



# Staying silent about safety issues: Conceptualizing and measuring safety silence motives

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## ABSTRACT

Communication between employees and supervisors about safety-related issues is an important component of a safe workplace. When supervisors receive information from employees about safety issues, they may gain otherwise-missed opportunities to correct these issues and/or prevent negative safety outcomes. A series of three studies were conducted to identify various safety silence motives, which describe the reasons that employees do not speak up to supervisors about safety-related issues witnessed in the workplace, and to develop a tool to assess these motives. Results suggest that employees stay silent about safety issues based on perceptions of altering relationships with others (relationship-based), perceptions of the organizational climate (climate-based), the assessment of the safety issue (issue-based), or characteristics of the job (job-based). We developed a 17-item measure to assess these four motives, and initial evidence was found for the construct and incremental validity of the safety silence motives measure in a sample of nurses.

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## 1. Introduction

The communication of safety-related information within an organization is a vital component of creating and maintaining a safe work environment. Although downward safety communication from supervisors is an important component of a safe workplace, upward communication from employees about workplace safety issues is critical to continuously promote or maintain a safe work environment. When employees speak up about safety issues at work, organizations are presented with opportunities to detect, correct, and prevent unsafe work practices or hazardous work environments before negative outcomes, such as accidents or injuries, can result.

The issue of individual-level underreporting, which occurs when employees do not report accidents and injuries to the appropriate authorities, is an important consideration for organizations in which safety is a critical concern. Over three million workplace injuries and illnesses were reported in the United States in 2013 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), and yet studies have found that 50–80% of work-related accidents and injuries go unreported by employees (Probst et al., 2008; Probst and Estrada, 2010; Rosenman et al., 2006). Receiving reports of accidents and injuries

can be valuable for organizations by allowing for the investigation of the causes of these incidents. Organizations can then take measures to decrease their accident and injury rates by learning how to prevent such events from occurring in the future.

In addition to receiving reports of accidents and injuries, organizations can benefit from receiving information about issues such as safety violations or errors, which can potentially lead to accidents, injuries, or even death. Safety violations are intentional acts of deviating from safe working rules or procedures and errors are unintentional acts that fail to accomplish a set objective (Lawton and Parker, 1998). Openly communicating to supervisors and management about the occurrence of safety violations and errors in the workplace is ideal, so that preventative action can be taken before they result in negative outcomes. In order to expand the research on safety-related communication in the workplace, it is essential to understand the factors that drive employees to remain silent about specific safety issues at work, so that measures can be taken to create workplace environments that foster this type of communication.

Variables such as employee silence and safety communication can be useful in identifying the motives behind staying silent about safety issues. Employee silence, described as a lack of upward communication regarding concerns, ideas, or opinions relating to the improvement of organizational functioning, focuses on staying silent in relation to a wide array of workplace issues (Van Dyne et al., 2003), which can range from not raising disagreements about

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a company's policies or practices to staying silent about abuse or harassment in the workplace (Milliken et al., 2003). In a qualitative study by Milliken et al. (2003), the top three reasons that employees did not speak up about their concerns or problems were out of fear of being viewed negatively, feeling as if they did not have enough experience or tenure to speak up, and considering their organization to have an intimidating hierarchical structure and/or an unsupportive climate. However, the motives behind staying silent about suggestions regarding general concerns can greatly differ from those behind staying silent about specific safety-related issues in the workplace. Consequently, a more situation-specific construct that directly relates to speaking up about safety issues, such as safety violations, errors, accidents, and injuries, is needed.

Safety communication, although specific to safety-related ideas and concerns, is also a fairly general construct. Safety communication can be defined as the degree to which employees are open to speaking to their supervisors about safety-related issues, opinions, and concerns, and perceive their supervisors as encouraging and accepting of employees' suggestions for improving workplace safety (Hofmann and Stetzer, 1998). Safety communication can refer to a variety of employees' communication behaviors, attitudes towards communication, and perceptions of supervisors' openness to communication. However, high safety communication does not necessarily indicate a lack of silence, since employees may have generally positive attitudes and perceptions towards safety communication, but may fail to actually communicate safety-related ideas and concerns based on several underlying motives (e.g., fear of facing negative consequences, time pressures of job, etc.). Indeed, examining perceptions of safety communication is distinct from identifying why employees may not always communicate their ideas and concerns to supervisors. Understanding the motives behind a lack of communication about safety-related issues is warranted, and measuring such a construct can be a powerful tool for organizational initiatives aimed at promoting workplace safety.

The objective of this paper is to define and measure the motives behind safety silence, which are defined in the present study as the underlying reasons for not speaking up about safety issues witnessed in the workplace. It is likely, for example, that individuals may stay silent if they feel that tension in the workplace may arise from speaking up, perceive their managers as unsupportive of hearing their concerns, or consider a safety issue to be harmless.

The present paper consists of three studies tracing the development and validation of the safety silence motives measure. We follow a well-established scale development process through which we define our construct, develop a scale to measure safety silence motives, pilot test the measure, administer and refine the measure, and finally provide evidence of validity for the measure (Spector, 1992). Study 1 consists of a qualitative study in which focus groups and interviews are conducted to identify the themes or patterns of motives behind safety silence. Study 2 involves the creation and refinement of the safety silence motives measure, during which the factor structure of the measure is established. Lastly, evidence for the construct and incremental validity of safety silence motives is collected in Study 3.

## 2. Study 1: defining the motives behind safety silence

### 2.1. Overview

Since safety silence motives have not previously been conceptualized, we chose to start with an exploratory qualitative study, which can be useful for capturing in-depth information on complex phenomena (Sofaer, 1999). In Study 1, focus groups and interviews were conducted with individuals working in organizations in which safety is a critical concern to identify themes or patterns of motives

behind safety silence. Participants were asked about instances in which they did not speak up about safety issues in their workplace, why they did not speak up about them, and what they thought would happen if they had. The results of this study yielded a total of six safety silence motives.

### 2.2. Method

#### 2.2.1. Sample

Twenty six individuals employed in organizations mandated to follow the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration's laws and regulations participated in this study. The majority of our sample was female (64%) and Caucasian (70.8%). Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 62 years ( $M = 40$ ;  $SD = 12.9$ ). Seventy six percent of participants reported working in the healthcare field, 12% in construction/utility services, and 12% in the retail industry. Participants worked an average of 40.54 hours per week ( $SD = 7.84$ ) and had an average tenure of 13 years ( $SD = 12.22$ ).

#### 2.2.2. Procedure

Individuals were recruited through flyers and personal contacts. Flyers describing the study were posted and distributed at two large healthcare organizations. In addition, flyers were emailed to personal contacts who met this study's inclusion criteria. Out of the 26 individuals who volunteered for the study, 16 individuals participated in one of two focus groups and 10 participants were individually interviewed. During the focus groups and interviews, a general list of discussion questions was asked. In the last five minutes of the sessions, participants were asked to provide critical incidents in which they chose not to address a safety issue that they had witnessed in the workplace. Participants were asked to describe the three components of a critical incident: the safety issue, why they chose not to address it, and what they thought would have happened if they had addressed it. Voice recordings of the discussions during focus groups and interviews were also transcribed and scanned for critical incidents that were verbally mentioned. A total of 46 critical incidents were gathered.

### 2.3. Results

Data from the interviews and focus groups were coded in two phases. During the first phase, one of the investigators and a research assistant separately sorted all critical incidents into general themes. Individual findings were then discussed and a master list of themes for each component of the critical incident was compiled. The themes in the master list were then sorted independently, and some themes were combined. Individual findings were then discussed until a consensus was reached. It should be noted that since participants were allowed to provide as much detail as they felt necessary during focus groups and interviews, and critical incident responses greatly ranged in length, it was decided that each individual critical incident could be sorted into more than one theme if the coders felt that a critical incident response clearly captured more than one reason for not speaking up about a safety issue.

In order to assess the reliability of the investigator and researcher assistant's analysis of the critical incidents, five advanced graduate students familiar with the field of occupational health and safety, research methods, and psychometrics were recruited as coders, and were trained to identify themes among the critical incidents provided by participants. The coders were given a week to independently complete coding worksheets, and were asked to not discuss their coding with others. The worksheets contained critical incidents, the themes previously generated, and a description of each theme. The coders were asked to identify one or more theme(s) that each critical incident captured.

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