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Perceptions of organizational politics, knowledge hiding, and employee creativity: The moderating role of professional commitment

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the relationships between perceived organizational politics, knowledge hiding, and employee creativity. In addition, we aim to examine the moderating role of professional commitment in the relationship between perceived organizational politics and knowledge hiding. The sample of the study comprised 316 faculty members and matched supervisors from three large public sector universities in Islamabad, Pakistan. Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire and hypotheses were tested with linear regressions. We found that perceived organizational politics positively predicts knowledge hiding that, in turn, negatively predicts employee creativity. Further, professional commitment attenuated the positive relationship between perceived organizational politics and knowledge hiding. We contribute to the literature by demonstrating that perceived organizational politics exerts its negative effects on employee creativity directly as well as indirectly through its impact on knowledge hiding behaviors. A number of practical implications are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Research has demonstrated that employee creativity – the generation of novel and useful ideas (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996) – is a key determinant of organizational innovation and success (Zhou & Hoever, 2014). Given the importance of employee creativity in predicting positive work outcomes, numerous researchers have examined its antecedents, such as empowering leadership (Zhang & Zhou, 2014), employee learning orientation (Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009), transformational leadership (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009), high-performance work system (Tang, Yu, Cooke, & Chen, 2017), intrinsic motivation (Dewett, 2007), and job dissatisfaction (Zhou & George, 2001). However, limited studies have examined the influence of work environment impediments such as organizational politics on employee creativity (e.g., Aryee, Zhou, Sun, & Lo, 2009), particularly the mediating and moderating mechanisms underlying this relationship.

Consistent with assertions by early theorists (e.g., Gandz & Murray, 1980), Ferris and Kacmar (1992) argue that it is not actual politics that matters most to organizational outcomes rather, it is the subjective perception of organizational politics, whether actual or not, that influences an individuals' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions. This is in line with Lewin's (1936) view that people respond on the basis of their perceptions of reality, not reality per se. Hence, we follow a

definition by Ferris, Harrell-Cook, and Dulebohn (2000, p. 90) to be more appropriate to the current study: the perception of organizational politics (POP) “involves an individual's attribution to behaviors of self-serving intent, and is defined as an individual's subjective evaluation about the extent to which the work environment is characterized by coworkers and supervisors who demonstrate such self-serving behavior.” In the present study, we aim to investigate the relationship between POP and employee creativity through knowledge hiding and the moderating role of professional commitment in the association between POP and knowledge hiding.

1.1. POP and knowledge hiding

Research has demonstrated that people who perceive politics at work experience negative outcomes; for instance, lower levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Vigoda, 2000), decreased job performance (Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009), and turnover intentions (Miller, Rutherford, & Kolodinsky, 2008). The link between perceived organizational politics and its outcomes can be explained by utilizing the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The JD-R model proposes that employee well-being is influenced by two specific characteristics of the work environment i.e., job demands and job resources (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001).

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In this study, we focus on the former, as we are positioning perceived organizational politics as a job demand. Job demands “refer to those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort or skills and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 312). Examples include high work pressure, poor physical environment, and perceptions of politics in one's workplace (Bedi & Schat, 2013).

In their meta-analysis, Bedi and Schat (2013) found a positive relationship between POP and counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., arriving late, taking extended breaks, etc.) suggesting that those who experience politics may respond by engaging in such types of withdrawal. However, relatively little is known about the relationship between POP and what has been termed as “counterproductive knowledge behavior” by Serenko and Bontis (2016). Particularly, knowledge hiding, defined as an “intentional attempt by an individual to withhold or conceal knowledge that has been requested by another person” (Connelly, Zweig, Webster, & Trougakos, 2012, p. 65). We propose that in a highly political organization, employees are likely to engage in knowledge hiding behaviors for three reasons. First, employees may hide knowledge in order to protect their self-interest in a politicized environment (Cui, Park, & Paik, 2016). In an uncertain work environment, employees try to protect themselves from being taken advantage of by others whom they personally do not trust. Second, since knowledge is considered to be a source of power in the knowledge economy, employees hide knowledge to gain political advantage (Webster et al., 2008). Third, employees may hide knowledge as a defensive behavior. Research has demonstrated that employees may become defensive in a political environment (Ashforth & Lee, 1990). Employees might be worried that the knowledge that they share with good intentions may cause unexpected problems in a political scenario (Cui et al., 2016). We therefore hypothesize the below:

Hypothesis 1. POP positively predicts knowledge hiding.

1.2. Knowledge hiding and employee creativity

As discussed above, an individual may become defensive in a politically charged work environment and engage in knowledge hiding. While doing so, an individual may feel safer because coworkers will not be able to discover and exploit his or her weaknesses, as they could if all information were disclosed (Černe, Nerstad, Dysvik, & Škerlavaj, 2014). In turn, defensive behaviors are known to decrease creativity (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008). Individuals who adopt a defensive stance are more focused on safety (Lanaj, Chang, & Johnson, 2012); as creativity is risky and potentially has negative outcomes, they would avoid being creative (Černe et al., 2014). Supporting these arguments, Bogilović, Černe, and Škerlavaj (2017) in a recent study showed that knowledge hiding is directly and negatively related to individual creativity. It is thus reasonable to assume that an individual who exhibits higher levels of knowledge hiding will have lower creativity. We thus propose:

Hypothesis 2. Knowledge hiding negatively predicts employee creativity.

1.3. POP and employee creativity

A politically charged work environment is typified by uncertainty and ambiguity where favoritism and self-serving behaviors are prevalent (Kacmar & Ferris, 1991). Work environments characterized by such norms require employees to be vigilant about the behaviors of others to protect their reputations and status in the organization. This vigilance taxes employees' affective, cognitive, and physical resources, which manifests in negative attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Bedi & Schat, 2013). Consistent with this line of reasoning, Aryee et al. (2009) found that POP was negatively related with creative

performance. We thus derive:

Hypothesis 3. POP negatively predicts employee creativity.

1.4. Moderating role of professional commitment

Professional commitment is defined as “psychological attachment to and identification with one's profession” (Chang & Choi, 2007, p. 301). Individuals with high levels of professional commitment are characterized as having a strong belief in and acceptance of profession's goals, a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the profession, and a strong desire to maintain membership in the profession (Chang & Choi, 2007). Professionally committed individuals also have a strong aspiration to expand their skills or knowledge (London, 1983). Such individuals may never hide knowledge if they consider it their professional duty to respond to all requests, even in a politically charged work environment characterized by distrust (Connelly et al., 2012). It is thus quite reasonable to expect that POP will have a weaker positive impact on knowledge hiding among individuals with high levels of professional commitment than those with low levels of professional commitment. We thus propose:

Hypothesis 4. Professional commitment moderates the positive relationship between POP and knowledge hiding.

1.5. The present study

Fig. 1 depicts the research model of this study. The model posits that POP positively predicts knowledge hiding that, in turn, negatively predicts employee creativity. Further, the relationship between POP and knowledge hiding is moderated by professional commitment. Data were collected from faculty members of public sector universities in Islamabad, Pakistan. There are many political problems in Pakistani universities as quite a few are working with incomplete acts/ordinances, and as a result policies and procedures are not enforced appropriately (Chaudhry, 2018). Institutions of higher education are required to contribute significantly towards knowledge creation and generation of creative ideas necessary for the development of the knowledge-based economy. Unfortunately, in terms of creativity Pakistan is ranked 111 out of 139 countries in the Global Creativity Index 2015 (Florida, Mellander, & King, 2015). Thus, the university setting in Pakistan provided an appropriate context in which to examine the relationships among study variables.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were full-time faculty members working in three large public sector universities located in Islamabad, and their respective supervisors. The participants came from a variety of academic departments. They held positions such as assistant professors, associate professors, and professors. In terms of demographics, 61.08% of the participants were male. The average age of respondents was 39 years, and the average organizational tenure was 8 years. The respondents were well educated, with majority (71.89%) holding a PhD degree.

2.2. Procedure

We collected two waves of data to reduce the potential common method bias (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). In the first wave, we administered 1000 questionnaires to faculty members, and asked them to report their own demographics (e.g., age, gender, educational background, and job tenure), their perceptions of organizational politics, knowledge hiding behaviors, and level of professional commitment. The 413 usable survey responses received constituted a

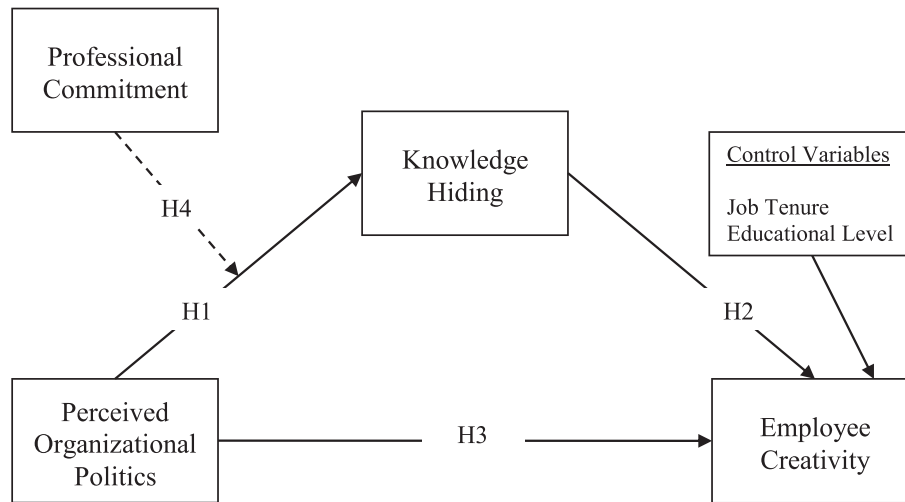


Fig. 1. Research model. Professional commitment as a moderator.

41.3% response rate. About four weeks later, in the second wave, questionnaires were distributed to 77 supervisors who were the department heads of the faculty members that have answered the questionnaires in the first wave of data collection, asking them to rate their subordinates' creativity. We received useful responses from 59 direct supervisors, for a 76.62% response rate. Finally, we were able to match 316 usable responses from both direct supervisors and subordinates.

2.3. Measures

POP was measured with 12-item Perception of Organizational Politics Scale (POPS) developed by Kacmar and Ferris (1991). A sample item is "Favoritism not merit gets people ahead." Scale anchors ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly agree). Knowledge hiding was assessed with three items adapted from the study of Serenko and Bontis (2016). A sample item is "I often leave out pertinent information or facts when communicating with my fellow colleagues." Scale anchors ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Employee creativity was measured using a 13-item scale developed by Zhou and George (2001) and was completed by supervisors. Some of the items from the original scale were modified for an academic context. A sample item is "This employee often has new and innovative ideas for curriculum development." Scale anchors ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly agree). Professional commitment was assessed with five items adapted from the study of Chang and Choi (2007). A sample item is "I am proudly talking to others about this profession." Scale anchors ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly agree). Employees' educational level and job tenure were the control variables of this study since they are related to creativity (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009).

3. Results

3.1. Common method bias

The unmeasured latent methods factor test (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012) was performed to examine the impact of common method bias. We included a common method variance factor that included all principal constructs' indicators and calculated the degree to which each indicator's variance was explained by its principal construct (i.e., substantive variance) and by the common method variance factor. The results showed that all method factor loadings were insignificant and that the indicators' substantive variances were substantially greater than their method variances. Specifically, the average substantially explained variance of the indicators was 0.83, while the average method-based variance was 0.02. The ratio of substantive variance to method variance was about 42: 1. Thus, common method bias was not a significant problem with regard to our data.

3.2. Measurement model

Prior to hypothesis testing, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in Amos 20 using a maximum likelihood estimator, clearly showing the emergence of four separate factors. The CFA model fitted the data well: χ^2 (489) = 669.93, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.03; CFI = 0.97; and SRMR = 0.02. All the alpha coefficients, composite reliability estimates, and average variance extracted values were above their cut-off values of 0.7, 0.7, and 0.5, respectively (Hair Jr., Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2016). To assess convergent validity, factor loadings of scale items on their respective constructs were examined. All item loadings were above the threshold value of 0.7 (Hair Jr, Babin, & Krey, 2017). As depicted in Table 1, discriminant validity was established as the square root of average variance extracted value for each scale was

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among constructs.

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Job tenure (years)	8.04	3.29	–					
2. Educational category ^a	0.71	0.46	0.13	–				
3. Perceived organizational politics	4.05	1.15	–0.01	–0.01	0.92			
4. Knowledge hiding	3.89	1.25	–0.05	–0.02	0.56	0.93		
5. Employee creativity	2.19	1.18	0.05	0.02	–0.68	–0.63	0.89	
6. Professional commitment	3.42	1.43	0.04	–0.15	–0.30	–0.17	0.21	0.90

Note. Square root of the average variance extracted value on the diagonal (in bold).

^a Educational category: Non-PhD = 0; PhD = 1.

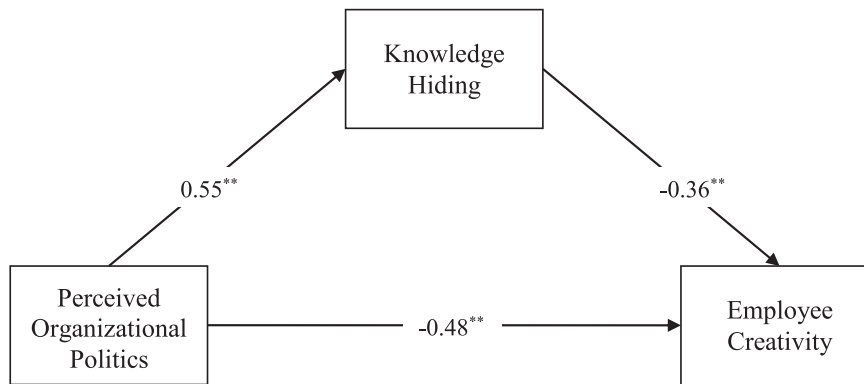


Fig. 2. Simple mediation model with standardized path coefficients. ** $p < 0.01$.

higher than the construct's respective correlation with all other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Together, the above results provided evidence for convergent and discriminant validity.

3.3. Hypothesis testing

Hypotheses 1–3 were tested using the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013) for SPSS with 5000 bootstrap samples under Model 4 specification (i.e., simple mediation model). Before conducting the analyses, all manifest indicators were standardized and unit-weighted to obtain observed composite scores for each of the constructs. All proposed relationships among constructs were significant at the alpha level of 0.01. As shown in Fig. 2, POP had a significant positive impact on knowledge hiding ($\beta = 0.55$; $t = 11.76$; $p < 0.01$, supporting Hypothesis 1). Knowledge hiding significantly influenced employee creativity in a negative way ($\beta = -0.36$; $t = -7.96$; $p < 0.01$, supporting Hypothesis 2). Similarly, POP had a significant negative effect on employee creativity ($\beta = -0.48$; $t = -10.44$; $p < 0.01$, supporting Hypothesis 3). The results further indicated that knowledge hiding mediates the relationship between POP and employee creativity with a point estimate of -0.20 and a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of -0.29 to -0.13 . The analysis of control variables indicated that job tenure and educational level had no significant impact on employee creativity.

To test Hypothesis 4, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis under Model 7 specification of PROCESS. As shown in Fig. 3, the interaction between POP and professional commitment was negatively

related to knowledge hiding ($\beta = -0.11$; $t = -2.11$; $p < 0.05$). The interaction term achieved an f^2 value of 0.03. Values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 indicate that the interaction term has a small, medium or large effect on the criterion variable (Cohen, 1992). In order to determine the nature of the moderating effect, we computed slopes 1SD above and below the mean of professional commitment to plot the interaction. Fig. 4 shows this interaction pattern. Consistent with Hypothesis 4, POP had a weaker (stronger) positive relationship with knowledge hiding when the degree of professional commitment was high (low). PROCESS also estimated the conditional indirect effects of POP on employee creativity via knowledge hiding at various values of the moderator variable (i.e., professional commitment) as well as the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (see Table 2).

4. Discussion

Our main aim in this study was to investigate the associations between POP, knowledge hiding, and employee creativity as well as to examine the moderating role of professional commitment in the POP-knowledge hiding relationship. We demonstrated that POP positively predicts knowledge hiding that, in turn, negatively predicts employee creativity. The findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that in a politically charged work environment employees are likely to engage in knowledge hiding as they fear that the knowledge that they may share with good intentions may cause unexpected problems (Cui et al., 2016). By hiding knowledge, employees may also tend to believe that their coworkers will not be able to discover and exploit their

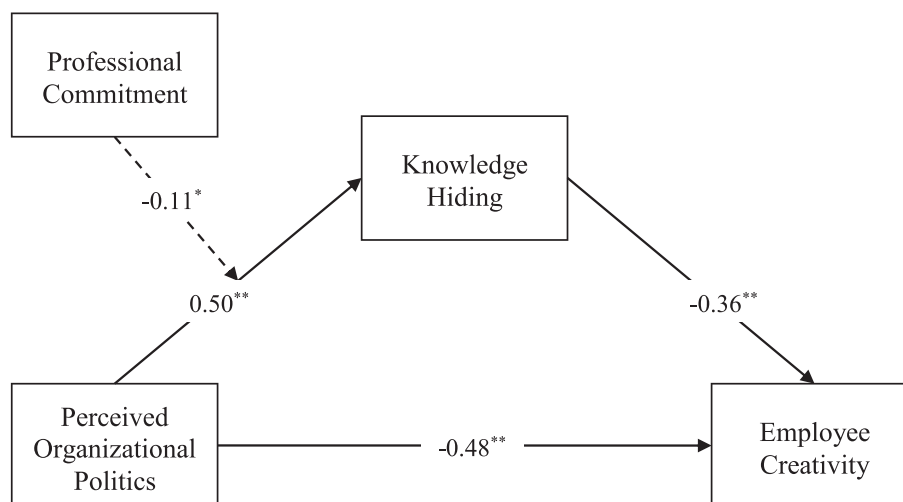


Fig. 3. Moderated mediation model with standardized path coefficients. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

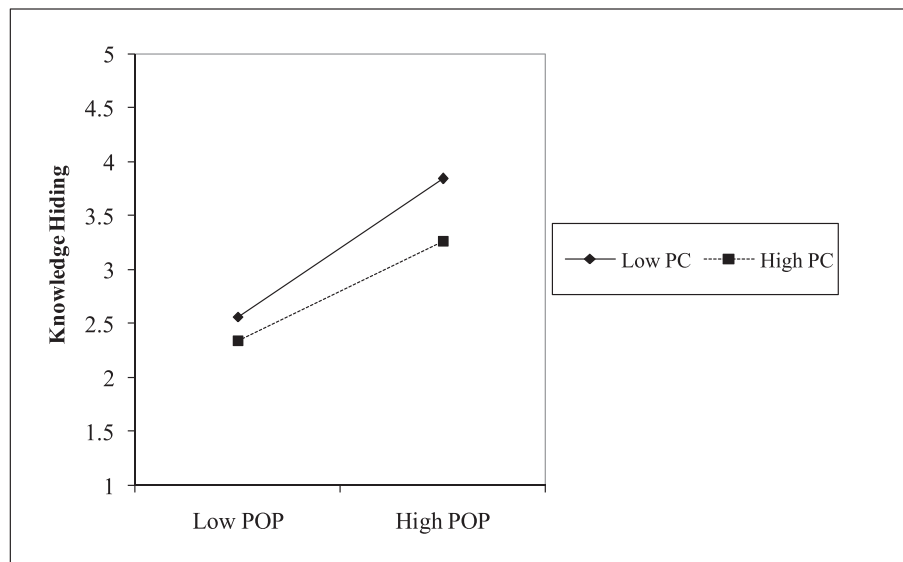


Fig. 4. The moderating effect of professional commitment on POP and knowledge hiding.

Table 2

Indirect effects of POP on employee creativity via knowledge hiding at low, mean, and high levels of professional commitment.

	Indirect effect	Boot SE	95% bias-corrected confidence interval	
			Lower	Upper
Low professional commitment	-0.22	0.05	-0.33	-0.14
Mean professional commitment	-0.18	0.04	-0.26	-0.12
High professional commitment	-0.14	0.05	-0.24	-0.07

weaknesses. In turn, this defensive behavior may result in inhibiting the knowledge hider's creativity. In a political work environment the knowledge hider prefers playing safe by undertaking actions that have a high probability of success and avoid being creative due to its risky nature. Further, we demonstrated that professional commitment moderates the positive relationship between POP and knowledge hiding. Individuals with high levels of professional commitment are characterized as having a willingness to exert energy and be persistent in pursuing personal career goals (Goulet & Singh, 2002). Consequently, individuals high in professional commitment are less likely to engage in knowledge hiding behaviors even while working in a politically charged environment.

The study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it enriches existing literature on employee creativity by demonstrating that POP – representing an important organizational impediment – has a direct negative effect on employee creativity. This study thus responds to Amabile et al. (1996) lamentation of the neglect to investigate creativity inhibiting relative to creativity enhancing characteristics of the work environment. Second, we demonstrated the mediating role of knowledge hiding in the POP-employee creativity relationship. To our knowledge, limited studies have explored mediating mechanisms linking POP and employee creativity (e.g., Aryee et al., 2009). To fill this important gap in the literature, we proposed and tested that knowledge hiding is responsible for transmitting the negative impact of POP on employee creativity. We contributed to the literature by showing that POP can lead individuals to engage in knowledge hiding – a type of counterproductive knowledge behavior – that, in turn, may inhibit the knowledge hider's creativity. Third, to gain in-depth insights

into the relationship between POP and knowledge hiding, we explored the moderating role of professional commitment representing an individual difference construct. We found that the interaction between POP and professional commitment negatively influences knowledge hiding. This finding adds to the literature on professional commitment by demonstrating that in a politically charged work environment individuals with high levels of professional commitment are less engaged in knowledge hiding behaviors than individuals with low levels of professional commitment as the former have a more positive attitude towards their profession. The finding demonstrates the need for the joint consideration of situation and person as well as their interplay in advancing research on employee creativity.

The results of this study have several practical implications. First, the detrimental impact of POP on employee creativity directly and indirectly through knowledge hiding calls for special attention. Given that POP stems from lack of fairness that undermines the effort-reward expectancy, strategies that organizations can use to minimize POP include instituting clear rules and guidelines on ensuring fairness in the resource allocation process, enhancing employees' perceptions of fairness of performance appraisal procedures, ensuring that important organizational rewards (e.g., promotions) are tightly linked with performance, and encouraging employees to speak out without any fear of personal negative consequences. Second, the results showed that knowledge hiding is responsible for transmitting the negative impact of POP on employee creativity. This implies that managers need to encourage knowledge sharing within their organizations. Managers interested in developing and sustaining knowledge sharing should not only tie knowledge sharing behaviors with organizational rewards (such as salary incentives, bonuses, or promotion incentives) but also increase their efforts to foster the targeted reciprocal relationships and interpersonal interactions of employees (Lin, 2007). Thus, if employees believe they can obtain reciprocal benefits from other colleagues by sharing their knowledge, they are more likely to view knowledge sharing favorably, which may eventually enhance their creativity. Third, we demonstrated that professional commitment attenuates the positive relationship between POP and knowledge hiding. Thus, steps taken to address known antecedents of professional commitment (e.g., job involvement, organizational commitment, job satisfaction; see Goulet & Singh, 2002, for a review) may be an effective strategy.

The study has some limitations that provide opportunities for future research. First, we employed a cross-sectional design. However, this may not severely harm the integrity of the results because reverse

causality that employee creativity affects perceived organizational politics and knowledge hiding behaviors does not seem very plausible. Second, in the current study knowledge hiding was assessed using a unidimensional scale. It would be interesting for future studies to separately examine the relationships between POP and the three sub-dimensions of knowledge hiding (i.e., evasive hiding, rationalized hiding, and playing dumb; Connelly et al., 2012). Third, we demonstrated that knowledge hiding only partially mediates the relationship between POP and employee creativity. Various other factors may be responsible for mediating the relationship between POP and employee creativity. For example, a previous study showed that a coworker's distrust mediates the negative relationship between knowledge hiding and knowledge hider's creativity (Černe et al., 2014). Thus, we offer only a preliminary exploration of the mediating role of knowledge hiding in the current study. Fourth, all data were collected from faculty members of public sector universities situated in Islamabad, which calls generalizability into question. More research is warranted using different samples, both in Pakistan and outside, so as to determine whether the results of this study are replicable. It might be fruitful for future studies to investigate the moderating roles of other individual difference constructs on the relationships between POP, knowledge hiding, and employee creativity. For example, previous research suggests that individuals high in political skill – an individual difference construct – are less affected by political behavior in their work environment (Bedi & Schat, 2013). Finally, also methodologically, future studies can consider or control certain personality dimensions such as openness to experience and extraversion which are known to be associated with employee creativity (King, Walker, & Broyles, 1996). It would be interesting for future researchers to examine the interactive effects of POP and the Big Five personality traits in the prediction of knowledge hiding and employee creativity (e.g., Witt, Kacmar, Carlson, & Zivnuska, 2002).

In conclusion, we demonstrated that POP can have detrimental impact on employee creativity directly as well as indirectly through knowledge hiding behaviors. Further, we found that the positive relationship between POP and knowledge hiding is moderated by professional commitment. Managers of organizations where creativity is important are advised to pay attention to promote less political environment, encourage knowledge sharing, and enhance professional commitment of their employees.

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