

COMMENTARY

Toward a culturally sensitive perspective on silence in organizations

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In the focal article, Asselineau et al. (2024) pointed out the lack of research on literal silences in organizational psychology. They highlighted the potential benefits of quiet environments and the intentional practice of silence in organizations. In this commentary, we extend the contribution by adding a culturally sensitive perspective that advocates the critical values of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in modern organizations. DEI, briefly and respectively, concerns the representation of social identities with a focus and recognition of underrepresented groups, upholding a fair and unbiased system, and providing an affirming environment for individuals with varied identities (Akbar & Parker, 2021). A fundamental step to pursuing DEI in organizations is to recognize differences in employees' cultural preferences and experiences (Plaut, 2010; Roberson, 2019). We propose that the practice of silence is an area where such cultural differences manifest, as silence has varied meanings for and asymmetric impacts on people from different cultural backgrounds. Building upon emerging cross-cultural research on silence, we further provide practical recommendations for organizations to advance DEI through silence-related practices.

Varied cultural meanings of silence

According to cross-cultural research, people hold varying beliefs about the meaning of silence across cultures. Understanding the diversity in the experience and practice of silence will help inform organizations about ways to promote a more equitable and inclusive work environment. As Asselineau et al. pointed out, a common misconception is that silence represents a lack of contribution or presence, particularly in the hustle of modern organizations. Expanding on this observation, we argue it is also “a typical Western bias in treating speech as normal and silence as deviant behavior” (Jaworski, 1992).

Speech is power: speech is to persuade, to convert, to compel.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

He who knows does not speak. He who speaks does not know.

—Lao Tzu

As illustrated in the quotes, the value placed on speech and silence could vary across cultures. In many Western societies, where personal independence often takes precedence, choosing to be silent might be seen as not having anything to say or a lack of personal expressiveness (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). However, not all cultural traditions view silence in this way. For example, in East Asian cultures, where interdependence among individuals is highly valued, silence is often seen as

a sign of respect and a means to convey humility and politeness (Nakane, 2012). This difference also manifests in educational practices. For instance, preschool teachers in China view silence as a sign of self-control, rather than inactivity and passivity, and thus value silence more than their American counterparts (Tobin et al., 1989). This cultural difference exists not only between nations but also within them. In the United States, for example, psychological studies have shown that Asian American adults tend to be less verbally quick, direct, and effusive in social interactions than their European American counterparts (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). Similarly, ethnographic research shows that silence holds significance in the social interactions within the Western Apache Native American community, especially when the situation is ambiguous, underscoring the cultural relevance of silence (Basso, 1970).

These insights lead to a promising research direction for organizational psychologists: to explore how and why silence at work is practiced and interpreted differently across cultures both within and across countries. For instance, as shown in the literature on “metaphorical” silence, employees withhold their views due to different silence motives (i.e., quiescent, acquiescent, prosocial, and opportunistic), and differences in these motives systematically predict employee well-being and turnover intention (Knoll & van Dick, 2013). Given cross-cultural research has already suggested that cultural values can influence silence motives (Knoll et al., 2021), together the evidence implies that it is critical and needed for future research to determine how silence motives may influence employee well-being and turnover intention across individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Another example comes from research on organizational dehumanization. Emerging work has suggested that Asian workers in the United States, stereotyped to be quiet and calm, could be wrongfully perceived as being robotic or machine like, explaining racialized mistreatments such as exploitation and deprived social opportunities at work (Li et al., 2024). These examples illustrate the potential danger of cross-cultural misperception or misunderstanding of silence that can lead to harmful consequences in organizations. We suggest that future research should examine cross-cultural differences in literal silences. Understanding these nuances can guide the development of workplace policies that accommodate and respect individual preferences for silence, thereby fostering a more culturally inclusive work environment.

Asymmetric cultural impacts of practicing silence

Silence not only holds diverse cultural meanings but also can have asymmetric effects on individuals’ performance and well-being across cultures. Imposing a universal approach to norms and policies related to silence may unintentionally yet systematically (dis)advantage certain cultural groups, undermining equity and inclusion at work.

The value and impact of practicing silence (versus verbal speech), especially when it comes to performing cognitive tasks, have been shown to vary. A series of studies has found that talking while thinking could impair the cognitive performance of East Asian Americans but not European Americans. This is because East Asians are less likely to use internal speech (Kim, 2002). In another study, verbalizing one’s thoughts when performing cognitive tasks reduced the stress level among European Americans, as indicated by the lower level of cortisol response to the task. However, verbalization had no stress-reducing effect among East Asian Americans (Kim, 2008). In other words, practicing silence might be a way to improve or maintain performance and well-being for East Asian Americans. More broadly, these findings suggest that silence, and the choice to speak, can have divergent effects on the psychological states and behaviors of individuals from different cultural backgrounds that still need more research to understand better.

These preliminary findings offer organizational psychologists a valuable research direction: to explore how silence influences employee performance and well-being across cultures. This research could guide organizations in tailoring policies that support employees from diverse

groups. In particular, expanding existing research on individual cognitive tasks to encompass more interdependent and relational forms of work could further our understanding. For instance, might the practice of communal silence during meetings, as noted in the focal article, be more effective for some cultural groups than for others? Does the intentional practice of silence foster an inclusive climate and psychological safety in culturally diverse work teams? These answers could shape more culturally sensitive and inclusive policies in organizations, allowing all employees to thrive in a collaborative environment.

Practical recommendations for organizations to promote DEI through silence

Because the interpretation and experience of silence vary across cultures, and yet constant verbal communication and auditory stimulation at work are the norms and predominantly favored in many Western contexts such as the United States, it is critical to ensure individuals with varying cultural experiences of silence would feel valued and accepted at work. Here, we offer three sets of practical recommendations to begin the conversation of how to leverage silence as a strategic element in fostering DEI for cultural minorities within organizations.

Incorporate and highlight silence-related policies to cultivate a diverse workforce

- **Offer flexible work arrangements to accommodate cultural diversity of preferences for silence.** Expanding on Asselineau et al. suggestions, organizations need to further recognize the need for and importance of flexible work arrangements and silent spaces as culturally meaningful practices. They can serve employees from cultures that place a higher value on silence, such as certain East Asian cultures (Kim, 2002, 2008). By acknowledging and respecting cultural diversity in preferences for silence, organizations will offer a more inclusive environment for employees from diverse backgrounds and potentially enhance their well-being, productivity, and retention.
- **Highlight respect for silence in recruitment to attract a culturally diverse applicant pool.** In today's increasingly diverse workforce, many organizations are eager to attract talents from varied cultural backgrounds. As our commentary highlights, one potential element that facilitates this goal is that organizations should emphasize, during recruitment efforts, their respect for cultural differences and the need for silence. This strategy can be particularly beneficial for attracting employees in roles involving frequent verbal communication or environmental noise. Highlighting their commitment to accommodating diverse cultural values related to silence, organizations can attract a more culturally diverse pool of job applicants who may anticipate a better cultural fit.

Recognize cultural differences in silence and ensure equitable evaluations

- **Develop cultural understanding of silence in DEI trainings.** In the realm of DEI training and development (e.g., Devine & Ash, 2022), we suggest organizations integrate intentional discussions about cultural differences related to silence. These could happen in the forms of individuals sharing and explaining their personal and cultural experiences regarding nuanced meanings, values, and practices about silence and how silence impacts the way people communicate and collaborate in the workplace. For example, employees from cultures that value silence may prefer longer pauses before responding to questions from others or may be more inclined to listen attentively instead of frequently contributing verbally. Increased understanding of cultural differences underlying these behaviors could prevent employees and leaders from misinterpreting an individual's silence as a lack of engagement, competence, or interest. Instead, they could foster an inclusive climate where all communication styles are valued.

- **Ensure culturally sensitive and equitable evaluations in selections and performance appraisals.** Organizations should examine their evaluation criteria and practices to minimize culturally based assumptions that unfairly favor or penalize certain culturally relevant silence behaviors. For example, in job interviews, extended periods of reflective silence before responding should not be automatically interpreted as a lack of confidence or preparedness. In certain cultures, thoughtful pauses might be respected as a sign of considering one's thoughts carefully rather than seen as a deficit. This applies to the increasingly popular approach of automated job interviews (e.g., Hickman et al., 2022). Organizations should be careful with how the frequency and duration of silence during the interview might influence the assessment of job applicants made by algorithms to prevent potential cultural biases. Similarly, when conducting performance appraisals and making promotion decisions, managers should interpret silence-related behaviors through a culturally sensitive lens. Although silence at work may signal a lack of verbal assertiveness in the U.S. context, in some cultures, it can convey respect, thoughtfulness, or other valued qualities. As assertiveness is often prioritized for leadership roles, organizations risk systematically penalizing employees from cultural backgrounds where silence is desirable or encouraged (e.g., Lu et al., 2020).

Develop silence-inclusive policies to elevate workplace inclusion

- **Foster a culturally inclusive communication climate.** As Asselineau et al. suggested, organizations could implement silent periods or intentional pauses during meetings and discussions to provide “rest stops” for people to process and think. We push this recommendation further to suggest that it has critical implications for ensuring a culturally inclusive communication climate. Because of cultural differences in silence-related values and practices, employees from certain cultural backgrounds may not feel most comfortable speaking up when everyone else is talking aloud. In this case, group meetings or discussions may risk ignoring the input from people with minoritized cultural backgrounds. To intentionally practice silence as a group could potentially ensure that diverse cultural perspectives are represented and appreciated.
- **Implement culturally inclusive wellness initiatives that embrace silence.** To foster the well-being of employees across cultural backgrounds, organizations could offer wellness programs that recognize the restorative power of silence, such as silent retreats or meditation sessions. These initiatives may be especially meaningful for employees from cultural traditions where silence is an important means of healing and recharging. These initiatives extend beyond just providing resources; they also symbolically embrace silence as an organizational value, signaling an affirmation of employees' diverse cultural identities.

Conclusion

Asselineau et al. have laid out a framework for studying the overlooked benefits of literal silences in the workplace. Our commentary extends their contribution by examining silence through a cultural lens, revealing that the meaning and impact of silence vary across cultures. Recognizing and respecting these differences is vital for creating truly diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization.

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