

Perceived supervisor support and subordinate silence: an uncertainty management perspective on the roles of interactional justice, commitment and procedural justice

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the potential of perceived supervisor support (PSS) to minimize subordinates' acquiescent and defensive silence toward their supervisors. Based on the uncertainty management theory (UMT), we propose perceived supervisor interactional justice as the key mediator and explore the moderating effects of commitment to supervisor and procedural justice.

Design/methodology/approach – Time-lagged data were collected over three waves of questionnaire surveys. Based on data from 263 employees across various Taiwanese companies, the analysis utilized a latent moderated structural equation modeling approach.

Findings – PSS was negatively associated with acquiescent and defensive silence, and these relationships were mediated by interactional justice. Commitment to supervisor and procedural justice served as moderators that strengthened the links between interactional justice and multifaceted silence.

Originality/value – This study extends the concept of employee silence by specifying supervisors as a target. It identifies critical supervisory factors that can effectively reduce employees' silence in the presence of their supervisors. Furthermore, unlike previous research that primarily adopted a social exchange theory perspective, this study uses UMT to formulate its hypotheses.

Keywords Uncertainty management theory, Employee silence, Justice perceptions,
Perceived supervisor support, Commitment to supervisor

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Employee silence has been shown to negatively impact organizational performance and leadership effectiveness (Morrison and Milliken, 2000), as employees may remain silent even when they witness wrongdoing or know a better solution to a problem. In line with the old saying “the less trouble, the better,” they may opt for silence to avoid the risk of backlash or being perceived as challenging authority (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). Supervisors, as frequent points of interaction and key resource allocators within the organization (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2002), are among the main targets of employee silence. However, supervisors may focus



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primarily on subordinates' compliance and cooperation, overlooking their potential reluctance to report problems. This can prevent the organization from detecting early warning signs and effectively addressing emerging work-related crises (Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008). Given these risks, understanding the supervisor-related factors that can alleviate employee silence has become an important concern for organizational research.

Initially, employee silence was conceptualized as an organizational phenomenon or aspect of the organizational climate (e.g. Morrison and Milliken, 2000), with research highlighting employee silence behaviors related to significant organizational issues (Morrison, 2023). Subsequently, researchers expanded the scope of employee silence and characterized it as a multifaceted construct grounded in motivational bases, including acquiescent and defensive silence, while also incorporating its directionality toward multiple organizational targets (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Building on this foundation, silence research has focused on the negative forms of leadership that result in employee silence, such as abusive supervision and leader narcissism (Hamstra et al., 2021; Hao et al., 2022). Other studies have shown that employees' perceptions of positive leadership, such as authenticity and benevolence, can help break their silence toward supervisors (Guenter et al., 2017; Li and Xing, 2021). However, these discussions have largely remained within the scope of general silence. Research has so far failed to fully explain how specific leader behaviors can effectively mitigate subordinates' multifaceted silence directed toward supervisors.

Silence in the workplace can take various forms, with acquiescent and defensive silence identified as particularly detrimental to organizational performance and development (Howard and Holmes, 2020). Acquiescent silence stems from feelings of futility, while defensive silence arises from a fear of sanctions (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Given the affective nature of supervisor–subordinate interactions (Cropanzano et al., 2017), both acquiescent and defensive silence directed toward supervisors are meaningful constructs. Subordinates may remain silent as a coping mechanism in response to uncertainty in supervisor behaviors. Because silence is fundamentally an inhibition-oriented response driven by uncertainty appraisal (Sherf et al., 2021), a theoretical framework that focuses on how individuals seek and process information to manage uncertain situations provides a useful lens for explaining these behaviors. From this perspective, this paper draws on uncertainty management theory (UMT), which suggests that individuals rely on fairness information as a primary cue for managing uncertainty (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002), we address the scenario in which a supportive supervisor may promote perceptions of interactional justice within the supervisor–employee relationship. This perception may help employees regain a sense of control and psychological safety in the belief that their ideas will not be ignored or criticized. This can reduce acquiescent silence and alleviate fear within vertical interpersonal interactions, thereby reducing employees' defensive silence toward supervisors.

In addition, this study introduces two moderators that represent distinct yet complementary fairness contexts within the UMT framework: commitment to supervisor and perceived supervisor procedural justice. These two represent the relational and structural fairness contexts that directly relevant to the distinct motivational bases of acquiescent and defensive silence. According to UMT, fairness information plays a central role in reducing interpersonal uncertainty (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002). Commitment to supervisor reflects identification with the supervisor's values and willingness to exert effort to secure the supervisor's success (Cheng et al., 2003). Employees with strong commitment to their supervisors closely integrate their self-worth with the supervisor, making them more sensitive and responsive to supervisors' justice behavior (Brockner et al., 1992). Given such commitment, perceived interactional justice conveys the idea that employees are valued, which may strengthen its effect in reducing uncertainty within supervisor–subordinate interactions and amplify its negative influence on acquiescent silence. UMT also indicates that people consult multiple fairness sources to evaluate and reduce uncertainty in the workplace (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002). Procedural justice establishes fair processes and provides clear norms that reduce the uncertainty within the environment, whereas interactional justice conveys immediate

behavioral information that alleviates uncertainty in interpersonal interactions (Colquitt, 2001; Thau *et al.*, 2007; Van den Bos, 2001). Procedural justice may serve as additional justice information and clarify the interactional context, and thus strengthens the link between interactional justice and defensive silence.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it establishes a clear, mediated pathway from perceived supervisor support (PSS) to interactional justice to subordinate silence. This confirms that PSS reduces employees' uncertainty and enhances their perception of being treated respectfully and fairly in interactions. This feeling of justice is the immediate precursor to reducing silence. Second, by examining the dual effects on acquiescent silence (passive withholding) and defensive silence (self-protective withholding), this study provides a more nuanced theoretical model than previous research, which often treated silence as a single construct. Third, this study enriches the model by incorporating moderators. The finding that commitment to supervisor and procedural justice strengthen the core relationship demonstrates that the efficacy of interactional justice is contingent upon both the quality of the existing relational bond and the fairness of broader organizational systems, thereby providing a crucial theoretical integration.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Perceived supervisor support and silence toward the supervisor

In the workplace, employee silence involves the deliberate suppression of viewpoints or the decision not to communicate with colleagues, particularly those in positions of authority who can enact change (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). Recent studies have identified supervisor behavior as a critical factor contributing to employee silence. Destructive leader behaviors, such as abusive, unethical or illegal actions, often compel subordinates to remain silent to avoid potential threats (Wang *et al.*, 2020). Subordinates tend to avoid any upward communication that poses risks to their evaluations or workplace relationships (Milliken *et al.*, 2003).

However, speaking up can help to address critical work-related issues and problems (Morrison, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to reduce employees' silence toward their supervisors. Van Dyne *et al.* (2003) categorized employee silence into distinct types based on its motivations. *Acquiescent silence* is a passive behavior whereby employees withhold opinions and information due to the belief that their input will not influence the situation. *Defensive silence* is a proactive yet self-protective behavior whereby individuals withhold work-related information out of fear. Both forms of silence are inhibition-oriented behaviors that may be reduced in environments that are free from threats and risks that could lead to rejection or uncomfortable interactions (Sherf *et al.*, 2021).

Previous studies aiming to encourage employee upward communication have adopted the social exchange theory (SET) as a theoretical foundation (e.g. Memon and Ghani, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2022). SET effectively illustrates mechanisms such as positive reciprocity and interdependent transactions, which build expectations for high-quality long-term relationships and thus promote approach-oriented behaviors such as employee voice (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Kim *et al.*, 2023). However, SET remains limited in its ability to explain how to reduce inhibition-oriented behaviors – specifically employee silence – which are primarily motivated by the perception of potential threats or harm within the environment (Sherf *et al.*, 2021).

Given that behavioral inhibition reflects an individual's tendency to avoid undesired or uncertain outcomes, this study proposes that UMT offers valuable insights into the mechanisms for reducing silence behaviors. People experience uncertainty when situations are ambiguous or unpredictable, or when information is unavailable or inconsistent (Brashers, 2001). This uncertainty can be perceived as a potential threat, which activates emotional responses that lead to coping behaviors (Brashers *et al.*, 2000). Silence is often motivated by emotional distress (Pinder and Harlos, 2001), and within this framework, it can be understood

as a strategy for coping with uncertainty. Employees may withhold opinions when they perceive that speaking up could heighten uncertainty – for example, by eliciting unpredictable managerial reactions, undermining the relationship with their supervisor or leading to undesirable consequences (Milliken *et al.*, 2003). Within supervisor–subordinate interactions, uncertainty may operate through cognitive ambiguity. When employees face unpredictable supervisory behaviors, they often lack sufficient information to anticipate potential outcomes (Thau *et al.*, 2007), making it difficult to assess whether speaking up will be met with receptivity or rejection (Milliken *et al.*, 2003; Takeuchi *et al.*, 2012). According to uncertainty management perspectives, obtaining adequate information can help individuals regulate and reduce uncertainty (Brashers, 2001). As ambiguity decreases, employees may feel less compelled to withhold input to avoid potential negative consequences. In addition, when appraised as a danger, uncertainty can generate anxiety and fear as well (Rains and Tukachinsky, 2015). These negative emotional states often motivate self-protective behavioral responses, prompting employees to suppress their opinions in order to shield themselves from potential harm or punishment (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, when uncertainty is effectively managed and the work environment becomes safer and more predictable, employees’ reliance on silence as a coping strategy should decrease, leading to reduced silence behaviors.

According to UMT, employees seek cues and information from accessible sources to manage this uncertainty, most notably through their interactions with supervisors (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos and Lind, 2002). PSS may serve as the first step in establishing a psychologically safe and less stressful environment, where employees view supervisors as caring and encouraging (Nahum-Shani *et al.*, 2014). Supportive supervisors consider employees’ needs and well-being and behave in a consistent manner (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2002; Rafferty and Griffin, 2006), which can form predictably and positively interactive contexts that decrease subordinates’ feelings of uncertainty. Employees who perceive supervisor support are more likely to believe that their contributions are valued by the supervisor (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2002). Such perceptions can alleviate feelings of frustration and helplessness in their interactions with the supervisor, thereby reducing acquiescent silence. Moreover, supportive and safe cues communicated by the supervisor may lessen subordinates’ fear of punishment, which in turn decreases their tendency to engage in defensive silence. Therefore, we propose *Hypothesis 1*:

- H1.* Perceived supervisor support is negatively associated with acquiescent silence (H1a) and defensive silence (H1b).

The mediating mechanism of perceived supervisor interactional justice

Within the UMT framework, fairness information serves as a critical interactive cue that manages uncertainty by signaling predictability. Fairness plays a pivotal role by alleviating the fear of exploitation during upward interactions (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002; Thau *et al.*, 2007) and enhancing subordinates’ confidence that their opinions will be acknowledged and respected by their supervisors (Whiteside and Barclay, 2013). Interactional justice reflects employees’ evaluations of the interpersonal treatment that they receive from their supervisors in decision-making contexts (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2002). Despite the apparent similarities of PSS and interactional justice in promoting positive interpersonal dynamics between supervisors and subordinates, these two constructs differ theoretically in their situational boundaries and conceptual scope (Greenberg and Cropanzano, 1993; Holtz and Harold, 2013).

PSS is broadly defined as the extent to which employees perceive that supervisor values their contributions and cares about their well-being in daily interactions (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2002). In contrast, interactional justice refers to the quality of interpersonal treatment employees receive from authority figures during formal decision-making events or procedural

enactments, reflecting the degree to which supervisors treat subordinates with respect, dignity, transparency and timely justifications for their actions (Greenberg and Cropanzano, 1993). In this sense, supportive supervisory behaviors can function as antecedents that cultivate perceptions of interactional justice (Holtz and Harold, 2013; Phillips *et al.*, 2001). This perspective is further supported by research on leader consideration, which demonstrates that considerate leaders and benevolent leaders shape employees' justice perceptions (Phillips *et al.*, 2001; Wu *et al.*, 2012). Such leaders interact warmly, show concern for employees' well-being and foster feelings of recognition that enhance employees' perceptions of interactional justice within the supervisor–subordinate relationship (Holtz and Harold, 2013).

Subsequently, subordinates who perceive high levels of interactional justice report that their supervisors treat them with sincerity, explain resource allocation and share relevant situational information (Greenberg and Cropanzano, 1993). Subordinates seek fair interpersonal treatment from supervisors to alleviate uncertainty and enhance their confidence in the supervisors (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos *et al.*, 1998). Subordinates may regain a sense of control and predictability through supervisors' consistent and sincere behavior, which reduces subordinates' counterproductive responses and fosters their vulnerability acceptance (Colquitt *et al.*, 2007; Nahum-Shani *et al.*, 2014). The perception of interactional justice can fulfill subordinates' psychological needs, encouraging their active participation in the workplace and thereby reducing their acquiescent silence. In contrast, defensive silence is driven by fear, which motivates subordinates to avoid expressing opinions that might lead to negative outcomes or personal harm (Hao *et al.*, 2022; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). The perception of interactional justice can build employees' trust in their supervisors and reduce perceived threats within vertical interactions, enhancing psychological safety (Sherf *et al.*, 2021). This may encourage subordinates to engage in open communication with supervisors, further reducing their defensive silence. Thus, we propose *Hypothesis 2*:

- H2.* Perceived supervisor interactional justice is negatively associated with acquiescent silence (H2a) and defensive silence (H2b).

Consequently, perceived interactional justice from supervisors is likely to be a key mediator of the relationship between PSS and subordinates' acquiescent silence and defensive silence. PSS fosters a safe climate and provides emotional support for subordinates, offering positive, secure and non-threatening cues that may reduce uncertainty in workplace interactions (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006; Thau *et al.*, 2007). Interactional justice in supervisor–subordinate relationships directly influence subordinates' job performance and citizenship behaviors (Colquitt *et al.*, 2012). Conversely, perceived injustice can create feelings of insecurity and anxiety, increasing deviant workplace behaviors (Robbins *et al.*, 2012). Thus, PSS establishes a safe and supportive environment for accurate perception of supervisors' fair interpersonal conduct. In turn, interactional justice provides the event-specific fairness cues that directly resolve the uncertainty motivating silence, alleviating the futility that drives acquiescent silence and the fear that drives defensive silence toward supervisors. Therefore, we propose *Hypothesis 3*:

- H3.* Perceived supervisor interactional justice mediates the relationships between perceived supervisor support and acquiescent silence (H3a) and defensive silence (H3b).

Two moderators: commitment to supervisor and supervisor procedural justice

UMT proposes that individuals rely on fairness information to reduce uncertainty in the environment (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002). We expect commitment to supervisor to moderate the relationship between perceived supervisor interactional justice and subordinates' acquiescent silence toward their supervisors. Employees feel a sense of commitment to immediate supervisors who directly offer feedback and promotion, and when employees

affectively commit to supervisors, they are more likely to internalize their supervisors' values, share common goals and be encouraged to engage in high-performance behaviors (Becker *et al.*, 1996). Studies have shown that employees with high levels of commitment are more sensitive to justice-related information because they closely link their self-identity and sense of self-worth to the relationship target. In this context, interactional justice signals sincerity and respect, affirming the employee's self-worth, whereas unfair treatment may be perceived as a threat to their core self-value (Brockner *et al.*, 1992). Therefore, highly committed employees are particularly concerned about supervisors' fairness behaviors, and their reactions are more strongly influenced by their perceptions of justice. When they perceive high levels of interactional justice, they are less likely to engage in counterproductive behaviors (Colquitt *et al.*, 2006). Conversely, when they experience mistreatment from their supervisor, they are more likely to exhibit behaviors that undermine organizational effectiveness (Lian *et al.*, 2012).

Moreover, commitment to supervisor fosters identification with the supervisor's values and goals, motivating subordinates to perform pro-supervisor and proactive extra-role behaviors (Cheng *et al.*, 2003). The defining characteristic of acquiescent silence is a sense of futility or worthlessness (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). Commitment, as the emotional bond within the supervisor-subordinate relationship, may reduce acquiescent silence when subordinates perceive supervisor interactional justice, as this relationship conveys that they are valued and, in turn, strengthens their inclination to act in the supervisor's favor. This moderating effect is bounded by the motivational basis of silence. Commitment to supervisor is not expected to moderate the relationship between interactional justice and defensive silence, as defensive silence is driven by fear of punishment and interpersonal risk (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). Commitment may not alter employees' objective assessment of such threat. Even highly committed employees may perceive that speaking up carries interpersonal risk, regardless of how strongly they identify with their supervisor (Burris *et al.*, 2008; Kim *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, we propose that commitment to supervisor strengthens the effect of perceived supervisor interactional justice in reducing the uncertainty about one's own value and influence that underlies acquiescent silence. Thus, we propose Hypothesis 4 as follows:

- H4. Commitment to supervisor moderates the negative relationship between perceived supervisor interactional justice and acquiescent silence. This negative relationship is stronger when commitment to supervisor is higher.

UMT also highlights the interaction effect of procedural justice and interactional justice on workplace outcomes. According to UMT, employees rely on multiple fairness cues to reduce ambiguity at work, with interactional justice and procedural justice serving as two distinct sources of information used to interpret supervisory behaviors (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002). Interactional justice focuses on fair interpersonal treatment and the behavioral aspects of social interaction, signifying the immediate respect and trustworthiness of the supervisor. Conversely, procedural justice refers to employees' perception of fairness in formal decision-making and resource allocation processes (Colquitt, 2001; Thibaut and Walker, 1975). Procedural justice is critical, as it shapes employees' sense of structural stability and control within the environment. In the supervisor-subordinate context, procedural justice information is vital for employees to assess the legitimacy and intentions of authority figures, as it influences their willingness to accept supervisors' decisions (Colquitt, 2001; van Prooijen *et al.*, 2002).

In this study, we propose that defensive silence – an avoidance behavior driven by self-protective motives to circumvent fear and uncertainty during interpersonal interactions (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003) – is a key outcome shaped by the interaction between procedural justice and interactional justice. While interactional justice provides immediate social cues to reduce uncertainty during a specific interaction, procedural justice serves as an equally important source of fairness that signals structural stability and procedural predictability at a broader organizational level. In situations where uncertainty is heightened, a strong perception of

procedural justice provides employees with clarity regarding fairness norms, effectively reducing perceived risk and anxiety about the environment (Van den Bos, 2001). Thus, we hypothesize that a supervisor's fairness in decision-making procedures establishes a background context characterized by fair rules and transparent principles. This stable context amplifies the certainty and security derived from fair interpersonal treatment, thereby reducing employees' defensive silence. However, procedural justice is not expected to moderate the relationship between interactional justice and acquiescent silence. Because acquiescent silence is motivated by feelings of worthlessness and futility (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003), procedural justice as a fairness cue that establishes procedural assurance may not help amplify employees' sense of being valued within the supervisory relationship (Colquitt, 2001; Van den Bos, 2001). Therefore, we propose *Hypothesis 5* as follows:

- H5.* Perceived supervisor procedural justice moderates the negative relationship between perceived supervisor interactional justice and defensive silence. This negative relationship is stronger when perceived supervisor procedural justice is higher.

Methods

Participants and procedures

The data were collected from employees across various Taiwanese organizations through a three-wave survey, with the waves spaced one month apart to reduce common method bias (Sherf *et al.*, 2021). Phase 1 measured PSS, commitment to supervisor and participants' demographic variables; Phase 2 assessed perceived supervisor interactional justice and procedural justice and Phase 3 measured acquiescent and defensive silence. This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of National Chung Cheng University (CCUREC106051501). A total of 393 paper-based questionnaires were distributed, and 306 were returned in Phase 1 (77.86%), 283 in Phase 2 (92.48%) and 270 in Phase 3 (95.41%). We assigned each participant a unique code to link their responses across the three waves. Once all three waves of data collection were completed, we de-identified the codes to ensure participant anonymity. Only participants who completed all three phases of the survey were included in the analyses. The final sample comprised 263 employees (55.13% female; mean age, 35.02 years; *SD*, 10.97 years). Most had a college degree (54.6%) or graduate degree (21.8%), and mainly worked in the manufacturing industry (27.0%), healthcare industry (12.6%), education industry (11.8%), professional, scientific and technical service (7.2%) and construction industry (6.5%). Participants had worked with their supervisors for an average of 3.67 years (*SD* = 4.86 years).

Measures

All of the survey items were adapted from validated scales and rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The translation-back-translation technique was used to ensure wording accuracy and fluency. The decision to use a 6-point format was made to reduce response bias, as participants influenced by Chinese cultural norms often tend to select middle-point ratings to present a modest self regardless of their actual feelings (Cheng *et al.*, 2003).

Perceived supervisor support was measured using a 6-item scale proposed by Eisenberger *et al.* (2002). A sample item is "My supervisor strongly considers my goals and values." Cronbach's α was 0.89.

Perceived supervisor interactional justice (seven items) and *procedural justice* (four items) were measured using the scale from Rupp and Cropanzano (2002). Sample items are "My supervisor treats me with dignity and respect" and "Where I work, my supervisor's procedures and guidelines are very fair." The Cronbach's α values for interactional justice and procedural justice were 0.93 and 0.90, respectively.

Commitment to supervisor was assessed by an 8-item scale from Jiang et al. (2007). A sample item is “I feel proud when someone speaks highly of my supervisor.” Cronbach’s α was 0.96.

Acquiescent and defensive silence were measured using a 10-item scale developed by Van Dyne et al. (2003). We modified the item descriptions by asking the participants to evaluate their behaviors while interacting with their immediate supervisor. Sample items are “I passively keep ideas from my supervisor about solutions to problems” and “I withhold relevant information from my supervisor due to fear.” The Cronbach’s α values for acquiescent silence and defensive silence were 0.96 and 0.94, respectively.

Control variables included employees’ age, education level and tenure with their current supervisor to account for the potential influence of individual demographics on employee silence behaviors (Guenther et al., 2017). Research has indicated that employees’ perception of unequal power can induce their silent behaviors (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). Therefore, power distance was controlled using a 7-item scale (Kirkman and Shapiro, 2001). Cronbach’s α was 0.79.

Results

This study first confirmed the distinctiveness of the six main variables (PSS, interactional justice, procedural justice, commitment to supervisor, acquiescent silence and defensive silence) through confirmatory factor analysis. To address the challenge of a limited sample size relative to the number of estimated parameters, item parceling was applied for each variable (Williams and O’Boyle Jr, 2008). The 6-factor model showed good fit (χ^2 (120) = 230.49, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.06) and outperformed five alternative models (Table 1; $\Delta\chi^2 = 163.80 - 1883.77$, $\Delta df = 5 - 15$, $p < 0.001$). Subsequently, we measured average variance extracted (AVE) to confirm discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The square roots of the AVE for the six main variables were greater than the corresponding correlation coefficients, supporting the discriminant validity of the constructs (Table 2). Thus, we utilized the 6-factor model for hypothesis testing.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and results of the correlation analysis. We adopted latent moderated structural equations using Mplus 8 to test our hypotheses (Cheung and Lau, 2017). To minimize potential biases between the independent and dependent variables, we added control variables to the model. Following Wayne et al. (2017), we first assessed the overall model fit by estimating a model without latent interaction variables, which showed good fit (χ^2 (216) = 379.24, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.05). Next, we evaluated the latent interactions between interactional justice and commitment to supervisor and between interactional justice and procedural justice, with paths to acquiescent and defensive silence (see Figure 1 and Table 3).

Table 1. Results of confirmatory factor analysis of the main variables

Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
1. Six-factor model	230.49	120			0.97	0.96	0.03	0.06
2. Five-factor model ^a	394.29	125	163.80***	5	0.93	0.92	0.05	0.09
3. Four-factor model ^b	611.14	129	380.65***	9	0.88	0.86	0.04	0.12
4. Three-factor model ^c	933.16	132	702.67***	12	0.80	0.77	0.07	0.15
5. Two-factor model ^d	1254.13	134	1023.64***	14	0.72	0.69	0.07	0.18
6. One-factor model ^e	2114.26	135	1883.77***	15	0.51	0.45	0.16	0.24

Note(s): The values of $\Delta\chi^2$ and Δdf are the differences between the six-factor model and other alternative models, ^aPerceived supervisor support and interactional justice combined, ^bInteractional justice and procedural justice combined; acquiescent and defensive silence combined, ^cPerceived supervisor support, commitment to supervisor, interactional justice and procedural justice combined, ^dPerceived supervisor support, commitment to supervisor, interactional justice and procedural justice combined; acquiescent and defensive silence combined, ^eAll variable combined into one factor

*** $p < 0.001$

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\sqrt{AVE}$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	35.03	10.97	–	–									
2. Education	3.80	1.01	–	–0.41**	–								
3. Years working with current supervisor	3.67	4.86	–	0.46**	–0.27**	–							
4. Power distance	4.22	0.92	0.70	0.19**	–0.14*	0.11	(0.79)						
5. Perceived supervisor support	4.34	0.93	0.85	0.02	0.02	0.10	0.16**	(0.89)					
6. Acquiescent silence	3.46	1.49	0.93	–0.11	–0.05	–0.09	0.01	–0.40**	(0.96)				
7. Defensive silence	3.52	1.42	0.92	–0.24**	0.06	–0.16**	–0.06	–0.39**	0.75**	(0.94)			
8. Perceived supervisor interactional justice	4.90	1.19	0.92	–0.01	0.02	0.09	0.26**	0.73**	–0.48**	–0.43**	(0.93)		
9. Perceived supervisor procedural justice	4.78	1.23	0.85	–0.06	0.05	0.06	0.20**	0.66**	–0.44**	–0.40**	0.81**	(0.90)	
10. Commitment to supervisor	3.82	1.21	0.95	0.12	–0.09	0.18**	0.27**	0.77**	–0.33**	–0.30**	0.66**	0.62**	(0.96)

Note(s): *N* = 263. $\sqrt{AVE}$ = square roots of average variance extracted. Cronbach's alpha coefficients are listed on the diagonal
 p* < 0.05. *p* < 0.01

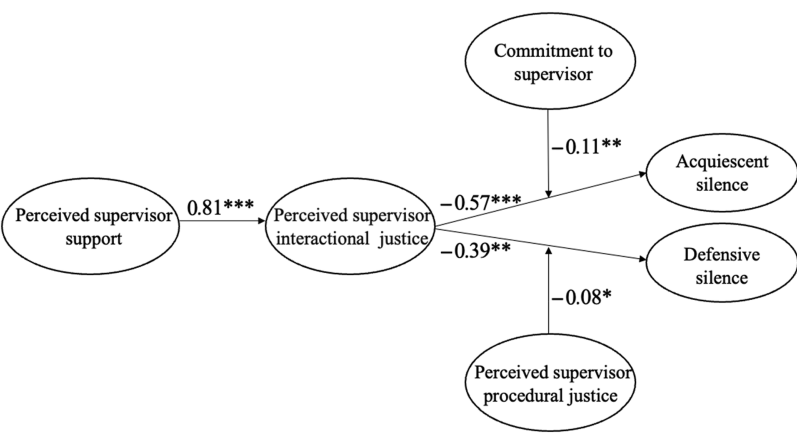


Figure 1. The theoretical model. *Note:* $N = 263$. Standardized coefficients. The direct path from perceived supervisor support to acquiescent silence and defensive silence, the paths of control variables, the correlations between mediators and moderators, correlations between two dependent variables and correlations between all control variables have been added into the estimation. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$. *Source:* Authors' own work

Table 3. Coefficients from structural equation modeling for the proposed model

	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i>
<i>Paths</i>		
Perceived supervisor support → Perceived supervisor interactional justice	0.95***(0.07)	0.81
Perceived supervisor support → Acquiescent silence	0.22 (0.28)	0.14
Perceived supervisor support → Defensive silence	-0.10 (0.16)	-0.07
Perceived supervisor interactional justice → Acquiescent silence	-0.78*** (0.17)	-0.57
Perceived supervisor interactional justice → Defensive silence	-0.45** (0.17)	-0.39
Commitment to supervisor → Acquiescent silence	-0.25 (0.14)	-0.20
Perceived supervisor interactional justice × Commitment to supervisor → Acquiescent silence	-0.13** (0.05)	-0.11
Perceived supervisor procedural justice → Defensive silence	-0.08 (0.12)	-0.07
Perceived supervisor interactional justice × Perceived supervisor procedural justice → Defensive silence	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.08
<i>Paths of control variables</i>		
Age → Acquiescent silence/Defensive silence	-0.03** (0.01)/ -0.03** (0.01)	-0.19/ -0.28
Education → Acquiescent silence/Defensive silence	-0.15 (0.09)/ -0.02 (0.07)	-0.10/ -0.01
Years working with current supervisor → Acquiescent silence/Defensive silence	0.01 (0.02)/ -0.01 (0.02)	0.02/ -0.02
Power distance → Acquiescent silence/Defensive silence	0.48** (0.17)/ 0.18 (0.15)	0.23/ 0.10
Note(s): $N = 263$. Abbreviation: <i>SE</i> , standard error. Paths of control variables: Values before and after the slash represent coefficients for acquiescent silence and defensive silence, respectively * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$		

The results showed that PSS was positively associated with interactional justice ($\beta = 0.81$, $p < 0.001$) and interactional justice was negatively related to acquiescent ($\beta = -0.57$, $p < 0.001$) and defensive silence ($\beta = -0.39$, $p < 0.01$), supporting [Hypotheses 2a](#) and [2b](#). The interaction between interactional justice and commitment to supervisor significantly reduced acquiescent silence ($\beta = -0.11$, $p < 0.01$), with stronger effects at higher commitment levels ([Figure 2a](#)). The interaction between interactional justice and procedural justice reduced defensive silence ($\beta = -0.08$, $p < 0.05$), with stronger effects at higher procedural justice ([Figure 2b](#)). These results support [Hypotheses 4](#) and [5](#).

Using 2,000 bootstrap resamples ([Cheung and Lau, 2017](#)), we found that PSS had significant total effects on acquiescent (unstandardized estimate = -0.52 , 95% CI $[-0.87, -0.13]$, $p < 0.01$) and defensive silence (unstandardized estimate = -0.53 , 95% CI $[-0.82, -0.30]$, $p < 0.001$), supporting [Hypotheses 1a](#) and [1b](#). The indirect effects of interactional justice on acquiescent silence (unstandardized estimate = -0.74 , 95% CI $[-1.15, -0.45]$, $p < 0.001$) and defensive silence (unstandardized estimate = -0.43 , 95% CI $[-0.80, -0.13]$, $p < 0.05$) were also significant, supporting [Hypotheses 3a](#) and [3b](#) ([Table 4](#)).

Finally, the moderated mediation examination showed that PSS influenced acquiescent silence via interactional justice, moderated by commitment ($b = -0.13$, 95% CI $[-0.22, -0.03]$, $p < 0.01$) and influenced defensive silence via interactional justice, moderated by procedural justice ($b = -0.08$; 95% CI $[-0.15, -0.003]$, $p < 0.05$). The conditional indirect effects of commitment to supervisor (-1 SD: $b = -0.59$, 95% CI $[-1.02, -0.27]$, $p < 0.01$; $+1$ SD: $b = -0.89$, 95% CI $[-1.31, -0.56]$, $p < 0.001$) and procedural justice (-1 SD: $b = -0.34$, 95% CI $[-0.70, -0.02]$, $p = 0.052$; $+1$ SD: $b = -0.52$, 95% CI $[-0.91, -0.20]$, $p < 0.01$) were all significant within a 95% confidence interval. These results suggest that the mediation effects were solid, the indirect relationship between supervisor support and acquiescent silence through interactional justice was stronger when subordinates committed more to supervisor and the indirect relationship between supervisor support and defensive silence through interactional justice was also stronger when subordinates perceived higher supervisory procedural justice.

Discussion

This study drew on UMT to deepen the understanding of multifaceted silence in hierarchical relationships, examining the relationships between PSS, justice perceptions and subordinate silence toward the supervisor. The present study conceptualizes silence as an inhibition-oriented coping response adopted in reaction to perceived uncertainty within supervisor-subordinate interactions. Both acquiescent and defensive silence are driven by interaction-specific concerns that are closely tied to the quality of interpersonal treatment that the employees receive ([Hao et al., 2022](#); [Pinder and Harlos, 2001](#)). Consistent with this line of reasoning, our findings confirm that a reduction in silence represents the expected outcome, as PSS conveyed through interactional justice directly alleviates the interpersonal uncertainty that initially motivates silence.

Furthermore, building on previous research demonstrating that distinct types of employee silence are driven by different underlying intentions ([Van Dyne et al., 2003](#)), this study contributes to the silence literature by identifying contextual factors that differentially shape these silence motives. Regarding acquiescent silence, we found that when employees are highly committed to their supervisors, interactional justice more effectively reduces acquiescent silence. This suggests that interactional justice is particularly significant for committed employees, as it makes them feel more valued and safer in the relationship. This heightened sense of security lessens their sense of futility and lowers their tendency to remain passively silent. Turning to defensive silence, our results also showed that when employees perceived higher supervisory procedural justice, the negative association between interactional justice and defensive silence was stronger. Procedural justice serves as a

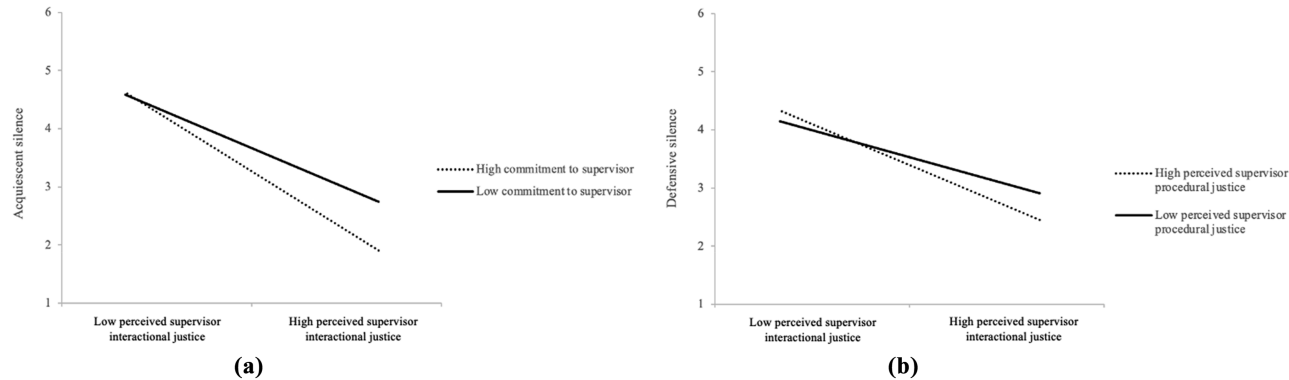


Figure 2. Moderation effect of commitment to supervisor and perceived supervisor procedural justice. *Note:* (a) The interactional effect of perceived supervisor interactional justice on acquiescent silence toward supervisor according to the level of commitment to supervisor. (b) The interactional effect of perceived supervisor interactional justice on defensive silence toward supervisor according to the level of perceived supervisor procedural justice. *Source:* Authors' own work

Table 4. Summary of mediation effects from the structural equation modeling

Paths	Est	95% CI
<i>Total effect</i>		
Perceived supervisor support → Acquiescent silence	−0.52**	[−0.87, −0.13]
Perceived supervisor support → Defensive silence	−0.53***	[−0.82, −0.30]
<i>Indirect effect</i>		
Perceived supervisor support → Perceived supervisor interactional justice → Acquiescent silence	−0.74***	[−1.15, −0.45]
Perceived supervisor support → Perceived supervisor interactional justice → Defensive silence	−0.43*	[−0.80, −0.13]
Note(s): <i>N</i> = 263. Estimates are unstandardized. Abbreviation: Est., estimates * <i>p</i> < 0.05. ** <i>p</i> < 0.01. *** <i>p</i> < 0.001		

source of environmental fairness (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002), creating a context of structural stability that enhances overall psychological safety. Under such conditions, interactional justice can further alleviate employees' fear of negative interpersonal outcomes, encouraging them to speak up rather than remain defensively silent. Together, these findings advance the understanding of employee silence as a multifaceted and context-sensitive behavior that is contingent upon both relational commitment and organizational structural fairness.

Theoretical implications

This study offers several theoretical contributions that extend and deepen existing knowledge on employee silence, justice perceptions and supervisory behavior. First, this research pioneers the application of UMT to the study of silence reduction, offering a theoretical reorientation from the dominant SET perspective. Even though previous studies grounded in SET have demonstrated that supportive supervisory behaviors foster positive reciprocity and promote approach-oriented behaviors such as employee voice (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2023; Zhang *et al.*, 2022), SET is limited in its capacity to explain inhibition-oriented behaviors, which are driven not by the motivation to reciprocate but by the motivation to avoid threat and uncertainty (Sherf *et al.*, 2021). Evidence suggests that silence is primarily an inhibition-oriented behavior – a self-regulating coping strategy that employees adopt to avoid uncomfortable tension in troubling work situations (Andrieu *et al.*, 2024; Jahanzeb *et al.*, 2018; Knoll *et al.*, 2019). By grounding our model in UMT, we demonstrate that silence reduction operates through a fundamentally different psychological mechanism that centers on uncertainty appraisal and fairness-based sense-making rather than reciprocal exchange. While long-term positive social exchange fosters relational stability (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005), the UMT perspective enables a more precise examination of how supervisors' fairness cues directly enhance environmental predictability and psychological safety. Importantly, this perspective highlights that promoting relational exchange alone may be insufficient to reduce silence, which depends on alleviating employees' uncertainty through immediate fairness cues. By showing that uncertainty reduction decreases employees' reliance on silence as a coping strategy, our findings refine the understanding of inhibition-oriented behaviors and position silence as a psychologically distinct phenomenon requiring its own theoretical lens.

Second, this study advances the silence literature by providing quantitative evidence that employee silence is a multifaceted and target-specific behavior. Previous research has treated silence as an organizational-level phenomenon and focused on organizational consequences (Morrison, 2023; Morrison and Milliken, 2000). A target-specific approach extends the theory of organizational silence by establishing the supervisor as a critical and distinct target of employee silence (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). Given the frequency of supervisor–subordinate interactions, supervisory behaviors have a highly significant influence on employee silence.

By focusing on this hierarchical relationship, we identify supervisor-related factors that influence both acquiescent and defensive silence toward the direct manager and clarify how distinct silence motives (hopelessness vs. fear) can be mitigated within hierarchical contexts. Moreover, this study advances the understanding of employee silence by examining whether acquiescent and defensive silence are differentially sensitive to specific contextual conditions. Prior research has acknowledged the fact that distinct types of silence are driven by different underlying intentions (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). However, empirical investigations into the boundary conditions that differentially shape these forms of silence remain limited. Existing studies have instead examined the effects of moderators on overall silence as a single composite construct (e.g. Guenter *et al.*, 2017; Li and Xing, 2021). Our findings reveal that interactional justice more effectively reduces acquiescent silence when employees are highly committed to their supervisors, and it reduces defensive silence more effectively when employees perceive high procedural justice, reflecting distinct mechanisms through which fairness alleviates futility versus fear. These differential moderation patterns contribute to a more nuanced theoretical understanding of silence as a context-sensitive and multifaceted behavior.

Third, this study enriches leadership and justice theory by identifying interactional justice as the critical proximal mechanism through which PSS reduces employee silence. Existing justice research has focused on procedural justice as the primary driver of employees' fairness perceptions and behavioral outcomes (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001). While procedural justice establishes structural fairness norms and environmental predictability, our results demonstrate that it is the dignity, respect and transparency of interactional justice that most directly address employees' immediate uncertainty within supervisor–subordinate interactions, rather than the formal fairness of organizational procedures. In doing so, this study refines the theoretical boundary conditions of justice theory by specifying when and how different forms of fairness operate to reduce distinct behavioral inhibitions, thereby contributing to a more differentiated understanding of the justice–silence relationship in hierarchical organizational contexts.

Practical implications

In terms of practical implications, this study suggests that supervisors should recognize that employee silence does not necessarily reflect a lack of opinions but rather a response to perceived uncertainty and threat within supervisor–subordinate interactions. Addressing silence therefore requires targeted actions that reduce interpersonal uncertainty rather than simply encouraging open communication. Supervisors can signal that subordinates' contributions are valued through regular feedback meetings and public acknowledgment of employees' input. When employees observe that their ideas are taken seriously, their sense of futility is likely to decrease. Supervisors should also prioritize the quality of interpersonal communication during decision-making events by treating subordinates with respect and dignity, providing timely explanations for decisions and responding thoughtfully when concerns are raised. Organizations may further support this by incorporating interactional justice training into leadership development programs and providing supervisors with tools for transparent communication and constructive interaction.

Moreover, establishing clear rules and principles in work-related procedures can help reduce employees' perceptions of environmental risk, allowing supervisors' fair interpersonal treatment to more effectively translate into reduced uncertainty and silence. Finally, supervisors should invest in strengthening employees' commitment by demonstrating consistency between stated values and behaviors, sharing relevant organizational information and involving subordinates in goal-setting. Such relational investments enhance employees' sensitivity to supervisors' justice signals and may increase their willingness to take initiative and contribute to organizational improvements.

Limitations and future research

First, collecting all data from employees in a single survey wave raises a common methodological concern regarding common method variance. However, because the predictor and criterion variables in this study – specifically employees' perceptions, attitudes and behaviors (e.g. perceived support, justice and silence) – are inherently subjective, self-reported data remain the most appropriate and essential source (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). To effectively mitigate this potential limitation, we implemented a time-lagged research design. By collecting data for different variables at distinct time points, this approach helps statistically and temporally separate the constructs, thereby reducing the likelihood of inflated correlations due to common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2024). Future research could further strengthen methodological rigor by incorporating multiple data sources, such as supervisors' perspectives on constructs like support and their subordinates' voice/silence behaviors, which would allow for a more comprehensive assessment and help triangulate findings across organizational levels. Additionally, experimental or quasi-experimental designs could be employed to establish stronger causal validity for the proposed relationships. Future studies should also explicitly assess potential differences between employees' and supervisors' perceptions of key constructs, offering richer insights into the supervisor–subordinate dynamic.

Second, this study focused on acquiescent and defensive types of silence, as they typically have negative consequences in the workplace. However, Van Dyne *et al.* (2003) identified a third type of employee silence: prosocial silence, which is characterized by cooperative and altruistic behavior. Given that silence has different effects depending on its target (Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008), future research could explore the processes that influence prosocial silence toward supervisors.

Third, it is essential to note that our participants worked in Taiwan, where Chinese cultural traditions may lead individuals to accept that a superior's personal preferences can influence decision-making (Hu *et al.*, 2004). Cultural factors may have influenced some of the moderation effects in our study. Our results suggest that having a supervisor with low interactional justice may lead to greater defensive silence in employees when procedural justice is high than when it is low. This suggests that employees influenced by Chinese cultural norms may prioritize interpersonal actions over formal rules. As a result, even when procedural fairness is present, a supervisor's behaviors can still generate significant feelings of risk among employees. Future research could gather data from Western countries to explore cultural differences in these dynamics.

Another limitation also concerns the influence of Chinese cultural factors, particularly *guanxi* (關係). *Guanxi* refers to the informal and particularistic interpersonal ties central to Chinese societies (Chen and Chen, 2004; Tsui *et al.*, 2000). Individuals tend to treat others differently based on relational closeness, extending greater care and support toward those with stronger personal ties (Xin and Pearce, 1996). Crucially, *guanxi* provides both access to resources and a sense of security when dealing with uncertainty in the workplace (Davidson *et al.*, 2017). This unique cultural mechanism may significantly shape employees' PSS and their responses to uncertainty. Consequently, in the current study, the measure of PSS may partially reflect the influence of *guanxi* rather than purely formal support. Future research should explicitly incorporate this construct to better capture the culture-specific mechanisms that contribute to reducing employee silence in Chinese organizational contexts.

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