Empirical Research

Sounds of Silence: The Reflexivity, Self-decentralization, and Transformation Dimensions of Silence at Work

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Abstract

This article explores silence as a phenomenon and practice in the workplace through a Buddhist-enacted lens where silence is intentionally encouraged. It brings forward a reconsideration of the roles of silence in organizations by proposing emancipatory dimensions of silence—reflexivity, self-decentralization, and transformation. Based on 54 interviews with employees and managers in a Vietnamese telecommunications organization, we discuss the dynamic nature of silence, and the possible coexistence of the constructive and the oppressive aspects of silence in a workplace spirituality context. Instead of studying silence as one-dimensional, we call for an integrated view and argue that studying silence requires consideration of the multiplicity of its interconnected dimensions. By considering silence as a relational and emerging processes constructed around its vagueness and uncertainties, our study reveals the many possible ways silence is organized and organizes and sheds light on silence as a marker of the complexities and paradoxes of organizational life.

Keywords

qualitative research, organizational behavior, communication

Introduction

Silence has often been neglected or merely considered as a unitary concept, mainly the absence of speech and fundamentally as an inaction (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2003). In this sense silence is more covert and less obvious, and therefore more difficult to study (Van Dyne et al., 2003; Zerubavel, 2006). Notwithstanding, a growing number of studies on workplace silence are rejecting the oversimplified understanding of silence and recognizing its implications for employee performance in organizations.

While the extant literature offers avenues for greater comprehension and analysis of silence, it limits the status of silence (Bigo, 2018; Donaghey et al., 2011; Fletcher & Watson, 2007) in two ways. First, many studies describe how silence unfolds in organizations through employees' intentional withholding of knowledge and information as a form of workplace disengagement and a passive response to an insecure environment (e.g., Mignonac et al., 2018; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). This view of silence in such contexts tends to carry negative connotations and suggests management dysfunction, particularly as it can be "contagious," spiraling from an individual choice to become a construct of organizational climate, or the climate itself (e.g., Bowen & Blackmon, 2003).

Second, silence is primarily explored through the lens of employees, with almost no attention paid to the management and institutional dynamics that play a catalytic role in producing—and are reproduced by—silence. While Donaghey et al. (2011) introduce an institutional focus by articulating the power-centered role of management in forming and perpetuating employee silence, silence is constructed as a manifestation of frustration and detachment, even though it can also be an effort of control that employees exercise over management by concealing valuable information. While such an institutional focus responds to Van Dyne et al.'s (2003) call that "it is not sufficient to focus attention solely on the employee's perspective" (p. 1374), it overlooks the possibly constructive silence that is deliberately fashioned by management, which is distinct from, and perhaps coexists with the oppressive aspects of silence.

Drawing on these theoretical limitations, we ask: What are the possible constructive roles of silence? Further, in what organizational context(s) can we understand such coexistence between the constructive and oppressive aspects of silence? To explore these questions, we draw on the context of workplace spirituality (WS), where silence carries a collective and more constructive role. Within this context,

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silence is considered an aspect of spiritual reflection (Poulos, 2004), a valued space for spiritual growth, and where full-ness of experience is attained by the removal of talk that is often seen as a distraction (Poland & Pederson, 1998).

Despite the contextual potential to explore silence constructively, only a limited number of empirical studies have been undertaken to examine the practical impacts of spirituality and spiritual expression on silence in organizational life (e.g., Afsar & Badir, 2017; Geigle, 2012; Giacalone, 2012). A recent study by Karakas and Sarigollu (2019) adds to the ongoing debate on silence within the WS context (e.g., Case & Gosling, 2010; Houghton et al., 2016; Kamoche & Pinnington, 2012; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009) by highlighting the emergence of spirals of silence as a negative dynamic of spirituality. This finding calls into question the constructive role of silence as a spiritual expression (Poland & Pederson, 1998; Poulos, 2004; Waistell, 2018), and establishes the necessity of further investigating its dynamic nature within the WS context.

Building upon such ongoing debate and developing understanding, this article focuses on the emancipatory dimensions of silence in an engaged-Buddhist context—Vietnam—and seeks to explore the overlooked dynamics of workplace silence. In Vietnam, the rise of engaged Buddhism in organizations (Vu & Tran, 2021) has provided opportunities for the application of Buddhist principles and practices, including the practice of silence as a skillful means (Schroeder, 2004) to attend to the complexities of organizational life, presenting a departure from the negative or unconstructive connotations of "silence."

This article contributes to the extant understanding of silence in three ways. First, it contributes to the ongoing debate on silence within the WS literature by theoretically constructing and empirically investigating three emancipatory dimensions of silence within the WS context, namely reflexivity, self-decentralization, and transformation. By drawing on the Buddhist-enacted organizational context where practices of silence are explicitly encouraged for both managers and employees, we extend the analytical lens of silence from employees to both employees *and* managers and explore how they *collaboratively* produce the three emancipatory dimensions. Our theorization of silence in a Buddhist-enacted context also highlights the lack of theoretical attention and the descriptive nature of the WS literature (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009; Liu & Robertson, 2011).

Second and more broadly, through such emancipatory dimensions, this article proposes a way to consider the constructive potential of workplace silence and encourages management scholars to rethink the roles of silence in wider organizational contexts and outside WS. It challenges the singular and passive understanding of silence by bringing forward its overlooked constructive dimensions and "highlight[ing] the complex and multidimensional nature of silence" (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1365). In doing so, our study points to the possible coexistence between the constructive and the oppressive aspects of silence. While the way such coexistence is constructed is contextually specific, our study sheds lights on the dynamics of the interwoven constructive and oppressive aspects of silence that is an ongoing negotiation, where what is seen as emancipatory can be a form of/basis for control, and what is established as a formal discursive rule may cultivate emancipation. We therefore call for an integrated understanding of silence and suggest that studying silence in any context requires consideration of the possible multiplicity of its interconnected/integrated dimensions, rather than its singular form, to reveal the hidden or taken-for-granted dynamics constituted by silence in our everyday organizational lives.

Third, our study highlights cross-cultural implications for understanding and managing silence in organizations. To transfer different traditions of silence as a spiritual practice into a workplace context, it is important to manage silence context-sensitively due to differences in theological epistemology and misinterpretations of spiritual practices. Therefore, for cross-cultural management, understanding and adjusting the compatibilities between the local cultural norms that influence notions of silence and the spiritual practice of silence is crucial to introducing and shaping such practice in a cross-cultural context. Our study reveals that only by enacting silence as a spiritual practice can it be appreciated, in turn fostering the reflexive and transformative dimensions of silence more evident in cultures like Vietnam, where uncritical and unreflexive behaviors are embedded in a strong cultural norm of nonquestioning (Dickhardt & Lauser, 2016).

This article first examines the theoretical construction of silence by reviewing the broader literature on silence in organizations and putting it in the context of WS, and its ongoing debate. Within this debate, we specifically focus on Buddhist-enacted silence. We then explain the empirical design and data collection in a telecommunications organization in Vietnam. This is followed by analyses of findings from the empirical study, which are further explored and summarized in the discussion and conclusion.

Silence in the Workplace Spirituality Context

In this section, we draw on the literatures of silence in organizations in general and in the WS context in particular to define the conceptual limits of silence and develop a theoretical framework for our study by integrating Buddhist interpretations of silence as the main context of the study.

Defining Silence

Extant studies on silence within management and organization studies present a core understanding of silence as the

intentional withholding of work-related ideas, opinions, and information (e.g., Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Brown & Coupland, 2005; Van Dyne et al., 2003), rather than simply as (unintentionally) having nothing to say. The intentionality in this construction implies that silence involves both choosing what *not* to reveal and engaging in *avoidance* of certain topics, denoting the activeness and the instability of silence. Such active avoidance can be driven by *individual-level* characteristics such as low position in the organization (Edmondson, 2003; Milliken et al., 2003), *group-level* characteristics such as the lack of supportive workmates (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003), and *organizational-level* characteristics such as an unsupportive culture (Milliken et al., 2003; Piderit & Ashford, 2003). A spiral of silence can therefore be formed where it is no longer just an individual choice but has become a dominant organizational norm.

Imbued with power relations, these characteristics point to the tendency to consider silence as an enactment of the fear of being marginalized and sanctioned (e.g., Brown & Coupland, 2005; Milliken et al., 2003). Besides fear, silence can signify disagreements with and disengagement from workplace injustice and discrimination. Though such subtle objections, silence is also recognized as a strategy to avoid risks to reputation and therefore to protect both social and professional development at work (e.g., Fernando & Prasad, 2018; Nord & Jermier, 1994; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). In this sense, silence is largely regarded as a passive marker for the exclusion and oppression embedded within power discrepancies and vulnerabilities.

Significantly, this understanding casts light on the essential role management plays in constructing and sustaining workplace silence. While silence is an intentional decision made by employees, it is not made in isolation from management influence (e.g., Manley et al., 2016; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Despite this, the attention paid to such influence is limited, creating a conceptual weakness in analyses of employee silence (Donaghey et al., 2011). Specifically, the potential of management to deliberately fashion silence in organizations has been bypassed (Donaghey et al., 2011). While Donaghey et al. (2011) highlight the need to consider management, their focus is on how management selectively "silences" workers and limits their voice to nonthreatening issues. This brings up another conceptual limitation in that the constructive potential of silence is largely overlooked, although with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Bigo, 2018; de Vaujany & Aroles, 2018; Van Dyne et al., 2003).

Drawing on these two limitations, our study focuses on a particular organizational context wherein management deliberately and explicitly encourages both managerial and employee silence as a constructive and desirable aspect of organizational development. Thus, employees can be *both*—instead of *either*—fearful and encouraged to participate in silence. Such silence is performed through the symbiotic collaboration of individual acts by members within a particular social system with particular conventions. In this sense, silence in organizations is not merely an action and should not be solely understood as "silencing" or "being silenced." Rather, and ontologically, it is an active and emerging process of becoming (i.e., "becoming silent") (e.g., Bigo, 2018; Dupret, 2018), with an inherently accumulative nature that has contextual and relational impact on possibilities for empowerment and emancipation in the workplace.

Seeing silence as essentially a process, this study turns away from the motive-based approach that "at the simplest level. . .encourages debate about whether 'x was the motive, rather than y, or perhaps z'" (Fletcher & Watson, 2007, p. 158) and employs an "either-or" analysis (Fletcher & Watson, 2007) of silence as a stable phenomenon. We instead follow Fletcher and Watson's (2007) relational and emergent approach to organizational silence to understand how fragments of the particular cultural and organizational contexts of WS, in this case engaged Buddhism, are woven into the patchworks of meaning that further shape and organize how people understand and experience silence in their organizational lives.

Bringing in the Context of Workplace Spirituality

WS has received increasing research attention, predominantly focusing on its positive impacts on organizations, such as increased job satisfaction (Lee et al., 2014), improved employee engagement and commitment (Gatling et al., 2016; Roof, 2015), and a growing sense of meaningful work (Molloy & Foust, 2016). However, a critical stream of literature has cautioned that WS may have harmful effects (Driver, 2005; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009), including in relation to its co-optation by organizations who may subsume spirituality for instrumental ends (Bell & Taylor, 2004; Kamoche & Pinnington, 2012; Polley et al., 2005). In an examination of the dynamic nature of spirituality in organizational systems, a recent study by Karakas and Sarigollu (2019) found an interplay between positive (liberating) and negative (repressive) aspects of spirituality, which they define as spirals. In their study, silence sits within the downward spiral of spirituality as a negative effect where individuals intentionally cultivate a defensive routine of self-reinforcing cycles of silence in response to threats of isolation and alienation. Similar to the spirals of silence in organizations (e.g., Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Brinsfield, 2013), silence in relation to a downward spiral of spirituality in organizations results in anxiety and resentment over time. In contrast to the constructive view of silence as a space for spiritual and moral growth (Burton & Vu, 2020), or as a form of meaningful communication in the Quaker tradition (Molina-Markham, 2014), this negative labelling contributes to the ongoing

debate within the WS context about silence and its identification and understanding as being either constructive or detrimental.

Within this debate, the Buddhist understanding of silence offers a departure from the absoluteness of the either–or debate. Silence in Buddhism is understood as a practice, a skillful means (*upāya*) approach (Schroeder, 2004) that can be either skillfully or unskillfully presented by its practitioners, subject to his/her level of practice and skillfulness. This raises the possibility of silence being attached to both negative and positive connotations at different times within the same context, or perhaps at the same time. The more fluid Buddhist understanding therefore allows an integrated understanding within the WS literature.

Introducing the Buddhist "Noble Silence"

Buddhist noble silence is a practice developed from the Buddha's teachings (*dharma*) based on the Four Noble Truths (Sanskrit: *catvāri āryasatyāni*; Pali: *cattāri ariyasaccāni*) and the Noble Eightfold Path (Sanskrit: *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga;* Pali: *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*).

Drawing on the Four Noble Truths, silence supports practitioners and individuals to overcome ignorance by defeating excessive attachment to one's own ideology and ways of communication through stages and processes of transformation (Schroeder, 2004). Towards achieving this, the eight principles in the Noble Eightfold Path serve as the underlying assumptions forming practices of silence in Buddhism. According to Buddhist doctrine on silence, the Buddha held various intentions behind his silence. However, in the scope of this article, we focus on three key dimensions of the Buddhist noble silence: reflexivity, self-decentralization, and processual transformation, to build a theoretical angle on the notion of silence within the WS context based on a Buddhist perspective.

Reflexivity. Silence occurs in the relational and social context of language and meaning (Charmaz, 2002) and requires a reflexive approach from both researchers and practitioners to reveal its implicit meanings (Kawabata & Gastaldo, 2015). Reflexivity is an important aspect of spirituality or spiritual practice (Vu & Burton, 2020; Xing & Sims, 2012). It is built upon beliefs, knowledge, and experiences (Cunliffe, 2002; Cunliffe & Jun, 2005) attained through inner dialogue and communication with core belief systems and practices. Karakas and Sarigollu (2019) argue that within silence, reflexivity and self-questioning are crucial to reaching inner spiritual balance without becoming self-absorbed. In this sense, reflexivity is facilitated by silence through self-problematization and nonattachment (e.g., Bodhi, 2011).

Buddhist doctrine reveals how the Buddha deconstructed the necessity of his silence towards fostering reflexive learning by his followers. For instance, silence was actively performed by the Buddha through intentionally withholding answers requested by followers and creating a space of vagueness (Schroeder, 2004). As the Four Noble Truths explain, receiving answers without engaging in reflexivity may only bring more questions, and eventually a continuous state of desire for answers can lead to suffering (Bodhi, 1994). In this sense, the Buddha's silence was not about withholding tactics per se. Instead, he offered his silence to foster others' self-reflexivity and to cultivate their acknowledgement that the route to ending ignorance/suffering is not about passively accepting answers from others, but rather about questioning the "self" and acquiring wisdom/knowledge through this process.

In this way, the space of vagueness within the Buddhist silence forms and spreads equivocality through the coexistence of not knowing and the possibility of multiple meanings. However, if practiced unskillfully, such silence can be interpreted negatively as acquiescence, or as a form of opportunism to maintain/obtain power/status (Knoll & Van Dick, 2013; Van Dyne et al, 2003). Thus, the multiplicity of meanings embedded *within* silence require a particular "state of mind" (Bigo, 2018, p. 130) towards self-scrutiny and self-realization, opening up an emancipatory space for alternative paths of thinking. In this sense, without disclosing the desired answer out loud, silence reveals itself as both a cause and a consequence of sensemaking by straddling the tension and opportunities that exist where "nothing is (yet) decided and all is (still) possible" (Bigo, 2018, p. 130).

Self-decentralization. The mainstream literature often claims that silence or remaining silent is about obtaining personal needs and desires (e.g., Chou & Chang, 2020). For instance, many studies examining employee silence reveal a certain "self" that accompanies silence in the form of self-protection mechanisms (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Milliken et al., 2003), self-esteem and self-doubt (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Premeaux & Bedeian, 2003), and lack of self-confidence or self-sense of power (Brinsfield, 2013; Morrison, et al., 2015). Relatedly, within the WS literature, the notion of the self is often embraced by scholars in the form of self-transcendence (Neubert, 2019), essential self (Bell & Taylor, 2003) or self-knowledge (Dehler & Welsh, 2003) to promote the wholeness of self at work. Bridging these two sets of literature and based on the Buddhist interpretation, silence can occur in relation to fulfilling a certain desire to obtain or achieve a sense of self through withholding. Such a desire can imply a form of attachment, leading to suffering based on the Four Noble Truths (Bodhi, 1994).

The silence of Buddha is viewed in relation to the esoteric doctrinal belief that "the Buddha knew about the ultimate problems but did not announce them to the multitudes who came to him for fear that he might disturb their minds" (Radhakrishnan, 1927, p. 273). As the unwillingness to answer, silence here expresses the willingness with which

the Buddha relinquished his own belief system/ideology to avoid influencing a troubled or confused mind and disturbing individual processes of giving sense to a complex reality. The Buddha practiced silence as an alternative way of teaching and communicating. By remaining silent about his own teachings and belief systems, the Buddha demonstrated a notion of silence as beyond ego-centric pursuits. This notion extends our understanding by considering silence as a practice of self-decentralization, as a withholding of information that is not for the benefit of the "addresser," but for the "addressee." This is different from the notion of opportunistic silence identified in the literature (Knoll & Van Dick, 2013; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Instead, one is required to let go of self-serving pursuits, including the desire to disseminate knowledge, and particularly in contexts where it is less applicable such as work environments. This is rooted in Buddha's belief that all knowledge is ideology and its dissemination is only necessary in certain contexts (Organ, 1954).

Processual transformation. As highlighted above, silence can unlock individuals' potential for reflexivity through self-transformation processes where individuals move beyond individual knowledge to collective knowledge to understand the underlying assumptions, paradigms and different worldviews embedded in silence (Söderlund, 2010). Spiritual practices can trigger such processes (Lynch et al., 1997), as has been documented in relation to various traditions such as mindfulness practices (Vu & Burton, 2020), Quakerism (Allen, 2017), or Daoism (Xing & Sims, 2012). Spirituality can enact transformative learning experiences through the construction of knowledge narratives and spiritual awareness (Taylor, 2017). By actively stimulating the addressee to explore knowledge and seek answers by themselves, Buddhist silence reflects a process of generating contextual understanding rather than passively receiving it. Such interpretations of silence in Buddhism move away from the traditional conceptualization of silence as a passive form of behavior for intentionally withholding information (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2003). This shift from receiving (e.g., absorbing surface levels of knowledge) to generating and sustaining such knowledge generation facilitates a process of self-transformation and continuous learning, and a process of wisdom articulation through the accumulation of reflexive experiences for incremental and progressive growth (Taylor, 2017).

By bringing in Buddhism, silence in organizations can be considered as constituted by and constituting a paradox where the vagueness and uncertainty of knowing are performed and transformed into opportunities and tensions around *being able to* know, thus articulating the possible coexistence of not knowing and a multiplicity of meanings. Here, silence is not (merely) a bubble for disconnection and avoidance from the outside world (e.g., a form of self-protection). Instead, it encourages individuals to reflexively make and give sense, to explore alternative directions, and to transform passivity to activity as an emerging process of relational knowing.

The instrumental agency of the Buddhist silence. While the Buddha's silence is considered an effective skillful means that cultivates and facilitates the identified features of reflexivity, self-decentralization and processual transformation embedded within its practice, there are nevertheless reservations concerning it. As a skillful means, silence may not be practiced in the same way across individuals. The variety of interpretations and motives attached to silence can contribute to different messages and multiple intentions when communicating with "silence." Going back to the ongoing debate on silence, while positive connotations are associated with silence as identified from Buddhist perspectives, the Buddha's silence can also be interpreted as an attempt to suppress or even stop people from voicing (metaphysical) questions (e.g., Kalupahana, 1976). It is also argued that silence was used selectively by the Buddha for certain reasons (Organ, 1954). In other words, there is instrumentality and an agentive purpose embedded in Buddhist silence. While the Buddha may have used silence for pedagogical purposes with positive intentions, it can be interpreted negatively by his followers, who may misunderstand the rationale behind the Buddha's silence, posing questions and challenges to the nature of silence as a "skillful" means. As a skillful means, silence can be a hermeneutical device, shaping different interpretations through the agency provided by its spiritual formulation (Federman, 2009).

To put silence into the particular context of Buddhist-enacted practices, the following section illustrates our empirical study of silence in a Vietnamese organization.

Research Design and Data Analysis

Research Context

The study was conducted in the transitional context of Vietnam. In 1986, the VIth Vietnamese Communist Party Congress adopted the renovation policy known as "Đổi Mới," which significantly changed economic and social relationships in Vietnam. Since then, Vietnam has pursued a market economy with a socialist orientation to achieve equilibrium through market liberalization mechanisms. Vietnam is considered a transitional economy, undergoing a market transition from a closed, centrally planned economy to an open economy (Desai, 1997; Fforde & de Vylder, 1996). In other words, countries with transitional economies are moving towards markets less restricted by state control, alongside the promotion of innovation, transformation, and entrepreneurship, in order to compete globally (Ahlstrom & Bruton, 2010). During the last 30 years, the "Đổi Mới" policy has fostered dramatic changes in Vietnam. These efforts towards

promoting trade liberalization, economic stability, and private initiatives (Hoskisson et al., 2000) have made Vietnam one of the fastest growing economies in Southeast Asia during the past decade, with an average growth of 6% (ADB, 2017). Along with economic reforms, legal reforms have also been taking place; however, the restructuring of the legal system has not generated well-functioning markets (Trubek & Santos, 2006). Due to the lack of an effective system of law and law enforcement in the country, there has been corruption and political turmoil (Cuadra et al., 2010; Peng & Heath, 1996), resulting in reduced levels of trust in the nation's bureaucratic and one-Party institutional systems. The trust that is developed and established based on well-developed legal systems, institutions, and markets (Browning et al., 1995; Uzzi, 1997) is absent in the case of Vietnam, where the development of an institutional system suited to the freer economy is only in its nascent stages (Nguyen, 2005).

The inconsistencies and uncertainty in the transitional context of Vietnam have resulted in materialism, uncertainty, and spiritual yearnings in the nation (Taylor, 2004). In parallel, engaged Buddhism has emerged as a rising phenomenon in Vietnam, playing a significant role in the national transitional context (Taylor, 2004; Vu & Tran, 2021). We have chosen to study the importance of silence as a Buddhist-enacted practice in a telecommunications organization for three main reasons.

First, in the transitional context of Vietnam where there are low levels of social trust, the practice of silence carries tensions from the sociopolitical context that may affect meaning-making by its practitioners (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). People may withhold opinions, particularly political viewpoints or business practices, to secure a "safety zone" in response to the weak legal system and bureaucratic corruption in the country. Culturally, silence is also prevalent in Vietnam as a face-saving mechanism (Agyekum, 2002), and this may affect people's decision-making in remaining silent.

Second, engaged Buddhism in Vietnam, emerging as the increased application of the Buddha's teachings (dharma) in daily activities, is a response to contemporary sufferings due to social, political, economic, and environmental issues related to the transitional context of the country (Thich, 1998). Apart from Buddhism being a practice that enables individual resilience in adapting and responding to tensions (Johansen & Gopalakrishna, 2006), the Vietnamese have witnessed the disadvantages of Confucianism as a remnant of Chinese rule and an active element within the regime. It is associated with backward (*lạc hậu*), feudal (*phong kiến*), and superstitious (*mê tín*) beliefs as opposed to the more enlightened Buddhist principles of flexibility and freedom. Among the many practices of Buddhism, silence is considered as a skillful means and an active element in eliminating suffering. Thus, the practice of silence in Buddhism represents an active state of understanding the multiplicity of dimensions embedded in the practices of silence.

Third, embedded in the national context, a telecommunications organization provides a representative setting for studying the phenomenon of silence in Buddhism, and the dynamics in relation to telecommunications and "voice" add a crucial dimension. The translations and applications of Buddhist-enacted silence may thus reveal paradoxes worthy of investigation for a richer understanding of silence in organizational life. The management of the organization we studied had initiated training sessions for employees on the practice of silence in the workplace. They ran a series of sessions customized to different departments, reflecting the instrumentality of the way silence was implemented, interpreted, and practiced in the context of our study.

Sampling

At the time of this study in 2017, the telecommunications organization located in Hanoi had more than 1,500 employees. We carried out 16 in-depth semistructured interviews with senior managers/leaders in the company who were Buddhist practitioners, and 38 interviews with employees across different departments who did not describe themselves as Buddhist practitioners. As a native Vietnamese, the lead author was able to take the emic perspective of cultural insider to understand the native point of view (Morris et al., 1999), which in this case refers to the understanding, interpretation, and application of Buddhist silence in the organizational context. In total, our sample consisted of 27 males and 27 females. Table 1 summarizes the participant details.

Purposeful sampling was applied to recruit both managers/leaders and employees working in the organization. This study developed from a larger research project examining the application of various Buddhist principles in the organizational context, in which silence emerged as a salient practice. The original intent of the wider study was to examine and explore the application and adaptation of Buddhist principles in leadership practices in response to concerns and criticisms of the commercialization and commodification of Buddhist practices, particularly in studies that have been undertaken in Western organizational contexts. One of the main purposes of our original study was to investigate how Buddhist practices more than 2,500 years old can be applied/interpreted/misinterpreted in the contemporary context. Managers/leaders who were Buddhist practitioners were therefore selected for the current project. In order to identify whether the managers/leaders were Buddhist practitioners, they were asked if they considered themselves Buddhists, and whether being Buddhists in Vietnam means applying Buddhist principles and philosophies in their management/leadership and everyday lives, or simply following certain religious rituals. Only managers/leaders who demonstrated relevant applications and deeper understanding of Buddhist

Table 1. Summary of Respondents.

	Title	Gender	Department	Religion
M1	CEO	M		Buddhist
M2	CFO	F		Buddhist
M3	Managing director	M		Buddhist
M4	Manager	F	Research and Development	Buddhist
M5	Manager	F	Mobile Application	Buddhist
M6	Manager	M	Public Relations	Buddhist
M7	Manager	F	Marketing	Buddhist
M8	Manager	M	Product Development	Buddhist
M9	Manager	M	Finance	Buddhist
M10	Manager	F	Human Resources	Buddhist
M11	Manager	F	Customer Relations	Buddhist
M12	Manager	M	Mobile Services	Buddhist
M13	Manager	F	Production	Buddhist
M14	Manager	F	Editing and Publishing	Buddhist
M15	Manager	M	Project Development	Buddhist
M16	Manager	M	Quality Control	Buddhist
E1	Employee	F	Research and Development	Non-Buddhist
E2	Employee	F	Research and Development	Non-Buddhist
E3	Employee	M	Research and Development	Non-Buddhist
E4	Employee	M	Mobile Application	Non-Buddhist
E5	Employee	F	Mobile Application	Non-Buddhist
E6	Employee	M	Human Resources	Non-Buddhist
E7	Employee	M	Human Resources	Non-Buddhist
E8	Employee	M	Product Development	Non-Buddhist
E9	Employee	F	Product Development	Non-Buddhist
E10	Employee	F	Product Development	Non-Buddhist
E11	Employee	F	Marketing	Non-Buddhist
E12	Employee	F	Marketing	Non-Buddhist
E13	Employee	M	Public Relations	Non-Buddhist
E14	Employee	F	Public Relations	Non-Buddhist
E15	Employee	M	Finance	Non-Buddhist
E16	Employee	M	Finance	Non-Buddhist
E17	Employee	M	Information Technology	Non-Buddhist
E18	Employee	F	Information Technology	Non-Buddhist
E19	Employee	F	Quality Control	Non-Buddhist
E20	Employee	F	Quality Control	Non-Buddhist
E21	Employee	M	Quality Control	Non-Buddhist
E22	Employee	M	Project Development	Non-Buddhist
E23	Employee	F	Project Development	Non-Buddhist
E24	Employee	M	Project Development	Non-Buddhist
E25	Employee	M	Project Development	Non-Buddhist
E26	Employee	F	Project Development	Non-Buddhist
E27	Employee	F	Production	Non-Buddhist
E28	Employee	M	Production	Non-Buddhist
E29	Employee	M	Production	Non-Buddhist
E30	Employee	M	Customer Relations	Non-Buddhist
E31	Employee	F	Customer Relations	Non-Buddhist
E32	Employee	F	Customer Relations	Non-Buddhist
E33	Employee	F	Customer Relations	Non-Buddhist
E34	Employee	M	Customer Relations	Non-Buddhist
E35	Employee	F	Editing and Publishing	Non-Buddhist
E36	Employee	M	Editing and Publishing	Non-Buddhist
E37	Employee	F	Editing and Publishing	Non-Buddhist
E38	Employee	M	Copyright	Non-Buddhist

practices were selected to be interviewed. Following this selection logic, employees were selected if they were directly influenced and managed by the manager/leader participants who were Buddhist practitioners.

Semistructured Interviews

Semistructured interviews were appropriate for the project as this interview processes support the formation and development of rapport and collaborative dialogues. The open-ended and follow-up questions that are a feature of semistructured interviews facilitate in-depth exploration of complex phenomena and "harness respondents' constructive storytelling" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 125). Throughout the semistructured interviews, silence was frequently mentioned as a particularly important mechanism/instrument shaping the everyday life of this organization.

Following the identification of silence as a focal topic, the managers/leaders were asked to describe their understanding of "silence" as a Buddhist practice and how they practiced silence in the workplace, and to identify any challenges related to practicing silence. A range of follow-up questions were asked to explore the role of Buddhist-enacted silence in management/leadership in the studied organization (e.g., "Why do you consider Buddhist silence an important practice in your management/leadership?" "How did you apply Buddhist-enacted silence in your management/leadership practices?" "What tensions did you face when introducing silence as a practice in your team/organization?" "What is your general impression of how your employees have received and responded to this practice?"—to name a few).

To explore and examine how employees received the practice of Buddhist-enacted silence by Buddhist-practitioner managers/leaders in the study organization, we asked the employees about their experiences of the application of silence. A series of questions were asked to reveal employees' interpretations and responses to managers/leaders' enactment of silence in their organizational lives (e.g., "How do you feel about how your manager/leader uses silence in his/her management/leadership style?" "To what extent do you feel that silence is an effective managerial means and practice in your team?" "Do you use silence yourself and how?" "What difficulties have you experienced in responding to your managers/leaders' silence?"). Both leaders and their subordinates discussed various expressions, interpretations, and tensions associated with the practices of silence initiated by managers/leaders. All the interviews were carried out anonymously in private settings, including private meeting rooms, tea rooms or cafes, to ensure that managers and employees were provided a safe and comfortable zone to share their thoughts. Most employees chose to be interviewed outside their workplace as they felt more at ease away from work.

Data Analysis

Our detailed thematic analysis of the data began with familiarizing and then immersing ourselves in the data to identify common threads across the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both authors went through and read the data several times to achieve immersion and a sense of the whole. We then used open coding to develop and explore initial codes and preliminary categories by taking 10% of the sample to develop the initial coding frame (Schreier, 2012), with a particular focus on the variations in interpretations of silence between different respondents. The initial codes were compared and supplemented between the authors (such as proactiveness, unknown, ambiguous, instrumentalization, multiplicity, mindful silence, wisdom-embedded silence) to form the first coding categories. Connections found between certain first categories were used as the basis for second categories, and then further divided into employees' and managers' perspectives. In the development of the initial coding frame, we developed clear descriptions of the categories, and a set of decision rules to determine how and when to include a piece of data under a particular category.

We then discussed discrepancies identified when applying codes as the basis for modifying the initial coding frame to form the final coding frame used to explore conceptual categories and the dynamics of Buddhist-enacted silence as a practice. We used comparison techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to compare employees' and managers' perspectives on Buddhist-enacted silence, identify delineating themes and aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 1994), and to identify the different functions and impacts of the practices of silence. To ensure we had captured the holistic meaning of the findings, we consulted with manager participants to double check our interpretations of their enactments of silence. In particular, wherever possible, we asked for more demonstrations to help us understand how Buddhist principles such as right mindfulness or right intention informed their practice of silence. Our final aggregate categories showed that the collected practices and processes of silence as a skillful means facilitate reflexivity and creativity, self-decentralization, and processual transformation, subject to different interpretations, understandings, and enactments from employees' and managers' perspectives. We now turn to our findings.

Constructing Reflexivity and Creativity through Silence

Managers talked about how they used silence to construct and develop reflexivity and creativity in their employees, a practice based on right intention, right view, right effort, and right mindfulness from the Noble Eightfold Path. For instance, a manager underlined how she used "silence" to encourage employees to learn from their mistakes:

[. . .] Silence is an important means for my leadership and I use it in various ways. Occasionally, I use silence to remind employees of their wrong doings, not in the sense that I use silence to threaten them, but to foster self-reflection. Sometimes, words are not as strong as expressions. Verbal warnings or reprimands in some cases cannot deliver a stronger message compared to the "unknown" in your silence that makes employees question and brainstorm about why you are silent. [M7]

While verbal advice and blame send direct and clear messages, they reduce the space created by ambiguity and the power of uncertainty. Building upon the vagueness experienced by employees through "not knowing," the manager's silence is purposefully cultivated to enable employees to have a space of their own in order to (re)think and reflect on the context and distinctive characteristics of the incident. The "unknown" embedded in the silence may stimulate or even push the employees to extend the boundaries of their knowledge and consider what they have not previously thought about. This reflexive process in employees is formed through constructing, deconstructing, and ascertaining the uncertainty around and within silence. It constitutes flexibilities and possibilities for new ways to understand the past, which may accumulatively promote individual commitment and ownership at work, in the present and future.

Such silence as seen through the lens of managers raises questions about how it is perceived and experienced by employees, and how employees react to it. Some employees in our study described how exposure to the silence of a manager had encouraged teams to be more creative in overcoming challenging tasks. For instance, silence can facilitate proactiveness and creativity in gaining access to local markets and developing new products:

> We have become more creative because of our manager's sort of "silence" practice. [. . .] Every time when there is no response from him in the meeting, we go back to our office and conduct an internal meeting to deconstruct what he meant by his silence. We have become more active and sometimes even more creative. For instance, we were struggling in gaining access to local markets to conduct research for our products for months and, because of our manager's silence, you know it is like showing total disappointment, like it is not what he was looking for, we were more proactive. We decided to organize a game show in those local markets with prizes, awards, and participatory live broadcasting events, in which we included our market investigation in small games, which were surprisingly effective. We gained more information than we expected in the first place. [E2]

> Our design group for mobile apps came up with a very unique comprehensive news-filtering program because of the tensions our product manager created through his silence in many meetings. I think we piloted our app at least fifteen times before he actually raised his voice to praise and approve our proposal. [E4]

In contrast with the extant understanding of silence in employees or organizations as a managerial problem that embodies failure to explore organizational potential and therefore needs to be overcome (Böhm & Bruni, 2003; Dupret, 2018), silence here is intentionally facilitated by management and articulated through a leadership style characterized "not by what it says but by what it does not say, or by the undecidability of what it may be saying" (Calás & Smircich, 1991, p. 570). Interestingly, although the employees perceived the silence as "showing total disappointment" and were concerned about the meaning of silence, no one actually asked the manager about it.

The gap apparent here in understanding of the manager's silence by the employees and the resulting employee silence towards the manager may generate ambiguities and tensions. In this case, such "unknowns" embedded in silence practice may make it more complicated than perceived by manager M7. The power differential may be reinforced through the ambiguity and pressure of "what we should do to *not* disappoint him." Therefore, instead of simply being *encouraging*, there is a sense of conformity that subtly generates a particular direction of how *to be encouraged*. Rather than constituting failures, such tensions in turn become (part of) the drive towards the proactiveness of creativity. Hence underneath this process is the role silence plays as a "paradoxical infrastructure" (de Vaujany & Aroles, 2018, p. 8) that materializes the power discrepancies and struggles and turns them into a particular expressivity that in some (counterintuitive) ways and to some extent stimulates the improvement of work practices, but in an "appropriate" direction.

This points to the importance of transforming and translating the performative nature and meanings of silence into a specific local (e.g., individually characterized) context within an organization, as different individuals within the organization will understand silence differently. Silence can be misinterpreted and may become a "double-edged sword," as explained by a project manager:

> Silence is like a double-edged sword (*con dao hai lưỡi*). You need to be skillful to use it. I experienced its negative effects when I stayed silent, refused to provide answers for an employee working on a complex project in the hope that she would learn to be more independent and creative. However, this particular employee had low self-efficacy. My silence really stressed her out and it affected her working mood with others as well as her effectiveness at work. But I have found silence can be a trigger for others to look for answers and find their creativity. Of course, it will depend on many contextual factors and individual characteristics. I guess I still have to learn a lot from how the Buddha himself skillfully attended to the context of his audience in practicing my silence. [M8]

While silence can be "a trigger" for reflectivity and creativity, the project manager indicated that silence can also generate struggles over and obstacles to such reflexivity and creativity.

Another manager with more than 20 years of practice in Buddhism highlighted that although silence is an important Buddhist practice, it can be interpreted differently across individuals and sometimes may even generate negative messages:

> In Buddhism, not everyone practices a particular practice in the same way. Ten years ago, I practiced mindfulness or even silence with force, following a particular guideline, disengaging with others' interpretations. Because of that, my colleagues saw me as an arrogant person for many years [. . .] But today, I observe people and the situation more carefully [. . .] Such observation can take months before I try to practice silence with my colleagues for example. It is difficult I must say, even among Buddhist practitioners, the way we practice is so different so you can imagine what can happen when it comes to people who do not understand the basics of Buddhist practice. [M2]

The understanding of silence as a double-edged sword is itself a reflection of the project manager's reflexivity, which derived from the reciprocal process and impact between practicing silence and being the subject of its practice. The emancipatory space that supports the way silence is practiced can be controversial. It is subject to individuals' understanding and ability to practice, which can either be skillful or unskillful, and to the addressees' interpretations, which can be contradictory to the original messages intended by the addresser. Among Buddhist practitioners, there are different levels of practice of the *dharma*: some may be more context-sensitive in approaching Buddhist teachings compared to others due to their mastery in understanding and practicing the *dharma*. This is exemplified by participant M2, who experienced changes in practice due to their changing level of mastery in practicing and understanding Buddhist silence. Thus, different leader/manager respondents practiced silence differently, subject to the relevance they accorded to context and their skillfulness, making silence a relationally emergent and contextually dependent construct.

Seeing silence as a "double-edged sword" highlights the instrumental nature of silence, reflecting how spiritual practices including practices of Buddhist silence can be forms of seduction and manipulation (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009) that generate tensions and stress for employees.

Constructing Self-decentralization through Silence

Studies have illustrated that organizational silence is both a cause and a consequence of the climate of silence at work that results from "a widely shared perception among employees that speaking up about problems or issues is futile and/or dangerous" (Morrison & Milliken, 2000, p. 708; see also Milliken et al., 2003; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Such a climate can further contribute to "silent lies" (Premeaux & Bedeian, 2003, p. 1559) that lead to decision making failures (e.g.,

Allard-Poesi & Hollet-Haudebert, 2017; Charan, 2001). However, in our study, some practices of silence were employed to facilitate a more constructive and supportive environment through fostering self-decentralization that moves away from egoistic self-awareness. This approach to silence is stimulated by the Buddhist principles of right intention, right action, and right effort. For instance, an employee shared how silence enabled her to avoid what could have been unpleasant discussions or even arguments about a past event, and to alter her focus towards seeking solutions:

> I sometimes just stay silent when I know that I have made a mistake. When our manager questions my ability and in fact shows disappointment, I think explanations just make it worse. Instead, I try to rectify my mistake and then present him with solutions rather than spending energy and time explaining why my plan failed. [E14]

Instead of being drawn into self-justifications for the mistake made, the employee stayed silent, which may have been triggered by fear and/or resistance to the disappointment shown. Yet such silence converted the struggles and potential conflicts into action that could compensate for the mistake with a positive impact. This is not only the case for employees. A project team leader employed silence for similar reasons, as some employees take conflict very personally, so practicing silence may simply be better for them (for example, respondent M8). This points to the emotional sensitivity and complexity of silence. While practices of silence can be triggered by emotional discomfort, remaining silent may in some ways leave individuals room for reviewing, accommodating, modifying, and presenting emotion and emotional reactions as a process of emotional governance. The paradoxical and powerful coexistence between the oppressive and the possibly constructive aspects of silence enables individuals to tame their "selves" in stressful circumstances to avoid further emotional suffering. In this sense, "becoming silent" is itself a way to deal with the circumstances of "being silenced." This narrative of silence is demonstrated by a product development manager who was suffering the constant pressure of a stressful competitive environment and strict deadlines:

> I was not happy with one of the proposals presented in our product development meeting. I stayed silent just because I tried to control my emotions in reacting to the product development group's major faults in their proposal. I did not want to be too harsh on my employees [. . .] my employees were even more stressed about my silence and they thought that I was reluctant in helping them and was withholding information to make it harder for them to complete the project [. . .] [M5]

However, the silence initiated by manager M5 had an unintended consequence. Silence here can also be seen as a

managerial instrument, creating uncertainty and unanswered questions in employees. Therefore, this emancipatory dimension of silence can suppress the potential of emancipation. In fact, the Buddha's silence is not without controversy, being seen by some as an attempt to stop people from asking metaphysical questions (Kalupahana, 1976). In other words, the Buddha's silence represents a selective way of providing knowledge only for certain reasons (Organ, 1954), which could be seen as an instrumental strategy by his followers.

Our data also demonstrate that variations in the forms of self-expression through silence influence and sometimes can even confuse others' interpretations of silence. Certain types of attachment or preference can be found in how individuals choose to express their "self" or "nonself," which can result in misinterpretation. One employee illustrated this observation:

> I am so used to silence in many different ways. Sometimes silence is the only option you have to tame an unsatisfied client or to acknowledge your mistake with your teams or managers. I don't mind really because listening is important to improve your weaknesses. But then I am so used to that type of silence so when my manager stayed silent in our meeting, I just really had no clue why he did that until later when he explained. I guess employees and managers look at silence differently. [E15]

The aforementioned comment suggests that "intentional" messages sent through the practice of silence remain challenging for addressees to interpret. We see three possible explanations here. First and fundamentally, there are differences in how managers and employees experience silence, as they have different roles and responsibilities that affect their understanding of the "intentions" behind silence.

Second, among our respondents, all the managers interviewed were Buddhist practitioners, whereas the same was not necessarily true for the employee interviewees. Therefore, differences in their level of understanding of engaged Buddhism, the practice of silence as a skillful means, and comprehension of the notion of self and nonself may have been reflected in the way different respondents understood and practiced silence differently. This gap highlights the difference between being the initiator of silence and the receiver of silence in terms of how silence is interpreted.

Third, even among managers, their different maturity and mastery of Buddhist practice affected the way they enacted silence. For instance, the way they incorporated nonself in the practice of silence differed. Among those in their early years of Buddhist practice, some had a tendency to cling to an outcome of practicing silence:

> I want my "silence" to be effective to my employees so I try to keep on practicing it whenever I can, in the hope that my employees can benefit from it. [M16]

However, those with more experience in practicing Buddhism accepted the impermanent and uncontrollable nature of outcomes, and thus initiated silence differently:

> I know for a fact that silence will never work on some of my employees unless they change. Now after 6 years, I understand that imposing my Buddhist knowledge and practice was really ignorant and was a false practice of both silence and nonself. I need and should spend a decent amount of time understanding someone, before evaluating whether being silent can help them or not. For me the turning point was when I could differentiate that practicing silence should be for the benefit of others and not for myself. [M2]

If silence is practiced with the instrumental aim of nurturing the spiritual whole self, as commonly claimed in the WS literature (e.g., Bell & Taylor, 2003; Dehler & Welsh, 2003), rather than embracing "otherness," in the Buddhist understanding this reflects attachment and ignorance. Even with good intentions, practicing silence without a "self" is challenging in both organizational and social contexts, as summarized by the following participant:

> It is not as easy to practice silence as it seems. When there is a deadline for a project, there is no time for silence, no time for reflection [. . .] I have to be "loud and clear" and sometimes even cruel, prioritizing the project not employees' feelings [. . .] in Vietnam, silence can be a form of obedience or a sign of agreeing that we tend to pick up in the Vietnamese family culture [. . .] This is a big problem. To give you an example, I was silent in a meeting to signal a constructive disagreement, but my employees thought I agreed with their ideas, even though that was not the case [. . .] [M8]

In this sense, contexts both enable and challenge the way silence is enacted in certain circumstances. It can also create distance in employee/manager and Buddhist/non-Buddhist interpretations of silence, particularly when the Buddhist practices and principles of nonattachment challenge the traditional Vietnamese values of respect and obedience adopted from Confucianism, which embraces kinship and relationship (Jamieson, 2010).

Constructing Processual Transformation through Silence

As a feature of Buddhist practice, mastery of silence requires the accumulation of experience, implying a process of transformation in its meaning making and narrative construction. Some employees found this process constructive for their own transformation in relation to skill development:

> Silence is scary. I remember how in a meeting our manager just stayed silent when we were presenting our proposal for a new project. He left the room without saying anything. Right after that, we stayed in the room for five hours to find reasons for his silence. Everyone was stressed, but at the end of the day, we found that one aspect of our proposal overlooked the legally binding conditions that can easily lead to malpractice. We had another meeting the next day, and our manager was happy that we had learnt from our mistake. His silence was very powerful,

but for me, it was an unforgettable experience. It has given a big lesson to our team. [E9]

As reflected by the description "scary," silence in this case created emotional uncertainty as the manager "left the room without saying anything," which resulted in everyone being "stressed." In terms of its emotional effect, here the manager's silence had the rhetorical impact of an open-ended question. The pressure and the uncertainty emerging *within* the silence led the employees to sway between different perceptions. This in turn persuaded them to question, identify, and confirm the limitation in their proposal. Here, the process of silence encourages rather than discourages the process of self-transformation through the accumulation of reflexive experiences, in this case recognizing their oversight with regard to legal requirements when preparing the proposal. Silence in this sense enables the formation of "the spoken and unspoken negotiations" (Fletcher & Watson, 2007, p. 170) of work and of the structure of work relations, which in turn generates meanings of silence and constructs its symbolic importance. Due to the contextuality of and variations in conceiving and perceiving silence, facilitating practices of silence in organizations requires processes that create spaces for individuals to learn, develop, reform, and sustain the fluid meaning of silence. Managers in our interviews acknowledged these underlying assumptions in the practices of silence, which were introduced in the employee training sessions on silence. This was further explained and emphasized by the CEO:

> I use silence as a meditative technique and a means to reflect upon myself before I make decisions. Based on that, in our departmental meeting, I always encourage my team to spend a few minutes in silence before we all come to a decision together after all the arguments and proposals have been presented. I think it is quite effective compared to previous very noisy discussions that sometimes ended up in conflict rather than in problem-solving. [M1]

The CEO [M1] found silence a more effective means to facilitate problem-solving than noisy discussions. This impetus was also emphasized in the training sessions he developed:

> Last year we had a workshop on silence. Personally, I found the workshop very meaningful and interesting. Some other colleagues of mine did not feel the same way. But anyway, we were given scenarios and tasks to communicate in silence. It was very difficult, but I learnt so much. [. . .] Every time we experience silence in the meeting room, everyone just starts to brainstorm. This is a really big change. . .. More recently, we had mindfulness silence sessions. This method is embraced by our CEO. He is a Buddhist practitioner, so he promotes mindfulness in our organization with many different workshops and invited guests. One of the sessions looked at reflexive silence through meditation. We were tested on a real unsolved problem, meditating on the problem for 20–30

minutes and then coming back fresh for a new round of discussion. [E17]

Respondents in our study described two main practices of silence introduced by the training sessions: (1) *Wisdom-embedded* silence based on sharing experiences (both personal and work related) to unpack how silence is understood and can be used in different contexts; and (2) *mindful* silence based on the exploration of thoughts and the "self" through silence in meditation practices that facilitate reflexivity and learning experiences. According to respondents, both managers and employees, the concepts of wisdom-embedded and mindful silence were well received by participants in the workshop sessions because of their practicability and applicability; participants had the opportunity to personally experience different forms of silence during the sessions. For instance, interviewees described using "mindful silence"—the practice of self-transformation through the process of reflexive learning and reflecting on the adoption of "right mindfulness" from the Noble Eightfold Noble Path, which combines past experiences with awareness in the moment (Purser & Millilo, 2015; Vu & Gill, 2018). This had significance for participants working in service departments, who found they were able to develop skills such as deep listening and reflecting on experiences:

> Staying silent is a way for me to brainstorm and revisit similar situations that I faced in the past to reflect on them and to explore more effective and meaningful way of responding and persuading difficult customers. [E31]

> Customers' feedback is extremely helpful for me to further develop our products and services. However, I must say that some comments are painful. I have learnt to be silent to deeply listen to customers to constructively unpack some of the painful comments. [E10]

Different from situations where silence is implicitly applied as a political means to conceal dissent and avoid conflict (e.g., McGivern et al., 2018), silence in this case is explicitly promoted as a part of the formal ideology. Further, while not speaking up is considered harmful for team learning by some (Edmondson, 2003), here silence is intentionally encouraged in collective brainstorming and decision making. Silence "performs the possibility of creating a space of nondecisiveness and . . . of delaying decision-making" (Dupret, 2018, p. 12), thus reducing pressure on individuals to speak up and allowing time for employees to process certain ideas. This in turn supports the duality in situations where no decision has been made and where various possible decisions can be offered as part of a process of knowledge construction and accumulation.

Furthermore, while there was positive feedback on this training approach to facilitating the practice of silence in the organization, considering the variety and variations in

interpretations of silence evident in our data, we ask: How realistic is it to introduce a practice of silence based on the personal experience of a particular practitioner as a normative practice when silence is subject to interpretive and contextual multiplicity? While the Buddha used silence as an instrument, he practiced silence in a rhetorical and pedagogical context to cultivate compassionate responses. Silence was thus not a universal means for the Buddha to teach; rather, it was subject to the contextual needs and dispositions of his followers (Schroeder, 2004). The danger of adopting the practices of silence in organizations in an "umbrella" application is that it may be intentionally or intentionally manipulated to control and alienate the possibility of multiple practices of silence, and to generate an institutionalized regulation of understanding silence as a formal rationality.

Silence should be initiated in combination with moral discipline, concentration, and wisdom (as suggested by principles of the Noble Eightfold Path to eradicate ignorance) in order to avoid the misinterpretations and instrumentality that may embed themselves in the processual practice of silence for both the addressers and addressees. To facilitate silence mindfully, our findings highlight the need to take into account the possibility of being exposed and conforming to the performative and intentional nature of silence.

Discussion

Our findings unravel how silence is not silent; rather, silence has agency that "voices" in various ways with rich registers and different sounds. Through our empirical study of a Vietnamese telecommunications company, we bring forward the social construction processes of *three emancipatory dimensions of silence at work*—reflexivity, self-decentralization, and transformation—as a critical engagement with and an alternative focus to the mainstream literature's passive readings of silence. We develop an integrated view of silence that goes beyond the understanding of silence as, and through, a singular dimension. Silence, like a Rubik's cube, requires consideration of the multiplicity of dimensions that are interconnected and constitute the ongoing formation of each other.

This article contributes to the extant literature in three ways. First, by considering silence in organizations through the lens of Buddhism, we extend the notion of silence in the context of WS and provide further understanding of Buddhist-enacted silence in practice, which has mostly been explored through a theological lens. While silence is often conceptualized with negative connotations within management and organization studies in the mainstream literature, silence as a spiritual expression is characterized as being positive in relation to cultivating the fullness of experience (Poland & Pederson, 1998; Poulos, 2004). We move beyond the binary conceptualization of silence as either negative or positive to extend Karakas and Sarigollu's (2019) demonstration of silence within the WS literature by illustrating the multidimensional dynamics of silence.

More specifically, our findings show that silence can facilitate a *reflexive process* in constructing and making sense of the uncertainty around silence. We argue that the unknown embedded within silence, including both the position of not knowing and the thing unknown, can stimulate processes of reflection that construct, deconstruct, and ascertain the ambiguity and uncertainty. As M7 noted, "The 'unknown' in your silence . . . makes employees question and brainstorm about why you are silent." The unknown facilitates internalized learning and constitutes flexibilities and creativity in generating alternative ways to understand practices and meanings in organizational life. Such emancipatory space was used by both the managers and the employees as a process of emotional governance that enables individuals to review, accommodate, modify, and present emotions.

Within and through these processes, silence is acknowledged as a collaboratively constructed achievement generated by both managers and employees through their contextually specific interactions and relations. While such emergent processes of silence cultivate the possibility of multiple meanings and interpretations, our study shows that such meanings and interpretations can be misunderstood in the process. Further, while silence can facilitate reflexivity, such reflexivity involves tensions in how silence is interpreted by different agents. As some of our Buddhist respondents suggested, different levels of mastery and experience in practicing silence affected managers' context-sensitivity in performing silence. Silence is not just a practice, but a relationally emergent and contextually dependent construct. Its practicability and value are placed within particular relations and structures in an organization. Hence, while silence might serve individuals, it is not individual in nature. It (re) produces meanings of a particular context and requires the context to make it meaningful.

Silence in our study also embraces a constructive intent through the notion of *self-decentralization* shaped by Buddhist principles of the Noble Eightfold Path (e.g., right intention, right action, right effort, etc.). The intent behind silence, as explained by our participants, was to move away from egoistic self-awareness to avoid self-justifications for mistakes made and unnecessary conflicts. However, there was a gap between the initiators of silence and the receivers of silence in how it was interpreted. While managers may use silence as a practice of self-decentralization by trying not to impose their ego-centric opinions and expectations on employees, employees who are not familiar with the notion of nonself in Buddhism may interpret the managerial silence as serving ego-centric purposes, such as being an informal test for employee commitment. The divide evident between Buddhist practitioners as managers and non-Buddhist employees in our

study was a significant factor contributing to tensions in the general adaptation of silence. Managers tended to use silence as an umbrella practice for a group of individuals who were not specifically selected. This approach fails to appreciate individual differences and therefore overlooks the latent individualities and individualization embedded within practices of silence. This raises questions about the general applicability of spiritual practices and highlights the need for context-sensitive approaches when introducing spiritual practices in organizational contexts. We will discuss this further below in relation to the third contribution.

Silence, as described by the participants, also carries a *transformative* dimension as a means of reflection in collective thinking, facilitating room for the accumulation of reflexive skills such as deep listening and reflection on experiences. Despite that, the mindfulness training sessions were initiated and established as a part of the organizational ideology and rule system. In our findings, employees were instructed to "spend a few minutes in silence" in departmental meetings before decision making as a form of normative behavior. Through such exercises of silence, employees learned how they were expected to behave as a "representational practice" (Deetz, 1992, p. 260) in meetings. Here, silence is expressive in that it enunciates and rectifies the sense of appropriateness at work, and is itself as "a component in the control dialectic" (Donaghey et al., 2011, p. 61). Silence has been transformed into an organizational norm that is maintained by, and as an "institutionally located 'substantive rationality'" (Clegg, 1975, p. 77, cited in Brown & Coupland, 2005). Such institutionally determined silence is part of the process of the formal creation of a rule for *what* to do and a normative taboo of *what not* to do "before we all come to a decision together." In this way, silence regulates the construction of knowledge as a political and ideological process and encourages a "legitimate" way of "reflexive knowing" that is being approved, governed, and displayed as an *organizational* activity.

Therefore, it is important to note that what we argue are the emancipatory dimensions of silence in the WS context do not exist in isolation from the manipulative dimensions of silence; rather, they are interwoven with each other as ongoing negotiations and construction. Although the vagueness of silence is discussed in this article as being constructive to reflexivity, self-decentralization and transformation, it also generates risks in that it can be reshaped or distorted to serve an instrumental and discursive purpose of control, such as the training sessions described earlier. Yet silence— through such ambiguity and distortion—can also be anti-discursive in a way that generates discontinuities in maintaining a formal rationality at work. Silence, in the interweaving between emancipation and instrumentalisation, is a form of voice yet simultaneously lacks a distinctive and clear voice. This may further lead to distortion and contestation of the intention and content of what has become silent. Hence, instrumental agentic interventions in how silence is enacted, as revealed in our studied organization, highlight how the cultivation of WS does not always lead to a win-win scenario (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009).

Drawing on such agency of silence and as our second contribution, this study furthers the understanding of silence beyond the WS context and in the broader management literature. Our study shows how silence is organized and organizes through the competing dynamics *within* its agentic process. When practicing silence constitutes a space for self-decentralized reflexivity and alternative thinking, such practices reinforce silence as the chosen "alternative" that speaks as a normative discourse and for the espoused values of managers. Silence is a site that enables and constrains quotidian accounts of emancipation. It contributes to and offers a lens for understanding the ongoing tension between identification and reidentification, and organization and reorganization of normality and reality at work. Silence is not a self-evident sign of the powerlessness (Tannen, 1994) that is often invisible in the routines of everyday life (Fletcher & Watson, 2007). It is instead a process of contestation and negotiation for participants to grasp, to learn, to adjust to, and to perform within particular power relations at work. Interwoven in such processes, silence has (re)emerged as itself "a pivotal institution at the heart of [the] many visibilities–invisibilities, continuities–discontinuities and passivities–activities" (de Vaujany & Aroles, 2018, p. 12) that represent the dialectical and paradoxical aspects of organizational life.

This study therefore introduces an alternative lens that challenges the singular and passive understanding of silence recognized in the broader management literature and extends "the complex and multidimensional nature of silence" (Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1365). The extant literature largely regards silence as a marker of exclusion and oppression (e.g., Brinsfield et al., 2009; Donaghey et al., 2011; Milliken et al., 2003), and an instrument of resistance (Bigo, 2018). Through exploring the possibilities for silence as a process of both relative and restricted empowerment and emancipation, we develop the understanding of silence beyond its role as an organizational imperative and as "silencing" or "being silenced." From the perspective developed here, we emphasize the importance of an integrated view that recognizes silence as being embedded in an ongoing negotiation between its constructive potential and the possible manipulations and control of such potential. This provides opportunities to understand silence through its embedded tensions and contradictions in future studies.

To further supplement the contexts for future investigations, we have directed attention to an organization that has explicitly established encouragements for "silence" and made employees feel (relatively) safe and encouraged *not* to speak up. This study adds another dimension to the existing empirical studies of the organizational contexts of silence, where employees are silenced silently by managers

(e.g., Fernando & Prasad, 2018) and made to feel that "it is *not* safe to speak up" (Morrison & Milliken, 2003, p. 1567, emphasis added).

Third, scaling up from the consideration of silence as a relational and emergent process (see Fletcher & Watson, 2007) that is made meaningful by its cultural and organizational contexts, our study has practical implications for practicing and understanding silence in cross-cultural contexts and management. *Spiritual practice* and *cultural setting* played a crucial role in unpacking the clash between enacting, interpreting, and deconstructing silence in our study. For example, there were different mastery levels and agentic interventions among Buddhist practitioners in practicing silence and different understandings of the theological epistemology around silence between Buddhist and non-Buddhist. Both aspects affected the levels of skillfulness in how silence was introduced to employees and how this was (mis)interpreted differently among the receivers of silence. This highlights that the potential transferability of any spiritual practice from a particular tradition (e.g., Buddhist-enacted silence in this study) needs to be managed context sensitively. Managers should clarify the intent of such a practice, such as by establishing how space and time can be transformed into a form of "silence" for employees as a reflexive opportunity, rather than assuming that silence can be an "umbrella" term and practice in secular organizational contexts.

Furthermore, considering and adjusting the compatibilities between cultural norms shaping and underlying notions of silence in different contexts and the spiritual practices of silence are essential for cross-cultural management practices. For example, when not being practiced as a spiritual practice, the reflexive dimension of silence can be difficult to promote in cultures like Vietnam where there are strong cultural norms of nonquestioning, leading to uncritical behaviors (Dickhardt & Lauser, 2016). The high-power distance in many similar collective cultures can also limit employees' questioning of the potential instrumentalization of silence in organizations, as silence can be considered a face-saving mechanism in some Eastern cultures (Agyekum, 2002). While constructiveness and criticality in dialogues are embraced in many Western management practices (e.g., Cunliffe, 2002; Maclean et al., 2012) to ease misunderstandings, doubt, or uncertainty, they remain limited in practice in some cultures like Vietnam. However, when silence is interpreted and practiced through the lens of a spiritual tradition like Buddhism, it embraces reflexive practices for both managers and employees. Therefore, when managed and introduced context-sensitively, silence as a spiritual practice can be helpful and more influential in contexts like Vietnam, where informal institutions of spirituality are highly appreciated for promoting values and beliefs when formal institutions (e.g., law enforcement) have failed (Helme & Levitsky, 2004), and particularly in supporting social trust (Vu & Tran, 2021).

Understanding cross-cultural adjustments in practicing and understanding silence is important since silence is a universal phenomenon practiced by all cultures worldwide, but differently from community to community, country to country (Agyekum, 2002). Because of such multicultural practices of silence, introducing the emancipatory dimensions of silence from a Buddhist lens responds to calls to acknowledge non-Western knowledge in international management in general (Jack et al., 2013), and in contextualizing research on organizational behavior (Cooke, 2018; Jackson et al., 2014; Kaufman, 2015) in particular. Our study sheds lights on the cross-cultural management of silence by revealing the phenomena of agency, behavior, and interaction that influence actors at the microlevel of individuals in organizations (Barmeyer et al., 2019). At this level, there is a process of first seeking to understand then to be understood for cross-cultural managers.

Nonetheless, we do not intend to generalize our findings across contexts. Nor do we believe the study should be understood in isolation from its context, as we consider such empirical generalization undermines the cultural credibility and social meaningfulness of any qualitative study. On the contrary, it is the specific context that enables us to reveal not only how (i.e., the processes), but why (i.e., the meaning of the processes) silence is practiced differently in the workplace. Such differences in "how" and "why" constitute the accumulated understanding of the actualities and potentialities of silence. Therefore, we hope our study makes sense through its contextual specificities and can raise awareness and recognition of "how silence might work (differently)," thus acting as a departure point for future studies.

Conclusion

We conclude by emphasizing the centrality to our arguments of the relational ontology of silence, which considers silence as an emergent process built upon shifting social and contextual constructs with ongoing negotiations and contestations of meaning. This is further theoretically and empirically unpacked and developed through the lens of a Buddhist-enacted context, bringing forward the emancipatory dimensions of silence, including the reflexivity, self-decentralization and transformation constructed around its vagueness, uncertainty, and constraints. Through the emancipatory dimensions of silence we introduce, we further contribute to comprehension of the dynamics and interplay of the constructive and oppressive aspects of silence. We offer implications for cross-cultural management through furthering understanding of silence based on awareness of cultural norms and the different theological epistemologies influencing the enactment and interpretations of silence in organizational contexts. Silence is itself a marker of the paradoxes of organizational life where nothing is yet decided and many decisions are possible;

where the unknown is not yet revealed, and multiple interpretations are possible. Silence is not silent: it is inherently an interaction between the absence of words and their presence, and expresses "a rich and complex world beyond the surface reflection that we generally take for granted" (Clair, 1998, p. 23).

Our study has limitations that offer possible directions for future research. First, silence is examined in a single organizational context within a specific industry. This may have limited our exploration of other features and dimensions of silence. Second, given the fact that the culture of Vietnam is diverse due to Western interventions and colonization over many years (by the French in the North and the Americans in the South), there will be variations in the interpretation and application of engaged Buddhist practices. As our study was carried out in Hanoi only, distinct provincial characteristics have not been taken into consideration. We therefore encourage future studies to gain insights from investigating the functions and impacts of silence within broader demographic settings and contexts in Vietnam (including within engaged Buddhist, or in comparison with non-Buddhist contexts) to reveal inconsistencies in the practice of silence due to contextual variations beyond employee/employer and Buddhist/non-Buddhist interpretations and practices. Furthermore, silence is a significant part of many spiritual and religious traditions, not just Buddhism. Hence a transcultural interpretation and application of silence in organizations would further contribute to the dynamic, but little explored notion of silence within cross-cultural management contexts.

Notwithstanding its limitations, our study has implications for future research and practice. By departing from a one-dimensional understanding and challenging the "two sides of the same coin" way of thinking, silence can be seen as a contingent and precarious achievement. Therefore, the practice of silence should take into account the particularities of local context(s). The dynamic nature of silence can be communicated and discussed between managers and employees to construct the contextual meaningfulness of silence. Through constituting the multitude of ways that silence can be experienced and revealing "the multidimensional nature of silence" (Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1365), we hope to encourage research and practice to challenge taken-for-granted views and explore the hidden dynamics of silence as a way to enrich understanding of our everyday organizational lives.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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