The Relationship of Workplace Ostracism and Territorial Behavior: An Empirical Study Based on Hierarchical Regression Analysis

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Abstract

Encountering workplace ostracism produces defensive psychology and fights back with territorial behavior tit-for-tat. Understanding such psychological fences and behavioral quirks that are detrimental to career development and workplace ecology has become an important research issue in current enterprise management. Drawing upon the conservation of resources (COR) theory, this study proposed theoretical hypotheses and model, and constructed structural equation model to empirically analyze how workplace ostracism positively affects territorial behavior by enhancing employees' prevention-focused psychological ownership. Significant results were obtained through a hierarchical regression analysis of data from 232 employees, results show that workplace ostracism positively related to employees' prevention-focused psychological ownership and territorial behavior. Prevention-focused psychological ownership played a partial mediating role between workplace ostracism and employee territorial behavior. This study revealed the deep logic of generating prevention-focused psychology and territorial behavior after encountering workplace ostracism, and provided theoretical references and management inspiration for enterprises to decipher negative psychology behaviors in the workplace.

Keywords: workplace ostracism; territorial behavior; prevention-focused psychological ownership; hierarchical regression; structural equation model

1. INTRODUCTION

In nature, many animals occupy territories through unique objects such as scent to demonstrate their ownership of that territory. In the workplace, it is not uncommon to guard against others coveting their work resources, which is called territorial behavior [2]. Territorial behavior has a number of negative effects on organization. For example, territorial behavior decreases individual satisfaction and organizational commitment, inhibits task synergy and knowledge sharing among organizational members, and leads to relationship and task conflict, ultimately reduce organizational performance. Organizational territorial climate also reduces employee's organizational identity and organizational citizenship behavior. Therefore, it is of great theoretical and practical value to investigate the mechanism of its formation, so as to control or reduce territorial behavior. However, there are few studies on the antecedents of territorial behavior in academia.

With the intensification of external competition and work pressure, workplace ostracism is becoming more common and tends to increase. Workplace ostracism refers to people's psychological perception that they feel excluded or ignored by others in the workplace, reflecting an embarrassing and painful experience [4]. Workplace ostracism is not only an unethical behavior [6], but it can also contribute to psychological damage to the ostracized employees; Thus, their psychological state would have a serious negative impact, such as job insecurity and defensive psychology, which can have an important impact on employee territorial behavior. As Avey pointed out, prevention-focused psychological ownership would facilitate individuals to defend and protect the targets [1].

This internal logic is well described by the conservation of resource (COR) theory, which holds that the depletion of individual resources will stimulate resource-protective psychology and behavior, so that ostracized employees will largely adopt defensive psychology (e.g., prevention-focused psychological

ownership) and protective measures (e.g., territorial behavior) to reduce the loss of resources. However, the existing literature has not clearly revealed the theoretical relationship between workplace ostracism, prevention-focused psychological ownership and territorial behavior.

In summary, based on the COR theory, we aim to explores the relationship between workplace ostracism and territorial behavior through the mechanism of prevention-focused psychological ownership. This can not only improve the research on workplace ostracism, psychological ownership and territorial behavior, but also provide a theoretical support for organizations to control workplace ostracism and territorial behavior, which has several theoretical value and practical contributions. Our theoretical model is illustrated in Figure 1.
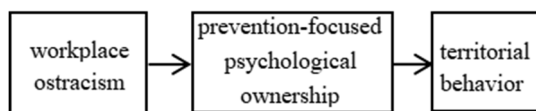

Figure 1: Theoretical model

2. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Workplace Ostracism and Territorial Behavior

As the perception of being despised, excluded or even attacked, workplace ostracism is a painful source of pressure or social death, often means the failure of workplace communication and working relationship. Ostracized employees often experience the embarrassing experience of being rejected by others, such as being turned down when seeking collaboration [7]. To avoid continued ostracism, ostracized employees will largely reinforce their boundary awareness, and mark their work resources and work space, thus leading to territorial behavior.

Further, from the perspective of COR theory, experiencing workplace ostracism undoubtedly depletes individuals' material, conditional, and energetic resources [5]. The loss of material resources facilities will directly reduce employees' task performance, and the depletion of conditional resources such as intellectual property will weaken employees' core competencies. According to the second basic corollary of COR theory, the initial loss of resources will lead to further loss of resources, and the development of resource loss will be more rapid, and the negative impact will be more intense, thus forming the spiral of resource loss. When the spiral of resource loss intensifies, ostracized employees will face the situation of the fourth basic principle of COR theory, namely resource desperation. At this time, employees' self-defense mechanism will be triggered, and they are likely to take defensive measures to reduce resource loss, and exhibit irrational or even aggressive behaviors, such as respond to the negative effects of workplace ostracism

with territorial behaviors. Therefore, out of strong motivation to maintain resources, employees are likely to implement territorial behavior to change stressors or produce strategies for coping with stress when they perceived workplace ostracism. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1 Workplace ostracism is positively related to employees' territorial behavior.

2.2 The Mediating Roles of Prevention-Focused Psychological Ownership

As one of the stressors in the workplace, workplace ostracism will have a negative impact on the psychological state of the ostracized employees. From the perspective of COR theory, workplace ostracism will deplete a large number of resources of the ostracized employees, and bring resource loss and negative impact to the ostracized employees. Employees who are ostracized by their supervisors will receive less task resources and support than normal [11]. The reduction of core work resources will undoubtedly prevent the ostracized employees from achieving their daily tasks and personal goals, so that their work efficiency, task performance and career prospects will be greatly restricted. Employees who are ostracized by their peers can perceive signals of shrinking interpersonal resources and fractured relationships. Prevention-focused psychological ownership refers to the individual's psychological perception of protecting the possessor from external encroachment, which reflects the protective motivation and psychological state of the possessor [3]. Workplace ostracism leads to negative emotions such as depression and emotional exhaustion, weakens employees' sense of belonging and self-esteem, and reduces employees' sense of organizational identity and self-efficacy [9]. This will further reduce the quantity and quality of employees' resource reserves as well as their career development potential, resulting in employees' protective motives against external encroachment, which leads to the prevention-focused psychological ownership [8]. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 2 Workplace ostracism is positively related to prevention-focused psychological ownership.

The psychological state plays a key role in influencing their activities and behavioral decisions. Researches on the antecedents of territorial behavior show that in addition to demography and personality traits, psychological ownership, as the psychological basis of territorial behavior, plays a critical role in influencing territorial behavior. Therefore, prevention-focused psychological ownership has an important influence on employees' territorial behavior. Prevention-focused psychological ownership reflects individuals' awareness of preventing others from encroaching on their resources. Individuals with stronger prevention-focused psychological ownership have stronger risk perception of

potential loss of resources. COR theory argues that individuals adopt defensive measures to conserve their resources when they deplete the resources. However territorial behavior is regarded as individual resource conservation strategy. Brown argues that territorial behavior has four types: identity-oriented marking, control-oriented marking, anticipatory defending, and reactionary defending (Brown et al., 2014). Therefore, for the motivation of resource protection, such as avoiding resource depletion, maintaining resource reserve and resource investment, employees with strong prevention-focused psychological ownership will not only declare their possessions by displaying defense behaviors, but also acquire additional resources to supplement the potential resource depletion by employing identity-oriented and control-oriented marking, which leads to more territorial behaviors. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 3 Prevention-focused psychological ownership is positively related to territorial behavior.

In summary, based on the internal logic of COR theory, workplace ostracism depletes scarce task resources or psychological resources cherished by ostracized employees, erodes their sense of psychological ownership of these resources and the benefits of the upward spiral of resources, thus triggering the prevention-focused psychological ownership of ostracized employees. Furthermore, as a key potential antecedent of territorial behavior, prevention-focused psychological ownership may lead to territorial behavior. Because employees with higher prevention-focused psychological ownership will engage in behaviors such as anticipatory and reactive defenses to preserve resource reserves, or actions such as identity-oriented marking and control-oriented marking to seek additional resources, thus leading to more frequent territorial behaviors. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 4 Prevention-focused psychological ownership mediates the positive effect of workplace ostracism on territorial behavior.

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from some company located in China. We distributed questionnaires to 252 employees and eventually obtained 232 valid questionnaires, with effective recovery of 92.1%. Among the subordinates, 31.0% were male, 90.9% were 35 years old and below, 89.3% had a bachelor's degree or above, and 87.9% had worked for less than five years.

3.2 Measures

The mature reliability scale from previous studies was used to measure the variables. As the original scales were all in English, we strictly followed standard translation and back-translation procedures to ensure the accuracy of measurement scales. Response options ranged from 1(completely disagree) to 5(completely agree).

A 10-item scale developed by Ferris et al. (2008) was used to measure workplace ostracism. One sample item is "Others left the area when I entered" ($\alpha = 0.940$). A 4-item scale developed by Avey et al. (2009) was used to measure prevention-focused psychological ownership. One sample item is "I feel I need to protect my ideas from being used by others in my organization" ($\alpha = 0.814$). The measurement of territorial behavior refers to the practice of Wang et al. (2018) [10], A 6-item scale developed by Brown et al. (2014) was used to measure territorial behavior. One sample item is "Tell/show others that the 'work resource/space' belong to me" ($\alpha = 0.842$). Employees' age, gender, education, and tenure were controlled in this study.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We used AMOS 24 to conduct a structural equation model and test the discriminant validity among variables. The fit indexes in Table 1 presents that the 3-factor model has a better fit (χ^2/df=1.675, RMSEA=0.054, CFI=0.963, TLI=0.956, IFI=0.964, GFI=0.903) than the other models, confirming discriminant validity.

Table 1: Results of confirmatory Factor Analysis

Model	c^2	df	c^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	IFI	GFI
One-factor model: A+B+C	965.761	152	6.354	0.152	0.691	0.652	0.693	0.620
Two-factor model: A+B, C	680.974	151	4.510	0.123	0.799	0.772	0.800	0.723
Three-factor model: A, B, C	239.593	143	1.675	0.054	0.963	0.956	0.964	0.903

N=232, A=work ostracism, B=prevention-focused psychological ownership, C=territorial behavior

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

We used SPSS 26 for correlation analysis of the main variables. The descriptive statistics and correlation analysis are in Table 2. The results showed that workplace ostracism was positively correlated with prevention-focused psychological ownership (r = 0.450, p < 0.01) and territorial behavior (r = 0.500, p < 0.01). Prevention-focused psychological ownership was positively correlated with territorial behavior (r = 0.502, p < 0.01). This is consistent with the theoretical expectation and provided initial support for the mediating effect.

Table 2: Means, standard deviations, and correlations

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Gender	1.698	0.460	-						
2.Age	1.552	0.707	-0.351**	-					
3. Education	3.202	0.669	0.242**	-0.054	-				
4. Tenure	1.853	1.021	-0.472**	0.706**	-0.279**	-			
5.Work Ostracism	2.785	1.022	-0.217**	0.280**	-0.165*	0.248**	(0.940)		
6.P-FPO	3.503	0.838	0.017	-0.029	-0.132*	0.009	0.450**	(0.814)	
7.Territorial Behavior	3.299	0.744	-0.026	0.182**	-0.122	0.183**	0.500**	0.502**	(0.842)

N = 232; P-FPO=prevention-focused psychological ownership

**$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$; Cronbach's α reliabilities are in parentheses on the diagonal

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

Hierarchical regression analysis showed that workplace ostracism was positively related to territorial behavior (β = 0.359, P < 0.001, M4) after controlling for gender, age, education, tenure. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was fully supported. Workplace ostracism was significantly positively related to prevention-focused psychological ownership (β = 0.406, P < 0.001, M2), and prevention-focused psychological ownership was positively related to territorial behavior (β = 0.317, P < 0.001, M5). Hence, Hypothesis 2 and 3 were fully supported. The direct effect of workplace ostracism on territorial behavior was positive (β = 0.230, P < 0.001, M5) when entering prevention-focused psychological ownership, suggesting that it partially mediated the relationship between workplace ostracism and territorial behavior. We conducted bootstrapping analysis to further confirm the mediating effect. The results showed that the indirect effect of workplace ostracism on territorial behavior through defensive psychological ownership was 0.129, with the 95% confidence interval [0.073, 0.190]. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was fully supported. Results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Results of hierarchical regression analyses

	P-FPO		territorial behavior		
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Gender	0.085	0.179	0.156	0.239*	0.182
Age	-0.033	-0.175	0.147	0.021	0.077
Education	-0.178*	-0.098	-0.122	-0.052	-0.021
Tenure	0.010	0.013	0.072	0.075	0.071
Workplace ostracism		0.406***		0.359***	0.230***
P-FPO					0.317***
R²	0.003	0.222	0.038	0.255	0.351
ΔR²	0.020	0.219	0.054	0.216	0.097
F	1.185	14.211	3.266	16.784	21.803

N = 232; P-FPO=prevention-focused psychological ownership; *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

5.   DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical Implications

First, although previous studies have explored the consequences of workplace ostracism and its mechanism, as well as many scholars have explored the mechanism of employee territorial behavior from the perspective of resources endowment. However, few scholars linked workplace ostracism and territorial behavior to explore the relationship between them. Based on COR theory, this study explored the effect and internal mechanism of workplace ostracism on territorial behavior, thus enriching the relevant literature.

Moreover, most of the current researches on psychological ownership regard it as a positive psychological resource to explore its promoting effect on attitude and behavioral. But few researches have explored the negative effects of psychological ownership. We use prevention-focused psychological ownership to construct a bridge between workplace ostracism and territorial behavior, which well reveals the potential mechanism between them. It not only provides a new perspective for examining the intrinsic association between workplace ostracism and territorial behavior, but also provides an empirical support for the dark side of psychological ownership, thus expanding the related research on psychological ownership.

5.2 Practical Implications

First of all, we suggested that organizations should pay attention to the impact of workplace ostracism. Workplace ostracism can make the ostracized employees deviate from the good psychological state, thus hindering the achievement of the overall goals of the organization. Therefore, managers should pay attention to the phenomenon or atmosphere of workplace ostracism in the organization, analyze the reasons, implement intervention measures timely to reduce the negative impact of workplace ostracism.

Additionally, managers should be aware of the negative impact of territory behavior, analyze the reasons and prevent the territory behavior in advance. On the one hand, managers should strengthen the construction of the mental health of employees, improve employee organization belonging and self-efficacy, thus reducing employees' negative psychological status. It can help to create favorable conditions for inhibiting territory behavior, thus promote the healthy development of the organization. On the other hand, managers should adhere to the scientific management concepts and deliver good organizational values, establishing the efficient communication feedback mechanism to promote positive interaction between employees, thereby to eliminate the soil of territorial behavior.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations should be noted. First of all, the cross-sectional research design makes it difficult to explore the causal relationship. Quasi-natural experimental design or longitudinal data collection at different time nodes can be carried out in future studies to further strengthen the causal relationship. Secondly, China's unique cultural environment may have a subtle influence. For example, in groups with strong collective culture and strong sense of face, individuals are more sensitive to interpersonal failure, so the negative impact of workplace ostracism may be stronger. Therefore, future research can further explore the moderating effect of traditional culture on workplace ostracism, so as to enhance the external validity of the research.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, drawing upon COR theory, this study constructed a theoretical model among workplace ostracism, prevention-focused psychological ownership and territorial behavior. Using matched data from 232 employees, the results show that: workplace ostracism has a significant positive effect on employees' territorial behavior; workplace ostracism positively related to prevention-focused psychological ownership; prevention-focused psychological ownership facilitated territorial behavior; prevention-focused psychological ownership partially mediates the relationship between workplace exclusion and employee territorial behavior. Future research could draw on the model to further examine the additional mediating role between workplace ostracism and employee behavior by using a quasi-natural experimental design or based on a traditional cultural perspective.

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