Scientific Essay

Psychological Safety Without Voice

Rethinking Safety, Silence, and Power in High Power-Distance Workplaces

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Introduction

Psychological safety has become a central construct in contemporary organizational and leadership research. Recent scholarship positions psychological safety as a critical enabler of learning, inclusion, innovation, and team effectiveness, particularly in complex and uncertain work environments (Newman et al., 2021; Frazier et al., 2023). It is commonly defined as a shared belief that individuals can engage in interpersonal risk-taking without fear of negative interpersonal consequences. Within this framing, psychological safety is often treated as a foundational condition for high-performing teams and adaptive organizations.

Despite its prominence, psychological safety is typically operationalized through a narrow behavioral lens. Speaking up, expressing dissent, admitting errors, and openly sharing concerns are widely treated as both indicators and outcomes of a psychologically safe environment (Detert et al., 2023; Morrison, 2023). Silence, by contrast, is frequently interpreted as a signal of fear, disengagement, or lack of trust. This interpretation has become widely accepted in organizational research and practice, often without explicit consideration of contextual or cultural contingencies.

This assumption becomes problematic when psychological safety theory is applied across organizational contexts characterized by strong hierarchy and power asymmetry. In high power-distance workplaces, where authority, deference, and relational harmony shape everyday interactions, silence does not necessarily indicate insecurity or withdrawal. Instead, silence may reflect competence, contextual intelligence, and socially appropriate behavior (Li et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2024). Consequently, dominant models risk misinterpreting culturally coherent communication practices as evidence of psychological unsafety.

This essay addresses the following question: To what extent does the dominant, voice-centric conceptualization of psychological safety adequately explain experiences of safety in high power-distance organizational contexts? The central argument advanced is that contemporary psychological safety models remain implicitly grounded in low power-distance cultural assumptions, limiting their explanatory power in hierarchical environments. By critically examining recent psychological safety and employee voice literature, this essay advances an alternative conceptualization that decouples safety from verbal expression and reframes silence as a potential indicator of relational psychological safety.

This paper makes three theoretical contributions. First, it makes explicit the voice-centric assumptions embedded in dominant psychological safety models. Second, it advances the concept of relational psychological safety as a context-sensitive refinement of the construct. Third, it differentiates adaptive silence from defensive and disengaged silence, clarifying when silence is compatible with safety and when it signals relational risk.

This study adopts an interpretivist epistemological stance, viewing psychological safety as a socially constructed and context-dependent phenomenon rather than a universally observable behavioral state. From this perspective, meaning is produced through interaction, power relations, and cultural norms. Accordingly, peer-reviewed empirical literature is treated as data for conceptual analysis and theory synthesis. The aim is not to test hypotheses, but to critically interpret existing evidence, surface underlying assumptions, and advance a refined theoretical understanding of psychological safety.

Psychological safety and the dominance of voice in contemporary research

Recent literature has reaffirmed psychological safety as a core construct in organizational behavior. Meta-analytic and review studies consistently link psychological safety to outcomes such as employee engagement, creativity, learning behavior, and error reporting (Frazier et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2021). These studies have strengthened the empirical foundation of the construct and reinforced its relevance for contemporary organizations.

However, a closer examination of this literature reveals a strong emphasis on behavioral indicators of safety, particularly voice-related behaviors. Measurement instruments commonly assess individuals' willingness to speak up, challenge authority, or express concerns (Newman et al., 2021). Teams characterized by frequent and open communication are consequently labeled as psychologically safe, while silence is often interpreted as an absence of safety.

Embedded within dominant psychological safety models are several implicit assumptions. First, psychological safety is often inferred from the frequency of voice behavior. Second, silence is treated as a proxy indicator of fear or disengagement. Third, speaking up is presumed to carry limited relational cost and to be universally interpreted as constructive. These assumptions are rarely made explicit, yet they shape theoretical interpretation and empirical measurement.

The employee voice literature further reinforces this framing. Voice is typically portrayed as morally desirable and organizationally beneficial behavior, associated with proactive problem-solving, ethical responsibility, and organizational improvement (Morrison, 2023; Detert et al., 2023). Employees who speak up are described as engaged, committed, and constructive contributors. Silence, in contrast, is frequently associated with fear, disengagement, and withdrawal (Knoll et al., 2021; Sherf et al., 2021).

While recent studies have begun to recognize silence as a multidimensional construct, voice continues to dominate as the primary indicator of psychological safety. As a result, literature tends to privilege expressive behaviors while giving limited attention to the relational and cultural conditions under which communication occurs.

This analysis draws on peer-reviewed empirical studies as its primary source of evidence. These studies provide data on how psychological safety, voice, and silence are measured, interpreted, and linked to organizational outcomes across different contexts.

Evidence from cross-cultural research indicates that power distance significantly shapes communication behavior in organizations (Li et al., 2021). In high power-distance contexts, hierarchical relationships are accepted and expected, and deference to authority is often viewed as appropriate and legitimate. Studies examining voice behavior in such contexts demonstrate that employees are more likely to exercise caution in expressing dissent, even when they feel secure in their roles (Jiang et al., 2024).

Additionally, research on silence suggests that employees may strategically withhold voice to preserve relationships, maintain harmony, or avoid social disruption (Knoll et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). These findings challenge the assumption that silence is inherently indicative of fear or disengagement, suggesting instead that silence can function as an adaptive response shaped by contextual demands.

It is important to distinguish among different forms of silence. Adaptive silence reflects strategic restraint aligned with relational norms and contextual awareness. Defensive silence refers to withholding due to anticipated punishment, embarrassment, or threat to face. Disengaged silence reflects withdrawal driven by low commitment or cynicism. Only defensive and disengaged silence necessarily indicates psychological unsafety. Adaptive silence, by contrast, may coexist with relational psychological safety.

From behavioral expression to relational experience of psychological safety

Viewed in this way, the empirical evidence raises questions about the theoretical assumptions embedded in dominant psychological safety models. If silence can be strategic, relationally motivated, and culturally appropriate, then equating silence with psychological unsafety becomes theoretically problematic.

Psychological safety theory has largely been developed and validated in low power-distance environments, where open communication and egalitarian interaction are culturally normative. When applied uncritically to hierarchical contexts, these models risk conflating behavioral conformity with disengagement. The evidence suggests that psychological safety may be experienced not only through expression but also through predictability, role clarity, and relational stability.

Accordingly, it may be suggested that psychological safety should be interpreted as a relational condition rather than a purely behavioral outcome. This interpretation aligns with an interpretivist understanding of organizational phenomena, in which meaning is contingent on social context and power relations.

Synthesizing evidence toward a relational understanding of psychological safety

Synthesizing the reviewed evidence and theoretical perspectives, a pattern emerges. Psychological safety research consistently privileges voice as the primary manifestation of safety, while empirical studies of hierarchy and power distance demonstrate that silence can be both rational and adaptive.

This synthesis suggests that psychological safety is not a singular or universal phenomenon. Instead, it is enacted differently across contexts. In hierarchical environments, safety may be expressed through restraint, deference, and relational attunement rather than through overt challenge or expression.

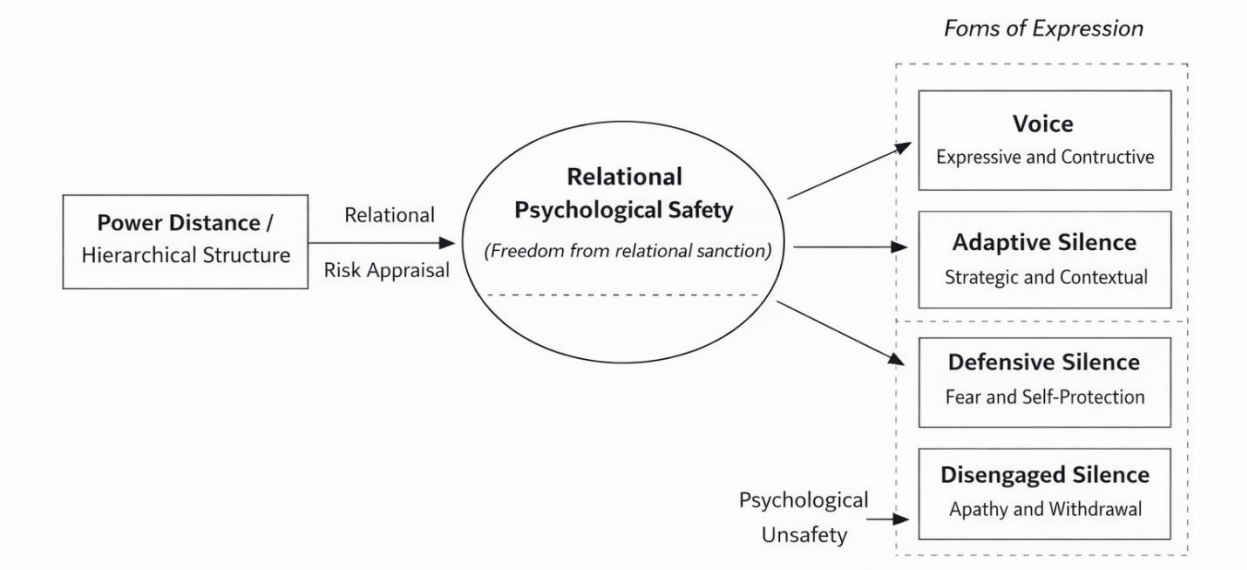
The concept of relational psychological safety integrates these insights by reframing safety as freedom from relational sanctions. Relational psychological safety may be defined as a shared perception that one can perform role-appropriate actions without incurring relational sanctions such as loss of respect, face threat, exclusion, or legitimacy damage. Core features of relational psychological safety include: (1) sensitivity to relational sanctions; (2) alignment with role-based expectations; (3) stability of authority structures; and (4) legitimacy preservation within hierarchical relations.

From this perspective, individuals experience safety when they can perform their roles without risking loss of respect, social exclusion, or damage to valued relationships. Silence, within this framework, can be understood as adaptive silence, reflecting engagement through contextual awareness rather than withdrawal.

The proposed relationships among power distance, relational risk appraisal, psychological safety, and differentiated expressions of silence and voice are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework of relational psychological safety



Note. Power distance and hierarchical structure influence relational risk appraisal, which in turn shapes constructive voice, adaptive silence, defensive silence, and disengaged silence.

Refuting the voice-centric view of psychological safety

The dominant view in psychological safety research equates safety with voice and treats silence as a deficit. This view is less acceptable in light of the evidence reviewed, as it fails to account for the role of hierarchy, culture, and relational risk in shaping communication behavior.

Specifically, voice-centric models assume that speaking up carries limited social cost and is universally interpreted as constructive. This assumption is not held in high power-distance contexts, where voice may threaten harmony or legitimacy. Consequently, the dominant view risks misdiagnosing psychologically safe environments as unsafe based solely on the absence of voice. By contrast, the relational psychological safety perspective offers a more context-sensitive explanation. It accommodates variation in how safety is experienced and expressed, making it theoretically more robust across diverse organizational settings.

Limitations and scope

This essay employs a conceptual synthesis of recent empirical literature as a theory-building approach. While this strategy strengthens conceptual integration and clarification, it does not provide direct empirical testing of the proposed framework.

The model is most applicable in organizational contexts characterized by salient hierarchy and elevated power distance. In more egalitarian environments where open dissent is institutionalized, voice may remain a valid primary indicator of psychological safety. Accordingly, the framework offered here should be understood as a contextual refinement rather than a universal replacement of existing models.

Further empirical research is required to validate the proposed distinctions between adaptive, defensive, and disengaged silence and to examine their measurement across diverse cultural and organizational settings.

Conclusion

This essay examined psychological safety through a critical and context-sensitive lens, demonstrating that dominant voice-centric models offer an incomplete account of how safety is experienced in hierarchical organizational environments. By tracing how psychological safety has been operationalized, empirically reinforced, and normatively framed through employee voice, the analysis has shown that silence is too often treated as a deficit rather than as a behavior requiring interpretation.

Integrating evidence from psychological safety, employee voice, and cross-cultural research, the essay argued that silence can be a rational and adaptive response shaped by power distance, relational risk, and cultural expectations. In such contexts, psychological safety may be sustained not through expressive freedom alone, but through relational stability, role clarity, and protection from social sanctions. This challenges the assumption that speaking up is the universal or primary manifestation of feeling safe at work.

The concept of relational psychological safety advances this argument by reframing safety as a condition embedded in social relations rather than a direct outcome of observable communication behaviors. From this perspective, adaptive silence represents a form of competent participation that reflects engagement with organizational realities, rather than withdrawal or fear. This reframing preserves the value of employee voice while rejecting its elevation to a universal diagnostic criterion.

The implications of this reconceptualization are both theoretical and methodological. Treating psychological safety as a relational construct calls for greater caution in how safety is measured and interpreted, particularly in hierarchical or high power-distance settings. Models that equate silence with dysfunction risk mischaracterizing stable and functional relational systems as psychologically unsafe.

Taken together, the primary advancement offered by this essay lies in repositioning voice as one possible manifestation of psychological safety rather than as a universal diagnostic criterion. By distinguishing adaptive silence from defensive and disengaged silence, the analysis expands the explanatory scope of psychological safety theory without rejecting its foundational insights.

Future research should therefore move beyond behavioral universalism and explore psychological safety as a relational accomplishment shaped by interaction, context, and power. Qualitative and interpretive approaches are especially well suited to capturing these dynamics and to developing more contextually responsive theoretical frameworks.

Recognizing that psychological safety can be sustained without voice does not diminish the relevance of the construct. It strengthens it. By accommodating multiple pathways through which individuals manage interpersonal risk, psychological safety theory becomes more analytically robust and better aligned with the diversity of organizational realities it seeks to explain.

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