vertical status difference within leader-member dyads. Employees having a lower status and lower position power than their supervisors may perceive an absence of shared recognition and respect from other members, thereby experiencing a lack of any sense of control over valuable resources. The perception of a lack of control over valuable resources may lessen an employee's belief that s/he can gain personal space in the group, thus debilitating their perceived insider status (Armstrong-Stassen & Schlosser, 2011). Furthermore, individuals with lower status tend to perform poorly in their jobs (Anderson et al., 2001; Groysberg et al., 2011). As a result, lower-status employees would experience a low level of self-evaluation and find it difficult to engage in high-quality interactions with their supervisor, which can further harm their perceived insider status (Zhao et al., 2014).

When employees have a higher status than their supervisors, however, their perception of insider status can still suffer. Indeed, according to role congruity theory (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001), a leader should have a higher status than his/her followers. If employees have a higher status than the leader in a group, they feel more tension in their interpersonal interactions with their leader (Triana et al., 2017). Employees with a higher status than their supervisor are also trapped in the situation of having superior status but inferior positional power than their supervisors; this inconsistency between formal position and informal status may be damaging to their psychological well-being (Bacharach et al., 1993). As Magee and Galinsky (2008: 364) have argued, "individuals with a great deal of status but little power are likely to run into some difficulty in exchange-oriented contexts (e.g., negotiations) in which the value of one's resources are more important than the extent to which one is respected". As a result, when employees have a higher status than their leader, their self-value cannot be fully admitted within the group, thus preventing them from experiencing feelings of group identity that match their status.

The foregoing disquisition infers that, when compared to employees with a lower or higher status than their leader, employees with a similar status to their leader may perceive greater insider status. Because they may be able to interact with the leader without the discomfort caused by an inferior status or imbalance in different hierarchies. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2. Vertical status difference has an inverted U-shaped relationship with employees' perceived insider status.

Perceived insider status and proactive behaviour

In view of the motivational implications of membership, Chen and Aryee (2007) have proposed that employees tend to adopt discretionary and innovative behaviours when they perceive themselves as an "an insider", indicating valuable membership in the group. Wang et al. (2017) have also found that the role identity generated by a high perception of insider status engenders feelings of obligation and motivates employees to meet organizational responsibilities with little concern about rewards. Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we also aver that people may strive to achieve and maintain a positive social identity (Gioia et al., 2013). As a result, we posit that perceived insider status, as a cognitive state of owning group identity, would make employees feel entwined with their group and engender the need to protect and promote the group benefits they derive from this status. These arguments, along with the preceding hypotheses, lead to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Perceived insider status will mediate (a) the positive linear relationship between horizontal status difference and proactive behaviour, and (b) the inverted U-shaped relationship between vertical status difference and proactive behaviour.

Moderating role of promotion criteria

As a reward mechanism within organizations promotion plays a strong motivational role in maintaining employees' attention on good performance (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). Employees may also develop fluctuating attitudes and behaviours in response to diverse systems of promotion adopted in their organization (Carlson & Rotondo, 2001; Yoon & Sengupta, 2019). Thus, setting clear promotion criteria may guide employees' behaviour, help organizations alleviate damaging status conflicts, and enhance positive outcomes for employees (Loch et al., 2001).

In the context of employing the absolute promotion criterion, organizations will establish an explicit and quantifiable performance level for promotion and place little emphasis on competition among peers (Phelan & Lin, 2001). As such, employees are induced to focus on outcomes and feel satisfied if
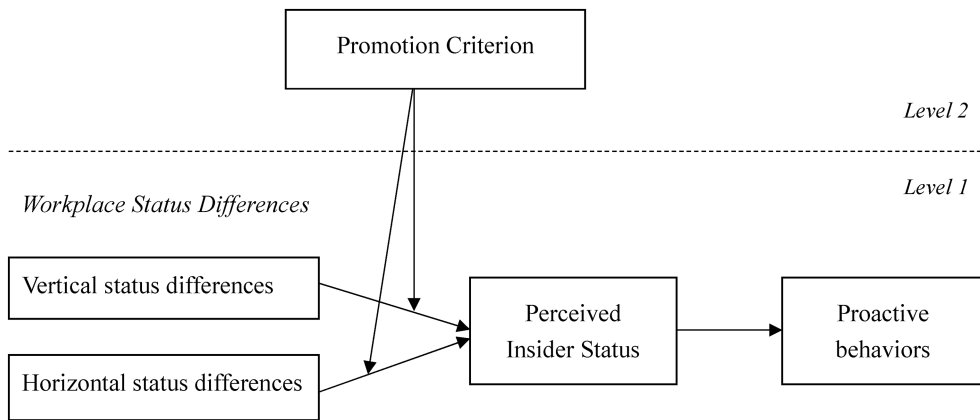
F I G U R E 1 Hypothesized model linking workplace status differences to proactive behaviour.

they achieve their goal. When promotion criteria are relative rather than absolute, though, the relative performance standing of employees in the group becomes more important. The use of relative criteria is also associated with "fixed job slots" and a "created internal promotion competition" (Devaro, 2006: 721). With a moving target hinging on the performance of their coworkers, members will be motivated to stand out from the group, as upward promotions are competitive and scarce and are based on a limited number of positions.

We expect promotion criteria to moderate the relationship between horizontal status difference and perceived insider status. When the promotion criteria are relative (rather than absolute), employees with superior status compared to their peers may develop a positive expectation towards their career advancement and gain additional resources (cf. Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2002). High-status members will generally participate in important decisions and have a central role within the group (Weisband et al., 1995). In a relative promotion system, they may thus embrace the auspicious prospect of garnering future promotions and hence expect to establish a strong identification with their group or organization. Such "inflated" status superiority of high-status employees, which is fostered by the relative promotion criterion, will be likely to further facilitate perceived insider status. For those with inferior status compared to their peers, however, a relative promotion system may weaken their sense of self-determination; this is because they anticipate fewer opportunities for promotion. Their sense of reduced promotional opportunities may lead them to develop negative mental representations towards the future compared to their peers, hence making them less likely to be involved in the construction of group-based identity. We thus expect that the positive effect of the horizontal status difference on perceived insider status becomes stronger when promotion criteria are relative rather than absolute.

We also expect that in a relative promotion system, employees will gain a deeper insider perception in relation to the vertical status difference when the status difference increases from negative to zero (i.e., a lower status compared to the supervisor). However, when the status difference increases from zero to positive (i.e., a higher status compared to the supervisor), relative promotion criteria will help high-status employees obtain a promotion more readily. Prospective promotion opportunities will mitigate their dissatisfaction arising from the supervisor's expectation violation (i.e., lower status than their subordinates) and thus weaken the negative effect of vertical social difference on perceived insider status. Cumulatively, the preceding discussions and research hypotheses lead us to propose a moderated mediation model (Figure 1):

Hypothesis 4a. Promotion criteria moderate the indirect effect of horizontal status difference on proactive behaviour through perceived insider status such that the indirect effect is stronger when the criterion is relative rather than absolute.

Hypothesis 4b. Promotion criteria moderate the indirect effect of vertical status difference on proactive behaviour through perceived insider status such that the inverted U-shaped is less steeper when the criterion is relative rather than absolute.

METHOD

Sample and procedure

Data were collected from part-time MBA students at a university in China who were working as full-time managers from various organizational and occupational backgrounds and their direct subordinates. We asked these managers to provide us with the names of all their subordinates for whom they were directly responsible. Invariably, the leaders and their group members interacted at least once a day in group meetings and/or in their tasks. All participants were asked to complete a two-wave survey, with a lag of one month between Time 1 and Time 2. We distributed the questionnaires to all participants in paper-and-pencil format. All questionnaires were coded to match the same respondents from Time 1 and Time 2. Leaders were given a list of names corresponding to employees' IDs so that they could evaluate each employee involved in the study. We informed respondents that the information that they provided would remain confidential.

At Time 1, a total of 140 leaders (i.e., one leader from each organization) and their 535 group members agreed to participate in the study and submitted their responses. One month later, we invited the same participants to complete and return their Time 2 survey. After excluding some missing or incomplete responses, we had valid data from 113 leaders and 421 employees (a minimum of 3 subordinates and a maximum of 7 ones per leader). The response rates of leaders and employees were 80.7% and 78.7%, respectively. The within-group response rate ranged from 67% to 100%, above the 60% threshold recommended by Timmerman (2005).

Of the 421 employees, 56.53% were male, the average age was 29.87 years old ($SD = 6.11$), and the mean group tenure was 2.39 years ($SD = 1.62$). Fifty-one percent of employees held bachelor's degrees, 12.35% held master's degrees, and .71% held doctorates. Of the 113 leaders, the average age was 37.53 years old ($SD = 7.77$), 64.60% were male, and the mean group tenure was 3.93 years ($SD = 3.68$). Fifty-three percent of leaders had bachelor's degrees, 22.12% had master's, and 4.42% had doctorates.

Measures

The questionnaire was initially developed in English and then translated into Chinese using the back-translation procedure from Brislin (1980). At Time 1, the leaders reported their promotion criteria and the industry of their organization. Employees indicated their status, their leader's status, their formal position, their group tenure, and their perceived insider status. Both leaders and employees provided their demographic information. At Time 2, leaders rated the proactive behaviour of their employees. All variables were measured on seven-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Workplace status difference

We assessed status with a 10-item scale adapted from Spataro (2012). Participants were asked to evaluate four dimensions of status: influential, valued, respected, and overall status. A sample item was, "I have a great influence on what happens in my group". We operationalized the vertical status

difference as the status of the focal member minus that of his/her supervisor and the horizontal status difference as the status of the focal member minus the mean of group members' (except for the leader's) status. A positive score indicated that the focal person had a higher status than the comparison party.

Perceived insider status

Stamper and Masterson's (2002) six-item scale was used to assess perceived insider status. A sample items was, "I feel very much a part of my work organization".

Proactive behaviour

We asked supervisors to assess the proactive behaviour of their employees using Kilduff and Galinsky's (2013) two-item scale. The two items were, "This employee tries to take the initiative within the group", and "This employee tries to speak up and assert him- or herself".

Promotion criteria

We used a deductive approach to develop the scale for promotion criteria (Hinkin, 1998). We conducted in-depth interviews with 86 managers of research institutions and state-owned and private enterprises who did not participate in the main study. These interviews resulted in the identification of 11 promotion criteria (e.g., individual performance rating, the result of competing with others, social capital). Based on these interviews and extant work on promotion criteria (Devaro, 2006; Phelan & Lin, 2001), we developed operational definitions of absolute and relative promotion criteria. As noted earlier, the *absolute promotion criterion* represents fixed performance standards that focus on qualifications and tend to result in the promotion of employees who meet the requirements (i.e., standards of the organization/ unit). The *Relative promotion criterion*, though, represents a fixed proportion, where a certain ratio of employees is promoted. We then consulted with three domain-relevant experts (Ph.D.'s in human resource management) and developed six items for relative and absolute promotion criteria (three items for each).

Next, we asked 183 employees in different organizations/units to assess the six items using a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). Principal component analysis, a dimensionality reduction method, revealed that two items loaded on a single factor had a factor loading higher than .50 (Roesch & Rowley, 2005): (1) "In our group, a fixed performance level is used to act as a promotion standard. An employee's rank is not highly related to their performance relative to others (an absolute promotion criterion)", and (2) "Our group encourages individuals to compete with others, and only those who rank at the top are qualified to get a promotion (a relative promotion criterion)". We provide the detailed results in an online supplement (Appendix S1). For this study, we asked leaders to evaluate the promotion criteria using these two items. Because the two items had a high negative correlation ($r = -.70$, $p < .01$), we averaged their scores after reversing the scores of the absolute criterion. A high score on the composite indicated a relative promotion criterion, but a low score represented an absolute promotion criterion.

Control variables

We included employees' group tenure, sex, and age as demographic control variables (Chen & Aryee, 2007). We also controlled for employees' formal positions in hypothesis testing. As Magee and Galinsky (2008) have proposed, people in higher positions may possess more valued resources and

official legitimacy, which could influence employee behaviours. In addition, we controlled for industry (e.g., manufacturing, retailing, education) by using two dummy variables to prevent organizational-level factors from affecting the findings. As a sensitivity test, we conducted analyses without the control variables. The significant results remained the same as the original results (Appendix S2).

We also tested our model after controlling for the effects of workplace status on the outcome variables. Owing to high multicollinearity among the component measures and the difference score, we controlled for group-level employee status and leader status only. The results from these analyses were consistent with our main findings (Appendix S3). Moreover, to investigate whether subjective status differences were related to employee outcomes beyond objective differences between an employee's and a leader's formal positions, we tested our model after controlling for formal position differences (1) between an employee and a leader, as well as (2) between an employee's and a leader's formal positions. The significant results remained the same as the original results (Appendix S4).

Analytical strategy

Given that the data were nested within organizations, we used Mplus 8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2015) to conduct path analyses with observed variables for our multilevel modelling framework. Specifically, we tested two-level models with promotion criteria at the organizational level and the other key variables at the individual level. To explore the cross-level moderating effects of the promotion criteria, following Hofmann and Gavin (1998), we centred the Level 1 predictor[1] (i.e., vertical status difference) at unit means (i.e., group-mean centring) and the Level 2 predictor (i.e., promotion criteria) at sample means (i.e., grand-mean centring). In addition, based on Monte Carlo bootstrapping with 20,000 replications, we used R software to analyse the confidence intervals for the indirect effects and moderated mediation effects. To test the curvilinear ("instantaneous") indirect effect of the vertical status difference on proactive behaviour via perceived insider status, we followed Hayes and Preacher's (2010) procedure to examine the indirect effect at different levels of the vertical horizontal difference.

R E S U L T S

Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the distinctiveness of employees' four self-rated variables (i.e., leader's status, employee's status, perceived insider status, and proactive behaviours). Item parcelling strategies were used to deal with nonconvergent issues in our multilevel CFA and to assess the model with a large parameter-to-sample-size ratio appropriately (Nasser & Wisenbaker, 2003). The results showed that the four-factor model fits the data better, $\chi^2(59) = 276.32$, $p < .01$; CFI = .92; TLI = .90; SRMR = .06 than alternative models, indicating that the constructs were distinct. Moreover, as shown in Table 1, the square root of the average variance extracted value for each construct was greater than its correlations with any other construct, further confirming discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and correlations for all variables are also reported in Table 1.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that horizontal status difference had a positive effect on the perceived insider status of employees. As shown in Table 2, the results revealed that horizontal status difference positively and significantly influenced perceived insider status ($\gamma = .25$, $p < .01$). Thus, this hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis 2 posited that vertical status difference had a nonlinear relationship with perceived insider status. The findings revealed that the vertical status difference had an inverted U-shaped relationship

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[1]Because we calculated horizontal status difference as the focal individual's status minus the group mean, we did not center this variable.

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability coefficients.

Level 1 variables	M	SD	SRAVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Sex[a]	.43	.50	—										
2. Age	29.87	6.11	—	-.06									
3. Group tenure	2.39	1.62	—	-.12*	.38**								
4. Employee's formal position	.44	.22	—	.00	.23**	.16**							
5. Leader's status	4.40	.86	.75	.07	.06	.10*	.06	(.91)					
6. Employee's status	4.20	.77	.69	.02	.21**	.22**	.14**	.48**	(.85)				
7. Vertical status difference	-.20	.84	—	-.05	.13**	.09	.07	-.59**	.43**				
8. Horizontal status difference	.01	.56	—	.11*	.13**	.17**	.11*	.35**	.71**	.29**			
9. Perceived insider status	4.65	.93	.80	.01	-.07	.14**	-.10*	.20**	.21**	-.02	.15**	(.88)	
10. Proactive behaviour	5.01	1.06	.85	-.03	.04	.14**	.15**	.10	.22**	.11*	.09	.22**	(.74)
Level 2 variables	**M**	**SD**	**SRAVE**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
11. Industry A	.20	.40	—										
12. Industry B	.25	.43	—	-.28**									
13. Promotion criterion	4.32	.96	.92	-.10*	.09	(.82)							

Note: $N = 421$ for level 1 variables, and $N = 113$ for level 2 variables. Internal consistency coefficients—Cronbach's alphas—are reported in the parentheses on the diagonal. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$.

Abbreviation: SRAVE, the square root of average variance extracted.

[a]1 = female, and 0 = male.

TABLE 2 Results of multilevel mediation and moderated mediation test.

| | Mediation test | | Moderated mediation test | |
| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Predicting perceived insider status				
Industry A	.19	.15	.17	.15
Industry B	.38	.21	.39	.21
Sex (0 = Male, 1 = Female)	.04	.08	.04	.07
Age	−.00	.01	−.01	.01
Group tenure	.00	.03	.01	.03
Employee's formal position	.39	.24	.39	.24
Vertical status difference	−.11*	.05	−.11*	.04
Vertical status difference squared	−.12**	.04	−.10**	.04
Horizontal status difference	.25**	.08	.25**	.07
Vertical status difference × promotion criterion			−.07	.04
Vertical status difference squared × promotion criterion			−.01	.03
Horizontal status difference × promotion criterion			.18**	.06
Predicting proactive behaviour				
Industry A	−.08	.22	−.08	.22
Industry B	.24	.20	.24	.20
Sex (0 = Male, 1 = Female)	−.01	.09	−.03	.09
Age	−.01	.01	−.01	.01
Group tenure	.07	.04	.06	.04
Employee's formal position	−.51	.30	−.54	.30
Vertical status difference	−.10	.06	−.12	.07
Horizontal status difference	.21**	.08	.21**	.08
Perceived insider status	.17*	.07	.16*	.07

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01.

Abbreviation: *SE*, standard error.

with perceived insider status (vertical status difference squared, $\gamma = -.12$, $p < .01$, Model 1), thus confirming the hypothesis. We also conducted a simple slope test of this curvilinear effect (Miller et al., 2013). As shown in Table 3 and Figure 2, the simple slope was positive and significant when the vertical status difference was low and then became negative and significant as the vertical status difference increased, thereby further supporting Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 proposes that perceived insider status mediates the relationships between horizontal and vertical status differences and employees' proactive behaviour. To test the indirect effect, we generated the 95% CI using a Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications. The results indicated that the mediating effect of perceived insider status on the relationship between horizontal status difference and proactive behaviour was significant (indirect effect = .04, 95% CI [.01, .09]). In addition, to test the curvilinear mediation effect of vertical status difference on proactive behaviour via perceived insider status, we examined the indirect effect at different levels of vertical status difference. The indirect effect was positive and significant when vertical status difference was extremely low (−4 *SD*, indirect effect = .07, 95% CI [.00, .17]), then was non-significant at values close to the median (e.g., −1 *SD*, indirect effect = .00, 95% CI [−.02, .03]), and finally became significant and negative when vertical status difference was high (+1 *SD*, indirect effect = −.04, 95% CI [−.09, −.01]). These findings lend support to Hypothesis 3.

T A B L E 3 Simple slope tests of the curvilinear effect.

	Simple slope	Standard error	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
Vertical status difference (−4 *SD*)	.41	.19	.04	.78
Vertical status difference (−3 *SD*)	.28	.15	−.01	.57
Vertical status difference (−2 *SD*)	.15	.11	−.06	.36
Vertical status difference (−1 *SD*)	.02	.07	−.12	.15
Vertical status difference (mean)	−.11	.05	−.20	−.02
Vertical status difference (+1 *SD*)	−.24	.06	−.35	−.13
Vertical status difference (+2 *SD*)	−.37	.09	−.54	−.20
Vertical status difference (+3 *SD*)	−.50	.13	−.75	−.25
Vertical status difference (+4 *SD*)	−.63	.17	−.96	−.30

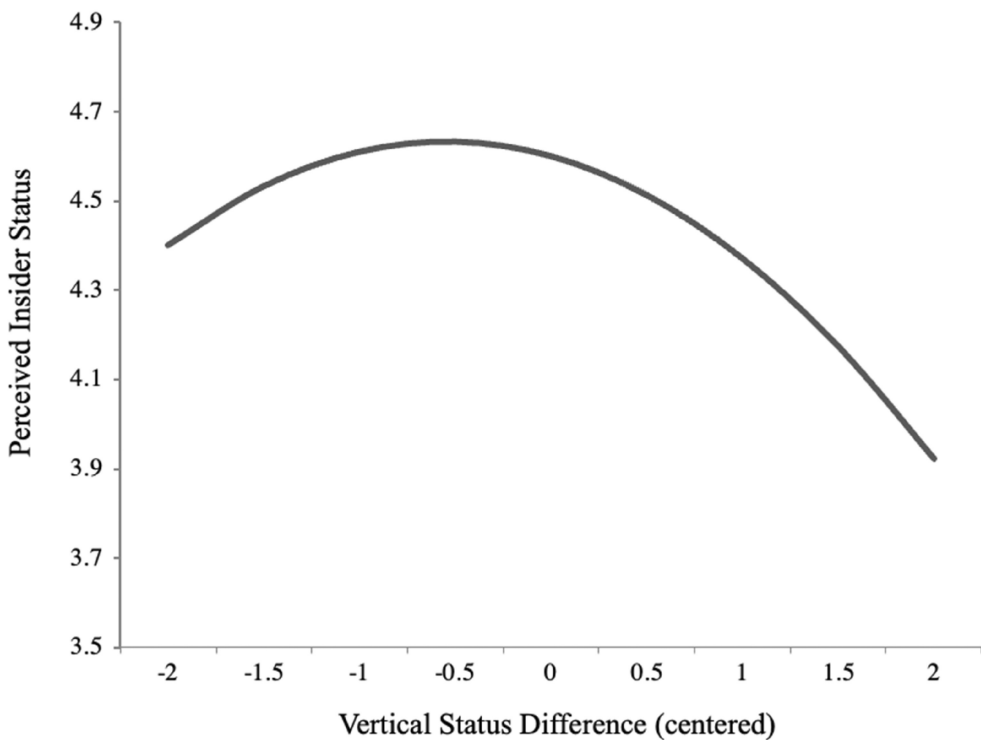*Note:* Data of vertical status difference are group-mean centred.

F I G U R E 2 Curvilinear effect of vertical status difference on perceived insider status.

For Hypotheses 4a and 4b, we tested the moderated mediation effect and verified whether the promotion criterion could moderate the indirect effect of horizontal and vertical status differences on proactive behaviours through perceived insider status. As shown in Table 2, the promotion criteria significantly moderated the effect of horizontal status difference on perceived insider status ($\gamma = .18$, $p < .05$). Simple slope results showed that horizontal status difference positively influenced perceived insider status when the promotion criterion was relative (simple slope $= .43$, $p < .01$), but the relationship was not significant when the promotion criterion was absolute (simple slope $= .07$, $p > .05$). These slopes are portrayed in Figure 3. The Monte Carlo simulation results also showed that the conditional indirect effect of horizontal status difference and promotion criterion on proactive behaviour via perceived insider status was significant (indirect effect $= .03$, 95% CI [.00, .07]);
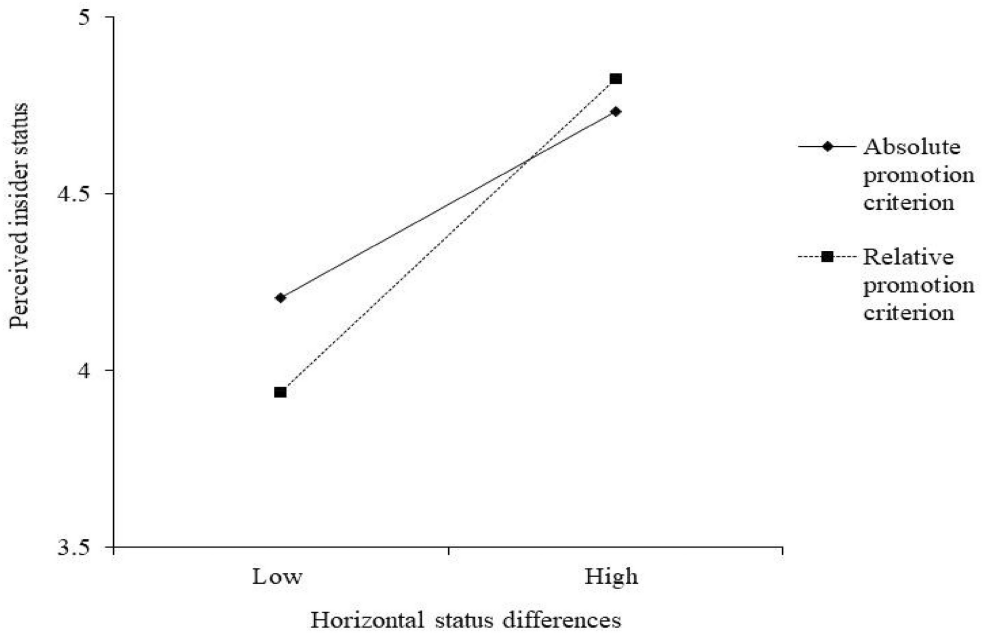
FIGURE 3 Interaction between horizontal status difference and promotion criterion on perceived insider status.

the difference of the indirect effect was significant under these two conditions of promotion criterion (*difference* = .06, 95% CI [.01, .13]), supporting Hypothesis 4a.

On the other hand, the interactive term between the vertical status difference squared and the promotion criterion was not significant (γ = −.01, p > .05). Meanwhile, following previous studies (Lin et al., 2017), we tested a curvilinear moderated mediation effect to explore whether the promotion criterion would moderate the indirect effect of vertical status difference on proactive behaviour. The results showed that all differences among the estimates of θ in different conditions of vertical status difference and promotion criterion were non-significant. Specifically, the difference in θ for high vertical status difference when the promotion criterion was relative (+1 *SD*) versus absolute (−1 *SD*) was −.16 (95% CI = [−.36, .04]). Similarly, the difference in θ for low vertical status difference when the promotion criterion was relative (+1 *SD*) versus absolute (−1 *SD*) was non-significant (difference = −.12, 95% CI = [−.32, .08]). Thus, Hypothesis 4b was not supported.

Supplementary analyses

As a supplementary analysis, we conducted multilevel polynomial regression analysis with response surface methodology that allowed us to examine similarity and dissimilarity in workplace status and the direction of the difference (Edwards & Parry, 1993). The results revealed that for the horizontal status difference, the slope along the incongruence line was positive and significant (Est. = .19, p < .05). This finding suggested that perceived insider status increased as the difference between a focal employee's status and the group mean of employees' status increased in a positive direction. These results further confirmed Hypothesis 1. Moreover, for the vertical status difference, the curvature of the incongruence line was negative and significant (Est. = −.16, p < .05), indicating that perceived insider status declined as the status scores of the leader and a focal employee increasingly differed from each other. This result is consistent with our proposition that the vertical status difference has an inverted U-shaped relationship with perceived insider status.

We tested the mediation effect using the slope parameter of the incongruence line for horizontal status difference and the curvature parameter of the incongruence line for vertical status difference as the α path estimate. This approach is consistent with recent studies (Bartels & Wellman, 2023; Rogers et al., 2023). The effect of perceived insider status on proactive behaviour was used as the β path estimate. The bootstrapping (20,000 iterations) results showed that the horizontal status difference was positively associated with proactive behaviour via perceived insider status (indirect effect = .05, 95% CI = [.00, .12]). Also, the indirect effect of the interplay of a focal employee's status and a leader's status on proactive behaviour through perceived insider status was negative and marginally significant (indirect effect = −.03, 90% CI = [−.07, −.00]). Taken together, these findings provided additional evidence for the mediation hypotheses.

We also conducted a moderated polynomial regression analysis to examine the moderating effect of the promotion criteria. We found that the pseudo-R^2 value of both interaction models (i.e., for horizontal and vertical status differences) significantly increased after the inclusion of the five interaction terms between promotion criteria and the five polynomial terms. Specifically, the slope along the incongruence for horizontal status difference was positive and significant when the promotion criterion was relative (Est. = .34, $p < .05$), but the slope was not significant when the promotion criterion was absolute (Est. = .09, $p > .05$). These findings confirmed Hypothesis 4a.

Moreover, when the promotion criterion was relative, the curvature along the incongruence line for the vertical status difference was negative and significant (Est. = −.22, $p < .05$). However, when the promotion criterion was absolute, the surface along the incongruence line was flat, as evidenced by a non-significant slope (Est. = −.11, $p > .05$) and a non-significant curvature (Est. = −.14, $p > .05$). For brevity and simplicity, we provide the detailed results, including the polynomial regression results and the figures showing the response surfaces, in an online supplement (Appendix S5).

DISCUSSION

Given the important role of status difference in shaping the perceptions and behaviours of employees, we examined how vertical and horizontal status difference is related to employees' perceived insider status and proactive behaviours. Our findings revealed that the horizontal status difference is significantly and positively related to perceived insider status and indirectly related to proactive behaviours through the effect of perceived insider status. Furthermore, the vertical status difference had an inverted U-shaped impact on perceived insider status. When the promotion criterion tended to be more relative (rather than absolute), the relationship between horizontal status difference and perceived insider status, as well as the indirect effect of horizontal status difference on proactive behaviours through perceived insider status, was stronger.

Theoretical implications

Our findings offer several important theoretical implications for existing literature. First, given the lack of research on the effect of status difference on employee outcomes, one important contribution is theorizing and demonstrating how horizontal and vertical status differences affect employees' perceived insider status and proactive behaviours. The results expand on previous studies of status difference that have focused on the effects of an individual's absolute level of workplace status (i.e., having a higher or lower status than others) and their outcomes but have ignored their workplace status level relative to other group members. Our undertaking also contributes to the social identity literature concerned with social relationship comparison (e.g., leader-member exchange relationship comparison) as a means of constructing social identity. In particular, we contribute by demonstrating that status comparison significantly affects employees' positive cognition of self-concept in a group (i.e., their perceived insider status).

Another important result from our study is that vertical status difference had a reverse U-shaped relationship with employees' perceived insider status. In general, this finding suggests that subordinates having a low "status distance" from their supervisor (i.e., a similar status, Phillips et al., 2009) are more likely to feel that they are insiders in a group and consequently engage in more proactive behaviours. Our findings complement and extend research on the status incongruence of a supervisor and his/her subordinates. Extant work has found that supervisors give poor performance ratings to higher-status subordinates and that status incongruence in terms of age, work experience, organizational tenure, or education mitigates the effect of transformational leadership on the affective organizational commitment of employees (Triana et al., 2017). We enrich this line of research through shedding light on how employees respond to the status incongruence between a supervisor and their subordinate, as well as the status distance between them and their supervisor. Furthermore, showing that horizontal and vertical status differences have different effects on employee outcomes, our study responds to Ravlin and Thomas's (2005) call for research that simultaneously examines the effects of different types of status difference (e.g., status difference with a specific target person) on employee outcomes.

Our results further reveal that a relative promotion criterion facilitates the effect of horizontal status difference on employee outcomes, thereby enhancing understanding of how organizations can affect employees' behaviours through a specific type of promotion system. In a relative promotion system, members with high horizontal status may embrace a strong insider status perception and engage in more proactive behaviours because they perceive the advantage of "moving up". This result is consistent with previous studies (George et al., 2012) that have ascertained that employees' perceived upward mobility is a powerful moderating factor when they express their attitudes or behaviours. Our findings also corroborate and extend Reh et al.'s (2018) work which determined that a competitive climate significantly moderates the effect of social status comparison on an individual's perception of his/her career trajectory through specifying how promotion practices fuel such competition in status comparison. Moreover, this study provides important insights into the current literature on promotion system that focuses on examining the antecedents or consequences of this system (García-Izquierdo et al., 2012) by demonstrating how it acts as a boundary condition under which the effects of workplace status differences may be contingent.

Finally, this study also provides additional knowledge for proactive behaviour research. Scholars (Crant, 2000; Parker et al., 2006) have revealed the antecedents that spur employees' proactive behaviours. We extend this line of research by examining vertical and horizontal status difference as new antecedents of employees' proactive behaviours. Specifically, we demonstrate that having a higher status than one's group members or a similar status to that of the leader can facilitate proactive behaviours.

Practical implications

Our findings offer several implications for organizations and their leaders. As per our findings, a higher status relative to one's group members enhances perceptions of insider status, consequently leading to employees engaging in proactive behaviours. As an informal rank, status can be achieved when employees receive respect, prominence, or admiration from others, especially from their managers. Managers should therefore be particularly cautious about whom they grant such status. They should consciously allocate resources and opportunities to high-status group members who tend to act as active agents and display proactive behaviours; such judicious efforts should result in effective use of resources and salutary outcomes for the organization. However, managers also need to help lower-status employees improve certain recognized status characteristics, such as performance and valued task-related skills and competencies; such assistance should foster enhancing their overall proactive behaviours for a given work group.

Our findings also show that a relative promotion criterion enhances the effects of horizontal status difference on perceived insider status and proactive behaviours. These results infer that organizations

can use the promotion system as a lever for employee regulation. Managers in groups with obvious status differences may act on relative (rather than absolute) promotion criteria, as such criteria can encourage high-status employees to engage in more self-initiated and change-oriented behaviours. Because high-status employees tend to be influential in a group, their foregoing deportment may well inspire other group members to be proactive. Meanwhile, high-status employees should be encouraged to help lower-status employees experiencing low levels of perceived insider status develop an inner identity within the work group. This might be accomplished by managers, for example, through creating a strong interpersonal justice climate or establishing an employee mutual aid platform.

Limitations and future research directions

The current study has some limitations that are suggestive of potential avenues for future research. First, we did not examine actual status but focused instead on employees' perceptions of their own status and their leader's status within a group. Admittedly, previous studies have frequently used the self-assessment measurement (Anicich et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2019). And Sumanth and Cable (2011) reported a high correlation between self-assessed and other-assessed status. In spite of this, additional research would validate our findings by using other-assessed status for employees. For example, scholars could ask participants to provide round-robin ratings of each team member's status (Hays et al., 2022), use social network centrality (Zhou et al., 2022), or utilize the recognized degree of professionalism (Groysberg et al., 2011) to reflect individual status. Second, our data showed that absolute and relative promotion criteria can be viewed as two extremes on a single continuum. Nonetheless, further empirical investigation is required to strengthen the validity of our promotion criteria scale.

Third, although we controlled for formal hierarchy (i.e., position), an enhanced concrete and direct comparison between formal and informal hierarchies and their effects on employee outcomes should be made. For example, Cross and Cummings (2004) found that more connections to people in higher formal positions contributed to better job performance; this was because individuals with such contacts were more likely to have access to valuable information. Future research might further explain how formal and informal hierarchies independently and interactively relate to employees' work attitudes and other types of behavioural outcomes such as job performance.

Fourth, there remain some key variables for which we did not control and that may drive or disrupt the reaction of employees to their relative status. For example, individuals' motivation to strive for status may be especially important in capturing the effect of status difference on employee outcomes. As Loch et al. (2001: 16) suggested, status can be viewed as "a rational means by which to attain resource[s]" or be sought "as an end in itself". Researchers may consider replicating our undertaking while controlling for employees' status-seeking intentions.

Fifth, because our data were from a single cultural context (i.e., China), the generalization of our findings may be limited. In a setting with high power distance, employees are inclined to treat the leader as a person of authority in the workplace (Clugston et al., 2000). They may thus develop special attention towards the leader and become inured to ways of interacting with the leader that differ from the reciprocal principle in coworker interaction (Farh et al., 2007). Subsequent research should seek to validate our findings in the context of a low-power distance culture (e.g., countries in the West).

CONCLUSION

Our study underscores the pivotal role of status difference as a predictor of employee outcomes. Within work groups, we have identified two distinct forms of status difference: horizontal and vertical status difference. Furthermore, our investigation reveals that these two forms of status difference exhibit distinct associations with proactive behaviour via perceived insider status and that the relationships

vary by promotion criteria. Our findings can serve as a catalyst for heightened scholarly consideration of the nuanced realm of status difference, prompting an augmented expansion of research endeavours in this domain. Empiricism that comprehensively explores the multifaceted status difference, including a comparative analysis of viewpoints that employees and leaders hold, will contribute to the enriched discourse within the theoretical landscape of status dynamics in organizations.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Zhiqiang Liu: Conceptualization; methodology; resources; data curation; investigation; funding acquisition; formal analysis; supervision; writing – review and editing; project administration; writing – original draft. **Xi Ouyang:** Writing – original draft; software. **Tae-Yeol Kim:** Writing – review and editing; conceptualization. **Ying Chen:** Writing – review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We declare that no conflict of interest exists in the submission of this manuscript, and the manuscript is approved by all authors for publication.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Appendix S1.
Appendix S2.
Appendix S3.
Appendix S4.
Appendix S5.