The energy and social dynamics involved in speaking up versus staying silent

Associate Professor Stacey Parker

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Davina Moore

Yiqiong Li

Employee Voice and Silence

- Employee voice refers to voluntarily speaking up about concerns, suggestions, issues, or opinions at work, with the aim to facilitate positive change (Van Dyne et al., 2003)

- Employee silence refers to withholding concerns, suggestions, issues, or opinions at work, when there could have been an opportunity to speak up
(Morrison & Milliken, 2000)

Thus, voice is instrumental in communicating key information within work contexts and can have significant ramifications for individuals, as well as team and organisational performance. Furthermore, silence is largely problematic for organisations, where it can result in errors or other dire consequences, sometimes with serious legal repercussions.

Voice ≠ Silence

Same or different antecedents?

Motivational processes: Personal capacity; social cues.

Temporal dynamics?

THE CIRCLE OF WORK LIFE

"LET'S CONTINUE THIS OVER EMAIL"

"LET'S TALK ABOUT IT IN THE MEETING"

LIZ FOSSLIEN

Principles and Corollaries of COR Theory

Principle or Corollary	Description
Basic COR theory tenet	Individuals (and groups) strive to obtain, retain, foster, and protect those things they centrally value.
Principle 1 - Primacy of loss	Resource loss is disproportionately more salient than resource gain.
Principle 2 - Resource investment	People must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain resources.
Principle 3 - Gain paradox	Resource gain increases in salience in the context of resource loss. That is, when resource loss circumstances are high, resource gains become more important - they gain in value.
Principle 4 - Desperation	When people's resources are outstretched or exhausted, they enter a defensive mode to preserve the self which is often defensive, aggressive, and may become irrational.
Corollary 1	Those with greater resources are less vulnerable to resource loss and more capable of resource gain. Conversely, individuals and organisations who lack resources are more vulnerable to resource loss and less capable of resource gain.
Corollary 2 - Resource loss cycles	Because resource loss is more powerful than resource gain, and because stress occurs when resources are lost, at each iteration of the stress spiral individuals and organisations have fewer resources to offset resource loss, and these loss spirals gain in momentum as well as magnitude.
Corollary 3 - Resource gain spirals	Because resource gain is both of less magnitude and slower than resource loss, resource gain spirals tend to be weak and develop slowly.

Note. Sourced and adapted from Hobfoll et al. (2018, p. 106).

Drivers of Voice and Silence

Social Cues (Norms) — Voice / Silence — Personal Capacity (Energy)
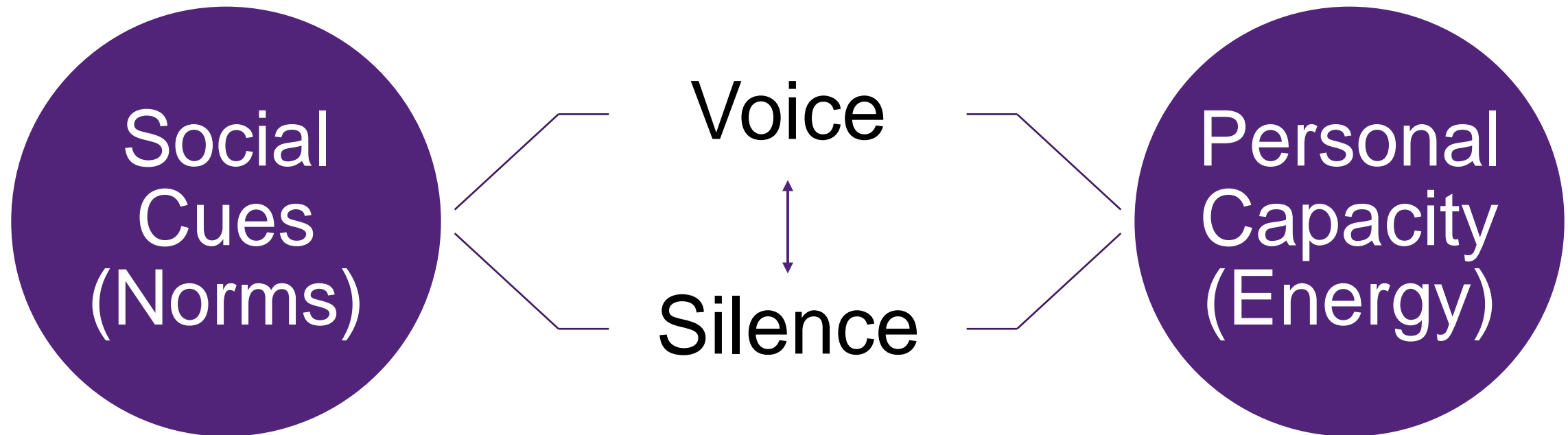
Employee Voice Process

Drawing on Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), theorise that voice is part of a resource gain process.

Voice climate → voice behaviour

- Higher voice climate means an employee perceives norms for speaking up (i.e., speaking up viewed as worthwhile; feel supported and encouraged to speak up).
- But, speaking up can be effortful. Employees will be motivated to speak up, to expend that effort, when there is opportunity for resource gain. In the context of a strong voice climate, they can see the potential benefits of speaking up because speaking up is likely to be received well and will help them to gain valued resources.
- **H1:** When an employee perceives more voice climate, then they increase their voice behaviour.

Voice behaviour → voice climate

- Speaking up can bring benefits. Speaking up can improve the work situation itself, but also social connectedness.
- Realising the benefits of speaking up can reinforce the perceived social value of speaking up, further enhancing the voice climate.
- **H2:** When an employee engages in more voice behaviour, then they perceive more voice climate.

These processes should be apparent within occasions, so we expect to see a positive association between voice and voice climate within occasions, but we also expect increases over time (week-to-week) and a positive recursive relationship.

Employee Silence Process

Drawing on Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), theorise that silence is part of a resource loss or resource protection process.

Emotional exhaustion → Silence behaviour

- Higher emotional exhaustion means an employee has less energy / capacity available. This is a context of resource loss.
- Speaking up can be effortful. Employees will be motivated to stay silent in the context of resource loss, to protect their energy resources.
- **H3:** When an employee feels more exhausted, then they increase their silence.

Silence behavior → Emotional exhaustion

- Staying silent demands self-regulatory resources (i.e., inhibition, withholding knowledge), which can drain energy.
- Staying silent also likely worsens the work situation itself and/or connectedness with team.
- **H4:** When an employee stays more silent, then they feel more emotional exhaustion.

These processes should be apparent within occasions, so we expect to see a positive association between silence and emotional exhaustion within occasions, but we also expect increases over time (week-to-week) and a positive recursive relationship.
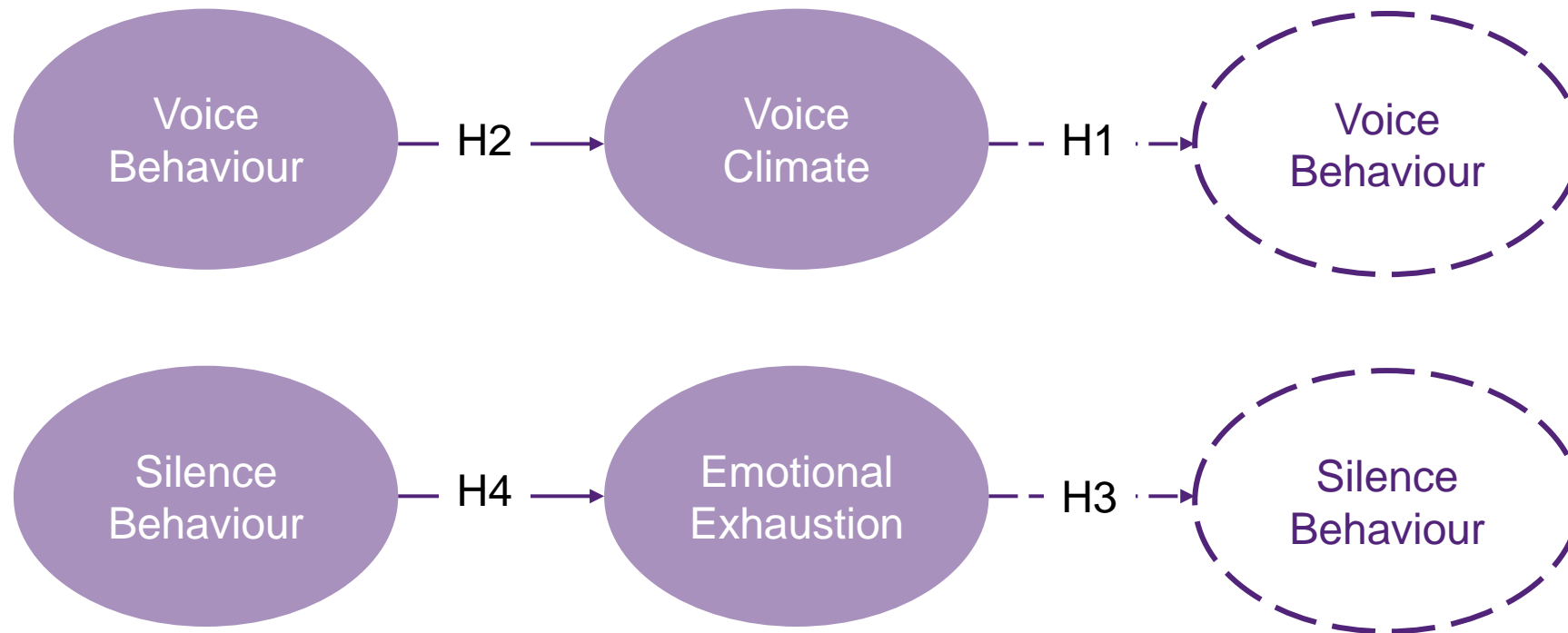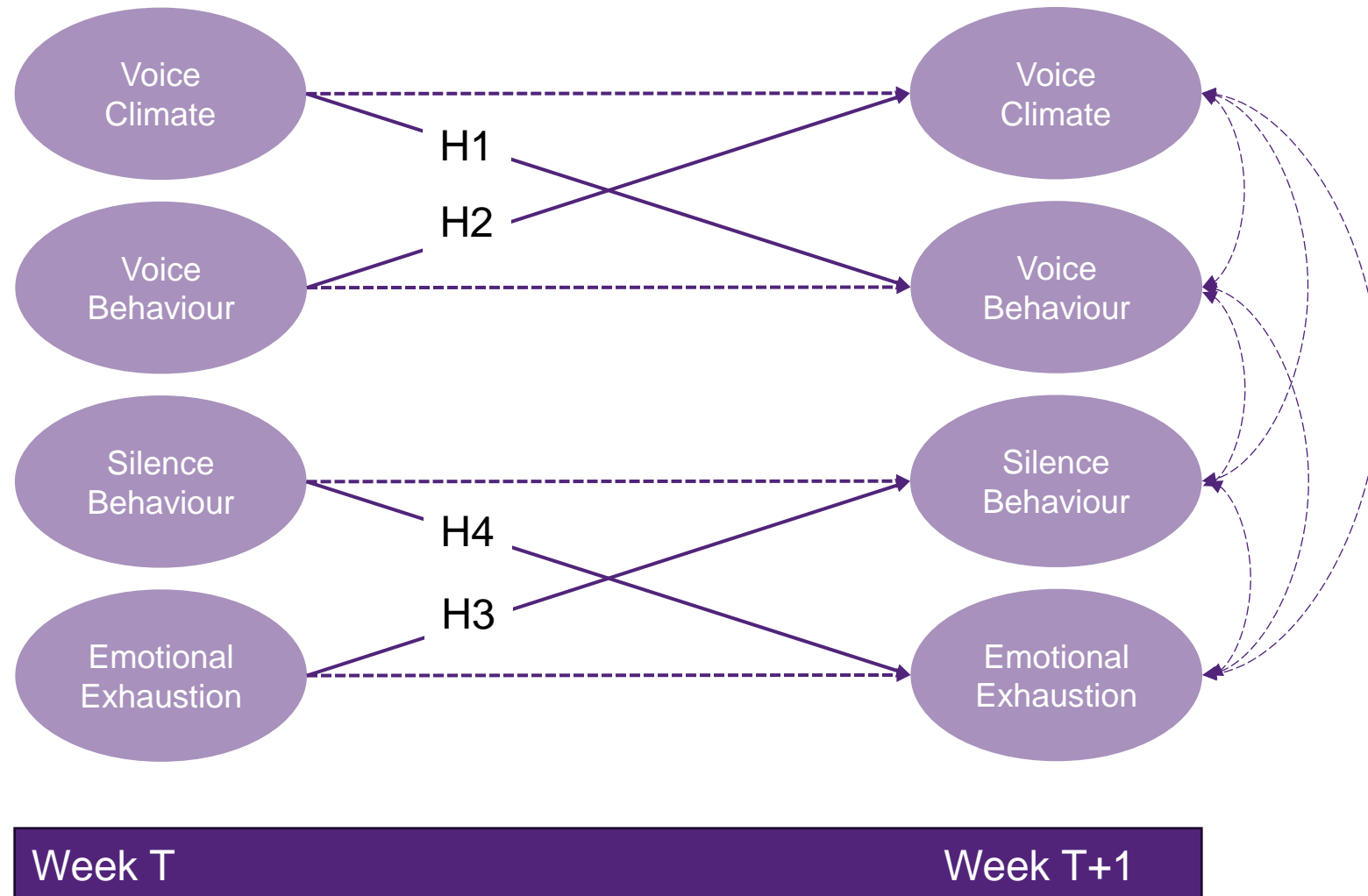
Conceptual Model
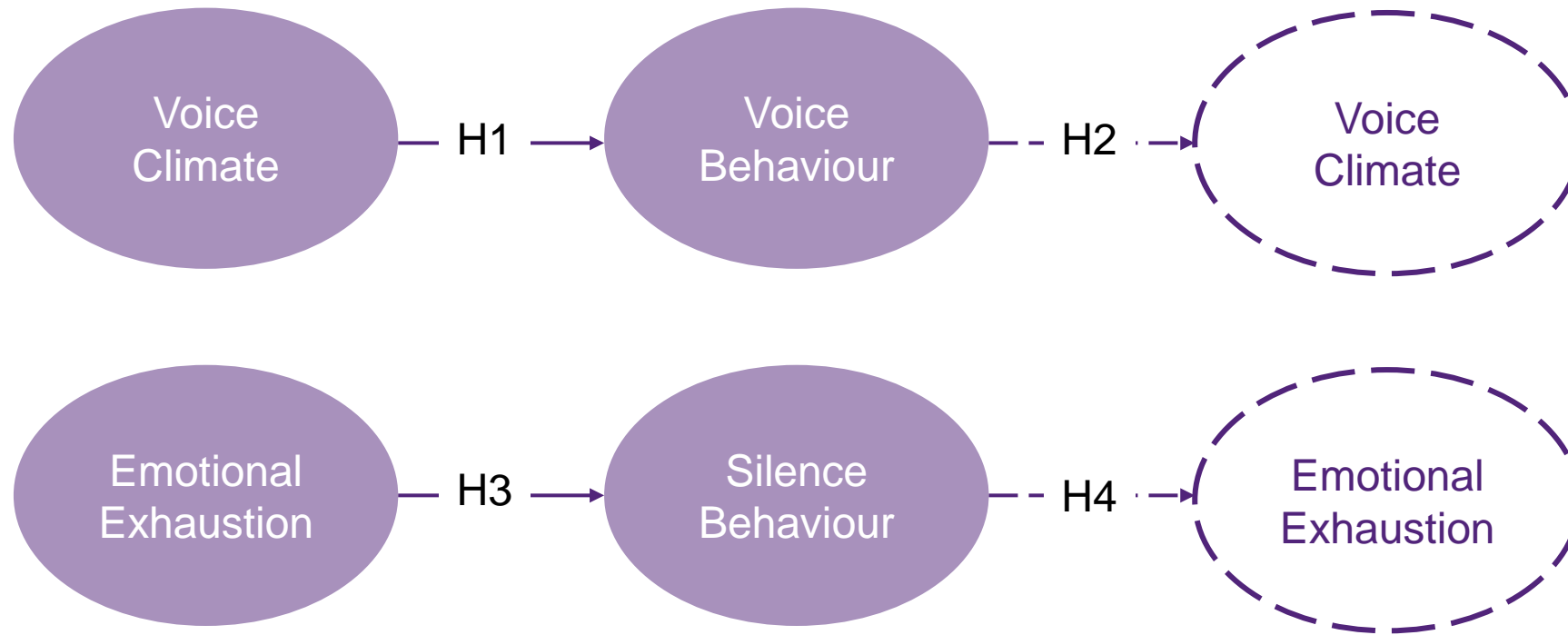
Conceptual Model (other possibility, but is incumbents)

Week T   Week T+1

Analytical Model

Methodology

- 10-week experience sampling study. All concepts measured once per week, on Friday afternoons, reflecting on the past work week.

- Where possible, used existing, validated measures. But, as there was no suitable existing measure of silence behaviour, we developed one.

- Participants were recruited via Prolific Academic. We used screeners to identify healthcare workers, where voice and silence behaviour potential have more importance and variation week to week.

- N=300 participants completed a baseline survey and were screened to ensure: employed, in medical industry, worked in a role with social interaction, available to participate. Based on these screening criteria, N=220 were invited to participate in the experience sampling.

- Retained participants were (N=192; n=1479) who completed at least 2 of 10 weekly surveys (M=7.65).

- Survey compliance was around ~75%, across participants and weeks.

- Checked for any systematic differences between those invited to participate and those excluded from the study and tests were non-significant for age, gender, work hours, and emotional exhaustion.

- **Analytic strategy:** Tested measures (ML CFA) and hypotheses (Dynamic SEM) in Mplus.

Our Measures

Voice and Silence (Never to Always) – This week, when you were at work, how often have you performed the behaviours listed below?

- Raised suggestions to improve working procedures. (Voice)
- Made constructive suggestions to improve work operations. (Voice)
- Proactively voiced suggestions to help achieve work goals. (Voice)
- Chosen to remain silent when you had ideas for how to improve working procedures. (Silence)
- Kept quiet instead of voicing suggestions when you wanted to help achieve work goals. (Silence)
- Said nothing when you had constructive suggestions to improve work operations. (Silence)

Voice Climate (Disagree to Agree) – Consider the team you spent the most time with this past work week…

- It was worthwhile for employees to speak up and encourage others to get involved in issues that affected the team.
- It was worthwhile for employees to speak up with ideas for new projects or changes in procedures that affected this team.
- It was worthwhile for employees to get involved in issues that affected the quality of work life in the team.

Emotional Exhaustion (Never to Always) – Please think about this past work week….

- I felt emotionally draining from my work
- Working was really a strain for me.
- I felt burned out from my work.

ML CFA

Four variable model (voice, silence, climate, exhaustion) had good fit across all indicators:

X^2 (96) = 126.40, p = .021. CFI=.997; TLI=.996; RMSEA=.015; SRMR(W)=.013; SRMR(B)=.028.

Within:

- All items loaded significantly on respective factors > .820
- Voice and silence (r=-.07); silence and exhaustion (r=.14**); voice and exhaustion (r=-.02); silence and climate (r=-.12**); voice and climate (r=.18**); climate and exhaustion (r=-.09)

Between:

- Item loadings are fine, no factor correlations above .70.

ICCs & Descriptives

- Ratings were on a 7-point Likert scale. Lower instances of silence, but this makes sense.

- Relatively high person-level variance in exhaustion, but still reasonable variance at the week-level.

- Within-level correlations on upper diagonal. Significant correlations in bold.

	ICC	M (B)	ω (w)	Voice	Silence	Climate	Exhaustion
Voice	.58	3.36	.92	-	-.06	**.17**	-.02
Silence	.55	2.33	.92	**-.30**	-	**-.11**	**.12**
Climate	.62	4.97	.91	**.47**	**-.61**	-	-.08
Exhaustion	.75	3.66	.89	-.13	**.33**	**-.37**	-

Dynamic SEM

All possible AR and CL paths are specified, variables are correlated within occasions, but on the next slide we only depict the significant and notable non-significant effects for brevity.

T

T+1
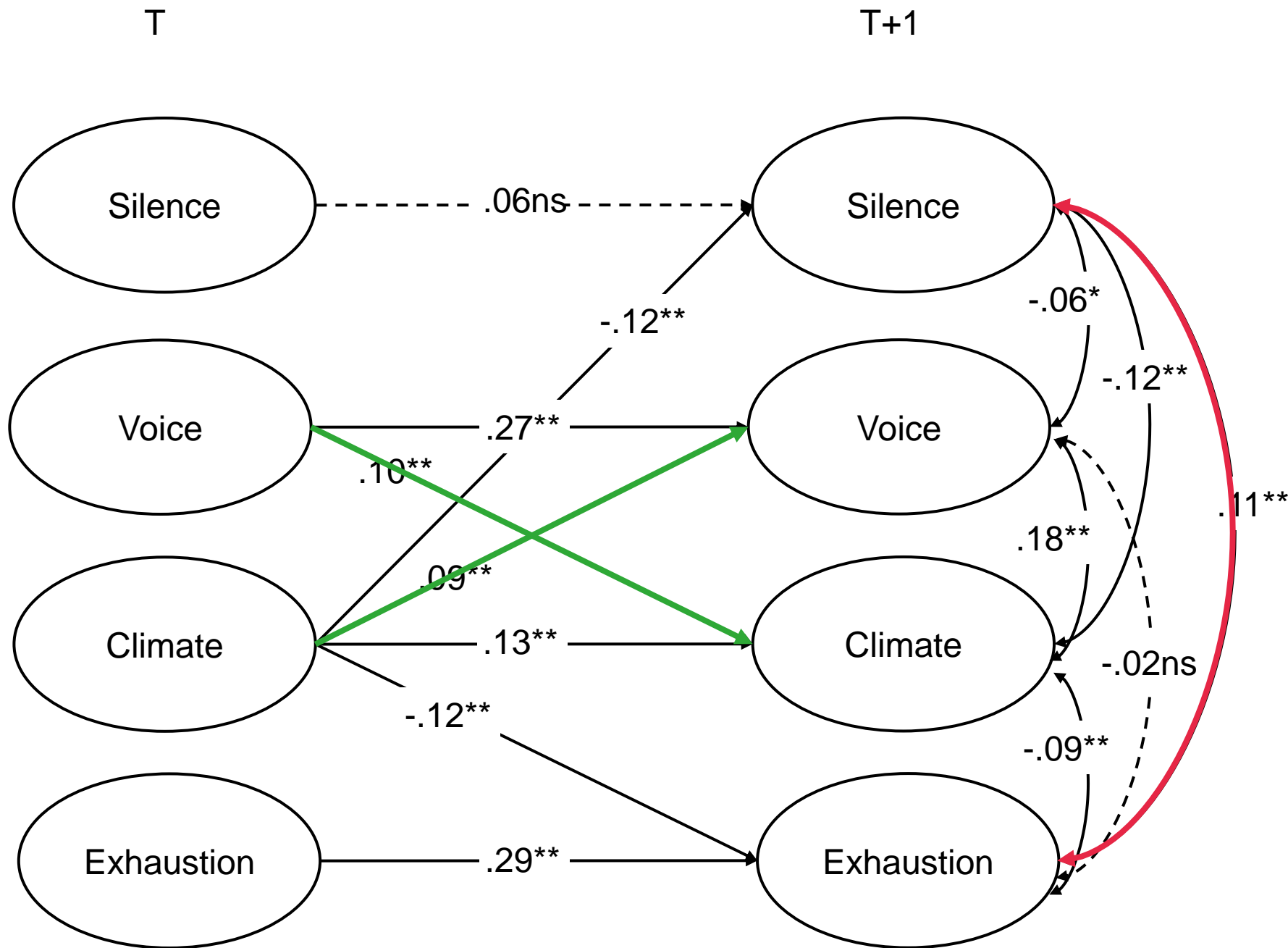
Summary:

Support for H1 & H2. Mediation of climate-voice-climate or voice-climate-voice is significant, so is a recursive effect.

No support for H3 & H4. Role of exhaustion not what was thought, but correlation within occasions is as expected.

No other potential recursive effects, but nice evidence for importance of climate.

Silence

Voice

Climate

Exhaustion

Silence

Voice

Climate

Exhaustion

.06ns

-.12**

.27**

.10**

.09**

.13**

-.12**

.29**

-.06*

-.12**

.18**

-.02ns

-.09**

.11**

CRICOS code 00025B

Limitations and Sensitivity Checks

1. As some of the participants were part-time and could WFH, there is potential variability in the opportunity for voice or silence, or potential for exposure to the climate or development of exhaustion. **Explored controlling for weekly work hours and work location: no changes.**

2. As the ESM asked weekly reports over 10 weeks, there might be a testing effect, perhaps more reflection on voice or climate affects future reports over time. **Explored linear trends and cross-classified model controlling for week of study variance: no trends and changes.**

3. There was some slight attrition over time (i.e., weekly compliance ranged from 69-88%, but not in a systematic way, it was up and down). Dynamic SEM should be robust to missing data, but perhaps we should check for any effects here? **Will explore further attrition or non-response analyses. However, also note these potential effects would be at the person- or week-level, which has been accounted for in the Dynamic SEM (and the cross-classified model).**
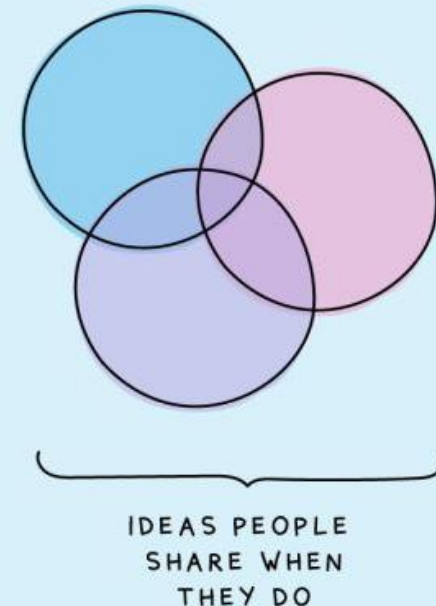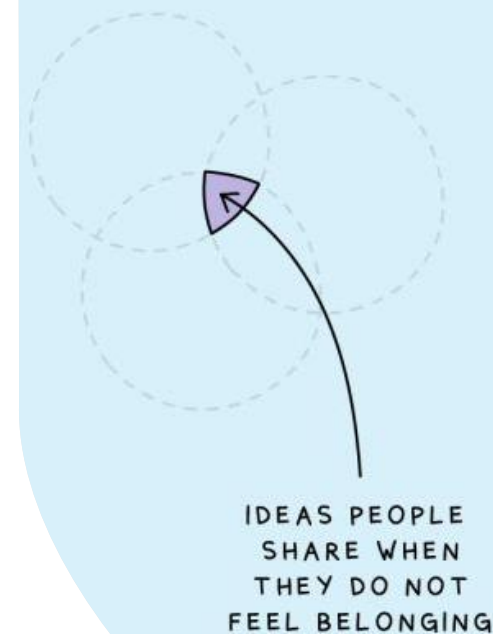
Other Limitations: Entirely self-report (i.e., some new or not ideal measures, climate was psychological not team-based / contextual). Only included promotive topic content, not prohibitive. Only ten weeks.

Research Implications

Summary: Model supported a positive recursive relationship of voice and climate. However, no lagged effects of exhaustion and silence.

- **Psychological climate for voice is particularly important, within and across weeks**. Voice climate improves voice. In turn, engaging in voice can reinforce a climate for voice. Voice climate also mitigates silence.

- Within weeks, **silence and exhaustion were positively associated,** but exhaustion was not associated with voice. While staying silent seems linked to one's capacity/energy level, it is yet unclear if there is any directionality to this association. Perhaps staying silent is more about how we feel in the moment, rather than an accumulated or lagged state? Perhaps the time frame studied did not allow for this resource loss/protection process to unfold?

Prior research assumes voice and silence are opposite ends of a continuum, but our research suggests these are distinct and have different dynamic and momentary processes. **Contrary to Conservation of Resources theory, we found more support for a resource gain process, rather than a resource loss process**.

IDEAS PEOPLE SHARE WHEN THEY DO NOT FEEL BELONGING

IDEAS PEOPLE SHARE WHEN THEY DO

Liz Fosslien

Practical Implications

- On a weekly basis, voice and silence are distinct behaviours. **It cannot be assumed that if employees are using voice on some issues, they are not staying silent on others**.

- The results involving voice climate suggest that practical **interventions targeting the social context around speaking up** would have value (e.g., **team/leader development, culture change**), as voice climate increases voice and simultaneously decreases silence.

- The positive recursive relationship of voice climate and voice behaviour also suggests that **training in speaking up** could be viable for reinforcing the psychological climate for voice and future voice behaviour.

- Additionally, the positive association of emotional exhaustion and silence highlights the need to **manage workloads and other demands that might drain employee energy**. However, more research is needed to understand the dynamic resource loss processes involved in silence and how to mitigate it.

EVERYTHING
YOU CAN DO

EVERYTHING
YOU CAN DO
TODAY

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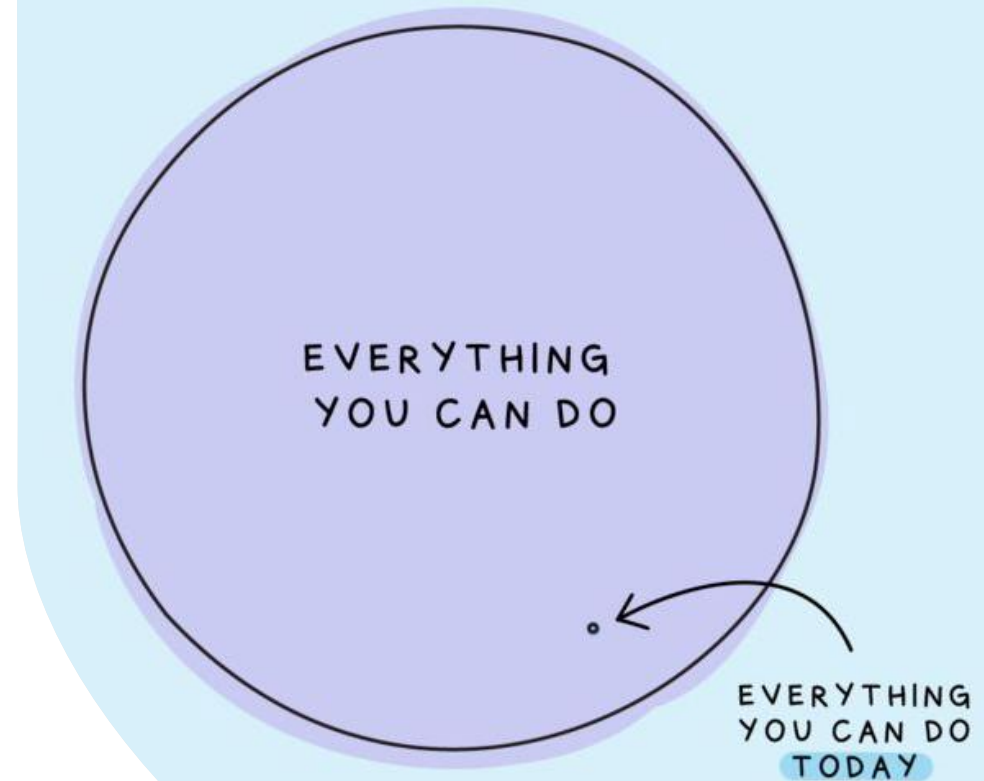
Thank you

Associate Professor Stacey Parker
School of Psychology
s.parker@psy.uq.edu.au
07 3365 6423

@StaceyLParker

@staceylouiseparker

Davina Moore
UQ Psychology

A/Prof Yiqiong Li
UQ Business

DIFFICULT CONVERSATION HEARTS

WHEN YOU...

CAN YOU TELL ME MORE?

...I FEEL

WHAT I'M HEARING IS...

MY GOAL IS...

2-GETHER WE CAN SOLVE THIS

THX FOR TALKING

@LIZANDMOLLIE