EMPLOYEE SILENCE:
QUIESCENCE AND ACQUIESCENCE
AS RESPONSES TO PERCEIVED
INJUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

Although employee silence is pervasive in organizations, its study has been neglected for a variety of reasons, including the assumption that it is a unitary concept meaning little more than inactive endorsement. We review disparate literatures to reveal additional meanings and conceptual complexities related to silence to stimulate its study in work organizations. We develop the concept of employee silence and introduce two attendant forms (i.e. quiescence and acquiescence) along with their behavioral, affective, and cognitive components. We also offer a model that explains why some mistreated employees become silent, how some break their silence, and what organizational contexts produce and reinforce employee silence. Implications of the model for human resource management as well as for future research are discussed.
INTRODUCTION

It happened at my first big [military] gathering. Half of us were privates. We were 18 and so were not allowed to have alcohol, but tons of alcohol had been brought in by the course officers. At one point, one of the officers grabbed me and threw me over his shoulder. He brought me into a little kitchenette off the main hall while privates guarded the two doors at the front and the back. At first it seemed like a game. He was laughing and all the other guys were laughing – but when he threw me down on the floor I didn’t think it was a joke any more. I gave him a shot to the face – I was yelling at him to get off and I yelled rape. Then he pulled up my top and pulled down my pants. It was a complete sexual assault. It was intercourse (O’Hara, 1998a, p. 16).

Private Elaine Smith (pseudonym)

In the spring of 1998, the Canadian public was shocked by the publication in a respected national news magazine of allegations from former and still-enlisted soldiers (almost all female) that they had been harassed and, in some cases, raped by superior officers (Branswell, 1998a; Geddes, 1998). Once made public, the original 13 allegations snowballed into 24 in the subsequent issue, along with countless second-hand stories of abuse at military bases across the country. Together, the number and gravity of these allegations triggered rounds of denials and counter-charges from the military high command (O’Hara, 1998a) and other soldiers, both retired and still in uniform (Maclean’s, 1998). The military eventually established a special unit to investigate and to instigate counseling and redress for victims.

In North America, stories of abuse of women in the military are not new (see Francke, 1997). These Canadian allegations were presaged by the notorious Tailhook incident in the U.S. Air Force (Caproni & Finley, 1997; Office of the Inspector General, 1993), and the widely publicized harassment of women cadets at the Citadel (Carlson, 1995). In addition, research suggests that sexual harassment (Stockdale, 1996) and other forms of interactional injustice (i.e. mistreatment during informal, everyday interactions with bosses; see Harlos & Pinder, 1999) affect employees across many positions, organizations, and industries, although frequency estimates of workplace mistreatment almost certainly underestimate actual rates. Fear of reprisal is the most likely explanation for victims’ failures to report their mistreatment (Hotelling, 1991; Morrison & Milliken, 2000), especially among women (Rudman, Borgida & Robertson, 1995).

Yet, as recent cases in the Canadian military show, some victims do speak out about their mistreatment to people who can effect change and bring relief. Often, however, they hold their silence for several years. In some organizations, employees’ long-held silences are explained by codes of silence, organizational norms and practices that block disclosures of abuse. Codes of silence can be
both maintained and broken by perpetrators, witnesses (Caproni & Finley, 1997; Schmitt, 1992), and sometimes victims (O'Hara, 1998b) through public revelations. In recent theoretical work, Morrison and Milliken (2000) developed the concept of *climates of silence* to explain how norms in organizations influence some victims of abuse to keep quiet, often forever. Surprisingly, with some exceptions (e.g. Cohen, 1990; Morrison & Milliken, 2000), injustice-induced silence is theoretically undeveloped and empirically unexamined in organizational research given its persistence and pervasiveness. Why do some employees stay silent while others break their silence? More fundamentally, what individual and situational factors are associated with silence in organizations?

**Purpose and Boundaries**

In this paper, we explore the causes, forms, and meanings of silence, drawing on research and theory from a variety of disciplines and literatures, both organizational and alternate. We find that silence concepts comprise two broad categories: *acoustic* and *pragmatic*. In both categories, we discover three main themes about silence: (1) it is a ubiquitous topic that rarely garners much agreement among scholars, (2) it is usually studied by comparing it to concepts presumed to be its opposite, and (3) the contexts within which silence occurs (if it occurs) are crucial for interpreting its meaning and significance. Within the category of pragmatic silence, we focus on the importance of interactive and socio-cultural forms, using what is learned as a foundation for our exploration of employee silence in organizational settings. In particular, we provide evidence from wide-ranging literatures that silence can be an act of communication in itself, involving a range of cognitions, emotions, or intentions such as endorsement or objection. To further our argument that it is a behavior in organizations, we introduce two forms of silence, quiescence and acquiescence, illustrating and distinguishing between them as we develop a process model to explain how employee silence is instigated, maintained and, in some cases, broken. Finally, we explore the implications of our analysis for human resource management research, theory and practice.

Throughout our analysis, we limit our discussion to employee silence as a response to injustice rather than to its causal role as a strategic form of communication intended to affect others. Space constraints preclude us from developing an extended treatment of employee silence in benign or positive circumstances, whether as an antecedent or consequence of behavior in organizations. Finally, although we make recurrent reference to the events that occurred in the Canadian military (e.g. the quotation at the beginning of this paper), we do not imply that those events provide sufficient evidence for a formal grounded theory of
injustice and silence. Rather, our repeated use of this one case is for convenience and illustrative purposes only. We begin by introducing and discussing our definition of employee silence.

**Definition of Employee Silence**

We suggest that individual-level silence encompasses a range of feelings, thoughts, and actions, based on the premise, prevalent in nontraditional literatures but rare in organizational writings, that silence is a form of communication (cf. Tannen, 1985). Indeed, "... the deepest fears and most intense joys are wordless... Silence is the language of all strong passions: love, anger, surprise, fear" (Flesch, 1957 as cited in Bruneau, 1973, p. 34). Accordingly, we conceive of employee silence as a multifaceted concept that includes, but is not limited to, lack of speech or formal voice; in fact, it may occur in the midst of sound or language. Hence, we argue that employee silence can occur simultaneously with either sound or speech: it is not necessarily the opposite of either. Interestingly, recent research on sleep and its relation to wakefulness is analogous to our view of the paradoxical relationship between silence and sound or speech, as Seabrook (1999, p. 65) reports:

> For many years, sleep was thought to be the opposite of wakefulness - rest for the mind. But the prevailing trend in neurological studies of sleeping brains is toward an active-mind theory of sleep. In sleep, there is only a 20% decrease from waking neural activity.

The parallel for silence is clear: like sleep, silence is an active (if covert) process. Yet, unlike sleep, its paradoxical and elusive nature is not readily conducive to reductionist, physical study.

Specifically, we define employee silence as the withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individual’s behavioral, cognitive and/or affective evaluations of his or her organizational circumstances to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change or redress. By our definition, any communication that: (1) does not reflect a desire to alter circumstances, or that (2) is not directed to persons perceived as capable of ameliorating those circumstances does not comprise an attempt to break silence.

**Features and Implications of our Definition**

Here, we outline five key features and implications of our definition. First, we propose that in contexts of injustice, silence (i.e. both as a concept itself and in its relation to voice) is a dynamic process that moves and morphs in response to a variety of individual and situational factors. To illustrate, we return to the quotation from Private Elaine Smith that introduces this paper and observes
that she demanded that her assailant stop his attack, thereby expressing voice. We argue that she also engaged in a period of silence following the attack (and before she spoke to the media), indicated by her failure to express her discontent to authorities whom she believed could effect change or enact her desire for redress. Although attempts she might have made to seek redress from superior officers or others in positions to alleviate her situation would constitute attempts at voice, informing family members would not.

Second, our definition is concerned with the cognitive, emotional and behavioral states of employees in relation to their own or others’ circumstances when those circumstances directly affect the individual in question. Therefore, our concept of silence is intended to include the concept from Miceli and Near’s (1989) whistle-blowing research of “silent observers”; that is, people who are quiet about others’ actions that they perceive as unjust, illegal, or immoral. Although we remain curious about people who do not voice by “blowing the whistle,” for the purposes of this paper, we are not concerned with the perspectives of people who either report others’ silence or who employ silence as an offensive strategy or tactic in their own treatment of others (e.g. employing the “silent treatment”). Instead, we are examining silence from the viewpoints of victims or recipients of injustice, rather than those who may have perpetrated injustices or third parties who might wish to observe either the injustice or the resulting silence.

A third feature of our definition is that silence can be broken by any or all of a range of communicative media or acts. Hence, a written letter or e-mail message, an oral utterance, or even deliberately-expressed body language may be used to communicate a desire to ameliorate unjust circumstances. Fourth, our definition allows that a person may be silent in circumstances that are either positive or negative without his or her conscious awareness. Our present interest, however, is on employee silence as a response to situations of personally-experienced injustice of which people are consciously aware. A final implication of our definition is that it may continue to be difficult (perhaps, in some case, impossible) for outside observers to register others’ silence. Hence, research into employee silence can be very challenging, requiring unconventional methods.

In short, silence is a fascinating (if ineffable) phenomenon. Yet, as we see in the following sections, it has attracted the interest and attention of many scholars from many disciplines for many years. Indeed, the main library at the University of Texas holds more than 700 books dealing with silence from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives (Wilmer, 1996), revealing broadly-conflicting views of it (see Jaworski, 1997) and its merit (e.g. “silence is golden” vs. “the squeaky wheel gets the grease”). Shortly, we examine the role and
significance of the concept in a sample of these disparate disciplines, seeking to find patterns that may enlighten, facilitate, or provide lessons for the study of employee silence. We begin, however, with a brief summary of the history of the concept in the organizational literature.

HIRSCHMAN'S LEGACY: RESPONSES TO OBJECTIONABLE STATES OF AFFAIRS

Since their introduction by Hirschman (1970), the concepts of voice and silence as responses to dissatisfaction have generated very different levels of interest among organizational scholars. Hirschman's definition of voice (i.e. "any attempt at all to change rather than escape from an objectionable state of affairs," p. 30) encompassed direct petitions, protests, and appeals to management or other higher authorities, including efforts to mobilize public opinion. Since Hirschman's (1970) book was published, studies have traditionally focused on voice and exit as the two primary ways that employees respond to dissatisfaction, including that induced by perceived mistreatment.

For example, when conceptualized as participation in decision-making, voice significantly influences perceptions of procedural fairness and organizational justice (Folger, 1977; Lind, Kanfer & Early, 1990; Sheppard, Lewicki & Minton, 1992). By contrast, individual-level silence has received little research attention, probably, in part, because Hirschman (1970) devoted far less attention to silence in his book than he devoted to exit and voice, electing not even to formally define it. Instead, he framed silence as a passive but constructive response synonymous with loyalty. According to Hirschman, although some dissatisfied, loyal employees voice their complaints, others stay and "suffer in silence, confident that things will soon get better" (1970, p. 38). Sometimes they do; other times they do not.

Conflicting Views of Silence: Endorsement or Objection?

Since Hirschman (1970), the organizational sciences have generally continued to equate silence with loyalty (e.g. Farrell, 1983), often implicitly assuming that silence represents inaction (e.g. Rousseau, 1995) and endorsement of the status quo. For example, employees who experience unfair treatment but do not file formal complaints are commonly regarded as silent but consenting (e.g. Boroff, 1989). Whether their silence might reflect informal, covert dissent with behavioral, affective, or cognitive elements is usually overlooked. Hence, silence
remains a neglected, albeit common, response of dissatisfied (e.g. Kolarska & Aldrich, 1980; Spencer, 1986; Withey & Cooper, 1989) and unjustly treated employees (Harlos, 1998).

Two notable exceptions to the historic neglect of silence are found in a theoretical review by Cohen (1990) and a conceptual model of its structural antecedents by Morrison and Milliken (2000). Cohen was probably the first to reject the notion that silence necessarily implies endorsement and to explore its origins among people who are unjustly treated or observing mistreatment. He argued that silence not only may signify objection and dissent, but that it may also result from a lack of information, an absence of voice opportunities, and a belief that voicing would be futile or dangerous (see also Morrison & Milliken, 2000). According to Cohen, organizations have a vested interest in exclusive interpretations of silence as endorsement; they benefit by substantiating their claims of justice, even (indeed, especially) when justice claims are untrue.

Consistent with conceptualizations of silence as objection, Parker and August (1997) proposed that some dissatisfied employees combine silence with exit, to quit quietly in what they label principled turnover. Several Canadian soldiers’ accounts reflect this concept. For example, before the exposé in Maclean’s magazine, Private Elaine Smith did not disclose her rape to anyone who could effect change. Instead,

A couple of months later I went to another one of these parties and I saw another woman go through the same thing. It was a different guy but he did the same thing: threw her over his shoulder and walked her into that area and the guys blocked the door. I hate when I get to this part of the story because I didn’t do anything. I started to walk to that kitchen, looked at the two guys guarding the door and I just stopped. I didn’t do anything and that’s why I decided to quit the military that night... I put in for a voluntary release the next morning (O’Hara, 1998a, p. 16).

Marketing research also acknowledges silence as a form of objection. In one study, two-thirds of dissatisfied customers remained silent about their dissatisfaction, or they expressed negative opinions to other prospective customers rather than complain to those providing the faulty goods or service (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998; see also Richins, 1983; Singh, 1990). Notwithstanding these exceptions, most organizational theorists and researchers adopt the traditional definition of silence as lack of voice denoting endorsement. As a result, they overlook much of its communicative significance and its behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components.

A major explanation for the paucity of empirical research on employee silence must be its paradoxical nature. Studying silence generally requires speaking out, in one form or another. Yet, not all speaking out constitutes the
breaking of silence, nor even, possibly, an awareness of one's own prior states of silence. Moreover, as we discuss shortly, silence can communicate (cf. Tannen, 1995).

Among the few empirical studies explicitly examining employee silence, weak construct validity of relevant measures is often a problem because of failures to come to grips with the boundaries of the construct itself (see Schwab, 1980; Withey & Cooper, 1989). These limitations, in turn, partially account for failures to predict or explain silent organizational behavior. Nevertheless, to stimulate additional insights toward concept development and empirical research on employee silence, we now review meanings of silence in literatures of disciplines other than the organizational sciences with a view to promoting an understanding of silence in organizational contexts.

FUNCTIONS, MEANINGS, AND FORMS OF SILENCE

Jensen (1973) proposed that silence serves five dualistic functions: (1) it both brings people together and pushes them apart; (2) it can both harm and heal people; (3) it provides and hides information; (4) it signals deep thought and/or no thought; and (5) it can convey both assent and dissent. Our analysis draws largely on the last three functions for their intuitive and, to a lesser degree, empirical relevance within contexts of workplace injustice (see Harlos, 1998).

In addition to serving multiple functions, silence has multiple meanings. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary identifies five distinct but related meanings of silence: (1) the state or fact of keeping silent; a refraining from speech or from making noise; (2) the absence of any sound or noise; (3) a withholding of knowledge or omission of mention; (4) failure to communicate or write; and (5) oblivion or obscurity.

Sobkowiak (1997) proposed a useful distinction, one which we adopt here, to integrate these multiple meanings by regarding silence as an acoustic (i.e. sound-based) or pragmatic (i.e. speech-related) phenomenon.³ Acoustically, silence is rooted in the physical domain as an absence of sound waves. Pragmatic silences, however, are rooted in the human domain and usually reflect an absence of speech for instrumental or strategic purposes. For example, some people intentionally withhold speech when they perceive danger in voicing (see Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Sobkowiak argued that the first of Webster's five definitions of silence is both acoustic and pragmatic (see also Jaworski, 1993). The remaining definitions are either exclusively acoustic (i.e. the second) or pragmatic (i.e. the latter three definitions). We now examine acoustic and pragmatic silences more closely.
Three recurrent issues dominate the literature that defines silence acoustically: (1) a tendency to describe silence by juxtaposing it with its conceptual opposite, sound; (2) the importance of context for understanding the meaning of any particular silence; and, most fundamentally (3) questions as to whether acoustic silence is even possible! Early disputants of its very existence included Cage (1961), who claimed that “there is no such thing as absolute silence, something is always happening that makes a sound” (cited by Bruneau, 1973, p. 17). Likewise, Muldoon argued that “under normal conditions, an absolute silent realm does not exist . . . To make an environment entirely soundless is technically difficult and remains relatively achievable only under laboratory conditions” (1996, p. 283).

In contrast, others maintain that acoustic silence is possible but only in relation to sound. Sontag explains:

Silence never ceases to imply its opposite and depend on its presence . . . so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence. . . . any given silence has its identity as a stretch of time being perforated by sound (1969, p. 11).

Like Sontag, many theorists have argued that silence is inexorably bound to sound. For example, Saville-Troike (1985) observed that silence in industrialized societies is rarely free of noise from construction, appliances, traffic, barking dogs, and other background sounds which ordinarily seem insignificant until made salient (or silenced). Moreover, Saville-Troike pointed to the Tantra in Hindu religion and its descriptions of sound arising from four different parts of the human body, although only that from the mouth is audible. These contradictions and controversies (see Jaworski, 1993) have prompted some scholars to label silence a “slippery concept” that may be better understood by conceptual integration between it and sound:

. . . it seems futile to continually insist on pitting silence against what we think to be its opposite, namely, what we hear and listen to. Is silence ever the ideal and the total other of sound? Does silence not lie somewhere on the scale that marks the entire range of sonic perceptions in the life-world? (Muldoon, 1996, p. 277)

Thus, Muldoon and others argued that to learn about silence we must uncover relationships between the auditory qualities of silence, orality, and surrounding contexts. The paradoxical notion that sound is required to understand acoustic silence we label as the **integrationist view**. As we see next, this view dominates the literatures on both acoustic and pragmatic silences.
Whereas sound is the putative opposite of acoustic silence, speech is typically cast as the contrasting concept for pragmatic silence (see Dauenhauer, 1980), hence an integrationist view underlies much of this literature as well. In other words, many scholars in this tradition believe that the boundaries between the concepts are indistinct, and that the human mind can accommodate speech and silence simultaneously (e.g. McCarthy, 1983; Wiggins, 1983). Hence, Sontag (1969) suggested that the communicative significance of Harpo Marx’s muteness derived from his positioning as the silent one surrounded by manic talkers, especially his brother Groucho. Similarly, the playwright Harold Pinter (1964), as cited in Hollis (1970, p. 15) posited that

the speech we hear is an indication of that which we don’t hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place . . . we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid.

This quotation illustrates both communication (whether with oneself or others) in general, and self-protection (consistent with fear of reprisal as a key determinant of silence) in particular, as key strategies behind pragmatic silence. Bruneau (1973) further explained that “there appear to be levels of communicative functioning associated with imposed silence. . . even when not speaking aloud, man carries on a continuous interior monologue” (p. 17). In the same vein, an editorial in the American Journal of Psychotherapy asserted that silence is a state during which we “commune with ourselves” (1993, p. 167). Other studies explore pragmatic silences as communication devices in political protest (Bruneau), symbolic expression (Ehrenhaus, 1988), and even reverence for God (Szuchewycz, 1997).

Finally, Bruneau (1973) outlined three forms of pragmatic silence that can communicate either assent or dissent: psycholinguistic, interactive, and sociocultural silences. Psycholinguistic silences, rooted in semiotics, comprise pauses and rapid, unintentional junctures in speech (e.g. the use of “uhs”). Interactive silence refers to longer-held pauses in conversation that often contain inferences, judgments, and affect. In contrast, socio-cultural silence reflects group and organization-level pauses that are often highly formalized. In the following sections, we draw heavily on the concepts of interactive and socio-cultural varieties of pragmatic silence for their relevance to individual and organizational-level functioning. (Because we believe that psycho-linguistic silence has limited relevance to employee silence, we do not examine it further.)
FORMS AND FEATURES OF PRAGMATIC SILENCE

The Literature on Interactive Silence

As a form of pragmatic silence, interactive silence is often strategic and intentional. It can allow us to exert control over others by commanding attention (e.g. when typically talkative people suddenly become silent), or by creating ambiguity in interpersonal exchanges that compels others to question their previous judgments and possibly alter relationships (Bruneau, 1973). Interactive silences can be constructive or destructive (cf. Jensen, 1973). Their dualistic nature is evidenced in their capacity to act as rewards or punishments by elevating or diminishing the status of the person receiving the silence (Watts, 1997). In this sense, interactive silence can signify both approval and disfavor. Among its negative potentialities, Bruneau (1973) regards *silent insults* as one of the most powerful punishments levied against subordinates by authority figures. Similarly, Yiannis' (1998) review of insults includes being ignored and kept waiting, both of which arguably involve silence or the perception of "silent treatment" by others. Interactive silence can also signal prejudice: we may be unwilling or unable to speak to people whom we are biased against or revulsed by (Houck & Gass, 1997; Saunders, 1985). Even when there are no harmful intentions, interactive silences can be deleterious: "if [they] become too long, interpersonal relationships are strained, uncertain, and perhaps threatened or (sic)beyond repair" (Bruneau, 1973, p. 29).

On the positive side, interactive silence allows opportunities for self-evaluation or self-revelation (*American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 1993). It also facilitates decision-making by giving people time to consider what others’ unusual utterances may mean, or to interpret the significance of ambiguous or threatening circumstances (Bruneau, 1973). As Kahn observed, it provides

> the possibility of choosing what to do first or next... Non-speaking gives man [sic] the power to enclose or disclose himself. He is free to make himself known or not, and this is, in the existentialist sense, an active attitude (1958, pp. 204–205).

Interactive silences, therefore, allow people to make inferences about verbal exchanges, including judgments about another’s character, motives, and personality. For example, interactive silence is a common reaction when we meet someone whom we perceive as different. In the face of such uncertainty, we can “buy time” to contemplate greetings or other social gambits using interactive silence (Sifianou, 1997).
Contextual Factors Affecting Interactive Silences
The context within which interactive silence occurs affects its meaning. From an integrationist view, speech itself is an obvious contextual factor. As Tyler (1978, p. 15) summarized,

what is not said... is often more important than what is said. Choosing to be inexplicit or silent in a context appropriate to explicitness and speech can be a way of saying something far too important for speech itself.

Social scientific theory and research on pluralistic ignorance (Miller & McFarlane, 1987), conformity (Asch, 1951), emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), principled organizational dissent (Graham, 1986), bystander effects (Latane & Darley, 1968), and whistle-blowing (Miceli & Near, 1989) also demonstrate the importance of various contextual factors on whether, why, and how people hold their silence or break it. Two contextual factors of special interest to us, particularly in light of the Canadian military, are power differences between perpetrators and victims of injustice and the gender of persons involved.

Power. Empirical research supports the role of power and related concepts (i.e. dominance, authority) in sexual harassment (see Stockdale, 1996) and interactional injustice (Harlos & Pinder, 1999). However, there is little direct empirical evidence of links between power and silence in organizations. Instead, theory and research tend to rely on power concepts to explain perpetrators' behavior (e.g. strong needs for personal power) or demographic characteristics of victims that may impel their power-related motives (e.g. young, unmarried, women of color; see Stockdale, 1996). However, there is theoretical support for the notion that people's perceptions of unequal power relations affect employee silence (cf. Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

For our purpose, Scott's (1990) socio-cultural treatise on power dependence is significant for explaining silence, as the military examples cited in this article also illustrate. Scott argued that there are public transcripts (i.e. voice) and hidden transcripts (i.e. silence) among dominant and subordinate groups. When power is exercised, both transcripts are produced. Of particular interest to us are the gaps between subordinates' hidden and public transcripts: Scott interprets these as perceived dependency. Thus, an employee whose public transcript is smiling submission but whose hidden transcript is rife with rage and fantasies of aggression against her supervisor has a large transcript gap, indicating her profound powerlessness. Scott's conceptualization of hidden transcripts implies that employee silence is a distinct behavior with cognitive and emotional elements.
Power dependence also underlies a silence strategy that we call *tactical joking*\(^5\) to intentionally defuse what is perceived as an unsafe situation (Harlos, 1998). Private Tracey Constable kept silent after her attack by a military base doctor. Instead of disclosing to someone who could effect change, she used tactical joking: “I tried to laugh it off. He was a captain and a doctor – he had all this authority and who was I, a little private” (O’Hara, 1998, p. 16). Together, these results lead us to suggest that power dependence arising from hierarchical levels increases both the frequency and duration of injustice-induced silence. Research on asymmetrical power relations associated with hierarchies supports our view, suggesting that differences in information, opportunities and resources contribute to asymmetries and power dependence (Kanter, 1977; Maneiro, 1986).

**Gender.** Besides power, gender is important for extended interactive silence. On the basis of a study of same and mixed-gender work groups, Molseed (1989) reported four types of silence: nonsequiturs, withdrawal, supportive, and inexpressive silences. Females were more likely to use supportive silences, indicated by nodding heads and smiling to encourage collaboration, whereas males tended to use inexpressive silences (e.g. failure to respond to requested information) and nonsequiturs to compete with or dominate others. Other research indicates that females are more silent in the presence of males (Tannen, 1990). To explain these and other findings, Lips (1994) draws on gender-based socialization and sexual stereotyping as sources for habits of silence and self-doubt among women.

**Combining power and gender.** Feminist scholarship traditionally has contended that gender and power are inseparable (e.g. Davis, Leijenaar & Oldersma, 1991). Here, we focus on research (feminist and otherwise) in linguistics and domestic abuse for insights into the dual roles of power and gender in social relations. Some linguistics studies, for example, suggest that the language differences between dominant and subordinate groups can reflect the effects of both gender and power because imbalances in social power and status can create gender-related language differences (e.g. Lind & O’Barr, 1979 as cited in White, 1990). Consistent with this research stream, we argue that, when combined, these factors foster silence. As Bezdek claimed, “... wherever social power is unequal, so is expressive power” (1992, pp. 568–569). Indeed, most Canadian soldiers “... were assaulted when they were most vulnerable, as raw recruits or recently minted privates in their late teens or early 20s – away from home for the first time, newly instilled with fear of rank” (O’Hara, 1998a, p. 18), further supporting the combined effects of power and gender in explaining both mistreatment and silence. Private Tracey Constable illustrates this in her reasons
for not reporting her sexual attack by a military doctor: "Being a private and being a female . . . I knew no one would even listen to me" (O'Hara, 1998d, p. 17). Research on domestic abuse sheds further light on how power and gender combine with injustice and silent behavior. For example, studies demonstrate that unequal power, together with the extremity of intermittent mistreatment, are key determinants of women's emotional attachments to abusive partners (e.g. Dutton & Painter, 1993). Additionally, domestic abuse research examines the psychological consequences of abuse among victims. Common findings refer to a range of cognitive and emotional symptoms, including shame, lowered self-esteem and self-blame (see Cleveland & McNamara, 1996; Gutek & Koss, 1993), experienced both while victims are silent as well as after they have broken their silence. Together, these findings confirm the important roles of both gender and power as contextual factors affecting employee silence.

The Literature on Socio-cultural Silence

Linguistic theorists have argued that socio-cultural silence results from institutional prohibitions and cultural norms concerning verbal behavior effected through individual-level silence. For example, institutional or religious authorities such as judges and deities commonly offer (i.e. "you have the right to remain silent") or require (i.e. "silence in the court") silence of individuals, producing socio-cultural silences (see Szuchewycz, 1997). Norms for socio-cultural silence exist both among common members of a culture as well as between common members and authority figures (cf. Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Socio-cultural silence frequently functions as a control device (like interactive silence) through socialization practices and norms that are reinforced by authority figures who employ silence to ignore subordinates and reduce both others' access and their own accountability (Bruneau, 1973). Just as the dynamics of interactive silence offered insights into micro-level aspects of employee silence, so socio-cultural silence prompts macro-level considerations of employee silence. In particular, we regard codes of silence (i.e. defined earlier as organizational norms and practices that block disclosures of abuse) as a narrow example of socio-cultural silence, "the characteristic manner in which entire social and cultural orders refrain from speech and manipulate both psycholinguistic and interactive silences" (Bruneau, 1973, p. 36).

Contextual Considerations Affecting Socio-cultural Silence

Similar to the way it plays a key role in the understanding of interactive silence, context is also critical in our interpretation of socio-cultural silence (Saville-Troike, 1985). For example, differences among cultural groups in their propensity
to speak with strangers can cause stereotyping and negative attributions about individuals whose interpersonal styles are unfamiliar (see Scollon, 1985; Houck & Gass, 1997; Sajavaara & Lehtonen, 1997). These differences in cultural expectations can prompt some to regard taciturn people as polite whereas others consider them rude (Sifianou, 1997). Saunders (1985) showed that in some cultures the deliberate use of noise and silence may be stylized strategies people employ when there is ambivalence about the expression of emotion. Among some Italians, for example, he noted that the more serious the potential for interpersonal conflict, the more likely they will select silence over verbal expression. As well, Saville-Troike noted that:

Utterances are also commonly completed in silence when the topic is a particularly delicate one or the word which would be used is taboo, or when the situation is emotionally loaded and the speaker is ‘at a loss’ for words. The Japanese term haragei ‘wordless communication’ captures the essence of this latter type of silence (1985, p. 7).

ORGANIZATIONAL CAUSES OF EMPLOYEE SILENCE

Earlier we considered the critical role of context in interpretations of employee silence. In this section, we argue that contextual factors can also be powerful causes of employee silence, particularly among unjustly-treated individuals. In fact, there has been intermittent interest in social science for many years directed at how features of context can be characterized as moral (or immoral), just (or unjust) (cf. Victor & Cullen, 1988), or politically charged (cf. Ferris, Russ & Fandt, 1989; Victor & Cullen, 1988), influencing the morality of participants’ responses and their decisions to exit, express voice or remain silent. Hence, our focus here shifts from silence as a noun or adjective (e.g. the state of being silent) to silence as a verb implying action (e.g. being silenced), prompting us to explore questions about whether and how certain organizational settings generate and sustain employee silence. In so doing, we draw on three different but related concepts: (1) cultures of injustice; (2) climates of silence; and (3) the deaf ear syndrome.

How Organizations Produce Employee Silence

Recently, an inductive investigation by Harlos (1999) of employees from 33 different organizations across 12 industries found that some organizations have cultures of injustice, a nomothetic concept developed to reflect shared meanings among mistreated employees of what working within unjust employment relationships is like. Specifically, from employees’ descriptions, she identified
six dimensions that capture common elements of such workplaces. Together, the dimensions depict conditions of intense supervisory control, strong suppression of conflict, valuing of job relations over human relations, and emphasis on production through competitive individualism.

Conducting empirical studies of individuals across several organizations at the same time allows researchers to identify influences from organizational factors (Rousseau & House, 1994). Findings from Harlos' (1999) study revealed both structural and procedural correlates of unjust cultures. Structural correlates included ambiguous hierarchies of authority (i.e. unclear reporting structures; Weber, 1947), high centralization (i.e. decision-making authority placed at the top of the organizational hierarchy; Pugh, Hickson, Hinings & Turner, 1968), and low formalization (i.e. minimal standardization of jobs and their protocols; Pugh et al., 1968), whereas procedural correlates included authoritarian management styles, poor communication, poorly-conducted performance reviews, and haphazard decision-making (consistent with the concept of organized anarchy; Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972).

In a related vein, Morrison and Milliken (2000) defined a climate of silence as any organizational context that is "... characterized by two shared beliefs: (a) that speaking up about problems in the organization is not worth the effort, and (b) that voicing one's opinions and concerns is dangerous." They identify a complex array of organizational and contextual factors that may create and foster climates of silence. These factors, including patterns of organizational policies and structures, demographic characteristics, belief structures of top management teams, and processes of collective sense-making and communication, are incorporated in a model explaining how lower-level employees become disillusioned and/or fearful about speaking out.

Similarly, preliminary studies have examined organizational failures to respond to employees' harassment complaints (Peirce, Smolinski & Rosen, 1998) or to broader injustice complaints (Harlos, 2000). Such organizational inaction, termed the deaf ear syndrome by Peirce et al. (1998), can result in substantial costs from litigation, decreased productivity, and increased turnover. Thus, the deaf ear syndrome functions as an organizational norm that discourages employees' direct and open expression of their discontent.

Interestingly, despite their unique points of emphasis, the concepts of cultures of injustice, climates of silence, and the deaf ear syndrome each suggest that some organizational contexts systemically and routinely (perhaps even predictably) generate injustices while fostering an atmosphere that discourages unjustly-treated individuals from breaking their silence to improve their situations. Further theoretical and empirical work is needed, however, to more closely examine the similarities and differences among these concepts.
The Role of Organizational Context in the Case of the Canadian Military

A fertile setting for the further study of the role of organizational contexts in producing employee silence appears to be the Canadian (or any country's) military. Although precise mechanisms or processes by which silence is created remain unclear, published accounts confirm the fundamental role of context with revelations that several soldiers' silences were due in part to their beliefs that the abuse inflicted upon them was simply "the way things are," an unfortunate but fixed feature of the organizational context. Indeed, despite his anger at his sister's rape, Private Elaine Smith's brother told her "this is what happens to women who come into the military. He told me to accept it and get over it" (O'Hara, 1998, p. 16). In withholding knowledge of her rape from those who could effect change, she recalled "I thought: 'Well, this is the hazing for women - something I've gone through and won't go through again'" (O'Hara, p. 16). Others reported deeply-held beliefs about the futility of informing their superiors because of the traditional failure of military organizations to take soldiers' complaints of mistreatment seriously, or to deal with them effectively (O'Hara, 1998b, 1998d; see also Frankle, 1997; Lenney, 1949; O'Day, 1974).

FORMS OF EMPLOYEE SILENT BEHAVIOR

To this point, we have shown that silence is not a unitary concept, and that it can be caused and maintained by a variety of factors. Moreover, its multiple forms can have multiple meanings, depending on the context(s) within which it occurs. In particular, in contexts of injustice, silence can reflect anything but inactive endorsement, as the literature review and military examples indicate. Rather, silence can be associated with substantive (if covert) feelings of fear, depression, and anger, attitudes of low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts and actions (O'Hara, 1998a). Conceptual development of silence is challenging, however, in part because of its conflicting yet simultaneous valuations as both positive and negative (see Tannen, 1985) that result in unavoidable subjectivity and ambiguity. But, according to Tannen, the determining factor in people's evaluations of silence as a good or bad thing is whether they feel something should be said. When people feel something should be said, silence is experienced as uncomfortable and is perceived as omission.

Following Tannen (1985), we believe that people's evaluations of whether something should be said is pivotal to understanding employee silence. Furthermore, we suggest that people's views of the circumstances surrounding their silence affects not only whether they feel that something should be said but also whether something can be said. Thus, our attention at this stage of concept development is not focused on silence as positive or negative per se,
but on people's degree of acceptance of organizational events and conditions that produce and reinforce silent organizational behavior within contexts of injustice. Some people, for example, are silent while preparing themselves, with only the slightest provocation or opportunity, to break their silence. Others who are silent are much less close to expressing voice, and are less vigilant for opportunities to do so. Still others accept events and conditions that they find unjust for long periods of time while being minimally aware of their own silence, of alternatives to their circumstances, or of alternatives to their silent responses. Like Tannen (1985), we regard each of these silences as omissions that reflect different underlying evaluations of whether something should and/or can be said.

We introduce two forms of employee silence to capture what we regard as the pivotal variations of people's silences in unjust work settings: employee quiescence and acquiescence. We distinguish between these two forms of employee silence in relation to their properties along eight dimensions: voluntariness, consciousness, acceptance, stress level, awareness of alternatives, propensity to voice, propensity to exit, and dominant emotions.

Employee Quiescence

Further to our preliminary definition of employee silence introduced earlier (i.e. the withholding of oral or written expression about employees' behavioral, cognitive, and/or affective evaluations of their organizational circumstances to persons who can effect change or redress), we propose employee quiescence as one form of silence that represents deliberate omission. In contexts of workplace injustice, it is an uncomfortable, conscious state that can be altered on one's own or with others' assistance or provocation. A state of quiescence connotes disagreement with one's circumstances, in effect suffering in silence while being aware of existing alternatives to change the status quo, yet unwilling to explore them. Nevertheless, quiescent employees are ready to break their silence to change the circumstances that fostered or produced the silence.

By our definition, the Canadian soldiers who disclosed their mistreatment to the media following the first set of published allegations were languishing in states of quiescence immediately before the revelations and allegations were made. Despite their prior lack of public protest, they did not accept their organizational circumstances as fair or inevitable. Private Tracey Constable's response (i.e. remaining silent for 11 years after being raped by a military doctor) illustrates:

She [felt] ... that she would not be believed by the military brass or by a system that often favored rank over reason ... Instead, Constable left the Forces with her secret, abandoning
the career she loved. For more than a decade, Constable says, she ‘rehearsed in my mind a thousand times’ how to tell someone what happened to her. But she kept silent - until . . . she picked up the May 25 [1998] issue of Maclean’s and cried as she read the heart-breaking stories of women who claimed they had been sexually assaulted by military men (O’Hara, 1998, p. 17).

During her protracted silence, Tracey was very much aware that her treatment was unfair, and she remained ready for opportunities to break her silence to those who could effect change or redress.

Some insight into long-held silences is provided by the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), a phenomenon by which we assess the degree of public support an opinion enjoys before expressing that opinion. If we perceive strong support, we feel more confident about the legitimacy of our view, and are more willing to disclose it publicly. However, when public support is seen as weak, we tend to view ourselves as a part of a “deviant minority,” and we perpetuate a downward spiral of silence to avoid further social isolation (Kennamer, 1990). In the Canadian military, the first wave of public allegations was evidence of public support for still-silent soldiers. It also challenged their self-perceptions as a deviant minority and reduced the perceived risks of social isolation from their own public disclosure, thereby encouraging soldiers to break their silences. Once a few soldiers had spoken up, many others followed quickly.

Employee Acquiescence

In contrast, to be acquiescent is to submit (Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language, 1965), perhaps even to condone. Employee acquiescence thus implies a deeply-felt acceptance of organizational circumstances, a taking-for-granted of the situation and limited awareness that alternatives exist. In unjust circumstances, acquiescence amounts to ignoring existing alternatives and lacking a desire to seek any.

Acquiescence is a deeper state of silence than quiescence. It requires more assistance or provocation to be broken than does quiescence. Acquiescent employees are less conscious of their silence and are less ready or willing to change than their quiescent counterparts. Like quiescence, it is uncomfortable but its motivational capacity is weaker. People in deep acquiescence have given up hope of improvement and become more or less oblivious to the importance of external events that may provide grounds for hope and a possibility for amelioration. It takes a lot more to motivate them into action (such as expressing voice) than it does to motivate a quiescent employee to speak out or complain. For example, we consider Canadian soldiers as acquiescent who continued to withhold public knowledge of their mistreatment, having succumbed to a sense
of inevitability about their circumstances, despite the nation-wide attention and support the Maclean's exposé generated. We suggest that, to this day some mistreated soldiers remain in states of acquiescence, discounting the merits of speaking out and accepting their pain and humiliation as a natural, inevitable part of military life.

Comparing Employee Quiescence and Acquiescence

Table 1 and Fig. 1 provide two vehicles for comparing employee quiescence and employee acquiescence. Table 1 compares the two forms of silence in terms of eight dimensions that characterize the phenomenological states involved as well as the salience required of any external event to motivate the silent employee to break his silence. For example, Table 1 indicates that quiescence is a relatively voluntary and conscious state in which employees have not accepted their "objectionable state of affairs" (Hirschman, 1970). Acceptance of the status quo is comparatively low, stress levels are relatively high, and employees are more likely to be aware of alternatives (or more willing to create them or respond to them if alternatives arise). It takes far less provocation by outside agents or subsequent organizational events to trigger attempts to express voice or to exit the scene altogether. The dominant emotions of employees in quiescence are fear, anger, cynicism, despair and possibly depression. The key point is that they have not given up.

In contrast, acquiescent employees are silent more or less involuntarily, and without conscious awareness of their state. Tolerance for the status quo is relatively high; acquiescent employees have accepted their circumstances as normal,

Table 1. Dimensions of Quiescence and Acquiescence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>QUIESCENCE</th>
<th>ACQUIESCENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VOLUNTARINESS</td>
<td>Relatively voluntary</td>
<td>Relatively involuntary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONSCIOUSNESS</td>
<td>Conscious</td>
<td>Less conscious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACCEPTANCE</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate to high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRESS LEVEL</td>
<td>Moderate to high</td>
<td>Low to moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AWARENESS OF ALTERNATIVES</td>
<td>Relatively high</td>
<td>Relatively low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROPENSITY TO VOICE</td>
<td>Relatively high</td>
<td>Relatively low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROPENSITY TO EXIT</td>
<td>Relatively high</td>
<td>Relatively low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOMINANT EMOTIONS</td>
<td>Fear, Anger, Despair,</td>
<td>Resignation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cynicism, Depression</td>
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</tbody>
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Fig. 1. Hypothesized Relationship Between Salience of Event and the Breaking of Silence for Quiescent and Acquiescent Employees.
or to be expected. Hence, stress levels are comparatively low and employees are not highly motivated to seek or create new alternatives to their circumstances. Therefore, acquiescent employees are less likely to express voice or quit than are quiescent employees. As suggested in Table 1, resignation is their dominant affective state.

Figure 1 provides an alternative representation of the similarities and differences between quiescent and acquiescent states. The horizontal axis of Fig. 1 represents the salience and significance of the events or agents that are required to motivate and enable employees in the two states to express voice, to break their silence. The vertical axis represents the probability of such action. As shown in Fig. 1, we hypothesize a negatively-accelerating relationship between the salience of external events and the probability of the expression of voice among quiescent individuals. Their awareness of the objectionability of their circumstances keeps them relatively vigilant for cues from the environment that a change in those circumstances is justified or possible. Hence, when *Maclean's* magazine published preliminary allegations of abuse in the military, it did not take long for quiescent soldiers to come forth and break their silence and a snowball effect occurred.

By contrast, we hypothesize a positively-accelerating relationship between event salience and the probability of voice among acquiescent employees. Acquiescent individuals have accepted their circumstances as more-or-less normal, and so are far less to become aroused to change those circumstances when outside events occur to suggest that something is wrong. However, once other people have spoken up in sufficient numbers, even acquiescent employees may grow to consider the unacceptability of their circumstances. When that occurs, as we hypothesize shortly, they may become quiescent and prepared to take action.

**AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF EMPLOYEE SILENCE IN ORGANIZATIONS**

In this section, we integrate the literatures reviewed with our concepts of employee quiescence and acquiescence, offering a processual model of how employees move into and out of states of silence in response to unjust treatment. The model is developed and explained in Fig. 2.

Figure 2 indicates that organizational events or conditions act as catalysts for the possible, eventual emergence of silence following a two-stage appraisal of the events, similar to that proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The primary stage of appraisal involves a judgment of whether the event is unjust (see Arrow 1). We propose that employees' demographic characteristics such as cultural
Fig. 2. Silence Responses to Organizational Injustice.
background and gender will influence the primary appraisal process (Arrow 2), as will any prior direct or indirect experiences of workplace injustice (Arrow 3). If no injustice is perceived, the process stops. However, if injustice is perceived, the second stage (or secondary appraisal process) is instigated (see Arrow 4). The secondary level of appraisal involves employees' assessments of whether circumstances can be ameliorated by the expression of voice. In some cases, the employee will express concern, disagreement, or protest immediately, even as the injustice is underway (Arrow 5). Any crying, protesting, or begging by the women soldiers as they were being beaten or raped would illustrate this preliminary form of voice. (Recall that the person to whom the expression is addressed is key: the soldiers performing the attack were in a position to stop it, so we define cries for cessation as voice behavior.) If the injustice ends at this point, the process shown in Fig. 1 discontinues. If the injustice continues or is completed, the victim may quit (Arrow 6), attempt voice through official channels after-the-fact (Arrow 7), or become quiescent (Arrow 8). Every time an individual attempts to seek relief or redress by approaching someone in a position to provide them relief comprises an attempt at voice (as shown by Arrow 7). Cases in which voice is attempted, and is ignored or otherwise fails to bring amelioration or redress, can result in exit behavior (Arrow 9) or extended quiescence (Arrow 10). In some cases, a quiescent employee such as Capt. Sandra Perron will quit and then express voice (Branswell, 1998a) (See Arrow 11).

Individual Predispositions Toward Employee Silence

As Fig. 2 shows, we propose that several individual (Arrow 12) and situational (Arrow 13) variables influence the secondary appraisal process, whereby employees determine how they will respond to a perceived injustice. We argue that theoretical and empirical explorations of employee silence must consider the potential effects of enduring personality predispositions toward silence. We focus on three traits: self-esteem, communication apprehension, and locus of control.

Self-esteem, reflecting any number of dimensions of the self (e.g. physical, social), is widely regarded in its aggregate as the overall evaluation of personal worth that people make and maintain about themselves (Battle, 1990; Gardner & Pierce, 1998; Locke et al., 1999). We propose that lower self-esteem leads to employee silence in general and quiescence in particular. However, we also recognize that abusive experiences can diminish self-esteem (see Cohen & Roth, 1987; Foliano, 1995) (see Arrow 14). Additional support for situational influences stems from research on organization-based self-esteem (Pierce,
Employee Silence

Gardner, Cummings & Dunham, 1989), a trait describing employees' beliefs about their personal worth as organizational members from their organizational experiences and roles. Employees with high levels of organization-based self-esteem feel valued at work and are described as motivated, capable, and empowered (Gardner & Pierce, 1998). Findings from Pierce et al. (1989) suggest that structural features of work environments can affect employees' sense of organizational value: in particular, employees will develop low self-esteem in mechanistic organizations emphasizing rigidity and control (see Arrow 15). We note that these mechanistic features producing low-self-esteem are consistent with work settings within cultures of injustice (Harlos, 1999) and climates of silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), as described earlier. As a final note, we might expect generalized self-efficacy to be related to employee silence. However, because self-esteem appears to account for much of its impact in field studies (Gardner & Pierce, 1998), parsimony demands that self-efficacy not be incorporated in our model.

The second trait, communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1970), refers to a broad-based fear of communicating. People high in this trait... anticipate negative feelings and outcomes from communication, and will avoid communication, if possible, or suffer from a variety of anxiety-type feelings when forced to communicate” (McCroskey, Daly & Sorensen, 1976, p. 376). In its extreme form, it is severely debilitating and is believed to afflict 5–20% of the population, according to one study (Bruskin Associates, 1973, cited by McCroskey et al., 1976). Of particular interest to us are links with self-esteem: people high in communication apprehension tend to be low in self-esteem (McCroskey et al., 1976). Burgoon further hypothesized:

Research on conformity and persuasibility demonstrates that the person with low self-esteem is more conforming, which may be due to individuals with low self-esteem having less faith in their own opinions... It should follow that such people will be unwilling to communicate because they will expect others to reject or criticize their communication efforts (1976, p. 61).

Traditionally, communication anxiety is defined in terms of people's willingness to express themselves orally. For our purposes, we expand its definition to include non-oral channels through which employees can register injustice complaints such as writing letters to authority figures or even the media.

Finally, locus of control is a personality trait reflecting people's varying beliefs that what happens to them in life results either from personal characteristics and effort or from circumstances beyond one's control (Rotter, 1966). People who tend to believe that they are in control of what happens to them are described as having an internal locus of control, whereas people who typically believe that there is little to no relationship between their own effort
and what happens to them have an external locus of control (see Lefcourt, 1991, for a review). We argue that externals are more likely to respond to unjust events with quiescence rather than voice. Among our propositions, this is admittedly the least supported by extant theory and empirical evidence: perhaps internals will be silent, blaming themselves for their mistreatment because of their assumption of personal control. However, in research on women's reporting of harassment and self-blame, it is unclear whether failing to report harassment (i.e. silence) leads to self-blame or whether self-blame leads to silence (see Gutek & Koss, 1993). Regardless, our focus in terms of silence is on the willingness to disclose to others who can effect change rather than self-blame. In this sense, it seems reasonable to assume that people who see themselves as in charge of their life will tend to forgo silence, opting instead for the response that provides them with the greatest potential to effect change (i.e. voice).

To summarize, we propose that employees with external loci of control, high levels of communication apprehension, and low levels of self-esteem will be more likely to respond with quiescence to events they perceive as unjust than will employees with internal loci of control, low levels of communication apprehension, and high levels of self-esteem (see Arrows 8 and 12).

**Situational Factors as Causes of Employee Silence**

Figure 2 indicates that three situational factors (i.e. cultures of injustice, the deaf ear syndrome, and climates of silence) construed here as organizational risk factors, may also predispose employees to silence in the face of mistreatment, whether directly (see Arrows 8 and 13 in Fig. 2) or indirectly through individual predispositions (as indicated earlier, see Arrows 8, 12 and 15). We propose that employee quiescence (Arrow 8) and exit (Arrow 6) in response to injustice are more likely when organizations have strong climates of silence, cultures of injustice, deaf ears, limited voice channels, and when employees are low in the organizational hierarchy.

**Breaking Silence: Moving to Voice From Quiescence and Acquiescence**

As Fig. 2 indicates, we propose that employees initially adopt quiescence when experiencing injustice, if only for a short period. Furthermore, the individual and situational variables identified here moderate the probability that quiescence is adopted rather than voice or exit. Anger is believed to dominate states of quiescence, along with fear of the consequences of voicing (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), followed by feelings of cynicism and despair (see Table 1 and
Fig. 2). We also suggest that new events, which represent increased support or additional opportunities to voice, can prompt both quiescent or acquiescent employees to re-evaluate their circumstances and to move to voice from quiescence (whether directly or preceded by acquiescence). As we argued earlier, however, we propose that such external events must be much more salient and forceful to motivate acquiescent individuals to action than is the case with quiescent individuals (see Fig. 1). In our military example, we regard the first wave of published abuse allegations as such a “new event” that caused other soldiers to re-evaluate perceived levels of public support and to reconsider the inevitability and acceptability of their own mistreatment. This interpretation is supported by others who speculate that prior publication of abuse in the U.S. military had inspired some Canadian soldiers to speak out (O’Hara, 1999a). Regardless of their exact nature, we suggest that new events (whether originating within or outside the organization) cause some silent employees to undertake additional rounds of secondary appraisal (see Arrow 17). We hypothesize that the same demographic variables (Arrow 18), individual predispositions (Arrow 19), and situational variables (Arrow 20) influence the secondary appraisal processes by which acquiescent employees may return to quiescence (Arrows 21 and 22), and thereafter express voice (Arrow 23), exit (Arrow 24), voice followed by exit (Arrow 9), or exit followed by voice (Arrow 11).

As indicated earlier, the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) offers insight into how silence is both maintained (i.e. staying in acquiescence or quiescence) and broken (i.e. moving from quiescence to voice). According to Noelle-Neumann, people stay silent in contexts of weak public support. When public support seems strong, however, people disclose their views with greater confidence and less fear. In the case of the Canadian military, despite national concern and a public invitation from the Chief of Defense Staff (Canada’s top soldier) for all who had been mistreated during their service to speak out, the process of breaking quiescence proved painful for many in part because of officials’ reported “bungling” of investigations (O’Hara, 1998d, p. 17). In all probability, other victims of rape and abuse remain quiescent to this day, waiting to see whether investigative procedures are improved, whether the organization is sincere in its espoused commitment to redress, and whether public support continues. Other soldiers, we propose, moved into acquiescence, the deeper state of silence. Jean Sutherland, the mother of one Canadian soldier who was abused, reported:

I fear that there are many other victims out there who have not spoken out yet. ... My one big wish is for these people to have the courage to do so - that is the only way to put an end to all this violence (O’Hara, 1998d, p. 21).
Thus, a key premise of our model is that to move into quiescence and become ready to voice, acquiescent employees must consciously reject the inevitability and acceptability of their unjust circumstances. The transition from acquiescence to quiescence may be short, possibly instantaneous. In addition, the subsequent transition to voice may be immediate, delayed or never occur. Regardless of outcome, both moving into (Arrow 16) and out from (Arrow 22) acquiescence entails a period of quiescent silence.

In some cases, however, acquiescence may last indefinitely until employees quit the organization, having withheld knowledge of their mistreatment as if nothing had ever happened to them (Arrow 25). Indeed, degrading or abusive initiation rites suffered by some soldiers during their socialization may have prompted them to accept such ritualized mistreatment as appropriate so that they perpetrated similar abuse on other new recruits. Similarly, quiescence may last for extended periods, even until the employee exits the organization for other reasons (Arrow 24). This is most likely when opportunities for voice or exit are restricted, or when dangers or costs of voicing or exiting are seen as prohibitive (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Employees in extended quiescence will be more uncomfortable than those in prolonged acquiescence because quiescence connotes a stronger awareness of their circumstances as unjust. Moreover, we would expect quiescent employees to be angrier than acquiescent employees, and therefore more motivated to take retributive action (overt or covert) in the form of sabotage or interpersonal aggression, for example. For some individuals, therefore, movement into acquiescence may be the most adaptive response; developing beliefs that the world is cruel, that their organization is dysfunctional, or that the injustices they have experienced are customary may make them feel safer (see Arrow 16). Alternately, family, friends, counselors, or colleagues may convince them that acceptance of reality underlying deeper acquiescent silence will bring peace.

**IMPLICATIONS OF EMPLOYEE SILENCE FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**

The central concern for organizational researchers and practitioners arising from our analysis is how best to understand and manage employee silence. Consistent with our focus on “objectionable states of affairs” in employment relationships, in this section we consider how organizations can discourage acquiescence and quiescence as responses to perceived injustices. These considerations reflect an underlying assumption that in negative contexts, employee silence is generally undesirable, even potentially destructive. Although there may be occasions
within these contexts when silence is desirable (e.g. as a tactic for self-protection amidst malevolent or hostile environments), we look at employees’ withholding of evaluations of their aversive organizational circumstances (from people who can effect change) is harmful to themselves, to others, and/or their organizations (cf. Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Additionally, our discussion here extends from a positive view of conflict, reflecting beliefs that it is inevitable, constructive (on balance), and based on mutual interests (Tjosvold, 1991). How, then, can organizations encourage disaffected or disaffected employees to break their silences? We begin by reviewing recent research on organizational injustice, then examining ways to manage silence by encouraging voice within contexts of injustice.

The Range of Employees’ Injustice Experiences

Previous inductive research suggests that a taxonomy reflecting four aspects of employment relationships (i.e. relational, procedural, distributive and contextual) exhaustively captures employees’ experiences of injustice. This taxonomy and its derivation are described in detail elsewhere (see Harlos & Pinder, 1999). For the present purpose, we draw on the patterns identified in that research to illustrate how employees’ beliefs about their organizations’ ability to respond to their injustice perceptions prompt them to voice or remain silent.

One of the most interesting and important findings is that the pattern of interactional injustice (i.e. mistreatment that occurs in the course of workplace relations between employees and one or two authority figures with whom a reporting relationship exists) emerged as a unique and substantive category of injustice. Although others have previously acknowledged the role of interpersonal treatment in justice research (Greenberg, 1990), to our knowledge this is among the first findings to empirically demonstrate its predominance as a stand-alone source of injustice perceptions rather than a secondary, social aspect of procedural fairness (e.g. Bies & Moag, 1986). Two other patterns – procedural and distributive injustices – more closely paralleled their justice-based counterparts (cf. Sheppard et al., 1992), reflecting in the first instance perceptions of unfairness from procedures involved in resource allocation decisions and, in the second instance, actual decisions or outcomes perceived as misallocations of resources. The fourth and final pattern identified (Harlos & Pinder, 1999) was labelled systemic injustice to capture employees’ pervasive but diffuse perceptions of unfairness from larger organizational contexts within which work relationships are enacted (i.e. interactional) and allocation decisions are made (i.e. distributive) and/or implemented (i.e. procedural). This diversity of issues behind the range of injustice perceptions, in turn, calls for breadth
and variety in ways that organizations respond to employees' complaints, as we explain below.

*Using Voice Systems to Listen to the Unspoken*

Increasingly, organizations are introducing systems for employees to express their suggestions, complaints, or concerns. Known in the organizational justice literature as *voice systems*, there are many types: open door policies, grievance procedures, and organizational ombudspersons. Findings suggest that voice systems can increase employees' satisfaction and commitment (Sheppard, Lewicki & Minton, 1992) while decreasing their propensities to unionize, quit (Lind & Tyler, 1988), or launch lawsuits against their organizations. Voice systems are effective because they provide employees with opportunities not only to make suggestions for change before decisions are made (i.e. *preventive voice*; Sheppard et al., 1992), but also to challenge objectionable decisions after they have been made (i.e. *remedial voice*; Sheppard et al.). Given our focus on negative contexts, our present concern is with remedial voice as employees seek to challenge unfavorable interpersonal treatment, processes, decisions, or work environments.

To date, most empirical studies in voice system research have focused on written grievance procedures in unionized work settings (see Lewin, 1999). In contrast, much less is known about more informal voice systems (e.g. mediation), despite their prevalence and increasing popularity. Rowe (1990), for example, argued that designers of voice systems need to build in a range of formal and informal options to meet the diverse needs of those who may wish to express voice. The diversity of needs arises, in part, from variations in individual demographic differences, the nature of complaints (e.g. interactional, distributive), and the functions of particular options (e.g. confidential advice, adjudication, upward feedback; Rowe & Baker, 1984).

Yet questions remain in voice system research concerning intersections between types of systems and types of injustice. For example, which voice system best addresses complaints of interactional injustice? Do those who feel they have been personally harassed or bullied prefer or require a different voice system from those whose promotion was denied without apparent cause? Empirical studies are needed to learn more about who uses voice systems, for what issues, and with what results (i.e. effectiveness). Moreover, little is known about whether effectiveness criteria vary across systems (see Brett et al., 1990). To learn more about employee silence, however, such research requires focusing on individuals rather than organizations, allowing not only for relationships between perceptions of voice systems and their actual use to emerge, but also
for unjustly treated employees who remain silent to provide data concerning expectations and effectiveness of voice systems as well as about barriers against their use.

On a more practical level, we recognize that there are several key implications for training both staff who are responsible for managing voice systems and employees who are considering whether to break their silence. Clearly, both parties need to be willing to communicate amidst emotionally-charged disputes. Handling one's own and others' emotions effectively while demonstrating empathy, attending, and probing (Egan, 1986) are among critical skills for listening to the unspoken and that which is voiced (see also Saunders et al., 1992). Additionally, along with a more conflict-positive approach, basic skills in negotiating to help identify integrative solutions (Brett, Goldberg & Ury, 1990) would discourage acquiescence and quiescence. This is particularly true for managers who lack formal training in conflict resolution but who nonetheless deal directly with disputes or promote high conflict tolerance through explicit promises that "their door is always open," for example.

**POTENTIAL DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH ON EMPLOYEE SILENCE**

Earlier we noted that silence has been referred to as "a slippery concept" (Muldoon, 1996). Our survey of both acoustic and pragmatic forms of silence confirms that, indeed, it is a difficult, perhaps intractable concept representing ineffable phenomena. Regardless, its slipperiness does not reduce its importance as a form of organizational behavior that has gone without much attention in the organizational sciences. We urge others to join in the pursuit of this fascinating phenomenon, and we offer a few suggestions for such research, along with a caveat.

First, along with Morrison and Milliken (2000), we have examined employee silence primarily as a *response* (to injustice) in organizational settings. We urge that silence be studied also as a *cause* of other organizational behaviors.

Second, we urge that silence be studied in positive, aversive, and benign organizational circumstances. To the same extent that it has been a mistake heretofore to assume that silence implies consent, it is a mistake to assume that silence implies disapproval.

Third, while we made frequent reference to the abuses suffered recently by a significant number of soldiers in the Canadian military, we do not presume to offer a grounded theory of employee silence in any particular circumstances, whether positive or otherwise. Hence, an early next step in silence research and theory construction should include the examination of many more organizations
in which injustices have been perpetrated (or allegedly so), with a particular emphasis on the rates at which victims of injustice break their silence (recall Fig. 1).

Fourth, we have offered the notion that there are qualitatively different forms (or states) of silence, hoping that those who wish to undertake the study of silence will explore the validity of our quiescence/acquiescence dichotomy and revise it as necessary.

Fifth, future work may also investigate the notion of optimal levels of silence. That is, a prima facie case may be made that too much silence or too little silence may be dysfunctional in organizational settings. As Morrison and Milliken (2000) and Kleiner, Nickelsburg and Pilarski (1988) observe, too much silence prevents feedback loops from developing to correct inappropriate organizational policies and practices. Yet, too little silence (a condition in which members of a work group or organization are constantly complaining) can also be dysfunctional (cf. Freeman & Medoff, 1984).

Whatever directions are taken in silence research, we anticipate that non-traditional methods such as diaries, personal accounts, and even projective techniques will be required, at least during the early stages of inquiry. Intrusive methods such as survey techniques may distort the experiences of silence participants are experiencing.

Finally, we urge careful exploration of silence, following the best precepts of construct development and validation (cf. Schwab, 1980; Frost & Stablein, 1992, especially Part II). Too often it is the case that preliminary levels of enthusiasm for a "new" concept in organizational science leads to a proliferation of measurement activity and substantive theory construction before sufficient care has been invested in sorting out and reaching agreement about the boundaries of the concept itself, as well as a sense of the nomological nets (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955) to which it belongs. (Early work on trust in organizations provides a recent example – see Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995.)

CONCLUSION

Despite the attention that the concept of silence has received in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and linguistics, it has been largely neglected in organizational research. This historical neglect stems, in part, from the common assumption that silence is nothing more than the absence of voice, reflecting inaction and endorsement. On the contrary, our review of disparate literatures suggests that silence can communicate and that it is accompanied by characteristic thoughts, feelings, and actions. Throughout this paper, we have attempted to not only preserve the complexities of the concept, but to expand its
conceptualization given the intricacies of human behavior and vagaries of organizational life. A recent New Yorker cartoon illustrates (literally) the conceptual complexity that we build on here. The drawing depicts a cocktail party, at which a woman, standing to one side with a man, says to the him, "His volumes speak silences." Thus, silences speak and voices can say nothing.

We accept that the terrain of silence is difficult and frustrating, but also eminently interesting and important. We endorse Johanssen's (1974) plea for further research on silence, specifically encouraging its systematic study within organizations. We hope, for instance, to prompt further inquiries into the nature, incidence, and impact of employee silence, including why some victims of organizational injustice maintain their silences whereas other break theirs. We have suggested that within circumstances regarded as unjust, silent organizational behavior may be acquiescent or quiescent in nature. It is premature, however, to assert that these are the only two meaningful forms of employee silence; further research may reveal that silence in organizations comprises more forms than the two proposed here. We hope that organizational researchers interested in studying silence will adopt the terms employee quiescence and acquiescence, at least initially, to foster theorizing by rejecting implicit interpretations of silence as inaction and endorsement.

We also hope that the theory introduced here will challenge managers to reject simplistic assumptions that employees' silence implies endorsement of organizational events; quiet employees are not necessarily content. Indeed, the soldiers' stories and the academic literatures reviewed here suggest that deafening silences in organizations can occur just before storms break.

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NOTES

1. More than 50 years ago, Lenney (1949) discussed at length whether hazing rituals at West Point were inhumane, and more recently, Nuwer (1999) has documented the traditions of hazing and rites of initiation in both fraternal and military organizations.

2. Fear of reprisal also affects indirect observers of mistreatment. For example, the day after her rape, Private Elaine Smith told her brother, also a soldier, what had happened. "He seemed very upset, very mad. Then he told me not to complain. . . . [He said] 'it's only going to hurt you, and it's only going to hurt me.' He said if people find out his sister complained he'll end up being ousted or leaving because they'll be so hard on him" (O'Hara, 1998a, p. 16).

3. Pragmatics is the sub-discipline of semiotics that deals with the extra-linguistic purposes and effects of communications (Honderich, 1995, p. 821).

4. Power dependence is rooted in exchange-based models of reciprocity between people where power is a commodity with costs and rewards affecting exchanges (Homans, 1961) and where relationships reflect mutual dependencies based on inverse degrees of power; the more that A is dependent on B, the more power B has over A (Emerson, 1962).

5. Similarly, other studies report that making light of harassment is a fairly common response allowing victims either to avoid interpreting the incident(s) as sexual harassment or to avoid confronting the harasser (see Gutek & Koss, 1993), thereby maintaining silence.

6. Webster's Dictionary (1965) does not define silence in connection with either quiescence or acquiescence, although Hirschman (1970, p. 31) makes passing reference to "acquiescence or indifference."

7. In contexts of justice, quiescence may belie vigilance against change or loss of one's comfortable circumstances. In this situation, a person is ready to speak up to protect the status quo.

8. In personality theory and measurement, acquiescence "... is the tendency to agree rather than disagree with propositions in general" (Paulhus, 1991, p. 46).

9. Individuals' work values, especially in relation to justice and injustice, are especially important components of cultural background in such situations (see Stackman, Pinder & Connor, 2000).

REFERENCES

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