



Workplace ostracism and knowledge hiding in service organizations



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ABSTRACT

As a pervasive workplace phenomenon in service organizations, knowledge hiding can cause serious economic losses to companies. This study seeks to identify a new interpersonal antecedent of knowledge hiding, specifically workplace ostracism. We further focus on the moderating roles of negative reciprocity beliefs and moral disengagement in the relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge hiding in service organizations. Using a time-lagged research design, we collected data from 253 samples in 17 Chinese hotels. As predicted, we found that workplace ostracism was positively related to hospitality employees' evasive hiding and playing dumb, but not related to rationalized hiding. In addition, we supported a hypothesized three-way interaction involving workplace ostracism, negative reciprocity beliefs, and moral disengagement on evasive hiding and playing dumb, but not on rationalized hiding. In particular, workplace ostracism was most positively related to evasive hiding and playing dumb when both negative reciprocity beliefs and moral disengagement were high. However, workplace ostracism was not related to evasive hiding and playing dumb when service workers have low levels in either or both.

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1. Introduction

With the advent of the knowledge economy era, service companies can only survive and develop through constant service innovation. Service innovation not only helps service organizations to earn customer confidence but also provides an inexhaustible driving force for enterprise development. In this process, knowledge transfer is critically important (Riege, 2005). That is to say, the highly efficient knowledge sharing is one of the key steps to improve the service innovation performance of service organizations (Yang, 2007; Hu et al., 2009).

Despite the established need for knowledge sharing, Connelly et al. (2012) concluded that knowledge hiding is prevalent in many service organizations and impairs knowledge transfer (Connelly et al., 2012). Compared with the negative influence of knowledge hiding on organizations and employees, the antecedents of knowledge hiding have not been extensively examined. We speculate that a factor influencing knowledge hiding is workplace ostracism. Workplace ostracism is a pervasive organizational phenomenon that reduces employee engagement and the resulting performance

of a service organization (Leung et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2013). Smart Richman and Leary (2009) concluded that workplace ostracism impacts interpersonal interactions among members of an organization. When faced with workplace ostracism, an employee will be more inclined to withhold knowledge requested by others. However, the linkage between workplace ostracism and knowledge hiding has not been examined in the empirical research.

In addition to the direct relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge hiding, we further aim to explore the boundary effects underlying this linkage. The boundary effects will help us build a better understanding of the conditions under which knowledge hiding is more or less likely to occur. However, empirical studies investigating the boundary conditions are relatively limited. To fill this void, we seek to study the joint moderating effect of negative reciprocity beliefs and moral disengagement on the relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge hiding. There are two reasons. First, both negative reciprocity beliefs and moral disengagement may have their unique influences on the impact of workplace ostracism on knowledge hiding. Second, when faced with negative treatment (e.g., workplace ostracism), individuals' behavioral choices (ethical or unethical behaviors) may vary with different levels of negative reciprocity beliefs and moral disengagement. The above assertions are consistent with the conclusions of Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) and Samnani et al. (2014).

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These scholars concluded that the positive relationship between workplace aggression and employees' unethical behaviors can be strengthened by negative reciprocity beliefs and moral disengagement.

In addressing the above purposes, we make two contributions to the existing literature. First, we enrich the knowledge hiding literature (i.e., Connelly and Zweig, 2015; Connelly et al., 2012; Černe et al., 2014; Peng, 2013; etc.) by identifying workplace ostracism as an interpersonal antecedent of knowledge hiding. Second, we extend the boundary conditions under which ostracized employees respond to knowledge hiding by analyzing how individual differences moderate the effect of workplace ostracism on knowledge hiding. Moreover, our joint moderating model can extend the work of both Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) and Samnani et al. (2014). This extension is as a consequence of establishing the joint moderating impact of negative reciprocity beliefs and moral disengagement. Previous studies have studied their moderating roles in isolation. By studying them jointly, our model provides insight into the mechanisms that underpin the relationship between workplace ostracism and knowledge hiding in service organizations.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Workplace ostracism and knowledge hiding

As an increasingly hot topic among practitioners and scholars (Connelly and Zweig, 2015; Černe et al., 2014; Peng, 2013), knowledge hiding refers to “an intentional attempt by an individual to withhold or conceal knowledge that has been requested by another person” (Connelly et al., 2012; p. 65). Connelly et al. (2012) pointed out that it is important to distinguish between knowledge hiding and other workplace behaviors such as knowledge hoarding and counterproductive workplace behaviors (CWBs). In particular, although both knowledge hiding and knowledge hoarding capture the act of withholding knowledge, knowledge hiding can be distinguished from knowledge hoarding. Knowledge hiding reflects an intentional concealment of knowledge that must be requested by another person. However, in contrast to knowledge hiding, knowledge hoarding represents the act of accumulating knowledge that may not necessarily be requested by another (Hislop, 2003; Webster et al., 2008).

Knowledge hiding also appears similar to CWBs, because both of them can be seen as inconsistent with moral standards (Connelly et al., 2012). CWBs describe a set of volitional acts taken by workers that “harm or intend to harm organizations and their stakeholders (clients, co-workers, customers, and supervisors)” (Spector and Fox, 2005, pp. 151–152). However, knowledge hiding is not necessarily intended to harm another person. For example, some employees may perform knowledge hiding behaviors (such as rationalized hiding) to protect themselves or avoid harming someone's feelings (Connelly et al., 2012). In addition, CWBs may be directed toward individuals (such as verbally abusing someone at work) or the organization (such as stealing something belonging to the employer), whereas knowledge hiding only occurs among individuals (Connelly et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2013).

Knowledge hiding includes three dimensions: evasive hiding, playing dumb and rationalized hiding (Connelly et al., 2012). Evasive hiding involves deception. Connelly and Zweig (2015) described evasive hiding as “the hider provides incorrect information or a misleading promise of a complete answer in the future, even though there is no intention to actually provide this” (p. 480). Playing dumb also involves deception and has no intention to help. The knowledge hider achieves the purpose of knowledge hiding by pretending that he/she does not understand what the requester is talking about (Connelly and Zweig, 2015). However, rational-

ized hiding does not necessarily involve deception. The knowledge hider may provide an explanation for failing to provide requested knowledge “by either suggesting he/she is unable to provide the knowledge requested or blaming another party” (Connelly and Zweig, 2015; p. 480).

Connelly et al. (2012) concluded that those engaged in knowledge hiding may in some situational circumstances characterize themselves as having positive intentions. For example, they may justify their actions as an attempt to avoid hurting other people's feelings. Despite this, knowledge hiding exerts a negative influence on organizational performance and team effectiveness by damaging the organization cooperation, creativity development, and organizational policy implementation (Peng, 2013). Babcock (2004) found that annual losses attributable to knowledge hiding amounted to \$31.5 billion in Fortune 500 companies. As observed by Connelly et al. (2012) the negative impact of knowledge hiding on organizations has been established. However, we still know little about the interpersonal antecedents of knowledge hiding and factors that can be used to predict the likelihood of knowledge hiding.

The research topic of ostracism originates from the attention to interpersonal negative treatment and has become an increasingly research hotspot in organizational field (Ferris et al., 2008; Wu et al., 2012). Ferris et al. (2008) defined it as “the extent to which an individual perceives that he or she is ignored or excluded by others in workplace” (Ferris et al., 2008; p. 1348). As a form of emotional abuse, workplace ostracism can be described in three ways (Ferris et al., 2008; Wu et al., 2012). First, workplace ostracism is not perpetrated by only one group within an organization. An individual may be ostracized by supervisors, subordinates, colleagues or customers. Second, an individual's perception of whether being ostracized or not is subjective. Third, those individuals who perceive themselves as being ostracized may characterize interpersonal interactions as negative, painful, and unpleasant.

It is generally accepted that ostracism can hurt physical and psychological health, damage job satisfaction and organizational commitment, inhibit organizational citizenship behaviors, and decrease service performance (Ferris et al., 2008; Wu et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2011). Recently, researchers have started to focus their attention on the impact of workplace ostracism on employees' interpersonal behaviors (Kouchaki and Wareham, 2015). Ferris et al. (2008) concluded that workplace ostracism has a positive impact on employees' interpersonal deviance. Zhao et al. (2013) found that workplace ostracism was positively related to hospitality employees' interpersonal counterproductive behaviors.

In line with these findings, we predict that workplace ostracism may affect knowledge hiding (a specific interpersonal behavior in workplace; Connelly et al., 2012). The norms of reciprocity can support this deduction. According to Gouldner's (1960) norms of reciprocity, people should treat others in the same way or attitude. Specifically, people should not do harm to those who helped you (i.e., positive reciprocity beliefs), but for those who have hurt you, people can take retaliatory strategy (i.e., negative reciprocity beliefs). As workplace ostracism is an unfavorable interpersonal experience, an ostracized employee will perceive those who are ostracizing him/her as interpersonal harm. This perception will trigger negative reciprocity beliefs. And then, it is acceptable that the excluded employee engages in the same interpersonal mistreatment (such as ostracism, knowledge hiding, or interpersonal counterproductive behaviors) in turn.

Connelly et al. (2012) also suggested that the history of reciprocity among colleagues can affect the likelihood of an employee's knowledge hiding behaviors. Specifically when faced with a request for knowledge, the ostracized employees tend to be uncooperative, withholding knowledge via evasive hiding and playing dumb. However, this case will not be true for rationalized hiding. This is

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