

## **Workplace Ostracism and Territorial Behavior, the Mediating Effect of Workplace Loneliness**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Territorial behaviors refer to the actions people expressed to mark and defend certain objects that they believe belong to them. We proposed that workplace ostracism positively affects employees' territorial behavior through the mechanism of workplace loneliness. We tested our hypotheses using data from 211 employees in Shanghai, China. The results showed that workplace ostracism is positively related to territorial behavior, and workplace loneliness plays a mediating role in workplace ostracism-territorial behavior relationship. Finally, these findings and their possible implications are discussed.*

**KEYWORDS:** *workplace ostracism, workplace loneliness, territorial behavior*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Territoriality is innate and universal. Within organizations, it is common for people to claim and defend their control of a variety of physical and social objects (Brown et al., 2005). The territorial behaviors are pervasive in modern organizations and the researches of this phenomenon begin to emerge and draw more attention than before (Baer & Brown, 2012; Brown & Robinson, 2011; Jarvenpaa & Tanriverdi, 2006; Salari et al., 2006). Researchers have argued that employees' territorial behavior could be either beneficial or detrimental to organizations. Although territorial behavior can sometimes help reduce conflicts, simplify social interactions and engender a sense of belonging to organizations, most of the time territorial behavior is a dysfunctional behavior that will hinder knowledge sharing and cooperation, diminish their focus on task performance (Brown et al., 2005) and undermine successful change efforts (Brown, 2009) especially when the individuals excessively engaged in. As a result, the in-depth researches of the factors that lead to territorial behavior have become an important issue in organization management because seriously negative consequences can result when these factors are neglected by managers.

In the literature, researchers have demonstrated the positive relationship between psychological ownership and territorial behavior (Avey et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2005). Furthermore, other studies have found territorial infringement was an important factor to engender defending behavior (Brown & Robinson, 2011; Wollman et al., 1994). However, workplace ostracism as a powerful, distinct, and regular occurrence in human life, has remained scarcely explored (Yang & Treadway, 2016). Workplace ostracism describes the extent to which an individual is ignored or excluded by others (Williams, 2001), which is a painful experience. When a person experiences ostracism, he or she may induce reduce interpersonal interactions among members of an organization, strengthen self-protection and commit less to the organization. Therefore, we argue that workplace ostracism may affect employees' territorial behavior in organizations.

In addition to the direct relationship between workplace ostracism and territorial behavior, we further aim to explore the mediating effect underlying this linkage. Workplace ostracism may affect employees' workplace emotions, like workplace loneliness. As with other workplace emotions, loneliness is predicted not only to influence how employees feel, but also their workplace behaviors (Ozcelik, 2011). Specifically, as loneliness is a feeling that involves estrangement and alienation from others in the social environment, we predict that workplace loneliness may play a mediating role between workplace ostracism and territorial behavior.

This study seeks to make several unique contributions. The first purpose of this article is to examine the effect of workplace ostracism on territorial behavior, by validating the effect with empirical evidence, we enrich the antecedent variables of territorial behavior. Second, we extend workplace ostracism literature by examining the relationship between workplace ostracism and workplace loneliness. Workplace ostracism conveys implicit information to the ostracized target that he or she has done something unacceptable and symbolizes social death in the organization (Ferris et al., 2008). Accordingly, being ostracized by others may feel loneliness in the organizations. Third, this study introduced workplace loneliness and found a mediating influence in the relationship between workplace ostracism and territorial behavior. Figure 1 presents our research model.

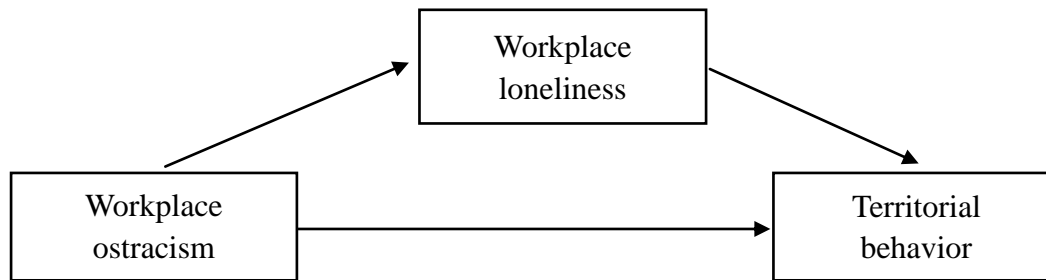


Figure 1. Research model

## Theory and hypotheses

### *Workplace ostracism and territorial behavior*

Territorial behavior is a self-other boundary regulation mechanism that involves marking or communicating an object that is owned by a person or group and defending territorial infringement (Altman, 1975). This perception highlights that the establishment of physical and social boundaries through territorial behavior can help people protect valuable objects and prevent unwanted intrusions (Brown, 2009). Workplace ostracism describes as “the extent to which an individual perceives that he or she is ignored, excluded or rejected by others in workplace” (Ferris et al., 2008). This study suggests that workplace ostracism, as an important workplace stressor, will lead to territorial behavior of employees. Based on conservation of resources (COR) theory, individuals (and groups) strive to obtain, retain, foster, and protect those things they centrally value (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Resources include object resources (e.g., car, tools for work), condition resources (e.g., employment, tenure, seniority), personal resources (e.g., key skills and personal traits such as self-efficacy and optimism), and energy resources (e.g., credit, knowledge, money) (Hobfoll et al., 2018). When individual resources are lost or threatened, their pressure will increase. Therefore, when employees experience ostracism, they will feel loss and threat of personal resources, for example, perceiving low self-efficacy or becoming negative.

In the case of pressure surge, employees will try to save other undamaged resources to make up for the damage caused by resource loss. Thus, they will engage in territorial behavior.

H1: Workplace ostracism is positively related to territorial behavior.

### *The mediating role of workplace loneliness*

Workplace loneliness is a psychological state that results from deficiencies in a person’s social relationships (Wright et al., 2006). Previous studies have found that the negative cognition formed by information processing has an important impact on workplace loneliness. Workplace ostracism can bring negative emotions to individuals, they often feel depressed, lonely, anxious or jealous which will further affect the mental health of employees (Schneider & Snyder, 1975). Therefore, we argued that workplace ostracism is positively related to workplace loneliness.

Employees who experience loneliness in the workplace are likely to conclude from this emotion that they are incapable and unwelcome, and have negative evaluations of themselves (such as low self-esteem and self-efficacy). They may choose to reinforce self-protection and reduce interpersonal interaction with team members. Furthermore, workplace ostracism leads to isolation between the ostracized target and other members in the organization. This will make the ostracized target lack the sense of belonging and identity to the organization, which will lead to the lack of organizational identity and strong workplace loneliness. Thus, the ostracized employees will hide their key work information and limit their own investment in the organization.

H2: Workplace loneliness will mediate the relationship between workplace ostracism and territorial behavior.

## II. METHODS

### *Sample and procedure*

A total of 300 employees from 3 enterprises in Shanghai were invited to participate in our survey. A cover letter attached to each questionnaire explained the objectives and procedures of the survey, and data matching was conducted via the questionnaire number, which ensured anonymity and confidentiality. We collected 256 questionnaires and 211 pairs are valid with an effective rate of 82.24%. In the sample of employees, 51% were females, with an average age of 27.88 years old. 86.50% had a bachelor’s degree or above, with an average monthly pretax income of 7,240 yuan.

### *Measures*

The original questionnaire was written in English and translated into Chinese by academic scholars bilingual in Mandarin and English. We used the conventional method of back-translation (Brislin, 1980) several

times until the English and Mandarin versions were highly similar.

*Workplace ostracism.* Workplace ostracism was measured using a then-item scale instrument developed by Ferris et al. (2008). A sample item is “Others ignored you at work”. The reliability for this scale was 0.692.

*Workplace loneliness.* We measured workplace loneliness using a sixteen-item scale instrument by Wright et al. (2006). Example items included “I often feel alienated from my co-workers”. The reliability for this scale was 0.956.

*Territorial behavior.* Territorial behavior was measured using a six-item scale instrument developed by Brown et al. (2014). A sample item is “I hide some “work” details or tricks to keep others from understanding it”. The reliability for this scale was 0.890.

*Control Variables.* Control variables were measured in terms of employee’s gender, age, educational level and salary. Gender was dummy-coded with 1 representing men and 2 representing women. Education was coded 1 for primary school, 2 for junior middle school, 3 for high school or technical secondary school, 4 for junior college, 5 for bachelor’s degree, 6 for master’s degree, and 7 for PhD. Age was asked to be filled in the questionnaire with the unit “year”. Salary was asked to be filled in the questionnaire with the unit “thousand yuan”.

### III. RESULTS

#### Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Prior to testing the hypotheses, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to check the measures’ convergent and discriminant validity, the four-factor model showed reasonable fit indices.  $\chi^2/df=1.864$ , RMSEA=0.06, CFI =0.939, NFI=0.879, IFI=0.940, GFI=0.891, TLI=0.928.

#### Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, Cronbach’s alpha and correlation coefficients among the variables were presented by table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables

Variables	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Education	3.490	.821	—						
2. salary	7.240	4.071	.304***	—					
3. Gender	1.515	.530	-.052	-.353***	—				
4. Age	27.888	4.800	-.099	.242***	-.111	—			
5. Workplace ostracism	1.795	.802	.202**	-.044	-.036	-.099	(.692)		
6. Workplace loneliness	2.908	.421	.181**	-.100	.016	-.116	.449***	(.956)	
7. Territorial behavior	3.774	.889	.317***	.011	-.090	-.089	.535***	.426***	(.890)

Note. N=211. Internal consistency estimates (alphas) are on the diagonal; \*  $p < .050$ , \*\*  $p < .010$

#### Tests of Hypotheses

H1 posits that workplace ostracism is positively related to territorial behavior. As shown in Table 2, the Model 4 indicates that workplace ostracism is positively associated with territorial behavior ( $\beta=0.528$ ,  $p < .001$ ), thereby confirming H1.

H2 predicts that workplace loneliness mediates the relationship between workplace ostracism and territorial behavior. As shown in Table 2, the Model 2 shows that workplace ostracism is positively associated with workplace loneliness ( $\beta=0.219$ ,  $p < .001$ ); the Model 5 shows that after controlling workplace loneliness, the effect of workplace ostracism on territorial behavior is reduced ( $\beta=0.434$ ,  $p < .001$ ), thereby supporting H3.

**Table 2.** Results of hierarchical regression analysis

Variables	Workplace loneliness		Territorial behavior		
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Education	.115**	.066	.371***	.252***	.223**
Salary	-1.741*	-1.188	-2.778	-1.441	-9.262
Gender	-.030	-.005	-.202	-.141	-.139
Age	-.005	-.003	-.007	-.002	-.001
Workplace ostracism		.219***		.528***	.434***
Workplace loneliness					.434**
R2	.063	.224	.123	.339	.373
$\Delta R^2$	.045**	.206***	.106***	.323***	.355**

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F	3.484**	11.869***	7.201***	21.067***	20.228***
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Note. N=211.\* p < .050, \*\* p < .010

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study showed workplace ostracism is an important antecedent of territorial behavior and workplace loneliness plays a mediating role in workplace ostracism-territorial behavior relationship. We now discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the results.

##### *Theoretical implications*

Our study has several theoretical implications. Our study extends the researches on antecedent variables of territorial behavior, the current results showed that workplace ostracism affected employees' territorial behavior. Previous works regarding the exploration of antecedent variables of territorial behavior mostly centered on psychological ownership as a key psychological foundation (Brown et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2005). However, workplace ostracism as common workplace phenomena, is an important yet neglected question that offers meaningful insights about territorial behavior. Our study provides empirical evidence on the relation between workplace ostracism and territorial behavior, which has never been examined. Moreover, this study found that workplace loneliness is a key mediation mechanism between workplace ostracism and territorial behavior.

##### *Practical implications*

Our study also provides some implications for managerial practices. One straightforward lesson from this study is that territorial behavior of employees in work group is related to workplace ostracism. Therefore, reducing workplace ostracism can inhibit the territorial behavior effectively. Managers should pay attention to the negative effects of workplace ostracism. For example: to establish a flexible organizational structure, to enhance the internal cohesion of the team. In addition, workplace ostracism will lead to workplace loneliness which make the employees more likely engage in territorial behavior. Therefore, managers should take a variety of measures to help employees face workplace ostracism and its negative reactions. For example, the organization can build informal communication places such as rest area and tea room to facilitate interpersonal communication.

##### *Limitations and future research*

This study also has some potential limitations. First, our examples of workplace ostracism, workplace loneliness and territorial behavior came from the same source which inevitably leads to a certain degree of common method variance. Future research should integrate the methods of self-evaluation and related personnel evaluation to measure the variables involved in the research. Second, because our research was cross-sectional, we are unable to draw strong causal inferences regarding the variables' relationships. Although we had strong theoretical and logical reasons for causality, alternative causal models may be plausible. Therefore, longitudinal research designs are needed in future research. Third, the data were collected from 3 enterprises from Shanghai, which limited the generalizability of our results. Thus, future research should use samples from different regions, even different countries or conduct targeted survey for a single industry or region to enhance the external validity of the study, and further verify the conclusions.

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