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Hey That's Mine! The Nature of Territorial Behavior in Organizations

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HEY, THAT'S MINE! THE NATURE OF TERRITORIAL BEHAVIOR IN ORGANIZATIONS

Territorial behavior is both prevalent and important in organizational life. To date, however, we know very little about how organizational members express and protect their ownership over things in the workplace. This empirical study explores the nature of territorial organizational behavior by identifying common forms of territoriality and their relationships to one another. Specifically, we identify four general categories of territorial behavior: control oriented marking, identity oriented marking, anticipatory defenses and reactionary defenses.

People, and thus employees, are inherently territorial. We make claims on and defend control of a variety of organizational objects, spaces, roles, and relationships. Within the realm of environmental psychology, studies of human territoriality have suggested its potential significant effect on the behavior and well being of individuals. For example, research on the territoriality of physical space has been shown to engender a sense of belonging to social groups (Altman, 1975), and that territoriality can be beneficial in clarifying and simplifying social interactions (Altman & Haythorn, 1967; Rosenblatt & Budd, 1975). In the fields of history, anthropology and political science, the role of territoriality has been well established in geopolitics, cultural development, conflict and war (Sack, 1986).

Despite its prevalence and potential influence, there has been virtually no research to date on territoriality in work organizations. The few studies of territoriality in organizations have largely been carried out within the tradition of environmental psychology (e.g., Wollman, Kelly & Bordens, 1994), and consequently have not directly addressed the issues that most concern scholars of organizational behavior (Sundstrom & Altman, 1989). Within organizational research, significant attention only recently has begun to be paid to the nature and antecedents of psychological ownership in organizations (e.g. Pierce, Kostova & Dirks, 2001). We believe, however, that researchers need to further consider how organizational members express that psychological ownership: that is, how they communicate, maintain, defend and restore the territories to which they feel ownership.

One of the first steps in studying territoriality is to identify and understand the different ways that people are territorial. Thus, we seek to identify the range of potential territorial behaviors that employees witness or engage in while at work. Moreover, we seek to provide a theoretical framework that integrates these various behaviors into a meaningful whole. This

study, which will hopefully clarify the meaning and nature of territorial behavior in organizations, is a critical first step to a systematic examination of this important and prevalent phenomenon in organizations.

A Typology of Territorial Behavior

Territoriality has been defined as an individual's behavioral expression of his or her feelings of ownership toward a physical or social object (Brown, Lawrence, & Robinson, forthcoming). Territoriality includes behaviors whose purpose is to construct, communicate, maintain, and restore one's ownership over organizational objects to which one feels a proprietary attachment. Although the various ways by which employees can engage in territorial behavior is large, drawing on studies of animal and human territoriality, we believe there are two general categories of territorial behavior that fully captures the domain of territoriality: marking and defending. These can be separated further into two types of marking and two types of defending behavior. Each of these forms is discussed below.

Marking: Control and Identity Oriented. Control and identity oriented marking refer generally to the territorial behaviours of organizational members that construct and communicate to others their proprietary attachment to particular organizational objects. Control-oriented marking involves marking an organizational object with symbols that communicate the boundaries of a territory and who has psychological ownership over it (Altman, 1975; Becker & Mayo, 1971; Smith, 1983). It serves to communicate to others that someone has claimed a territory so that others are discouraged from accessing or using it. An example of a control-oriented marker might include a jacket placed on a chair.

Identity-oriented marking, or personalization, is the deliberate decoration or modification of an object by its owners to reflect the owner's identity (Sommer, 1974). Identity oriented marking serves the function of enabling individuals to both construct, and express, their identities to themselves and to others through the ownership of objects at work. An example of an identity-oriented marker might include a photo of a family member on a desk or a degree hung on a wall.

Defending: Anticipatory and Reactionary**.** Although marking demarcates territorial boundaries and indicates the relationship between a territory and an individual, the socially defined nature of these boundaries and attachments means they will sometimes be under conflict or subject to differing interpretations (Brown & Altman, 1981; Wollman et al., 1994). Because of fear of infringement, or actual infringement, and because of the value that territories have for individuals, individuals also engage in defending their territories. Anticipatory defences are actions by organizational members that are non-communicative in nature, which are taken prior to an infringement, for the purposes of thwarting infringement actions that are taken by others (Dyson-Hudson & Smith, 1978; Edney, 1975). An example of an anticipatory defence might include a lock on a door or a password preventing access to some computer files. Thus, anticipatory defences function to prevent infringement attempts from being successful.

Despite organizational members attempts to mark their territories and establish anticipatory defences, infringements still occur. This leads to the fourth type of territorial

behaviour: reactionary defences. Reactionary defences are actions by organizational members that are taken after, and in reaction to, an infringement attempt (Brown, 1987; Wollman et al., 1994). They function to provide an emotional expression of one's feelings toward the infringement, undermine the infringement, and restore the territory to the actor. An example of a reactionary defence might include yelling at the infringer or sending an email to the person warning against future infringements.

We theorize that any given territorial behaviour will fall into one of these four categories of territoriality. Moreover, together these four related but distinct theoretical categories can capture the entire domain of territorial behaviour in the workplace.

Method

To empirically examine our theoretical framework of territoriality in organizations, we conducted a multi-phase study involving open-ended surveys and cluster analysis. In the first phase of this study, we generated a large pool of territorial behaviours described via open-ended survey by those who have engaged in territorial behaviour in the workplace. We then winnowed this large subset of behaviour into a list of mutually exclusive, largely exhaustive behaviours. In the second phase, we used another sample representing observers of territorial behaviour to identify the extent to which each behaviour communicated ownership (a core underlying component of territorial behaviour) and to what extent each behaviour was related to every other behaviour in the list. In essence, we were able to use this data for a cluster analysis. Clustering represents an efficient classification system by identifying similar groups of items by estimating their degree of similarity (Sokal & Sneath, 1963). The purpose of cluster analysis is to identify homogenous groups so that the degree of association is high between items of the same group and low between items of different groups. This method of clustering is ideal for our purposes in that it can help to validate our proposed theoretical framework of territorial behaviours in organizations.

Phase 1: Generation of Behavioural Exemplars

Sample. We recruited 106 respondents, 54 men and 52 women, from two sources. First, data was gathered from respondents in two MBA classes (n=24) and three undergraduate classes (n=65) at a large public Canadian university. Second, data was gathered from 17 full-time employees. The average age of the sample was 29 and the mean years of work experience was 6.7 years.

Procedure. Respondents were asked to provide examples of territorial behavior that they had engaged in or witnessed while at work. We asked them specifically to provide us with examples of how they communicated that a particular space was theirs and then how they defended this claim. From this procedure, an initial pool of 952 territorial behaviors was generated. Among this set of 952 items, however, there was considerable redundancy. After eliminating redundant items, we also rewrote some items to capture very detailed and yet very similar exemplars. For example, detailed behavioral exemplars such as "displaying a photo of a friend", "displaying a photo of a family member," and "displaying a photo of sailing", were

grouped into a single exemplar that read "bring in personally meaningful photographs (i.e., friends, family, pets, activities)". We then asked five "judges" (management professors and graduate students) to eliminate items that were not clear in meaning and which were not clearly behaviors. Following this procedure, 34 distinct behavioral exemplars of territorial behavior were identified.

Phase 2: Cluster Analysis

Sample. There were 157 respondents, 72 women and 85 men, all were undergraduate students at a large public Canadian university. All of the respondents participated in the cluster analysis. A subset of these participants (n = 30) also completed a survey asking them to identify the extent to which each behaviour communicated ownership.

Procedure. Respondents were given the list of 34 territorial behaviours and asked to indicate the degree of similarity/ dissimilarity between a focal territorial behaviour (each respondent was randomly assigned one of the 34 territorial behaviours as a focal behaviour) and the remaining 33 territorial behaviours. The respondents used a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = very similar, 7 = very different). After this task, respondents were asked to indicate the criteria they used to distinguish between the target behaviour and the other territorial behaviours.

Clusters were formed by hierarchical agglomeration using Ward's method. Ward's method uses an analysis of variance approach to evaluate the distances between clusters and is regarded as one of the best hierarchical clustering techniques (Wishart, 1987). It attempts to minimize the sum of squares within, and maximize the sum of squares between, to produce tight minimum variance clusters. As we proposed, there are likely four different general categories of territorial behaviours. Because of our *a priori* theory regarding the nature of the clusters, space-contracting methods, like Ward's method, are the most appropriate (Everitt, 1980). Moreover, Ward's method, in Monte Carlo simulations, has provided superior data recovery of known cluster structures (Aldenerfer & Blansfield, 1984).

Results

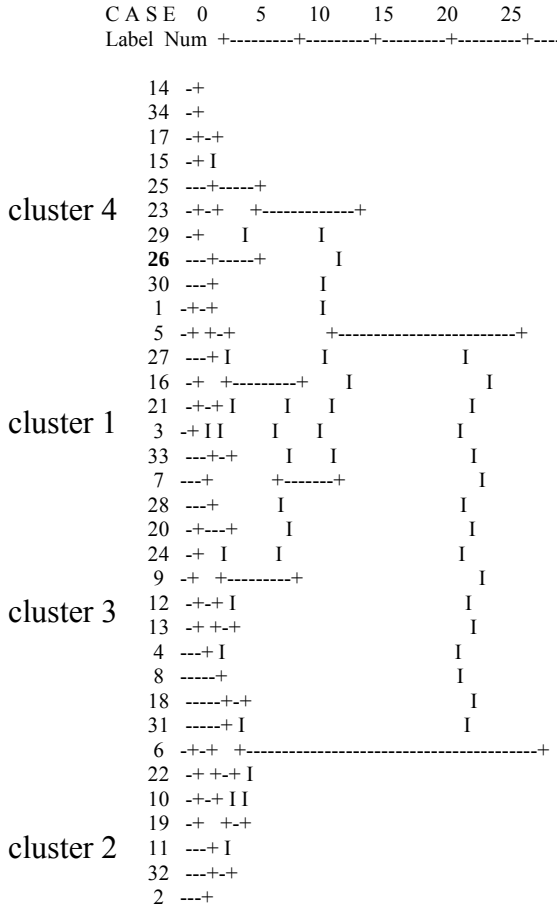
Ward's method is also useful because it provides an indication of the appropriate number of clusters. A large increase in the Euclidean sum of squares indicates that dissimilar clusters are being combined. Using this indicator, we terminated the clustering at four clusters. This can seen visually in Figure 1. The emergence of four cluster fits well with our theoretical model. Each of the clusters is now described below (see Table 1 for a list of items in each cluster).

Cluster 1. We labeled this cluster as "control-oriented marking." People commented that items in this cluster showed a high concern for establishing and protecting one's claim. It primarily consisted of actions that serve to communicate to others that a territory is claimed and thus no one should attempt to infringe upon it. Thus, for example, it contained behaviors such as "clearly state boundaries of the work space" and "use signs to communicate that the space has been claimed." It should also be noted that there was overt activism around this cluster such that

individuals were either visually or vocally open about what was theirs and how it should not be used or claimed by others.

Figure 1

Dendrogram using Ward Method (Rescaled Distance Cluster Combine)



Cluster 2. This cluster represents behaviors mostly reflecting personalization or "identity-oriented marking". The behaviors contained within this cluster reflected marking the space as "one's own" either with personal artifacts or giving it a homey or lived in feel. Example behaviors within this cluster include: "Bring in personally meaningful photographs", "create a lived in feeling" and "leave belongings in work space". This cluster is the most distinct from the others and did not join the others until much higher in our clustering tree (see Figure 1). This is not surprising because identity oriented marking, although serving the purpose of protecting and

defending one's territory like the other behaviors, also serves an additional function of allowing one to express one's identity, independent of its protective value.

Cluster 3. This cluster is the least well defined in terms of identifiable features. It contains primarily reactionary defense behaviors but also some control-oriented marking behaviors. Generally, the behaviors reflect attempts to avoid infringement or reclaim territory when infringement attempts are made. These behaviors reflect more passive behaviors in terms of both reactions to an infringement or strategies claiming a territory. Example behaviors include "spend time devising strategy on how to get the work space back", "formalize (form rules about) the assigning of workspace", and "involve coworkers to settle disputes regarding claims over the work space."

Cluster 4. This cluster represents behaviors that are primarily "anticipatory defense" actions. They reflect non-communication actions that seek not to avoid infringement attempts but rather to thwart success of infringement attempts. Example behaviors include "use locks and passwords", "display hostility towards people who enter their work space" and "avoid working with or interacting with people who use their territory". It also seems to capture the extreme territorial behaviors – those that are most likely to cause problems in the organization for the individual and others who interact with that individual. Respondents used terms such as hostile, possessiveness, and dominating to differentiate between behaviors in this cluster and other territorial behaviors. Initially one of the items, "write name all over space", did not seem to fit and we would have thought it better included in the claiming cluster. However, upon inspection of the criteria people used to cluster items, they saw this as an aggressive move to either sabotage the space or defiantly state one's claim. One respondent claimed that this was a type of graffiti – a strong "gang-type" marking. Other items similarly contained elements of aggressiveness and potentially negative consequences for the organization.

Additional Analyses

One of the few ways to confirm the utility of clusters is to compare them to other relevant criteria (Aldenerfer & Blansfield, 1984). Often this is difficult, if not impossible, as clustering is usually exploratory. However, in the current sample, we did collect data on the degree to which each item communicated ownership (Table 2). Thus, we can compare the clusters to see if they communicate different levels of ownership. To run these analyses, we used paired sample t-tests (Table 3) comparing each cluster to the others. There were significant differences between cluster 1 and clusters 2, 3, and 4. However, there were no significant differences between the other clusters.

In general, all the clusters communicate ownership. The mean across all clusters was 5.11 out of a possible 7. However, cluster 1 communicated the most ownership. This is not surprising given that this cluster, reflecting control-oriented marking, is defined in terms of communicating territorial claims so as to avoid infringement attempts. It is the type of territoriality that is directly about communicating ownership to others.

We also ran a reliability test of the agreement of ownership communicated within each cluster (Table 2). This is a useful confirmation of the degree to which each cluster is a tight, good fitting cluster. The reliabilities are acceptable for clusters 1, 2 and 4 but cluster 3 is considerably lower with a coefficient alpha of only .56. This is not surprising given the lower distinctiveness and identity of behaviors in this cluster.

Table 2
Descriptives of Ownership Concept for Each Cluster

	Reliability	Mean Ownership Score w/ (sd)
Cluster 1	.75	5.58 (.86)
Cluster 2	.79	4.89 (.97)
Cluster 3	.56	4.93 (.80)
Cluster 4	.84	5.06 (1.02)

Table 3
Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences Mean	t	df	p
Pair 1	CLUSTER1 - CLUSTER2	.69	3.59	29	.01
Pair 2	CLUSTER1 - CLUSTER3	.64	4.86	29	.00
Pair 3	CLUSTER1 - CLUSTER4	.52	3.78	29	.01
Pair 4	CLUSTER2 - CLUSTER3	-.04	-.26	29	.80
Pair 5	CLUSTER2 - CLUSTER4	-.17	-.75	29	.46
Pair 6	CLUSTER3 - CLUSTER4	-.13	-.80	29	.43

Discussion

This descriptive study explores the range of tactics that employees use to mark and defend their ownership over space. There appears to be four clusters representing a range of territorial behaviors. These clusters are distinct and represent different types of marking and defending behaviors. As expected, the items reflecting four clusters converged quickly. This is not surprising, given that they share a common antecedent: ownership. Also, as can be expected, the identity-oriented marking cluster was the most distinct in that it joined the other clusters at much greater distance. Although this cluster is the most distinct in terms of clustering with the other clusters (Figure 1), it does not communicate significantly more or less ownership. In fact,

the average score was similar to clusters 3 and 4 (Table 2). This is interesting because it shows that different types of territorial behavior relate to ownership but may appear quite different and manifest themselves differently in organizations.

In general, the clustering of the items fits with our theoretical model. Cluster 1 was largely about communicating boundaries. Not surprisingly then, this was also the cluster that communicated the highest level of ownership. Cluster 2, identity-oriented marking, reflected items of personalizing spaces and communicating one's identity. Anticipatory defenses, cluster 4, were also largely as we expected. We had theorized that these behaviors were largely non-communicative with the intent of discouraging infringement. However, we also found out that people discourage infringement in other ways, some of which are primarily communicative. Certain behaviors like "display warnings to others about the consequences of infringement", although still largely with the goal of discouraging infringement, were done by threatening consequences. We still feel these are anticipatory defenses because they are about trying to stop the infringement. Although the results generally support our theoretical model, cluster 3 showed some crossover and is cause to reflect. Why did aspects of both marking and defending cluster together? From the items and people's responses, it seemed that this was more strategic and calculative. Future research is needed to understand why these items cluster together. It may be the case that people use certain behaviors or clusters of behaviors dependent on their positions in the organization or perhaps personality traits. For example, those in more powerful positions, or who are more confident about the territory may use items from cluster 4 more than cluster 3. Those who are in less powerful positions or are less confident may resort to using items from cluster 3 rather than cluster 4. These are only a few of the interesting questions that need to be considered, and which can currently be studied now that we have a description of the range of behaviors that people use to mark and defend territories.

These findings also indicate that both actors (those who engage in territorial behavior) as well as the observers of territorial behavior tend to view territorial behaviors in clusters, very similar to our proposed framework. This is significant because it suggests that the behaviors we use to communicate ownership and our intentions towards a territory are largely understood by those who view them. Thus a common social language of claiming behavior exists. However, the implications of exhibiting territorial behaviors may differ. For example, locks and passwords may have little intent other than territory protection on the part of the owner but may lead others to view the person as paranoid or uncooperative. Moreover, agreement regarding communication of ownership does not necessitate agreement over appropriateness of the behavior. For example, a person may feel justified in reacting to the infringer because they feel their claims are well established. The infringer (or observers) may also agree that the person communicated ownership but disagree as to the appropriateness of the (re)action.

Although this study provides researchers who wish to study territoriality with a set of behaviors to study the different impact of territoriality, this is only a beginning. Necessary next steps include establishing the validity of territorial behavior. This might include comparing it to power and political behavior, dominance personality, ownership, among others. Moreover, there are several limitations to this study, most of which can be addressed by future research. First of all, we have a range of items and clusters, but we do not yet know how these relate to one another

or to important outcomes. Although we tested the extent to which ownership is communicated, we need to further understand how effective these behaviors are in maintaining and restoring territories. Also, as we noted at the beginning, people can be territorial to a wide range of objects. It is important to recognize that workspaces are only a subset of the possible territories to which people claim. Future studies will want to consider how people mark and defend other territories.

In sum, this study is only a beginning. We hope, however, that it allows further insight and understanding into an important aspect of organizational life. Whether it be workspaces or roles or ideas, people develop attachments and proprietary claims over objects in the organization and, as evidenced in this study, take various measures, some reactive and drastic, others more calculative, to construct, communicate, maintain, and restore these relationships. This, undeniably, is an important aspect of organizational behavior.

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Table 1
Items Loading on Each Cluster

TARGET ITEM	Cluster #	Match to Figure 1
create a border around the work space	**1**	**1**
clearly state boundaries of the work space	**1**	**3**
put up physical barriers around the work space	**1**	**5**
continually physically occupy the work space	**1**	**7**
be the first person to claim the work space	**1**	**16**
complain to supervisor if another person tries to claim the work space	**1**	**21**
verbally challenge others rights to use the work space	**1**	**27**
use signs to communicate that the space has been claimed	**1**	**28**
have authorities in the organization identify the work space as theirs	**1**	**33**
arrange items (in the work space) in an individualized way	**2**	**2**
bring in personally meaningful photographs (e.g., friends, family, activities,...)	**2**	**6**
bring in your own work related items that are not the organizations (books, mugs, etc.)	**2**	**10**
delay sharing the work space until their claim is well established	**2**	**11**
lay things out in an orderly way	**2**	**18**
post personal achievements (qualifications, awards, etc.) in the work space	**2**	**19**
create a lived in feeling	**2**	**22**
leave belongings in work space	**2**	**31**
display quotes, expressions, motivational phrases in the work space	**2**	**32**
rationally explain to the person that the work space was already claimed	**3**	**4**
spend time devising strategy on how to get the work space back	**3**	**8**
put stuff in (around) the work space right away	**3**	**9**
try to regain the work space if lost	**3**	**12**
spread items out in the work space so that it looks like a work in progress	**3**	**13**
formalize (form rules about) the assigning of the work space	**3**	**20**
involve coworkers to settle disputes regarding claims over the work space	**3**	**24**
display hostility towards people who enter their work space	**4**	**14**
display warnings to others about the consequences of infringement	**4**	**15**
avoid working with or interacting with people who use their territory	**4**	**17**
make the work space unattractive	**4**	**23**
write their name all over work space	**4**	**25**
make it hard to find things in the work space	**4**	**26**
use locks and passwords	**4**	**29**
use facial expressions to express feelings of disagreement or dislike to infringers	**4**	**30**
retaliate against people who infringe their work space	**4**	**34**

Note. Item #26 “make it hard to find things in the work space” was dropped from the four-factor solution because it did not attach itself to cluster four until much later. There was significant distance between it and the other members before inclusion.