

Breaking Silence in Meetings

Teaching material based on:

*Szkudlarek, B., & Alvesson, M. (2024). Doing silence: how silence is produced in meetings. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 23(2), 304-324*

The authors consent & encourage other scholars to use this material in their teaching.



Academy
of Management

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Education

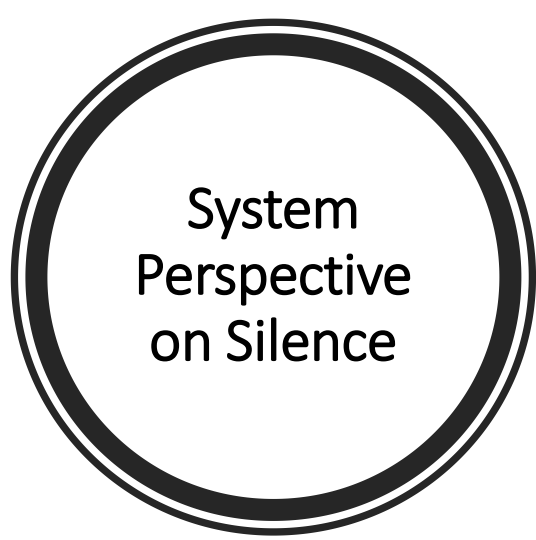
Notes on using this teaching material:

We encourage you to use these materials to teach about

- How silence can be perpetuated in organizations, and how it contributes to numerous dysfunctionalities;
- How silence can be broken through an organizational culture of participation and individuals activating their voice;
- The insights are relevant for both leaders and organizational members who want to create and be a part of thriving workplaces.

This material is suited to students of both under- and post-graduate levels, as well as for use in executive education.

Please be in touch if you have any feedback or questions
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- **Climate of silence:** employees' collective perceptions that speaking up is futile or dangerous, perhaps discouraged by managerial policies or practices (Morrison & Milliken, 2000)
- **The deaf-ear syndrome:** lack of consultative policies, denial of the problem, and blaming the victim which fosters a climate of silence (Pierce et al., 1998)
- **The spiral of silence:** the gradual suppression of minority voices (Noele-Neumann, 1974)




- **Quiescent silence:** withholding information due to fear of negative consequences of voicing one's views (Pinder & Harlos, 2001)
- **Acquiescent silence:** being silent due to the belief that one's voice is unwanted, unappreciated and ultimately futile (Pinder & Harlos, 2001)
- **Prosocial silence:** withholding voice for the benefit of others or the organisation (Van Dyne et al., 2003)
- **Opportunistic silence:** strategically withholding ideas, information, or opinions for self-benefit (Knoll & van Dick, 2013)
- **Inherent inability** to exercise voice (Donaghey et al., 2011)



Our research

- Silence is produced when individual and system factors interact; one should not be overstated over the other
- Semi-structured interviews with tenured academics (professors and associate professors) at BSUX, where dissatisfaction with organisational practices/policies was expressed
- Application of three core domains of institutional theorising of silence: structure, culture, agency



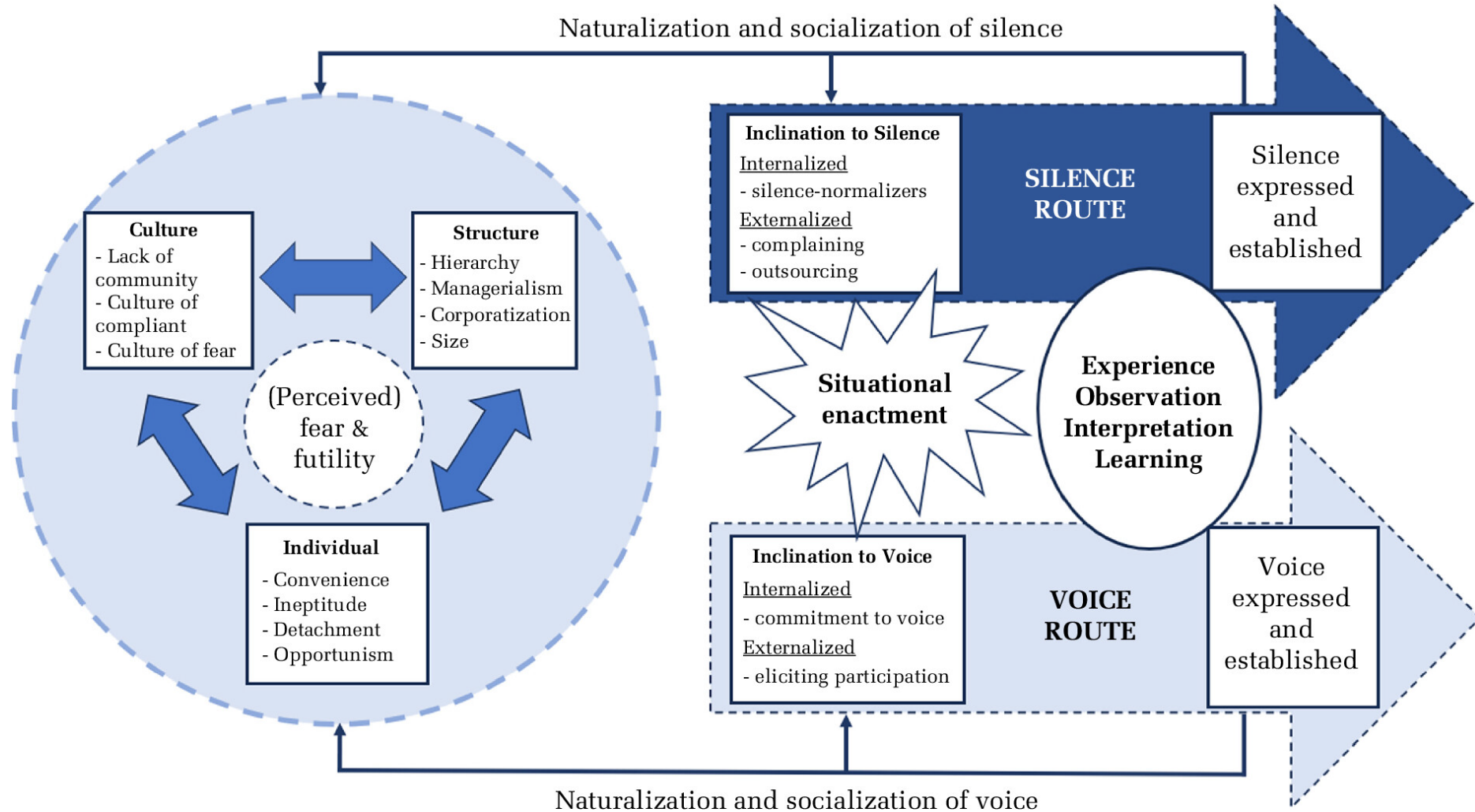
A system
perspective on our
findings

- **Structure:** A top-down-driven organizational hierarchy with management in the driving seat contributes to a lack of engagement, limited trust, and a restricted sense of community.
- **Culture:** The collective culture of silence is created due to a lack of community, complaining, and fear. Performative acts of moaning and groaning in more informal settings are observed rather than active voiced participation or support of others' contributions.

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- **Opportunism:** silence was employed strategically for personal interests and rewards, outweighing organizational goals
 - **Convenience:** participation was withheld for convenience of time and effort
 - **Ineptitude:** respondents withheld their views due to self-beliefs of lack of skills to speak up
 - **Detachment:** silence reflected lowered expectations from the organization and disengagement



Processual Model of Silence




Based on Szkudlarek, B., & Alvesson, M. (2024). Doing Silence: How Silence Is Produced in Meetings.

Academy of Management Learning & Education.



Breaking silence
in meetings -
How to create a
culture of
participation

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- Rethink meeting structures.
 - Reduce time spent on disseminating information.
 - Ensure everyone comes prepared to share their views.
 - Appoint devil's advocates to test ideas.
 - Use breakout groups to share and synthesize ideas.
 - Assign colleagues to propose and lead discussions on relevant topics.
 - Allocate workload time for implementing proposed changes.
 - Mentor newcomers for active participation.
 - Eliminate or reduce excessive policies and procedures that encourage passivity.



Breaking silence
in meetings -
Commit to
meaningful
participation

- Take responsibility for your organization.
- Overcome shyness and insecurities.
- Form alliances for a stronger collective voice.
- Stay engaged and committed to organizational improvement.
- Stop outsourcing the responsibility of raising important issues.
- Think long term; small suggestions can have lasting impacts.
- Be courageous; your voice matters.

Exercising voice should not be seen as a sign of bravery.

We are all responsible for creating organisations we want to work for.