Chapter 2

Voice and Silence as Observers’ Reactions to Defensive Voice: Predictions Based on Communication Competence Theory

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Abstract

Using voice is one way employees respond when they experience mistreatment at work. We discuss the notion of defensive voice by integrating the literatures on employee voice behavior and communication competence. In so doing, we develop a conceptual model of factors and processes that influence observers’ reactions to defensive voice. Our model includes type of defensive voice (instrumental vs. expressive), intensity of defensive voice (high vs. low), and target of defensive voice (peer vs. supervisor) as key predictors of observers’ judgments of communication appropriateness and subsequent negative verbal and nonverbal communication responses of voice and silence. We conclude by discussing practical implications and future research ideas.

In this chapter we integrate the literature on employee voice behavior (e.g., LePine & Van Dyne, 1998) with literature on communication competence (e.g., Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) to develop theoretically based predictions for consequences of voice. Specifically, we consider the judgments that employees who are targets of voice make about the appropriateness of different types of voice behavior and their subsequent use of voice and silence. Here, we focus on one particular type of voice, defensive voice. Van Dyne, Ang, and Botero (2003) defined defensive voice as “expressing work-related ideas, information or opinions — based on fear — with the goal of protecting the self” (p. 1372). Building on this definition, we further explain defensive
voice as acts in which employees utter complaints and criticism in response to the sense that they are being abused or treated unfairly. We note that this definition focuses exclusively on verbal communication. Thus, we consider written communication as beyond the scope of this chapter. We differentiate several types of defensive voice and then develop differential predictions for their consequences.

Speaking up is one way in which employees respond when they feel threatened by changes in their job responsibilities (Van Dyne & Ellis, 2004). Yet, research on voice has not focused on voice motives or observers' reactions to different types of voice. To begin the process of enriching our conceptualizations of voice, Van Dyne et al. (2003) challenged simplistic notions of employee voice that limit themselves to frequency of speaking up and recommended the benefits of more refined conceptualizations that consider different motives for speaking up. Developing this idea, they moved beyond existing research on prosocial voice (i.e., speaking up in a manner that is constructive and intended to contribute positively to the organization, Frese & Fay, 2001; Howell & Higgins, 1990; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Withey & Cooper, 1989; Zhou & George, 2001) by identifying acquiescent voice (based on motives of disengagement) and defensive voice (based on motives of self-protection). Extending this work, Van Dyne and Ellis (2004) proposed that ongoing expectations to “do more with less” (p. 181) often lead to employee reactance and use of voice behavior. Specifically, in situations in which employees feel a loss of personal freedom to make choices about extra-role contributions, they may complain and criticize in an effort to reestablish a sense of personal freedom to choose whether and when to contribute extra-role behaviors (Van Dyne, Cummings, & McLean Parks, 1995).

Building on this prior work, we focus specifically on forms of voice that are self-protective — that is, defensive voice. In contrast to existing literature, which typically has focused on antecedents to voice, we develop a conceptual model of factors and processes that influence observers' reactions to defensive voice. Furthermore, we draw on the communication competence literature (e.g., Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) as our framework for explicating and developing proposed relationships. Integrating these literatures, our model includes type of defensive voice (instrumental vs. expressive), intensity of defensive voice (high vs. low), and target of defensive voice (peer vs. supervisor) as key predictors of observer judgments of communication appropriateness and subsequent negative verbal and nonverbal communication responses (i.e., voice and silence). For an overview, see Figure 2.1.

Research demonstrates that between 25 and 30% of U.S. employees are emotionally abused or bullied at some point during their time at work (Keashly & Neuman, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2005), and scholarly work has begun examining abusive or tyrannical managerial behavior (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Tepper, 2000; Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001; Yamada, 2000; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). One of the strongest sources of workplace emotion and psychological reactance involves interactions with coworkers and supervisors (Miller, Considine, & Garner, 2007; Waldron, 2000). Although coworkers and supervisors have the ability to provide emotional support, these relationships often trigger strong psychological reactance and conflict (Van Dyne & Ellis, 2004). Understanding these
relationships and how various interactions unfold, promises to be an important step toward understanding how workplace abuse escalates and how it can be resolved.

Recent work has considered the communicative process that occurs when employees experience emotional abuse at work. For example, Lutgen-Sandvik (2003) identified six stages of communicative generation and regeneration of employee emotional abuse: (1) initial incident (cycle generation), (2) progressive discipline, (3) turning point, (4) organizational ambivalence, (5) isolation and silencing, and (6) expulsion and cycle regeneration. This communicative process model of employee emotional abuse identifies the growing problem of employee mistreatment by more powerful organizational members and focuses on the role of communication throughout the process of employee abuse. Meares, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs, and Ginossar (2004) also explored workplace mistreatment and found that voices often are muted in the workplace due to repeated silencing over time as well as ambiguous organizational policies. Although some work suggests that over time abused employees may be silenced (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Meares et al., 2004), other work suggests that employees use voice in an effort to rectify the mistreatment (Van Dyne & Ellis, 2004). By considering factors that affect perceptions of voice and subsequent communication responses, we further explore the communicative processes that occur when employees experience abuse of workplace mistreatment.

2.1. Employee Reactance and Defensive Voice

This section addresses the communicative processes that occur when employees experience abuse or workplace mistreatment. We begin by exploring job creep and employee feelings of abuse, followed by a discussion of types of voice employees may use when they experience mistreatment. We conclude this section with a discussion of competent communication and the factors that contribute to successful message outcomes when employees use voice in response to workplace mistreatment.
2.1.1. Job Creep and Feelings of Abuse

One specific example of abuse is the conceptual model of job creep developed by Van Dyne and Ellis (2004) which depicts the consequences of ongoing employee expectations to do more with less. Job creep involves the gradual and informal expansion of role responsibilities. It can be described as a process in which organizational citizenship behavior, defined as doing more work than required, becomes in-role expectations because supervisors and peers come to expect continued performance of what started as discretionary behaviors. These heightened expectations by supervisors and peers for additional contributions can be a form of abuse because they are not formally recognized or rewarded (Fraser, 2001). Furthermore, this abuse becomes apparent when employees experience ongoing pressure to continue making contributions that are not part of their formal role obligations. When employees feel they regularly must perform additional duties without formal recognition, this behavior is no longer discretionary.

Contributing extra-role behaviors on an ongoing basis also can be costly personally. For example, long working hours reduce time for family and personal activities and trying to “do more with less” is stressful. In contrast, if an employee occasionally chooses to stay late or to take on additional projects, this discretionary behavior enhances feelings of choice. However, when contributions that initially were intended as discretionary behavior become an unofficial but normatively mandated ongoing part of the employee’s role, this represents abuse that leads to psychological reactance.

Based on reactance theory (Brehm & Brehm, 1981), Van Dyne and Ellis’ (2004) model explicated how job creep threatens personal freedom, generates psychological reactance, and can lead to expressions of discontent directed at supervisors and peers. Specifically, the model suggests that employees will speak up (e.g., sounding their complaints) in an effort to reduce the pressure they feel to overfulfill obligations at work. For example, an employee may speak up to motivate a low-performing coworker to pick up the slack so others help with the extra work. Alternatively, he or she may speak to a low-performing peer, encouraging this individual to leave the work group (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001). Ultimately, these uses of voice are directed at regaining personal freedom to choose the degree to which one elects to engage in discretionary behavior at work.

When employees experience job creep and other forms of workplace abuse from coworkers or supervisors, they often feel overwhelmed, exhausted, frustrated, cynical, and angry (Hallowell, 2005; Maslach & Leiter, 1999) because their sense of personal freedom and control are reduced (Spector, 1997). Reactance theory describes perceived threat to personal freedom as triggering reactance (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Psychological reactance is not a generic response to loss of freedom nor is it a diffuse emotional state. Rather, reactance is an internal, psychological state and “the direct manifestation of reactance is behavior directed toward restoring the freedom in question” (Brehm & Brehm, 1981, p. 4). Using voice may be one method employees use to restore their freedom to make discretionary contributions at work. Specifically, we propose that the more an employee experiences job creep, the more
likely he or she will experience reactance and a sense of restricted freedom. Defensive voice, such as expressing complaints and criticism about the unfair treatment, is one mechanism through which employees can restore or regain their sense of freedom. Accordingly, our first proposition proposes a positive relationship between job creep and intensity of defensive voice.

**Proposition 1.** The more the job creep, the higher the intensity of defensive voice.

### 2.1.2. Types of Voice

Emotional abuse among employees is costly and research has found that it often causes employees to refocus their efforts from productivity to self-protection (Hirigoyen, 1998; Wyatt & Hare, 1997). Speaking up with complaints and criticism (voice behavior) is one way employees can protect themselves when they feel abused. Building on Van Dyne and colleagues' (2003) multidimensional framework of employee voice and voice motives that included prosocial voice (i.e., other-oriented expression of ideas, information, and opinions for constructive ways to improve work and work organizations, based on cooperative motives), defensive voice (i.e., self-protective expression, based on fear), and acquiescent voice (i.e., disengaged expressions based on resignation), we focus on defensive voice. This is because defensive voice should have direct relevance to job creep, feelings of employee abuse, and reactance. Next, we explain the proposed relationship between job creep and defensive voice, focusing on different types of defensive voice and resulting consequences.

By definition, defensive voice is self-protective and involves using communication in an effort to reduce perceived personal threats. The intent of issuing complaints and criticisms is not primarily to benefit the organization but rather, self-interest. Examples of defensive voice include speaking up and shifting attention to others who may not be working as hard as they should or proposing ideas that divert attention to others and away from the sender. Applied to job creep, an employee may use verbal expressions of complaints and criticism (i.e., defensive voice) with the goal of restoring a sense of personal freedom and autonomy.

Here, we use the job creep model (Van Dyne & Ellis, 2004) as a starting point and focus on the consequences of defensive voice. When employees use defensive voice in an effort to regain their freedom to choose whether or not to engage in organizational citizenship behavior, receivers may respond differently depending on the form of defensive voice used by the sender. Van Dyne and Ellis contrasted two forms of voice — expressive and instrumental voice. Expressive voice is used by employees who speak up for purposes of complaining and expressing their frustration. Expressive negative voice, to which we refer as expressive defensive voice, is based on emotion-focused reactance (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005). By contrast, instrumental voice occurs when employees speak up with complaints and criticism in efforts to try to change the situation (Choi, 2007; Fuller, Marler, & Hester, 2006;
Graham & Van Dyne, 2006). Instrumental negative voice, to which we refer as *instrumental defensive voice*, is based on problem-focused reactance (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005). These two types of voice parallel Buss' (1961) distinctions between expressive and instrumental aggression and also Kowalski's (1996) differentiation of expressive and instrumental complaints. For expressive voice, the focus is self-oriented catharsis (e.g., venting frustrations and communicating personal feelings). For instrumental voice, the focus is other-oriented attempts to change the situation by suggesting a solution to the problem.

### 2.1.3. Communication Competence

In the communication literature, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) defined communication competence as using communication to accomplish goals in a socially appropriate manner (Monge, Bachman, Dillard, & Eisenberg, 1982; Parks, 1994). Canary and Spitzberg (1989) claim that there are two aspects of competent communication: evaluation of appropriateness and evaluation of effectiveness. Appropriate communication meets situational and relational guidelines governing the communicative context, whereas effective communication accomplishes the speaker's goals, objectives, or intended functions (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987). Appropriate communication fulfills social expectations with regard to how a communication exchange should unfold. In contrast, inappropriate communication includes things that are out of place or unsuitable for a given situation (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987). Generally, a message that is in bad taste or a message that is too lengthy represents inappropriateness. Effective communication includes conversations characterized by usefulness, helpfulness, or clarity. When messages are seen as clear and purposeful they have higher communication effectiveness. When communication is viewed as appropriate and effective, communication competence is higher (Canary & Spitzberg, 1989). Thus, communication competence involves judgments of a particular communication exchange. These judgments can be made by the speaker, the target, or by observers (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987; Spitzberg & Canary, 1985; Wiemann, 1977). Overall, appropriateness and effectiveness are both essential for competent communication.

Someone using defensive voice is likely to be perceived as competent when communication is perceived as appropriate and effective. Communication competence becomes particularly important in conflict situations in which goals are incompatible (e.g., employees want to restore their ability to choose discretionary behaviors and the supervisor wants them to take on the new role permanently — Van Dyne & Ellis, 2004). Research demonstrates positive relationships between communication competence and favorable conflict negotiation strategies (Canary & Spitzberg, 1989; Canary & Cupach, 1988; Canary & Spitzberg, 1987), conflict resolution (Canary, Cupach, & Serpe, 2001), and goal achievement and sensitivity (Lakey & Canary, 2002). Canary and Spitzberg (1987) found that the most effective conflict negotiation strategies were related to highly competent communication,
as well as to satisfaction with others’ communication. When employees find themselves in conflict situations, their ability to communicate in an effective and appropriate manner is critical for obtaining the desired outcome of protecting oneself.

Expressions of anger and frustration are governed by social rules about acceptable ways of expressing emotion in the workplace. These social rules are complex and multi-faceted (Domagalski & Steelman, 2007). When individuals violate these social rules for expressing emotion, they are perceived as lower in communication competence. Examining the communication dimensions of effectiveness and appropriateness promises to enhance our understanding of the factors that contribute to successful message outcomes. For example, although a sender may craft an effective message, it may be perceived as inappropriate when directed toward a particular target and thus may lead to undesired outcomes. However, targets may perceive themselves as appropriate targets for specific messages, yet see the message as ineffective or unpersuasive. To achieve desired outcomes, competent communicators must attend to both dimensions of appropriateness and effectiveness.

In our theorizing, we focus on communication appropriateness from the perspective of the target. Thus, we consider the receiver’s judgments about the extent to which defensive voice is used appropriately by the employee. In other words, when employees respond to job creep (or other actions that trigger feelings of injustice) by speaking up defensively, others in the workplace hear these comments and judge their communication appropriateness. Because we are developing an initial model of observers’ reactions to defensive voice, we hold judgments of communication effectiveness constant, and assume that defensive voice is equally effective throughout our model. This allows us to focus solely on observers’ judgments of appropriateness as we develop our predictions.

2.2. Defensive Voice and Communication Appropriateness

Having established the background, we develop propositions for the consequences of job creep by examining voice and silence as target responses to defensive voice. Defensive voice is self-protective and involves using communication in an effort to reduce perceived personal threats. Defensive voice can be compared with a variety of negative behaviors such as bad behavior (Griffin & Lopez, 2005), antisocial behavior (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997; Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998), misbehavior (Vardi & Weitz, 2004), sneers, snipes, and stab wounds (Glomb, Steel, & Arvey, 2002), complaints (Kowalski, 1996), incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), bullying (Keashly & Neuman, 2005), and workplace aggression (Glomb & Liao, 2003; Neuman & Baron, 1998). Defensive voice, however, differs from these concepts. Although defensive voice may include complaints, negative comments, or rude remarks, the primary difference is that defensive voice is explicitly self-focused and does not focus primarily on intentions to harm others or the organization. In some instances, although defensive voice may have negative effects on peers, supervisors,
and others in the organization, this may be considered collateral damage instead of the primary motivation behind the behavior. Instead, defensive voice is motivated by a sense of injustice and attempts to regain a sense of personal control. Thus, as defined by Van Dyne and colleagues (2003), it is primarily self-protective in orientation.

Defensive voice includes verbal expressions of complaints and criticism aimed at restoring a sense of personal freedom. For example, employees can speak up defensively to try and persuade others to help with the extra work. Alternatively, they can speak up defensively to vent and express their frustrations. These expressions of defensive voice can be targeted at peers or supervisors. In addition, defensive voice can vary from low to high intensity.

### 2.2.1. Intensity of Defensive Voice and Perceived Communication Appropriateness

When employees use defensive voice to regain a sense of control at work, these expressions of voice can be manifested with varying levels of intensity. Intensity represents the amount of emotion included in the expression of voice. Low emotion is low intensity, and high emotion is high intensity. We propose that the level of intensity of defensive voice will influence the judgments a target makes about the message and its appropriateness. When defensive voice is delivered with high intensity, targets typically will react negatively and judge the communication as inappropriate.

Appropriate communication does not violate the situational or relational rules governing the setting in which it occurs. Highly intense defensive voice may be perceived as threatening to a target and may be recognized as violating situational and relational rules for communicating in the workplace. For example, compared to low-intensity messages, messages delivered with high intensity are more difficult to deal with, are harder to ignore, and are more likely to distract other employees from their work (O'Leary-Kelly & Newman, 2003). In contrast, low-intensity voice may require little or no response from the receiver (Griffin & Lopez, 2005) and will be perceived as less threatening and more collaborative than high-intensity voice. Thus, we propose the following proposition.

**Proposition 2.** The higher the intensity of defensive voice, the lower the judgments of communication appropriateness.

### 2.2.2. Moderating Role of Type of Defensive Voice

Van Dyne and Ellis (2004) differentiated instrumental voice and expressive voice. Applying this distinction to defensive voice produces two, more fine-grained and nuanced types of voice. Expressive defensive voice occurs when employees complain or criticize others in a general manner that does not focus on a particular issue or problem. Expressive defensive voice can be characterized as communication of
frustration or anger. It is a form of venting. In contrast, instrumental defensive voice occurs when employees use complaints and criticism as the basis for making suggestions for change in a specific problem-focused manner.

We propose that type of defensive voice moderates the relationship between intensity of defensive voice and receivers’ perceptions of communication appropriateness. This is because receivers’ judgments of appropriateness are grounded primarily in the perception that the communication falls within the boundaries of acceptable ways of expressing ideas and emotions in the workplace. When defensive voice is delivered with low intensity it will be perceived as more appropriate because it does not violate situational or relational rules governing the communicative context. These exchanges consume little energy, do not threaten the receiver, and are typically brief in nature. Thus, we propose that type of defensive voice (instrumental vs. expressive) makes no difference in judgments of communication appropriateness when voice is low in intensity.

In contrast, we argue that type of defensive voice makes a significant difference when voice is high in intensity. Compared to expressive defensive voice, instrumental defensive voice delivered with high intensity is more likely to be perceived as appropriate because it involves offering complaints and criticism in a constructive or problem-focused manner with the goal of changing the situation in a positive fashion. Due to the constructive nature of the comments, instrumental defensive voice generally will be perceived as appropriate because it is solution-oriented. Thus, targets may conclude that a sender is passionate about solving the problem rather than feeling personally attacked or threatened. Furthermore, when individuals complain and then offer a solution, this is seen as more positive and socially acceptable than simply complaining and not offering possible solutions. In comparison, expressive defensive voice delivered with high intensity is more likely to be perceived as inappropriate because intense complaints and criticisms are negative and threatening. No one likes to be the target of emotionally charged criticism or complaints. In addition, this typically violates relational and situational norms of the workplace. Anger and strong expressions of emotion normally are considered negative because they often create emotional conflict and discomfort (Averill, 1982; Crawford, Kipppax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton, 1992). Thus, we propose that defensive expressive voice that is high in intensity will be judged by observers as low in communication appropriateness.

To summarize, we predict an interaction between intensity of defensive voice and type of defensive voice, such that type of voice makes little difference when intensity is low, but type of voice makes a significant difference in judgments of communication appropriateness when intensity is high. In other words, communication appropriateness will be significantly lower for expressive voice that is high in intensity (compared to instrumental defensive voice that is high in intensity). Accordingly, we propose the following (see Figure 2.2 for an overview).

**Proposition 3.** Type of defensive voice moderates the relationship between intensity of defensive voice and judgments of communication appropriateness, such that the negative relationship is stronger for expressive defensive voice than for instrumental defensive voice.
2.2.3. **Moderating Role of Target of Defensive Voice**

In further refining this prediction, we consider also the importance of whether voice is targeted at peers or supervisors (Glomb et al., 2002; Griffin & Lopez, 2005). Perceptions of appropriate communication vary depending on the relational and situational rules governing the context. Thus, the relationship between interactants also influences the extent to which messages are deemed appropriate. For example, it might be appropriate to stop by a colleague's office to tell a joke or funny story, but interrupting a supervisor with the same joke or story could be viewed as a waste of valuable work time. In general, relationships between supervisors and subordinates tend to be more formal than those between peers. Therefore, nonwork exchanges with supervisors could be viewed as inappropriate, whereas the same nonwork exchange with a peer would be seen as positive, collegial, and a form of social support.

Proposition 3 proposed a 2-way interaction. When employees use defensive voice with low intensity their communication will be seen as appropriate because it does not violate situational or relational rules for the context. In other words, communication appropriateness will be high for both types of defensive voice so long as the voice is low in intensity. Similarly, we propose here that low-intensity voice (either instrumental or expressive) targeted at supervisors or peers will be judged as high in communication appropriateness. In contrast, however, we propose that supervisors and peers will judge high-intensity voice differently. Thus, we propose a 3-way interaction between intensity of defensive voice, type of voice, and target of voice.

**Proposition 4.** Intensity, type, and target of defensive voice interact in predicting judgments of communication appropriateness.

In the following paragraphs we explain the components that form the basis of Proposition 4 (i.e., Propositions 4a, 4b, and 4c).
When expressive defensive voice is directed at the supervisor with high intensity, the supervisor most likely will see this form of communication as inappropriate because the employee is complaining and voicing frustration without offering constructive suggestions for improving the situation. This highly intense communication can be threatening or annoying. It also can seem like a waste of time. Furthermore, workplace norms suggest that direct outward displays of anger or emotional expression are more common for individuals in high status positions, while lower status members are expected to suppress expression of their anger (Conway, DiFazio, & Mayman, 1999; Sloan, 2004). Several studies showed that higher status individuals are given latitude to express anger toward lower status individuals (Conway et al., 1999; Gibson & Schroeder, 2002; Hochschild, 1975; Sloan, 2004; Tiedens, 2000); yet lower status individual do not enjoy the same latitude at work. Thus, intense expression of emotion from subordinate to supervisor is not considered normative in the workplace. In addition, most supervisors do not see their primary role as offering social support to subordinates, so highly intense expressive defensive voice violates situational and relational norms for supervisor-subordinate relationships. In sum, supervisors are likely to judge expressive defensive voice delivered with high intensity as being inappropriate.

However, when highly intense expressive defensive voice is directed at peers, it is less likely to violate workplace norms. Peers in workgroups often provide social support such that “co-workers are able to vent feelings, clarify perceptions, and mutually define the work environment” (Ray, 1987, p. 188). This type of communication can alleviate stress and reinforce group cohesion. Albrecht and Adelman (1987) argued that supportive communication reduces uncertainty and provides a sense of perceived control over stressful circumstances. Because peers often provide this type of supportive communication to other peers in their workgroups, they are less likely than supervisors to see expressive defensive voice as inappropriate and violating norms for communicating with other peers in the workplace, even when it is high in intensity. Focusing first on expressive defensive voice, we propose the following 2-way interaction (Figure 2.3).

**Proposition 4a.** Target of defensive voice moderates the relationship between intensity of expressive defensive voice and judgments of communication appropriateness, such that the negative relationship is stronger for expressive defensive voice directed at supervisors than for expressive defensive voice directed at peers.

Now, consider instrumental defensive voice. Here, we propose the opposite relationship, such that instrumental defensive voice delivered with high intensity is judged to be lower in communication appropriateness by peers than by supervisors. Again, we suggest that there will be no difference based on target when instrumental defensive voice is low in intensity. Both will be judged as being relatively high in appropriateness. However, when delivered with high intensity, instrumental defensive voice will be judged differently by supervisors and peers. Due to status differences, peers lack the legitimate power to act upon suggestions made by employees using instrumental voice. In contrast, supervisors possess the legitimate
power needed to respond to criticism and suggestions to make changes in the work environment. Thus, when an employee directs instrumental defensive voice with high intensity at a peer, the peer may feel overwhelmed, frustrated, and helpless. This exchange may highlight the peer’s relative lack of power and he or she may feel unable to do anything useful. This, in turn, will cause the peer to feel uncomfortable and view the exchange as less appropriate.

Supervisors, however, possess the legitimate power and authority to make changes in the workplace. When confronted with an employee who is complaining and passionately making suggestions for change (i.e., instrumental defensive voice), a supervisor is more likely to see the exchange as appropriate because the employee is targeting someone who has the ability to change the situation. Furthermore, supervisors are apt to see this communication as appropriate because the employee is not just complaining, but rather, focused on problem-solving and seeking to improve the situation. Thus, for instrumental defensive voice we predict the following 2-way interaction (Figure 2.4).

**Proposition 4b.** Target of defensive voice moderates the relationship between intensity of instrumental defensive voice and judgments of communication appropriateness, such that the negative relationship is stronger for instrumental defensive voice directed at peers than for instrumental defensive voice directed at supervisors.

Combining Propositions 4a and 4b yields a 3-way interaction. Thus, we propose that intensity of defensive voice (low–high), type of voice (instrumental–expressive), and target of voice (supervisor–peer) interact and influence observer judgments of communication appropriateness. Overall, type and target of voice do not make a difference when intensity is low, but they are critically important when intensity is high. Thus, communication appropriateness will be judged as especially low when highly intense expressive voice is directed at supervisors. It will be also
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Figure 2.4: Target of defensive voice moderates relationship between intensity of instrumental defensive voice and judgments of communication appropriateness.

Figure 2.5: Intensity, type, and target of defensive voice interact in predicting judgments of communication appropriateness.

judged as especially low when highly intense instrumental voice is directed at peers (Figure 2.5).

**Proposition 4c.** Intensity, type, and target of defensive voice interact in predicting judgments of communication appropriateness.

2.3. **Communication Appropriateness and Negative Communication**

We now turn our attention to receiver responses to defensive voice. We first consider negative communication responses to defensive voice and second we explore voice and silence as two forms of communication that employees can use when they receive defensive voice communication from others.
2.3.1. **Negative Communication Responses to Defensive Voice**

Communication is an ongoing series of exchanges in which senders and receivers switch roles as they exchange messages. Thus, it is also important to consider communication responses of those who are targets of defensive voice. Here, we suggest that the extent to which targets judge a specific example of defensive voice to be inappropriate will influence the nature of their own communication responses. When targets judge employee communication as being low in appropriateness, they see the exchange as violating situational and relational norms of the workplace (Canary & Spitzberg, 1989). Furthermore, targets may feel threatened by what they perceive as a negative exchange and thus, seek to reduce the threat. For example, supervisors could view the intense but general complaints of expressive voice as a challenge to their authority. Peers could view the intense complaints and suggestions of instrumental voice as an attempt to delegate work inappropriately, without authority. Reactance theory suggests that perceived threats such as these trigger reactions and a desire to regain control. Reactance is a motivational state that can be intense and typically results in behavior directed at restoring a sense of control (Brehm & Brehm, 1981).

When interactions are seen as extremely inappropriate, reactance is stronger than when interactions are seen as mildly inappropriate. This is because targets feel more threatened by interactions they label as highly inappropriate (e.g., speaking too loud, interrupting a meeting, reprimanding or giving negative feedback in public). When communication is judged as low in appropriateness, however, it is less threatening and results in little reactance. Communication, however, that is judged as highly inappropriate will trigger more reactance and increase the likelihood that the receiver will respond with negative communication. Negative communication is one strategy targets can use to gain a sense of control. However, targets experiencing little reactance will use less negative communication because they do not feel threatened and do not have a sense of limited personal control. Thus, we propose a negative relationship between communication appropriateness and negative communication.

**Proposition 5.** The lower the target’s judgments of communication appropriateness, the greater the reactance he or she will experience and the more likely that person will respond with negative communication.

2.3.2. **Voice and Silence**

For our final proposition, we consider voice and silence as two contrasting forms of communication that employees can use when they receive defensive voice communication from others. Voice is a form of verbal communication, and some forms of silence can represent nonverbal communication (DePaulo & Friedman, 1998). Although both can be used as positive communication such as prosocial voice and prosocial silence described by Van Dyne and colleagues (2003), each can also be
used as a form of negative communication. Here, we focus on the negative forms of voice and silence as potential responses employees can use when they judge communication appropriateness as low.

When communication is perceived as appropriate, targets (supervisors and peers) are unlikely to use negative verbal or nonverbal responses because they are unlikely to experience reactance or feel threatened. However, when communication is seen as highly inappropriate, supervisors and peers will differ in their use of voice and silence. Cox (1999) noted that managers and peers use different strategies when dealing with deviant behavior because managers possess "legitimate authority" (p. 188). For example, unlike peers, managers have the power to permit exceptions and to grant employee requests (Cox, 1997). In contrast, peers do not have this power and thus should be more likely to use negative nonverbal communication strategies such as silence and avoidance.

Supporting this, research demonstrates that employees often react to inappropriate or uncivil behavior with more incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Brett, Shapiro, & Lylte, 1998) or resistance (Tepper et al., 2001). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that peers most commonly reduce contact or completely avoid communicating in response to inappropriate behavior, such as when they want a coworker to leave the organization. Other strategies include undermining behavior (Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006), being unfriendly, hostile, or rude, and performing malicious acts intended to sabotage or harm the deviant peer (Cox, 1999). Consistent with this, Cox (1999) explained that coworkers lack the authority to "punish" others or "negatively alter" their job duties, so they use nonverbal strategies and "unauthorized acts of malice" to harm peers and encourage them to leave. In sum, when peers are the target of defensive voice and judge communication appropriateness to be especially low, they are likely to respond with negative nonverbal communication such as silence (than with negative verbal communication such as voice).

In contrast, we propose that supervisors will be likely to use negative verbal communication such as voice when they are the targets of defensive voice and judge communication appropriateness as low. Supervisors have the authority to implement formal sanctions. They also can use informal techniques such as verbally encouraging and persuading employees to change their behavior or voluntarily leave the organization (Cox & Kramer, 1995; Longenecker, Sims, & Gioia, 1987). For example, Cox (1997) identified a typology of message-based strategies managers use to encourage employees to leave their organizations. This may involve using voice to disparage employees or to recommend that they pursue other job and career alternatives. Furthermore, abusive supervision is often characterized by hostile verbal behaviors (Tepper, 2000) such as derogatory name calling, explosive outbursts, yelling or screaming, threats, and humiliating or ridiculing an employee in front of others (Keashly, 1998). In sum, we propose that when supervisors judge defensive voice to be highly inappropriate, they will be more likely to respond with negative voice than with negative forms of silence.

Combining these arguments, we predict the interaction between communication appropriateness and target of defensive voice determines whether
When communication appropriateness is low:

Figure 2.6: Judgments of communication appropriateness interact with target to influence type of negative communication response.

individuals respond with negative voice or silence. Thus, we offer our final proposition (Figure 2.6).

**Proposition 6.** Judgments of communication appropriateness interact with target to influence type of negative communication, such that supervisors are more likely to respond with voice and peers are more likely to respond with silence when communication appropriateness is judged to be low.

2.4. Discussion

Drawing on communication competence theory, we have explicated a conceptual model of employee use of defensive voice in response to feeling abused. Specifically, we framed our model as an extension of the Van Dyne and Ellis (2004) conceptualization of job creep. When employees feel they are expected to perform extra-role behaviors on an ongoing basis, this can be a form of abuse that causes reactance. Reactance involves strong feelings and the motivation to restore a personal sense of freedom in deciding whether or not to go above and beyond assigned job responsibilities. As explicated in the model we have presented in this chapter, job creep often triggers defensive voice which can be directed at peers or supervisors. The model also differentiates expressive voice and instrumental voice and makes differential predictions about the communication appropriateness of different types of voice. Finally, the model emphasizes that communication is an ongoing process where senders (speakers) become receivers (listeners) and receivers become senders as they engage in 2-way communication exchanges. Thus, the final outcome we predicted is the communication responses of those who are the targets of defensive voice.
2.4.1. Theoretical Implications

Our first theoretical contribution is the integration of the organizational behavior literature on speaking up (employee voice behavior) with the communication literature on communication competence. We suggest that each of these literatures can benefit from incorporating aspects of the other perspective. For example, research to date on employee voice behavior tends to consider frequency of voice and antecedents (both personal and situational) of voice (Avery & Quinones, 2002; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Zhou & George, 2001). Drawing on the communication competence literature has allowed us to take a different perspective by considering specific aspects of voice behavior that influence consequences of voice. For example, we have considered judgments of communication appropriateness as well as intensity and the target of voice. Drawing on the organizational behavior literature, we differentiated expressive and instrumental voice. Overall, this integration suggests the benefits of future organizational behavior research on appropriateness of voice as well as future organizational communication research on instrumental and expressive voice.

Second, our model should have implications for research on reactance (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Although employee reactance is not uncommon, there has been little recent theorizing or empirical research on reactance (Spector, 1978). Because this is our second chapter on the application of reactance theory to employee voice, we hope that other scholars will join us in theorizing about specific applications of reactance and examining ways in which organizational problems such as job creep and other abusive situations that trigger perceived injustice generate reactance and employee voice responses.

Third, our model should also have implications for the important and emerging literature on employee silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder, & Harlos, 2001). For example, the model introduces a new way of thinking about antecedents to silence, as opposed to voice. Specifically, we emphasize the prevalence of silence as a form of nonverbal communication that employees use to communicate negative reactions to their peers. This suggests that the silence literature may benefit by considering relationships between peers as a source of silent communication. The model also suggests that those doing research on silence could consider silence as a form of negative, nonverbal communication (see Chapters 13 and 14 in this volume). These considerations would help enrich the conceptualization of silence by treating it as more than just withholding ideas, opinions, and information (Van Dyne et al., 2003).

Finally, this is the first chapter to focus specifically on Van Dyne and colleagues’ (2003) idea of defensive voice. Defensive voice is speaking up in an effort to protect the self; it is self-oriented. Accordingly, defensive voice seems to be an obvious and natural consequence of reactance such as experiencing a loss of freedom to choose whether or not to engage in extra-role citizenship behavior. Building on our prior work, we used job creep as one specific example of abusive behavior in the workplace (Griffin & Lopez, 2005). This suggests that other abusive and unjust work situations
may also generate reactance and defensive voice (Neuman, 2004). Accordingly, our model and key concepts should have specific applicability to research on abusive supervision (Tepper et al., 2001) and general applicability to research on organizational justice (Colquitt & Greenberg, 2003; Greenberg, 1996).

2.4.2. Practical Implications

Our conceptualization also has potential implications for managers and employees. First, if empirical research supports our proposed relationships, the model could serve as a guideline for predicting employees’ responses to job creep. It also could allow supervisors to anticipate circumstances when defensive voice is likely to be judged as inappropriate, as well as the types of communication responses that are likely to be triggered when appropriateness is deemed to be low.

Second, we hope the model, with its emphasis on potentially negative communication outcomes, antisocial behavior (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997), and probable spirals of incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) will alert managers to the dangers of job creep. In addition, because the model includes spillover effects on targets of defensive voice (peers and supervisors), it implies that allowing, encouraging, or tolerating job creep, even if just for one employee, most likely leads to negative consequences for the whole work group. If allowed to continue, negative effects could spread to other groups and eventually damage the overall organizational culture.

Third, since the model differentiates effects of expressive and instrumental voice, this suggests that managers could deepen their thinking about voice by using more fine-grained conceptualizations of voice types. Likewise, because the model emphasized the deleterious effects of high-intensity voice, this suggests the benefits of staying in touch with employees so that small problems do not build to the point where employees exceed their threshold for rational and balanced expression of voice that is low in intensity. For example, to diffuse tension and to afford opportunities to intervene with changes before problems become acute and employee voice becomes intense, some organizations encourage employees to discuss small issues before they become big ones (e.g., suggestion boxes, group meetings, hotlines).

Finally, our model highlights the point that voice and silence can be used as forms of negative communication. This is important because managers and employees often assume that communication is limited to voice. For example, this could include the idea that no news is good news. Drawing on prior research that describes ways in which employees use nonverbal behavior (e.g., obscene gestures, rolling eyes, walking away from an argument), especially in communicating with work group peers (Cox, 1999), we have expanded typical conceptualizations of communication to depict specific ways that silence may occur as negative communication in response to judgments that defensive voice is low in communication appropriateness (e.g., avoiding someone, boycotting a meeting, and withholding ideas when asked to share your opinion).
2.4.3. Future Research

Our first recommendation for future research is to encourage empirical examination of the relationships we have proposed in our conceptual model. This could include survey research in field settings and experimental research in laboratory settings. For example, employees could describe their personal reactions to scenarios that describe job creep. These responses could then be coded for incidents of defensive voice, intensity of defensive voice, type of defensive voice (instrumental or expressive), and target of defensive voice (supervisor or peer). Alternatively, employees could rate communication appropriateness for a series of examples of defensive voice that vary intensity, target, and type of voice. Finally, it also would be useful to ask employees to describe their responses to defensive voice that is low vs. high in appropriateness. These narratives then could be coded for frequency of verbal responses (voice) vs. nonverbal responses (silence). To strengthen this design and to avoid same-source bias, it would be best to randomly divide employees into three categories, one to describe responses to job creep, a second to rate communication appropriateness, and the third to describe their responses to low appropriateness.

A second type of field study could focus on recent personal experiences in which subordinates or peers engaged in defensive voice. For example, participants could respond to an email sent at the end of the week for three weeks. This survey could ask them to describe one specific incident they observed during the week involving job creep, defensive voice, or communication appropriateness. This approach also could include Likert scale ratings of intensity, appropriateness, and frequency of voice and silence responses of targets.

The model could also be tested in laboratory settings where participants would be randomly assigned to view a video with one type of defensive voice communication, crossing intensity (low–high), type (instrumental–expressive), and target (supervisor–peer). This would be a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design with 8 cells. Preparation would involve creating 8 video examples involving the same actors engaging in the different types of defensive voice. Participants would rate communication appropriateness. Then, in the second phase of the study, participants would describe how they would respond personally if they were the target of the defensive voice they just observed on the video. These descriptions could then be coded for type of negative communication (frequency of voice and frequency of silence).

Another area for future research would be extension of the model. For example, we held judgments of communication effectiveness constant across the model and focused only on judgments of communication appropriateness. Accordingly, a natural next step would be to enrich the model by considering judgments of effectiveness. Interestingly, it would be possible to consider both self-judgments and observer judgments of effectiveness (Canary & Spitzberg, 1989, 1990; Spitzberg & Canary, 1985). This raises the possibility that judgments of effectiveness (or appropriateness) between sender (speaker) and receiver (listener) could be matched and congruent (low–low or high–high) or unmatched (low–high or high–low). For example, we would expect that unmatched judgments of effectiveness would lead to lower observer ratings of communication appropriateness. We also
anticipate that unmatched judgments of effectiveness would accentuate supervisor use of negative voice and peer use of negative silence.

The model also could be expanded to include specific individual differences with relevance to communication competence. This could include emotional expressiveness. For example, prior research demonstrates that those high in the dispositional characteristic of emotional expressiveness are stronger forces for emotional contagion (Friedman & Riggio, 1981). This, in turn, could further amplify the self-reinforcing cycle. If employees withdraw support when they are the target of defensive voice (Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 1999), future defensive voice might be even stronger in intensity, especially for expressive defensive voice. This describes a self-reinforcing cycle of escalating spirals of incivility. Over time, inappropriate interactions could result in emotional exhaustion, causing others to distance themselves both physically and communicatively (Cox, 1999; Hirigoyen, 1998). This in turn, would have strong negative implications for group norms, cohesion, and ongoing willingness to work together interdependently (Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998).

Future research also could consider implications for the literature on workplace aggression (Neuman & Baron, 1998; O’Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996) and related negative behaviors. For example, although research indicates that verbal aggression is more common than physical aggression, there is less theory and empirical research on verbal aggression (Griffin & Lopez, 2005; Vardi & Weitz, 2004). Thus, our model should have implications for these other behaviors. We differentiated defensive voice from a variety of negative work behaviors because it is self-protective, rather than intended primarily to harm others or the organization. At the same time, the ultimate outcome predicted in our model — negative communication — fits well with prior research on negative behaviors. Thus, job creep, communication appropriateness, and negative communication responses should have relevance to the workplace aggression literature where behaviors are intended to cause harm (Griffin & Lopez, 2005). This includes antisocial behavior, bad behavior, misbehavior, incivility, bullying, harassment, and victimization.

Finally, future research may consider interventions that would lower the incidence and intensity of defensive voice and negative communication. This could include skill training in emotional regulation. It also could include modification of organizational norms. Specifically, training could focus on emphasizing norms for cooperation instead of norms for aggression (Neuman & Baron, 1998). It also could include top management efforts to reduce abusive supervisor behaviors and the prevalence of job creep so that employees do not feel they always have to “do more with less” — sometimes just to keep their jobs. Along these lines, research on justice could inform the model and suggest ways to reduce defensive voice and negative communication.

In conclusion, we hope the conceptual model and propositions we advanced in this chapter stimulate empirical research on voice and silence as observer reactions to defensive voice. We also hope this chapter triggers additional research that integrates theories and concepts from the organizational behavior and communication literatures.
References


