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#MeToo? The role of organizational ethics in employee silence reactions to sex discrimination

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#MeToo? The Role of Organizational Ethics in Employee Silence Reactions to Sex Discrimination

Gender equality is recognized as an important goal by the United Nations (George et al., 2016), but despite transformative shifts in modern society, gender inequality persists (Ridgeway, 2011). A specific area in which existing systems allow sex discrimination to proliferate (MeToo International, 2019) is within organizations. In the years following the MeToo movement, over 200 high profile sexual harassment allegations emerged and permanently removed offenders from powerful positions (North et al., 2019). While normally employees are able to distance themselves from their organizations (Phillips et al., 2009), in the presence of mega-threats such as the “highly publicized accusations of sexual harassment” (Leigh & Melwani, 2019: 565) preceding the MeToo movement, employees may be triggered emotionally, which makes maintaining culturally accepted workplace norms difficult.

Following the MeToo movement's focus on power abuse and silence, we develop our theoretical framework for how silence emerges within different organizational cultures using spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) and expectation states theory (Berger et al., 1972). According to expectation states theory (Berger et al., 1972), individuals form self-other performance expectations that influence their behaviors. Thus, underlying status beliefs associated with sex categories influence interactions such that self-other expectations will favor men over women (Ridgeway, 2011). Consistent with this theory, we suggest that sex discrimination emphasizes employees' lack of power, which increases silence due to beliefs that speaking up will be ineffective (Brinsfield, 2013). Since employees are more likely to turnover in organizations where the culture does not value employees (Kurtessis et al., 2017) and employees

engage in silence due to organizations' poor expectations of their performance, it follows that silence should also mediate the relationship between discrimination and turnover intentions.

To incorporate the organization's ethical culture, we utilize spiral of silence theory which posits that individuals fear isolation and that, due to this fear, they will ascertain the climate of opinion. If the climate of opinion is similar to their own, they will voice. If not, they will either switch their opinion to that of the majority or stay silent (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Based on this, we suggest that an ethical culture serves as a moderator because deciding whether to remain silent is a complex phenomenon that involves both the organizational climate and the greater societal climate (Johns, 2006; Clemente & Roulet, 2015). Though a strong ethical culture transmits positive information about the employer's value for employees, an environment with high levels of sex discrimination provides negative information. Thus, before the MeToo movement, when an individual receives conflicting information in their assessment of the climate, they are more likely to remain silent due to uncertainty (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). After the MeToo movement, we propose that an ethical culture will now be perceived as even more positive through the lens of positive societal change and will encourage employees to speak up even if sex discrimination is present because the organization's culture reflects a strong climate of opinion that supports speaking up in the face of discrimination. This clarifies the climate of opinion for employees and reduces uncertainty, increasing the likelihood that employees will speak up.

The proposed hypotheses were tested using data from three field samples collected before (2014, $N = 333$ employees, $N = 299$ paired participants) and after the height (2019; $N = 298$; 2021, $N = 414$) of the MeToo movement. Across all studies, more sex discrimination in the organization led to more silence. As expected, preliminary results showed a positive indirect

effect of sex discrimination on turnover intentions through silence and before the MeToo movement, both discrimination and ethical culture served as conflicting sources of information that made ascertaining the climate of opinion difficult, encouraging silence and turnover intentions. Though we hypothesized that the MeToo movement would frame ethical culture in a more positive light that would reduce silence and turnover intentions, the data did not support this. Instead, an ethical culture had very little effect, and at times a positive effect, in the case of silence, on the relationship between sex discrimination and employee outcomes after the height of the MeToo movement. These findings underscore the importance of establishing a consistent organizational climate that creates the psychological safety and efficacy beliefs necessary to support employees who experience discrimination because though the MeToo movement may have helped organizations take small steps forward in reducing silence, more dedicated progress within organizations is needed to reduce employee silence and address sex discrimination in the workplace.

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