

# Territoriality and job performance: A literature review and future direction

Xinyu Gao \*

School of Economics and Management, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing, China

\* Corresponding Author Email: gaoxinyu\_11@163.com

**Abstract.** Territoriality refers to individuals or groups in the territory and related action. Territorial behavior is widespread in organizations; however, relevant theoretical and empirical researches are rare in Chinese cultural context. Its theoretical system has not been completely established, and there are still deficiencies in the connotation and application of the core definition. This paper involves the connotation and classification of territoriality by combing a large number of relevant literatures. It describes the relationship between territoriality and job performance in different levels, as well as its impact and effects in organizations. This paper aims to provide a new path to explore employee job performance from territorial perspective, as well as a new perspective to enhance organizational competitive advantage.

**Keywords:** Territoriality, territorial behavior, job performance, literature review.

## 1. Introduction

Territoriality has been a hot topic of research in zoology, anthropology and environmental psychology, and it first originated in the 18th century with observations of animal behavior. Since the 1970s, the definition has been applied to human society. Human beings are born with the drive to defend their territories, and while territoriality brings individuals a relatively free physical space, it can also lead to the expansion of psychological distance and lack of spiritual communication among individuals [1]. Human territoriality is the act of an individual or organization claiming control of an area, including the personalized marking of a place or object, as well as the dissemination and maintenance of its ownership and control of the place or object [2]. It was not until 2005 that the concept of territoriality was formally introduced into the field of organizational behavior by Brown et al.

Organizations, as special carriers of human activities, have certain special characteristics of their own. Correspondingly, the individual territorial behavior in it also has a new special connotation. Brown et al. [3], in the process of theoretical expansion of the concept of territoriality, mainly focus on the two aspects of territoriality, cognitive and behavioral, and especially emphasize that it is a kind of purposeful behavior, that territoriality within the organization is the behavioral expression of members' ownership to the target object in the organization. It encompasses both the psychological ownership perceptions that an individual develops with respect to that object, and the behaviors that an individual undertakes to construct, communicate, maintain, and restore the territory with respect to the object for which they have developed psychological ownership perceptions. This object can be either physical or non-physical space, or even something social or invisible. It also pioneered the division of territorial behaviors into territorial marking and territorial defending, in which marking behaviors are used to declare territorial ownership and prevent unprovoked intrusions by others; and defending behaviors are used to defend territorial ownership and combat hostile intrusions by others.

Territoriality is ubiquitous and unavoidable in organizations and groups [4], focusing on the outcome variable of job performance and associating territoriality with it to explore the relationship between the two is not only due to the fact that performance issues have historically been at the core of managers' concerns, but more importantly, the essence of territoriality is the allocation of organizational resources, and as a result, a series of problems, such as communication and conflict, which can ultimately have serious impacts on the performance outputs of an organization. The role

of territorial behavior in organizational performance has been a major concern of managers. Previous studies have achieved rich research results on the mechanisms of territoriality, including individual factors, group factors, and organizational contextual factors. However, the existing research on the relationship between territoriality and job performance is fragmented and lacks the exploration of new features of employees' territorial behavior in the Chinese cultural context. The findings are also contradictory in the sense that they can have both positive and negative effects on performance-based factors in organizational management. Therefore, on the basis of the definitions of territoriality and territorial behavior, this paper combed and summarized the related research results of territoriality and job performance, which enriched the research content of territoriality and performance management and was somewhat innovative.

## 2. Theoretical Foundation

### 2.1. The Definition of Territoriality

Territoriality first received attention in the 20th century in the study of animal behavior, and most of these studies on animal territoriality focused on its role in biological evolution. Burt proposed the definition of territorial behavior by observing animal behavioral patterns [5], pointing out that the special space occupied by animals in nature and which they desperately try to maintain is a territory, and the behaviors of animals to protect this geographic space are territorial behaviors. For example, zebras mark their territories through feces. Ardrey pointed out that territory means inviolability [6], and individuals or groups will regard the territory as a three-dimensional private space and completely occupy the area, including the land, water and air in the area, etc. After the 1970s, scholars gradually began to examine the territorial behaviors of human beings in physical space. Edney expanded the concept of territorial behavior to the field of anthropology [1], and territory is defined as a force or relationship that affects the members of a particular group, through personalized marking of a place or object to highlight that the place or object is owned by oneself. Knapp et al. proposed that other individuals would dispute the ownership of a territory or its boundaries [7], and make territorial invasions based on the desire to possess the territory, as well as a series of behaviors to stop such invasions is territorial defending.

Brown et al. formally introduced the concept of territoriality into the field of organizational behavior in 2005 [3], extending the scope of research from physical space to the territoriality of social objects in organizational contexts, and defined territoriality in organizations as the expression of an individual's ownership of a tangible or intangible social target that can be perceived. Salari et al. stated that territoriality is the mechanism by which an individual's boundaries with other people are managed [8], includes personalized marking of the target object and defending actions when the territory is violated. With the deepening of the research on territoriality, the research objects of territorial behavior have been diversified, and the research level has gradually developed from the individual level to the group level and the organizational level. Gardner et al. Take "people" as the territorial resources [9], focus the occurrence of territorial behavior on the situation between managers and subordinates. It believes that managers will have psychological ownership of their subordinates and regard subordinates as their own territorial resources, and calls this territorial behavior as employee guarding.

### 2.2. The Dimension of Territoriality

Early territoriality studies mostly focused on the physical space and boundaries of territories, and then gradually advanced from zoological studies to anthropological studies. Until 2005, territoriality was introduced into the field of organizational behavior. Brown et al. pointed that the territorial behaviors of individual employees mainly include marking behaviors and defending behaviors [3]. Marking behaviors are mainly used to declare and construct territories, while defending behaviors are mainly used to maintain and restore territories. Brown further subdivided marking behaviors into identity-oriented marking and control-oriented marking, as well as defending behaviors into

anticipatory defenses and reactionary defenses in 2009 [4]. Identity-oriented marking refers to individuals intentionally decorating and modifying their surroundings to reflect their identity; control-oriented marking refers to individuals attempting to prevent others from entering or destroying the territory by communicating with them in a way that informs them that the territory has been claimed; anticipatory defenses refers to individuals defending themselves by constructing hard and impenetrable boundaries beforehand; and reactionary defenses refers to measures taken by individuals after their territories are violated.

### **3. Research Development**

#### **3.1. Territoriality and Task Performance**

First, based on the different perspectives of the two parties of territorial behavior. According to social exchange theory, on the one hand, for the territorial behavior actor, employees who exhibit territorial awareness are self-interested [10], and an excessive focus on the self reduces the level of attention to more important work and organizational goals and correspondingly reduces the amount of energy invested in accomplishing these goals [11]. Awareness and behavior of maintaining territory depletes employees' own resources, and when individuals' material or emotional resources tend to diminish, their psychological state in a given work situation declines, which in turn results in lower performance in the role of organizational members.

On the other hand, for the receivers of territorial behaviors, territorial employees are reluctant to venture into certain areas, take on new tasks, or collaborate with specific colleagues, and this awareness can lead to a cycle of mutual distrust among colleagues [12]. When the actor withholds information from other coworkers out of territoriality, the receiver retaliates and returns the favor to the initial knowledge hider through a negative reciprocal cycle of interpersonal mistrust, which further triggers knowledge hiding from each other [13]. Knowledge hiding behavior leads to wasted organizational resources and negative spillover effects on key stakeholders, which in turn undermine individuals' true task performance [14]. In addition, territorial behaviors such as identity-oriented marking and anticipatory defenses exhibited by the actor reduce communication opportunities and familiarity with colleagues, making the individual appear secretive or distrustful of others, which in turn reduces the willingness or desire of other receivers to work with them. Such behaviors of alienating others are often considered undesirable and ultimately lead to employees with high territorial awareness being perceived by others as poor job performers [15].

In summary, territoriality negatively affects both real and perceived task performance of employees.

Second, some scholars have explored the different effects of territorial marking, territorial defending and territorial expanding on job performance based on different dimensional perspectives of territoriality [16]. Conservation of resources theory suggests that resource management work has two main motives, includes protecting existing resources and acquiring additional resources. On the one hand, there is a natural tendency to protect or enhance the resources owned, which may lead to territorial marking and defending if employees tend to reduce resource utilization to prevent further losses. This tendency to avoid utilizing or exchanging resources makes them closed in an egoistic safe space, never venturing into information exchange and accessing external information. Lack of information resources may lead to poor decision making and wasted time on the part of employees, which in turn reduces their job performance. On the other hand, if employees tend to increase resource utilization to gain more revenue, it may lead to territorial infringement and expanding. This tendency to aggressively expand or reach out to resources leads them to engage in more information exchange to gain access to external resources. By being exposed to different perspectives and modes of thinking, employees can think and solve problems faster, which in turn improves their performance.

In summary, territorial marking and territorial defending negatively affect employee task performance, and territorial expanding positively affects employee task performance.

### 3.2. Territoriality and Innovation Performance

Most studies on the relationship between territoriality and innovation performance are based on knowledge territorial behavior. This is due to the fact that knowledge has a unique value of its own, and the individual's mastery of knowledge requires long-term learning as well as a process of internalization and contemplation, which in turn leads to the formation of highly dependent knowledge with its own characteristic labels. Employees tend to have a strong desire for control and exclusivity over the knowledge they have acquired through their own efforts [17], which is the capital for employees to carry out creative outputs and maintain their competitiveness and status in the workplace in the organization. Boundary barriers to knowledge can affect the effective allocation of innovative resources and the realization of innovation [18, 19], which in turn adversely affects organizational performance.

On the one hand, based on the perspective of territorial marking, social identity theory suggests that positive initiative at work can be reflected in the love of the office environment and personalized decorations, etc. Employees with proactive personalities are more courageous to break through the status quo to open up new ideas, and show their creativity while bringing in more communication topics to form a collision of viewpoints to promote the generation of creativity. On the other hand, based on the perspective of territorial defending, the increase of territorial defending behaviors means preventing and protesting others from encroaching on one's own work territory, and reducing interactions and information sharing behaviors with others [3], which will inhibit the flow of innovative resources. In order to protect themselves and avoid risks, individuals will use inherent problem-solving methods, which in turn reduces innovation needs and behaviors. Social exchange theory suggests that reactionary defenses are retaliations against the other party's infringement of the territory, and that this negative reciprocity is prone to overreaction and dissatisfaction with colleagues and work, and that negative attitudes toward work are likely to result in emotional exhaustion, which is not conducive to the enhancement of individual creativity, and ultimately affects the realization of innovation performance.

In summary, territorial marking will positively affect employee innovation performance and territorial defending will negatively affect employee innovation performance.

## 4. Research Prospect

Studies on the relationship between territoriality and job performance basically cover different dimensions and levels of territoriality, such as territorial marking and territorial defending, internal territorial behavior and external territorial behavior, as well as different dimensions and levels of job performance, such as task performance, innovation performance and team performance. However, there are still some shortcomings and issues that need further research.

First, Brown et al. subdivided territorial marking into identity-oriented marking and control-oriented marking, as well as territorial defending into anticipatory defenses and reactionary defenses [3]. Employees with different territorial awareness have different attitudes towards the territorial behaviors of other colleagues in the organization. Therefore, in the future, the effects of the four different territorial behaviors on job performance can be explored differently to further observe whether there are more nuanced differences across the subdivided dimensions.

Second, the relationship between territoriality and performance exists not only at the individual level, but also at the group level and the organizational level, and there are differences in the mechanism of action between territoriality and job performance at different levels. Therefore, in the future, a cross-level study of territoriality and job performance can be conducted to include the individual level, the group level, and the organizational level, also to compare the similarities and differences of the different effects between the levels.

Finally, organizational territoriality has a double-edged effect, enhancing performance in some cases and undermining it in others. The personality traits of the parties involved, the work environment they are in, and the culture of hard constraints versus soft incentives may all have a

moderating influence on the causal model. Therefore, in the future, it is possible to explore the “black box” of territoriality’s impact on job performance, and identify the corresponding moderating variables, in order to more clearly outline the mechanism of territoriality’s impact of employee performance.

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