

Employee Silence and Silence Antecedents: A Theoretical Classification

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Abstract

Given the pervasiveness of employee silence, this article explores different forms of employee silence and silence antecedents. In particular, this article classifies employee silence using two dimensions: the target's solicitation and the employee's decision basis of conscious silence desirability. Drawing on relevant literature, it is proposed that employee silence can be classified into three distinct forms: unsolicited predetermined employee silence, unsolicited issue-based employee silence, and solicited target-based employee silence. When considering antecedents of employee silence, we claim that unsolicited predetermined employee silence is an outcome of personality traits, that unsolicited issue-based employee silence is triggered by functional motives, and that solicited target-based employee silence is determined by social relationships and relational experiences. By investigating forms of employee silence, this article provides important implications for theory and managerial practice.

Keywords

employee silence, unsolicited predetermined employee silence, unsolicited issue-based employee silence, solicited target-based employee silence, employee silence antecedents

Effective organizations often encourage employees' opinions, suggestions, and concerns because employee voice is critical to organizational performance (Fast, Burris, & Bartel, 2014). Unfortunately, employees often choose to remain silent because speaking up may be viewed as negative and threatening (Milliken, Morrison, &

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Hewlin, 2003; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). While speaking up may be perceived as risky, employee silence can adversely affect managerial effectiveness in decision making, organizational innovativeness, and organizational learning and change (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991; Sitkin, 1992). More importantly, employee silence may lead to dysfunctional organizational outcomes such as illegal behaviors and unethical practices (Premeaux, 2003; Van Dyne et al., 2003).

Given the link between employee silence and various detrimental individual and organizational outcomes, there is a growing interest in conceptualizing employee silence. Perhaps one of the most important conceptualizations is provided by Pinder and Harlos (2001) who define employee silence as an employee's intentional withholding of genuine expression about behavioral, cognitive, and/or affective assessments of organizational conditions to organizational members who seem capable of changing the situation. Building on Pinder and Harlos's (2001) work, Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008) note that employee silence represents "employees' intentional withholding of critical work-related information from other members of their workgroup" (p. 41). While most scholars have viewed employee silence as a unitary construct, Van Dyne et al. (2003) have emphasized that the absence of intentional silence does not necessarily mean the presence of intentional voice, and that employee silence is a multidimensional construct. Consequently, Van Dyne et al.'s work provides an important theoretical base for exploring different types of employee silence and silence antecedents.

The acknowledgment of employee silence as a multidimensional construct has resulted in extensive scholarly effort in identifying antecedents of employees' conscious choice to remain silent. According to extant literature, antecedents of employee silence can be broadly classified into three levels, including the individual, interpersonal, and organizational/societal levels. At the individual level, employees may choose to remain silent because of factors within the confine of individual traits such as extraversion (e.g., Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014), conscientiousness (e.g., LePine & Van Dyne, 2001), and agreeableness (e.g., LePine & Van Dyne, 2001). Interpersonally, employees can intentionally withhold important information because of certain interpersonal factors such as the quality of interpersonal treatment (e.g., Pinder & Harlos, 2001) and the availability of interpersonal communication opportunities (e.g., Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). In a broader organizational environment and societal context, factors such as organizational structure (e.g., Morrison & Milliken, 2000), organizational climates (e.g., Frazier & Bowler, 2015), and societal cultural values (e.g., Ward, Ravlin, Klaas, Ployhart, & Buchan, 2016) can determine whether employees intentionally withhold relevant information. Clearly, findings from prior research on antecedents of employee silence have provided important theoretical insights and practical implications.

Despite the scholarly interest in employee silence, there are still two major gaps in the existing body of knowledge. First, even though existing conceptual and empirical research in employee silence has yielded various critical conceptualizations of employee silence, little is known about forms of employee silence that may be exhibited (Brinsfield, 2013). While a few prior studies have identified different forms of employee silence (e.g., Brinsfield, 2013; Teo & Caspersz, 2011; Van Dyne et al., 2003), almost all of these studies have focused on classifying employee silence

without considering how the behaviors of the target (i.e., an organizational member who seems capable of changing the situation) may lead to employee silence. Put differently, prior research has predominantly focused on identifying forms of employee silence from the employee's perspective. However, what is missing from this perspective is the role of the target (e.g., supervisor, subordinate, and peer) in determining which forms of employee silence are exhibited. That is, employee silence may arise from the interplay of the employee and target. Second, because employee silence is a detrimental organizational phenomenon (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), scholars have attempted to identify antecedents of employee silence (e.g., Brinsfield, 2013; Milliken et al., 2003; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Nonetheless, most identified antecedents of employee silence have been linked to employees' perceived risks for speaking up (Brinsfield, 2013). Given that employees may choose to remain silent based on reasons not associated with risks for speaking up (Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, & Kamdar, 2011), greater research in antecedents of employee silence is needed because it allows us to better understand this detrimental organizational phenomenon.

Given the aforementioned research gaps, this article attempts to explore different forms of employee silence that may be exhibited. Specifically, because employee silence typically occurs in organizational contexts where the employee is interacting with others who are the target of silence behavior (Van Dyne et al., 2003), classifying employee silence and exploring antecedents of employee silence require the consideration of behaviors exhibited by the employee and the target. As such, this article has two principal goals. First, because employee silence has generally been characterized as an employee's intentional withholding of important information (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), the occurrence of employee silence may be an outcome of the target's explicit solicitation of opinions, suggestions, and concerns. Accordingly, this article attempts to classify employee silence using the presence or absence of the target's explicit solicitation. Although the target's explicit solicitation may result in employee silence, an employee's choice of speaking up or remaining silent may be affected by a particular decision basis used by the employee to assess the desirability of conscious silence. As such, this article also includes the employee's decision basis used for assessing conscious silence desirability when classifying employee silence. It is, however, worth emphasizing that we presume that the employee has complete access to organizational information and conditions, which allows the employee to determine if remaining silent is desirable. Hence, this article does not consider unintentional silence resulting from having nothing to say or mindlessness as a form of employee silence suggested by Van Dyne et al. (2003).

Even though antecedents of employee silence have been investigated by previous studies, the literature still has limited understanding of the nature and scope of different employee silence antecedents (Brinsfield, 2013). Consequently, the second principal goal of this article is to explore the theoretical perspective that can best explain the antecedents of each of the different forms of employee silence identified in this article. Accordingly, this article contributes to the employee silence literature by providing a dyadic approach for understanding different forms of employee silence. More importantly, given that the consequences of employee silence may be determined by the

form of employee silence exhibited, our classification of employee silence and theoretical underpinnings explaining employee silence antecedents provides an important foundation for future research that examines consequences of employee silence.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. In the second section, we provide a review of the employee silence literature. Next, we present our classification of employee silence. This is followed by our discussion on the theoretical underpinning that can best explain the antecedents of each of the different forms of employee silence. In the fifth section, we present theoretical and managerial implications as well as future research. The final section concludes this article with a brief summary.

Literature Review

Conceptualizations and Forms of Employee Silence

As competition intensifies, effective organizations often encourage employee voice because it helps promote organizational improvements and prevent organizational harms (Crant, Kim, & Wang, 2011; Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012). Conceptually, employee voice occurs when an employee intentionally expresses constructive opinions, concerns, and/or ideas about certain work- and/or organization-related issues (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Even though expressing opinions, concerns, and/or ideas may lead to favorable individual outcomes such as positive performance evaluations (Thompson, 2005) and promotion opportunities (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), employees still often choose to remain silent about their concerns (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). This particular workplace behavior has been labeled as employee silence, which refers to an employee's intentional withholding of genuine expression about behavioral, cognitive, and/or affective assessments of organizational conditions to organizational members who seem capable of changing the situation (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Because employees' silence encompasses organizational issues and matters such as organizational weaknesses, poor managerial decisions, and misconducts of certain organizational members, employee silence has been found to be negatively associated with managerial effectiveness in decision making, organizational innovativeness, and organizational learning and change (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991; Sitkin, 1992). More importantly, dysfunctional organizational outcomes such as illegal behaviors and unethical practices are generally followed by employees' intentional withholding of important information (Premeaux, 2003; Van Dyne et al., 2003).

In the literature of employee silence, Pinder and Harlos's (2001) conceptualization perhaps is the most prominent work. According to these authors, there are two basic forms of employee silence. First, employee silence can represent disengaged workplace behaviors, which these authors used the term *acquiescent silence* to describe such passive form of intentional withholding of information. Second, employees can exhibit silence because of fear of receiving negative consequences. Hence, Pinder and Harlos used the term *quiescent silence* to reflect an active withholding of relevant information aimed at protecting self. Building on Pinder and Harlos's (2001)

active-passive conceptualization of employee silence, Van Dyne et al. (2003) further incorporated the dimension of self- and other-oriented motives into their conceptualization and classification of employee silence. Specifically, these authors suggested that employee silence can be exhibited based on not only disengagement (i.e., acquiescent silence) and fear (i.e., defensive silence) but also a sense of cooperation and altruism (i.e., prosocial silence). As such, prosocial silence describes an employee's intentional withholding of relevant information with the goal of benefiting the organization and members of the organization. For instance, an employee could choose to remain silent to outsiders in order to protect confidential information that is important to the organization's competitiveness (Van Dyne et al., 2003).

It is worth pointing out that while speaking up and remaining silent may seem to be the mutually exclusive, Van Dyne et al. (2003) emphasized that employee voice and silence are conceptually distinct, and that an employee silence is a multidimensional construct affected by different antecedents. In line with Van Dyne et al.'s (2003) view, Brinsfield (2013) argued that there are meaningful distinctions between forms of employee silence based on different antecedents. Through his empirical analyses, Brinsfield (2013) further conceptualized six forms of employee silence. First, deviant silence represents a form of counterproductive work behavior where one intentionally fails to give others necessary information with the goal of hampering or harming others performance or effectiveness. Second, relational silence is exhibited as a means to preserve interpersonal harmony, prevent conflict, or avoid hurting others' feelings. Third, defensive silence is motivated by one's fear of receiving negative and unpleasant outcomes after speaking up. Fourth, diffident silence describes an employee's lack of confidence, sense of insecurity, and feeling of embarrassment. Fifth, ineffectual silence reflects an employee's feeling of speaking up will not make a difference. Finally, disengaged silence refers to an employee's fundamental disengagement and lack of involvement at work. Another important work is Knoll and van Dick's (2013b) study. These authors not only adopted three basic forms of employee silence (i.e., acquiescent, quiescent, and prosocial silence) proposed by Pinder and Harlos (2001) and Van Dyne et al. (2003) but also introduced the concept of opportunistic silence. Drawing on Williamson's (1985) concept of opportunism, Knoll and van Dick (2013b) further proposed that employees may intentionally withhold relevant information to achieve advantages for themselves (i.e., opportunistic silence). It is important to note that the demonstration of opportunistic silence accompanies with one's acceptance of harming others through remaining silent (Knoll & van Dick, 2013b).

Employee Silence Antecedents

The Individual Traits Perspective. Given the pervasiveness and hampering effect of employee silence, scholars have sought to understand why employees choose to remain silent. When reviewing relevant research in this area, we have identified three prominent levels of analysis. First, because voicing and remaining silent at work are considered discretionary work behaviors that are not required by formal job descriptions, these behaviors can be strongly related to personality traits given that

personality influences individual actions taken in a social context (Crant et al., 2011; Motowidlo, Borman, & Schmit, 1997). Not surprisingly, empirical evidence has shown that certain personality traits, especially the Big-Five personality traits, influence employees' decisions to remain silent or voice. For example, drawing on the theorization that individuals who are agreeable tend to be friendly, cooperative, and tolerant, and conform to social conventions (Barrick & Mount, 1991). LePine and Van Dyne (2001) found that agreeableness reinforces an individual's intentional withholding of suggestions and opinions. Additionally, LePine and Van Dyne (2001) showed that individuals who have higher conscientiousness trait (e.g., dependable, reliable, organized, and hardworking) are less likely to withhold their expression of suggestions and opinions than those who have lower conscientiousness trait. Similarly, Lee, Diefendorff, Kim, and Bian (2014) discovered that agreeable individuals exhibit lower levels of prosocial and defensive silence than nonagreeable individuals, and that extraverts engage in less prosocial, acquiescent, and defensive silence than introverts. In their effort to explore personality traits and different forms of employee voice, Maynes and Podsakoff (2014) found the following results. First, extraversion trait reduces an employee's intentional withholding of expression that supports worthwhile organizational policies, procedures, and objectives. Second, individuals who are more open to new experience, imaginative, and creative are less likely to withhold their expression of opinions and suggestions concerning making constructive and functional changes to the organization than those who are less in the same characteristics.

Another well-studied individual personality trait in the area of employees' choice of voicing or remaining silent is proactive personality. In general, proactive personality describes an individual's relatively stable behavioral tendency that brings about environmental change (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Because proactive personality is predictive of whether an individual engages in proactive behaviors that make constructive change in his or her environment (Morrison & Phelps, 1999), individuals with high proactive personality are less likely to withhold relevant information than those with low proactive personality (Crant et al., 2011; Fuller, Marler, & Hester, 2006; Liao, 2015; Thomas, Whitman, & Viswesvaran, 2010). In addition to the Big-Five and proactive personality traits, several other traits have been linked to employee silence. For instance, Premeaux and Bedeian's (2003) study showed that individuals who are high in self-monitoring, defined as the extent to which an individual monitors his or her behavioral choices in a given context (Day, Schleicher, Unckless, & Hiller, 2002), are more likely to remain silent compared with individuals who are low in self-monitoring. Focusing on employee authenticity, which refers to a sense or belief that one is real or true (Lenton, Slabu, Sedikides, & Power, 2013), Knoll and van Dick (2013a) demonstrated that higher levels of individual authenticity result in lower levels of employee silence. In a more recent theoretical study conducted by Timming and Johnstone (2015), it was proposed that fascistic personalities, which refer to personality structures that prefer deference to managerial authority, reinforce employees' choice of remaining silent.

The Interpersonal Perspective. Findings of research focusing on exploring the impact of individual traits on employee silence have implied that individual traits are

relatively stable and, consequently, can contribute to employees' decision to remain silent. Thus, the study of employee silence from the perspective of individual traits presumes that employees themselves are the main driver for determining whether to remain silent. While this perspective provides important insights, it may not be able to capture the effect of factors in the social and interpersonal context on employee silence. As such, a number of prior studies have incorporated interpersonal factors in the analysis of why employees choose to remain silent. For example, Pinder and Harlos (2001) noted that interpersonal fairness in the group can reduce employee silence. Tangirala and Ramanujam's (2008) study showed similar findings, which revealed that employee silence is reduced when group members believe that they are treated fairly by organizational authorities executing organizational policies and procedures. Meanwhile, Whiteside and Barclay (2013) focused on overall justice and founded that employees are less incline to engage in acquiescent and quiescent silence when they are treated more fairly by the organization and managers. In a recent study, R. Wang and Jiang (2015) drew on the concept of interactional justice, which represents the quality of the interpersonal treatment received by an employee (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998) and uncovered that employees who are treated without dignity and respect tend to exhibit low level of employee silence aimed at benefiting the organization (i.e., prosocial silence).

Because employee silence is directed to a target (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), interpersonal closeness between the target and an employee may influence whether the employee chooses to remain silent. Indeed, in a qualitative study conducted by Milliken et al. (2003), it was shown that employee silence can be affected by lack of closeness between the supervisor and employee. Similarly, Vakola and Bouradas (2005) found that higher levels of communication opportunities between the manager and employees lead to lower levels of employee silence. Several other studies have also highlighted how increased communication opportunities weaken employees' intentional withholding of relevant information (e.g., Avery & Quiñones, 2002; de Vries, Jehn, & Terwel, 2012; Milliken, Schipani, Bishara, & Prado, 2015).

As mentioned previously, employee silence is directed to a target (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008) who typically is an organizational authority (e.g., managers). As such, employee silence could be triggered by the fear of receiving negative consequences provided by the voice target (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Jain, 2015; Milliken et al., 2003; Milliken & Morrison, 2003; Morrison, 2014). This implies that the interpersonal behaviors exhibited by a manager may influence an employee's conscious decision to remain silent. Several prior studies have shown the support for this rationale. For example, Detert and Burris (2007) revealed that a manager's interpersonal behaviors that manifest management openness enhance employees' willingness to speak up and, consequently, reduce employee silence. Tangirala and Ramanujam (2012) found similar evidence, which suggested that a manager's consultative and inclusive behaviors directed to an employee foster the employee's sense of responsibility, which leads to reduced employee silence. Additionally, de Vries et al. (2012) discovered that managerial behaviors that manifest a manager's disregard of employee inputs reduce employees' willingness to speak up.

When considering leadership styles, scholars have unveiled a range of leadership styles that are relevant to whether employees are willing to speak up. Perhaps the most commonly studied is transformational leadership because transformational leaders are change-oriented (Waldman, Javidan, & Varella, 2004). Specifically, because transformational leaders emphasize individualized consideration and utilize inspirational motivation (Bass, 1985), they foster a sense of responsibility to contribute to the organization through two-way communication. As a result, employees of transformational leaders are likely to voluntarily provide opinions and suggestions. Indeed, ample evidence has supported the link between transformational leadership and employees' willingness to speak up (e.g., Conchie, Taylor, & Donald, 2012; Detert & Burris, 2007; Duan, Li, Xu, & Wu, 2016). Another crucial leadership style that has been linked with employees' willingness to speak up is ethical leadership. Generally speaking, ethical leaders place high importance on two-way communication and doing and saying the right thing (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Presumably, ethical leadership helps encourage employees' expression of concerns and suggestions. Not surprisingly, extant leadership studies have provided strong support for the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' willingness to speak up (e.g., Chen & Hou, 2016; Hsiung, 2012; Neubert, Wu, & Roberts, 2013).

The Organizational and Societal Perspective. Even though prior studies have investigated employee silence from the individual and interpersonal perspectives, employees' workplace behaviors, including remaining silence, may be shaped by the broader organizational systems and features. Morrison and Milliken (2000) supported this view by stating that organizational structural features, such as hierarchical structure, can increase employees' reluctance to speak up. While hierarchical structure can impede employees' communication with and access to managers, certain organizational climates may also promote or discourage employees' willingness to speak up. For instance, Park and Keil's (2009) findings suggested that when an organization implements centralized decision making and lacks feedback solicitation systems, the organization encourages an overall organizational climate that discourages upward communication, which leads to employee silence. Accordingly, one can expect that the lack of the upward communication and participative climates in the organization contributes to employee silence, which has been well documented in a number of prior studies (e.g., Frazier & Bowler, 2015; Lee et al., 2014; Ng & Feldman, 2012). In another study, Y. Wang and Hsieh (2013) found that instrumental climate reinforces employees' concern for self-interests, which, in turn, promotes acquiescent silence. However, these authors also uncovered that caring climate motivates employees to make ethical decisions aimed at benefiting others, thereby reducing acquiescent silence and defensive silence.

In addition to organizational climates, organizational policies may seem relevant to employees' willingness to speak up because these policies regulate and guide employee behaviors at work. In a qualitative study, Morrison and Milliken (2000) found that employees consciously choose to remain silent when speaking up is punished by organizational policies. A recent study conducted by Dedahanov, Lee, and Rhee (2016)

also showed that organizational policies that provide punishment to employee voice encourage employee silence. Certainly, organizations may adopt policies that encourage employees to express their suggestions and opinions. For instance, through allowing employees to take part in formal decision-making and feedback process, organizations can reduce employee silence (Huang, Van de Vliert, & Van der Vegt, 2005). Because speaking up may be viewed as negative and threatening (Milliken et al., 2003; Van Dyne et al., 2003), employees may choose to remain silent because of self-protective reasons (i.e., defensive silence). Thus, union provides a great platform for individual employees to express their concerns and opinions without being identified, thereby reducing defensive silence (Schlosser & Zolin, 2012).

Although factors within an organization have been explored in the context of employee silence, the influence of societal cultural values on whether employees choose to remain silent has been investigated because societal cultural values provide individuals a means to gauge what behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable in the social context. Among various cultural values, power distance, which is defined as the extent to which an individual accepts that power in organizations is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 2001), has been found to be associated with employees' willingness to speak up. In particular, existing evidence has consistently shown that employees with high-power distance values are more likely to withhold their voice compared with employees with low-power distance (e.g., Kwon, Farndale, & Park, 2016; Rhee, Dedahnov, & Lee, 2014; Wei, Zhang, & Chen, 2015). From the perspective of individualism/collectivism, which indicates the extent to which an employee is oriented toward collective needs and interests (Galang, 1999), research results have been mixed. Some have revealed that collectivistic cultures reinforce cooperative and supportive behaviors and, consequently, discourage employees' willingness to provide different opinions and express their view points (e.g., Panaccio, Henderson, Liden, Wayne, & Cao, 2015; Saad, Cleveland, & Ho, 2015). Others have shown that collectivistic cultures foster employee behaviors focusing on maximizing collective performance and supporting others' welfare, thereby encouraging employees to express their opinions and suggestions that help enhance collective performance (e.g., Jiao & Hardie, 2009; Moorman & Blakely, 1995). Other identified cultural values that enhance employees' willingness to speak up include masculinity (e.g., van den Bos et al., 2010) and high-context communication orientation (e.g., Ward et al., 2016).

In sum, our review of the literature shows that conceptualizations and forms of employee silence have been explored. Additionally, extant literature has addressed antecedents of employees' conscious decisions to remain silent extensively. To be clear, our intent is not to provide a comprehensive review of how employee silence may be exhibited and what determines whether employees choose to speak up or remain silent. Instead, we intend to highlight two important gaps in the literature. First, existing research has predominantly focused on conceptualizing forms of employee silence solely from the employee's perspective. Given that employee silence cannot occur without the presence of the employee and the target, we argue that conceptualizing different forms of employee silence requires the consideration of both the employee and the target. In other words, without considering how the employee and

the target together generate a particular form of employee silence, one may fall short of identifying antecedents of employee silence. Second, while employees may choose to remain silent for different reasons (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), theoretical perspectives utilized by prior studies to explain why employees consciously choose to remain silent seem to be contingent on the theoretical interests held by the researcher. As such, some theoretical perspectives may contradict other theoretical perspectives. For instance, employee silence has been explained from the self-protective or risk avoidance perspective (e.g., Brinsfield, 2013; Milliken et al., 2003), which holds a different theoretical underpinning compared with the prosocial or other-oriented perspective of employee silence (e.g., Van Dyne et al., 2003). Consequently, the literature still lacks an overarching theoretical conclusion as to why employees engage in silence. Given these two research gaps, we next present our classification of employee silence using the explicit behaviors exhibited by the employee and the target. Then, we discuss how existing theoretical perspectives may be used to identify the antecedents of employee silence that we classify.

Classification of Employee Silence

The Target's Solicitation

Because employee silence typically occurs in face-to-face interactions at work where the employee interacts with supervisors, peers, and/or subordinates (Van Dyne et al., 2003), employee silence essentially contains a dyadic nature where the employee and the target of the employee's silence behavior may generate this behavior together. Indeed, as noted by Pinder and Harlos (2001), employee silence is generally directed to a target in the organization who seems capable of changing a particular situation. More importantly, prior studies have emphasized that managerial behaviors, such as seeking inputs from employees and listening to employees' suggestions and concerns about work-related issues, are highly relevant to whether employees perceive a sense of direct access to the managers, which, in turn, can determine the employees' willingness to speak up (Ashford, Sutcliffe, & Christianson, 2009; Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & Trevino, 2010; Edmondson, 2003; Saunders, Sheppard, Knight, & Roth, 1992; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012).

In line with prior research, we expect that the target of employee silence plays an important role in determining what form of employee silence is exhibited. In particular, we propose that solicitation of opinions, concerns, suggestions, and/or constructive criticism made by the target should be used as a dimension to classify employee silence. As such, employee silence can be broadly classified into unsolicited employee silence and solicited employee silence. Unsolicited employee silence describes an employee's intentional withholding of genuine expression about organizational conditions to a target within the organization who seems capable of changing the conditions when the target does not solicit the employee's expression of voice. In contrast, solicited employee silence reflects an employee's intentional withholding of his or her genuine expressions about organizational conditions to a target within the organization

who seems capable of changing the conditions when the target solicits the employee's expression of voice.

The Employee's Silence Decision Basis

As we indicated previously, solicitation of suggestions, concerns, opinions, and/or constructive criticism may result in employee voice or employee silence. However, employees may not always choose to remain silent solely because of the presence of solicitation. That is, employees may choose to remain silent because of their subjective assessments. Indeed, a number of prior studies have suggested that employees may intentionally withhold their genuine expressions of concerns, suggestions, opinions, and/or constructive criticism because of their perceived negative consequences (e.g., retaliation). Accordingly, we expect that the form of employee silence exhibited can be affected by the basis on which silence decision is made, particularly in the absence of the target's solicitation or prior to the recipient's solicitation. It is worth emphasizing that we presume that an employee uses a subjective cost-benefit calculation process where the employee may not always derive the decision from factual data and objective information. As such, the second dimension that we use to classify employee silence focuses on the employee's decision basis. In particular, we claim that there are three different decision bases: individual-based, issue-based, and target-based.

Using the three decision bases of employee silence, we contend that an employee subjectively and proactively engages in risk calculations that help determine whether to remain silent. It is important to emphasize that these calculations are conducted prior to perceiving or seeing any organizational issue or even when there is no organizational issue. As a consequence, the individual-based silence decision can be considered an employee's predetermined conscious decision that remaining silent is highly appropriate and desirable regardless of the nature of organizational issues. In the context of organization, for example, an employee can decide that speaking up in any kind of occasions is undesirable and unattractive without facing or perceiving an actual organizational issue and/or being solicited. We term the second decision basis as issue-based, which suggests that an employee's decision to remain silent is made based on the employee's subjective assessment of the organizational issue confronted by him or her. As such, the employee does not initiate the cost-benefit calculation process until he or she perceives or sees the presence of an organizational issue. In other words, this particular employee silence decision-making process is triggered by the employee's perceived need for speaking up or remaining silent due to the surface of an actual or potential organizational issue. Continuing the previous example, the employee can closely observe the organization's conditions and wait until a perceived or an actual organizational issue emerges that subsequently triggers the employee's decision to remain silent before being solicited. That is, the employee does not make conscious decision on remaining silent until he or she assesses the perceived or actual organizational issue. Last, employee silence decision can be made based on the employee's assessment of target of silence behavior. That is, an employee's decision to remain silent is made based on the employee's subjective assessment of the characteristics of

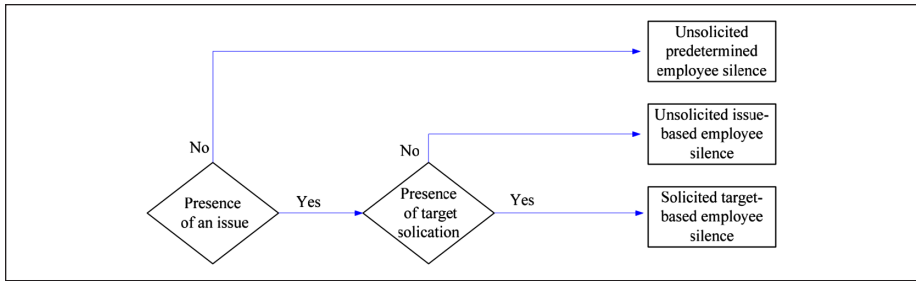


Figure 1. Timeline for the three decision bases of employee silence.

the target who solicits opinions and suggestions from the employee. Given this, we expect that the employee's cost-benefit calculation process is only initiated due to the solicitation of voice, and that the outcome of the calculation process is mainly determined by the employee's subjective assessment of the characteristics of the target. Consequently, this form of employee silence is triggered by the presence of an explicit solicitation of voice. Following the previous examples, the employee can wait until a person (e.g., the manager, coworkers, or subordinates) asks for suggestions, opinions, and concern, and then determine that remaining silent is desirable given the characteristics of the person. In other words, the employee does not make conscious decision on remaining silent until he or she is being solicited by another individual within the organization. Figure 1 shows the timeline for the three decision bases of employee silence.

Forms of Employee Silence

Previously, we contended that classifying employee silence requires the inclusion of the target's solicitation and the employee's decision basis. Accordingly, we use these two dimensions to classify employee silence into three distinct forms. The first form of employee silence is labeled as *unsolicited predetermined employee silence*, which refers to an employee's predetermined motivation to consistently withhold important information to an organizational target when the target does not solicit expression of voice. The second form of employee silence is called as *unsolicited issue-based employee silence*, which describes an employee's intentional withholding of important information due to the employee's assessment of an organizational issue when the target does not solicit expression of voice. The third form of employee silence is termed as *solicited target-based employee silence*, which is defined as an employee's intentional withholding of important information due to the employee's assessment of the target's characteristics after when the target solicits expression of voice.

Antecedents of Employee Silence

In the previous section, we presented our classification of employee silence utilizing two dimensions: the target's solicitation and the employee's decision basis for

assessing conscious silence desirability. In particular, we contended that employee silence can be exhibited in three distinct forms, including (a) unsolicited predetermined employee silence, (b) unsolicited issue-based employee silence, and (c) solicited target-based employee silence. Because it is likely that different forms of employee silence are triggered by different antecedents, we discuss various theoretical perspectives that can best explain antecedents of each of the forms of employee silence.

Unsolicited Predetermined Employee Silence: An Outcome of Individual Traits

As described previously, unsolicited predetermined employee silence is exhibited in the absence of the target's solicitation of expression. Additionally, unsolicited predetermined employee silence is exhibited based on the employee's predetermined perceptions of what speaking up generally entails without perceiving or seeing an organizational issue. In other words, unsolicited predetermined employee silence is a conscious silence decision triggered by an employee's predetermined motivation to remain silent regardless of the nature of the organizational issue. Given its nature, we argue that the demonstration of unsolicited predetermined employee silence heavily relies on the employee's personal and subjective perception of risks of speaking up and benefits of remaining silent. That is, unsolicited predetermined employee silence is a behavioral outcome continuously reinforced by the employee's perception that remaining silent outweighs speaking up in any given organizational setting. This, therefore, suggests that unsolicited predetermined employee silence is not exhibited because of the presence of a particular organizational issue. Instead, unsolicited predetermined employee silence is triggered by an employee's continuous and proactive calculation of the risks of speaking up and benefits of remaining silent. Thus, unsolicited predetermined employee silence seems to be triggered by factors within the confine of the employee's personality traits and dispositions, which tend to be stable, consistent, and persistent. As such, we contend that individual traits consistently reinforce an employee's continuous belief that remaining silent is highly desirable even when there is no potential organizational issue. This, therefore, leads to the demonstration of unsolicited predetermined employee silence.

Given the nature of unsolicited predetermined employee silence, we propose that the individual traits perspective is the most appropriate theoretical underpinning. Our view is consistent with existing evidence. For instance, Motowidlo et al. (1997) note that one of the key predictors of whether individuals engage in contextual performance, such as making constructive suggestions, is personality traits, particularly the Big-Five personality traits (i.e., extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, and openness to experience). A later study conducted by LePine and Van Dyne (2001) also confirms that conscientiousness and extraversion positively influence voice behavior, whereas agreeableness and neuroticism negatively affect voice behavior. Similarly, several studies have revealed the positive and negative impact of the Big-Five personality traits (e.g., Avery, 2003; Lee et al., 2014; Nikolaou, Vakola, & Bourantas, 2008), proactive personality (e.g., Crant et al., 2011; Liao, 2015), innovative and adaptive

dispositions (e.g., Janssen, de Vries, & Cozijnsen, 1998), self-efficacy (e.g., D. Wang, Gan, Wu, & Wang, 2015), and affect (e.g., Madrid, Patterson, & Leiva, 2015) on whether an employee speaks up.

On the basis of prior research finding, we suspect that an employee's conscious decision on remaining silent that is made in the absence of solicitation of voice and organizational issues is mainly affected by the employee's predisposed individual traits. Hence, we propose the following:

Proposition 1: Unsolicited predetermined employee silence is primarily motivated by an employee's individual traits and, consequently, can be best understood using the individual traits perspective.

Unsolicited Issue-Based Employee Silence: A Behavioral Outcome of Functional Motives

Like unsolicited predetermined employee silence, unsolicited issue-based employee silence is also exhibited in the absence of the target's solicitation. However, unlike unsolicited predetermined employee silence, unsolicited issue-based employee silence is not decided until an employee perceives and/or sees the presence of an organizational issue that may require speaking up or remaining silent. That is, an employee does not assess the risks and benefits of remaining silent until the employee subjectively perceives or sees that an organizational issue is emerging or present. As such, the demonstration of unsolicited issue-based employee silence is triggered by an employee's assessment of an actual or emerging organizational issue.

Given its nature, we argue that unsolicited issue-based employee silence is likely to be motivated by an employee's perception that remaining silent is of value to himself or herself due to the nature of the organizational issue. Consequently, the antecedents of unsolicited issue-based employee silence can be best understood using the functional needs approach, which is concerned with identifying the reasons, purposes, plans, and goals that motivate individuals to exhibit and sustain specific actions (Snyder, 1993). In particular, because the decision of an employee's unsolicited issue-based employee silence is made based on the employee's subjective assessment of the issue, it seems that this particular form of employee silence is passively decided because of attainment of certain personal needs and desires. Indeed, the literature has shown that employee silence may be a form of self-protection mechanism based on factors such as fear of consequences associated with speaking up (e.g., Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Milliken et al., 2003); feelings of self-doubt, potential embarrassment, or personal insecurity (e.g., Noelle-Neumann, 1974); lack of confidence and personal power (e.g., Brinsfield, 2013; Morrison, See, & Pan, 2015); fear of being viewed negatively (e.g., Milliken et al., 2003); and personal strategy for expressing disagreement (e.g., Knoll & van Dick, 2013b).

In line with prior research demonstrating silence as a product of obtaining personal needs and desires, we posit that unsolicited issue-based employee silence is an employee's intentional withholding of important information that is triggered by the

employee's perceived attainment of personal desires and needs resulting from remaining silent. Put differently, we expect that the desire for satisfying functional needs motivates an employee's demonstration of unsolicited issue-based employee silence. As such, we propose the following:

Proposition 2: Unsolicited issue-based employee silence is primarily motivated by an employee's desire for satisfying functional needs and, consequently, can be best understood using the functional needs perspective.

Solicited Target-Based Employee Silence: A Process of Social and Instrumental Exchange

As defined previously, solicited target-based employee silence is only exhibited after the target's solicitation of expression. The nature of solicited target-based employee silence, therefore, suggests that an employee's conscious decision on remaining silent is triggered by the characteristics of the target. As a consequence, antecedents of solicited target-based employee silence can be best understood from the relational perspective. Specifically, because the decision to remain silent is made after the target solicits opinions and suggestions, it is quite likely that remaining silent is used by an employee as an instrumental means to preserve and maintain existing relationship with the target. Not surprisingly, evidence from prior studies has consistently revealed that employees may intentionally withhold speaking up because of not wanting to harm the relationship with the target (e.g., Brinsfield, 2013; Milliken et al., 2003; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Moreover, it is plausible that solicited target-based employee silence is an outcome of negative and/or abusive relationship between the target and employee. Indeed, evidence from prior research has demonstrated the impact of negative and/or abusive relationship on employee silence (e.g., R. Wang & Jiang, 2015). Furthermore, relational experiences that an employee has, such as lack of organizational support (e.g., Milliken et al., 2003; Y. Wang & Hsieh, 2013), lack of trust in the supervisor and organization (e.g., Dedahanov & Rhee, 2015; Premeaux & Bedeian, 2003), and lack of organizational justice (e.g., Whiteside & Barclay, 2013), can foster the employee's intentional withholding of important information.

Given that the decision basis of solicited target-based employee silence is placed on the employee's relational perceptions of and experiences with the target, as well as the employee's relational perceptions of and experiences with the organization represented by target, we posit that solicited target-based employee silence is driven by the employee's cost-benefit analysis from the relational standpoint. Accordingly, we propose the following:

Proposition 3: Solicited target-based employee silence is primarily motivated by an employee's (a) desire to establish and/or maintain positive relationships with the target and organization and/or (b) negative relational experiences with the target and organization and, consequently, can be best understood using the social and instrumental exchange perspective.

Table 1. Classification of Employee Silence.

	Forms of employee silence		
	Unsolicited predetermined employee silence	Unsolicited issue-based employee silence	Solicited target-based employee silence
Conceptual definition	An employee's predetermined motivation to consistently withhold important information to an organizational target when the target does not solicit expression of voice.	An employee's intentional withholding of important information due to the employee's assessment of an organizational issue when the target does not solicit expression of voice.	An employee's intentional withholding of important information due to the employee's assessment of the target's characteristics when the target solicit expression of voice.
Trigger	None	Perception of an emerging organizational issue or presence of an organizational issue	Presence of the target's request for expression
Silence antecedents	Personality traits	Functional motives	Social relationship and relational experiences

In the previous sections, we have classified three forms of employee silence using two distinct dimensions. Additionally, we have discussed the theoretical perspective that can best explain the antecedents of each of three forms of employee silence. Table 1 summarizes our classification of employee silence.

Discussion

The main purpose of this article is to provide a new perspective on classifying employee silence and analyzing antecedents of employee silence. By doing so, this article provides several implications. In the following section, we discuss theoretical and managerial implications.

Theoretical Implications

Even though existing conceptual and empirical research in employee silence has provided various critical conceptualizations of employee silence, how employee silence may be exhibited remains understudied (Brinsfield, 2013). Although a few prior studies have devoted effort to this particular gap (e.g., Brinsfield, 2013; Teo & Caspersz, 2011; Van Dyne et al., 2003), these prior studies have explored employee silence predominantly from the employee's perspective. Here, we believe that because employee

silence reflects an employee's intentional withholding of important information from others (Johannesen, 1974), the demonstration of employee silence may be partly determined by the target. Indeed, Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008) note that an employee's silence may differ based on the target. As a consequence, classifying forms of employee silence may require the inclusion of the target. Given the dyadic nature of employee silence, our classification of employee silence not only incorporates the employee but also considers the target's explicit behavior (i.e., solicitation of expression) that fosters the formation of a particular form of employee silence. Accordingly, this article advances the existing body of knowledge by providing a dyadic approach for differentiating forms of employee silence.

As pointed out by Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008), employees may choose to remain silent for different reasons. As such, our understanding of why employees intentionally choose to withhold expressing their concerns, suggestions, and opinions may be advanced when distinctions between forms of employee silence are made (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). While a number of prior studies have attempted to understand antecedents of employee silence utilizing different theoretical perspectives with different theoretical standpoints on why employees consciously choose to remain silent, some of these theoretical perspectives seem to contradict other theoretical perspectives. For instance, employee silence has been explained from the self-protective or risk avoidance perspective (e.g., Brinsfield, 2013; Milliken et al., 2003), which holds a different theoretical underpinning compared with the prosocial or other-oriented perspective of employee silence (e.g., Van Dyne et al., 2003). As such, it may seem difficult to reach an overarching theoretical conclusion on why employees engage in silence. Nonetheless, this article classifies different forms of employee silence using the employee's decision basis and target's solicitation, which, in turn, allow us to better understand the nature of a particular form of employee silence. More importantly, through this article, we demonstrate that antecedents of employee silence can be better explained when the form of employee silence is accounted for.

When attempting to understand the phenomenon of employee silence, scholars have emphasized that employees weigh the costs of speaking up and determine the favorability of speaking up or remaining silent (e.g., Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997; Miceli & Near, 1992; Morrison et al., 2011). That is, the perspective of avoiding risks has been central of the study of employee silence (Brinsfield, 2013). As such, employee silence is often considered a passive form of employee behavior where the employee's calculation of risks is only activated when a potential or an actual organizational issue emerges. However, it has been noted that not all forms of employee silence reflect the passive nature (Scott, 1993). While research on employee silence from the perspective of employees' passive avoidance of risks provides important implications, this article extends the literature by theorizing that employee silence can have a proactive nature where an employee's decision on remaining silent needs not to be made based on the presence of issues and the target. In other words, we show that employee silence can be a voluntary act that is motivated by individual tendencies and dispositions.

Managerial Implications

As stated previously, employee silence may lead to negative organizational outcomes such as reduced quality in decision making, lowered organizational innovativeness, and decreased organizational learning and change (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991; Sitkin, 1992). Consequently, it becomes critical to understand how managers view employee silence. While some research findings from existing research have suggested that one of the main reasons why employees intentionally withhold their voice is their fear of damaging interpersonal relationships and negative consequences (e.g., Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001), some scholars show that managers not only want employees to be willing to speak up (e.g., Bennis, Goleman, & O'Toole, 2008) but also positively value employee voice (Grant, Parker, & Collins, 2009; Podsakoff, Podsakoff, Whiting, & Mishra, 2011; Whiting, Maynes, Podsakoff, & Podsakoff, 2012; Whiting, Podsakoff, & Pierce, 2008). Thus, there seems to have a discrepancy between how employees perceive the benefits of remaining silent and managers value the importance of employee voice. Through our classification of employee silence, we further suggest that solicitation made by the target (e.g., the manager) may greatly affect an employee's perceived need for remaining silent, particularly when the employee seeks to maintain positive interpersonal relationships and/or has experienced negative interpersonal relationships previously with the target. Given this, this article suggests that managers may need to implement anonymous recommendation approach where employees can express their opinions, suggestions, and concerns without revealing personal identity. Additionally, when implementing anonymous recommendation approach is not viable, we recommend that employees can express their opinions, suggestions, and concerns when solicited by sympathizing the manager's current situation. Then, the employees may use conjunctive statements that flow from the previous stage along with honorific and nonaggressive tones when providing suggestions and opinions and/or expressing concerns. By doing so, employees may be able to maintain and preserve positive interpersonal relationships when speaking up.

While some prior studies in employee silence have offered managerial implications with the assumption that employee silence is primarily directed to the supervisor (e.g., Huang et al., 2005; Milliken et al., 2003), employee silence can be directed to individuals without managerial positions such as coworkers and customers (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). As a result, solicitation of expression may be made by those who are not in supervisory positions. This, therefore, suggests that managers may be able to discourage solicited target-based employee silence by helping organizational members develop camaraderie so that members can feel comfortable to express their suggestions, opinions, and concerns to one another when necessary. This can be done by, for instance, encouraging organizational members to attend social activities (e.g., sports or arts events). Additionally, managers can utilize quality mentorship programs that reduce employees' stereotypes of others, thereby promoting employees' willingness to share opinions and suggestions. Consequently, employees may not have negative perceptions and/or fear of speaking up when solicited.

Given that there is a general consensus that employee silence can lead to detrimental outcomes (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Premeaux, 2003), implications provided to managers concerning why employees engage in workplace silence become critical. Meanwhile, because the vast majority of research in employee silence has suggested that this detrimental workplace behavior is mainly motivated by avoiding risks of speaking up (Brinsfield, 2013), this stream of research may fall short of offering effective recommendations. Meanwhile, this article proposes that individual traits and tendencies may play a critical role in determining whether an employee exhibits workplace silence. Thus, certain employees may exhibit silence even when there is no or minimum risk involved in speaking up. Consequently, managers may utilize friendship to encourage employees with certain individual traits and tendencies to express suggestions, opinions, and concerns through trustworthy social exchange relationships. In particular, because friendship typically results in high-quality social exchange (Bowler & Brass, 2006), the presence of strong friendship may break employees' silence reinforced by certain individual traits and tendencies and, consequently, enhance their willingness to express suggestions, opinions, and concerns to others.

Future Research

Although the primary purpose of this article is to classify employee silence using the employee's decision basis and the target's solicitation, we recognize that this article has several limitations and, consequently, can be extended in the following directions. First, when attempting to classify employee silence using the target's solicitation, we emphasize the presence of explicit solicitation made by the target. Consequently, this article does not consider nonverbal solicitation made by the target. While we believe that explicit solicitation made by the target allows us to clearly distinguish between unsolicited and solicited employee silence, research on interpersonal communication has not only shown that 60% to 95% of a message's meaning is conveyed through nonverbal communication (Knapp, 1972) but also suggested that nonverbal communication influences communication outcomes (Graham, Unruh, & Jennings, 1991). Accordingly, it is strongly encouraged to examine whether and how the extent of nonverbal solicitation of expression made by the target determines the form of employee silence exhibited.

In addition to emphasizing the target's explicit solicitation of expression when classifying employee silence, our classification of employee silence draws on the presumption that the employee who exhibits silence has complete access to organizational information and conditions, which, in turn, allows him or her to determine if remaining silent is desirable. It, however, can be expected that employees may not always have the complete access to their organizational information and conditions. This can then prevent employees from assessing the desirability of speaking up or remaining silent. As such, we highly encourage future research to examine how the configurations of an employee's social network ties (e.g., tie strength, network centrality, and network density) within the organization affect his or her access to organizational information and conditions, which, in turn, influences his or her workplace silence behavior.

As evidenced by the nature of employee silence, this pervasive workplace behavior can encompass different organizational issues (unethical misconducts vs. performance improvement) and be directed to different targets (e.g., the manager vs. coworkers; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). Accordingly, it is plausible that employee silence is targeted to multiple targets simultaneously with different topics. For instance, an employee may intentionally remain silent when seeing the manager conducts performance appraisals using favoritism, which leads to a coworker's steal of the company's property for compensation. This complexity of employee silence, therefore, results in the need for further investigating antecedents of employee silence when multiple targets and topics are involved.

On the basis of the evidence of prior research in newcomers in the organization, one can expect that newcomers of an organization generally exhibit lower levels of challenge-oriented workplace behaviors compared with organizational insiders. Indeed, Schein (2004) supports this view by noting that newcomers often seek to establish themselves as valued members by being cooperative given their perceived vulnerability and uncertainty. As employee silence may be viewed as a form of cooperative behavior (Van Dyne et al., 2003), we suspect that the newcomer status is likely to reinforce a new employee's conscious and intentional decision on remaining silent even when expression of opinions is solicited. Therefore, it may be particularly interesting to incorporate an employee's work-related characteristics and status (e.g., part-time vs. full-time, newcomer vs. insider, and foreign workers vs. domestic workers) into our classification of employee silence.

Finally, given the detrimental impact of employee silence, managers can be benefited from being able to assess and measure the extent of each of the form of employee silence exhibited by employees (Brinsfield, 2013). Consequently, we highly encourage future researchers to develop scales that capture the three forms of employee silence classified in this article. By doing so, future research may provide managers with tools that help effectively capture the form and the degree of employee silence, which, in turn, allow the managers to establish a workplace environment where detrimental employee silence is minimized.

Conclusion

In this article, we have attempted to classify employee silence using the target's solicitation and employee's decision basis. Specifically, because the literature still lacks the understanding of how employee silence may be exhibited and the antecedents of different forms of employee silence (Brinsfield, 2013), we classify employee silence into three distinct forms: (a) unsolicited predetermined employee silence, (b) unsolicited issue-based employee silence, and (c) solicited target-based employee silence. Additionally, we discuss the theoretical perspective that can best explain the antecedents of each of these three forms of employee silence. As such, this article provides important implications for theory that may help guide future theoretical and empirical research in employee silence. More importantly, we believe that by understanding how employee silence may be exhibited, managers can better overcome the detrimental outcomes resulting from employee silence.

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