



Cornell University
The Johnson School

*Implicit voice theories:
A new perspective on
leadership and employee
self-censorship*

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New Directions in Leadership Research Conference

Fuqua/Coach K Center on Leadership and Ethics at Duke Univ.

May 2009



Agenda

- **Overview**
 - *(A quick)* review & two propositions
- **Results from several studies**
- **Summary & future directions**



OVERVIEW



Types of voice

- ***Major issues***
 - Whistle-blowing, principled dissent
 - Focus on issues that are illegal or immoral
- ***Employee treatment***
 - HR issues, grievance filing
 - Focus on personal injustices or violations of contractual agreements
- ***Organizational improvement***
 - Pro-social voice
 - Focus on speaking up about problems and possibilities for improvement in job tasks or organizational processes and actions

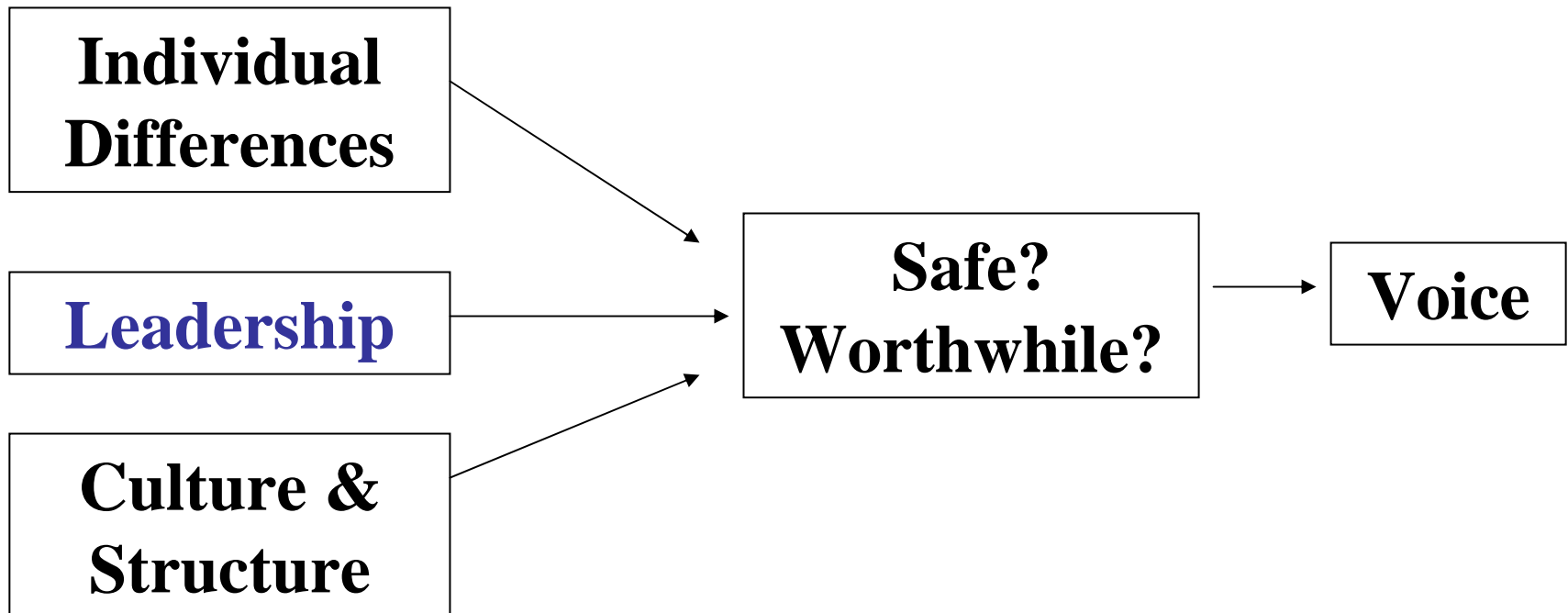


Summary of improvement-oriented voice research

Antecedents

Cognition

Behavior





Typical: A “leader-centric” view of voice

- **Leader Bhvr. → ‘Ees’ Beliefs → ‘Ees’ Bhvr.**
 - **Managerial openness → Safety → Voice**
 - Detert & Burris, 2007, *AMJ*
 - **Abusive supervision → Fear → Silence**
 - Burris, Detert & Chiaburu, 2008, *JAP*
 - **Managerial inaction → Futility → Silence**
 - Detert & Trevino, FC, *Org. Sci.*
- **Assumptions of this view:**
 - Subordinates beliefs and behaviors are rooted in/caused by the observed behaviors of, and experiences with, current leaders
 - “*Good*” or “*positive*” leadership styles/behaviors (e.g., consideration) stimulate organizational citizenship behaviors



Proposition 1

- Leadership that begets desired subordinate behaviors – e.g., upward voice in the service of organizational improvement – is as much about overcoming extant subordinate beliefs as about causing them



Proposition 2

- **Explicit, eliciting leadership is necessary to stimulate behaviors involving personal risk for subordinates; more passive forms of leadership – no matter how “positive” or “kind” – will be insufficient for creating learning organizations**



SOME RESULTS



Unshared Knowledge at “Hi-Co”

- *People don't go to management with the options, because they are afraid – they try to second guess what management wants instead of what management really needs to know, and so the problems build up.* [Director of Global Finance]
- *We're very careful with what we say, how we say it, where and who we talk to, because you never know if anything that is said is eventually going to be used against you.* [Senior Sales Representative]



We began to observe...

... beliefs not based in (recent) experience with leaders, current organization

Probing for basis of fear:	Responses:
Do you know of anyone who has ever lost their job because they spoke up?	<i>"Everyone knows that we never fire anybody." "I've never seen it happen."</i>
Has anything ever happened for asking hard questions?	<i>"Nothing whatsoever. Nothing happens to anybody for asking any questions."</i>
<i>("We don't... speak up, because you always have in your mind that eventually whatever you say is going to be used against you.")</i> Q: Are there any examples of this?	<i>"Not that I know, but we're always afraid that that can happen. Why? I don't know. And I feel the same way. And I cannot explain why."</i>



Implicit theories and voice

- **Implicit theories are “schemalike knowledge structures”** (Ross, 1989) **used for everyday sensemaking** (Levy, Chiu & Hong, 2006).
 - **The term “implicit theory” suggests a belief structure that contains *assumptions about cause and effect among stimuli*** (Anderson & Lindsay, 1998).
- **“Implicit” in that such theories tend to be:**
 - **unconscious** (Heider, 1958)
 - **poorly articulated** (Levy et al., 2006)
 - **rarely discussed** (Ross, 1989)
- **These attributes apply well to voice episodes**
 - **e.g., presumed cause and effect between where, when, and about what one speaks up and likely outcomes**



In two exploratory studies...

... we identified six recurrent “implicit voice theories”

- **Study 1:** 190 interviews in a high-tech firm
- **Study 2:** 70 MBA and Exec MBA written responses to vignettes in survey



Recurrent Implicit Voice Theories

- **Presumed target identification (IVT1)**
 - *“People get so attached to their projects; their projects become part of their self-image and self worth, so it’s not acceptable to question them.”*
- **How this works:**
 - **Episode specific cues:** Voice content *is something owned by/closely related to voice target*
 - Those cues **evoked IVT1**
 - IVT1 **links** these *specific cues* (the **causes**) to the conclusion that speaking up in such circumstances will not go well (the **effect**)
 - Silence therefore becomes more likely when IVT1 evoked by environmental cues



Recurrent Implicit Voice Theories

- **Polished or complete ideas only (IVT2)**
 - *“The biggest fear here is to say I don’t know. You can’t be at a meeting and somebody asks you a question and say I don’t know . . . The ultimate fear is that [managers will] ask a question that you can’t answer. You have to be able to answer everything.”*
- **Don’t bypass your boss upward (IVT3)**
 - *“You don’t want to cut your boss’s throat, so if you’re being asked by a manager above him, I would not speak up if I disagreed with what my manager was doing.”*
- **Don’t embarrass your boss downward (IVT4)**
 - *“I don’t want to embarrass [my boss]. I think there’s a level of embarrassment to say, ‘Gee boss, that’s factually incorrect.’ So I mention it later in private.”*



IVTs have (apparently) broad roots

- **Sometimes proximate:**
 - Abusive, abrasive current leaders (e.g., bulldozer blowing nasty commands)
- **Other times apparently distal, diffuse:**
 - *"You don't want to cut your boss' throat [by challenging him in front of more senior managers]."*
 - Q: Is that belief based on specific experiences?
 - *"No. I just think it's kind of a business thing that you don't disagree with your manager to his boss."*



In a third, more deductive study, we asked:

- **Can we develop valid and reliable survey measures of some implicit voice theories?**
- **Do these IVTs predict propensity to stay silent beyond leader behaviors/styles (and other contextual and individual influences)?**
- **Does leadership style influence the potency of these implicit voice theories?**



Useful in predicting silence?

Respondent Individual Differences

- gender, age, managerial status, current employment status, sample, proactive personality

Contextual Influences

- org formalization, org centralization, **leader intellectual stimulation, leader abusiveness**

Implicit Voice Theories

Silence Propensity

step 1

step 2

step 3

Regressions test hypothesis that IVTs predict silence propensity **after controlling for typical predictors**, including **leadership behaviors/style**



Useful in predicting silence?

YES

1: Individ. diffs	$r^2 = 12\%$				
2: Context factors	$\Delta r^2 = 5\%$				
3: IVT1		$\Delta r^2 = 3\%$ $p = .017$			
3: IVT2			$\Delta r^2 = 3\%$ $p = .014$		
3: IVT3				$\Delta r^2 = 2\%$ $p = .066$	
3: IVT4					$\Delta r^2 = 6\%$ $p = .000$

Survey 1: IVTs

Survey 2: Proactive personality, Leader behaviors, Central. & Formal.

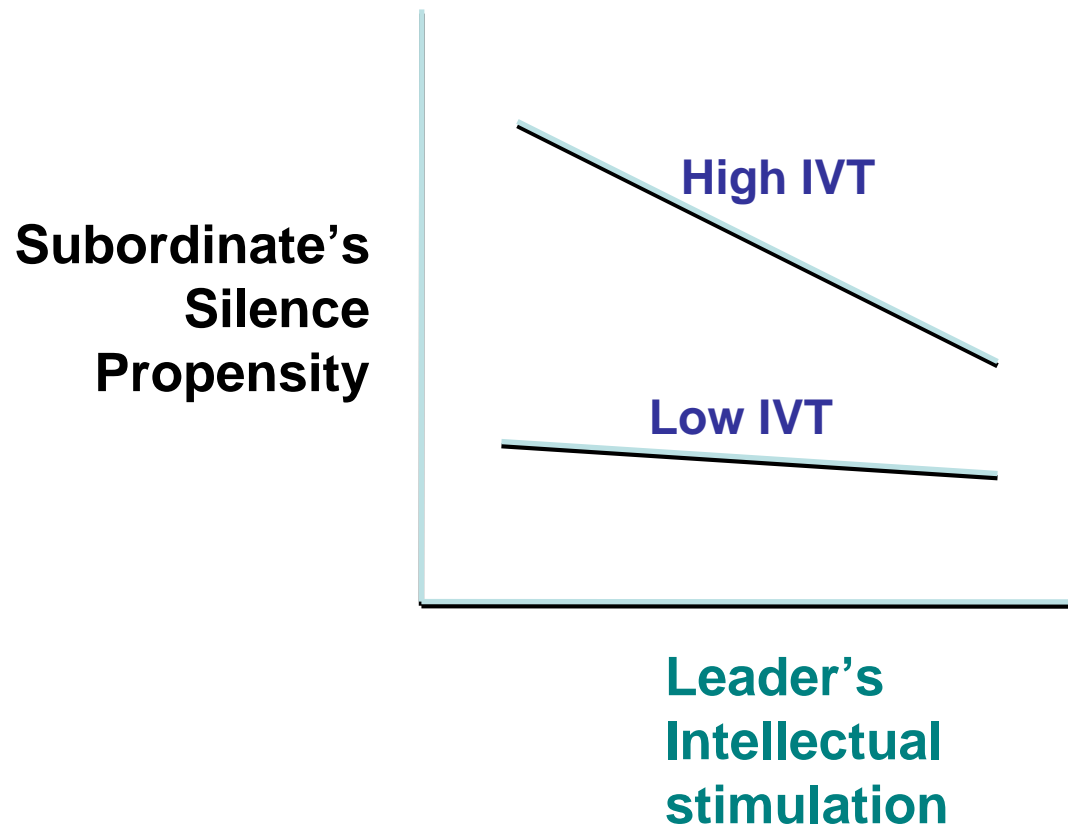


Do leadership styles interact with IVTs?

- IVTs are developed through a lifetime of experiences with authorities
 - parents, teachers, prior org. experiences
- Current/recent bosses are influences on the usage/invoking of IVTs
 - behaviors that create fear should exacerbate influence of IVTs; behaviors that encourage voice should attenuate influence of IVTs



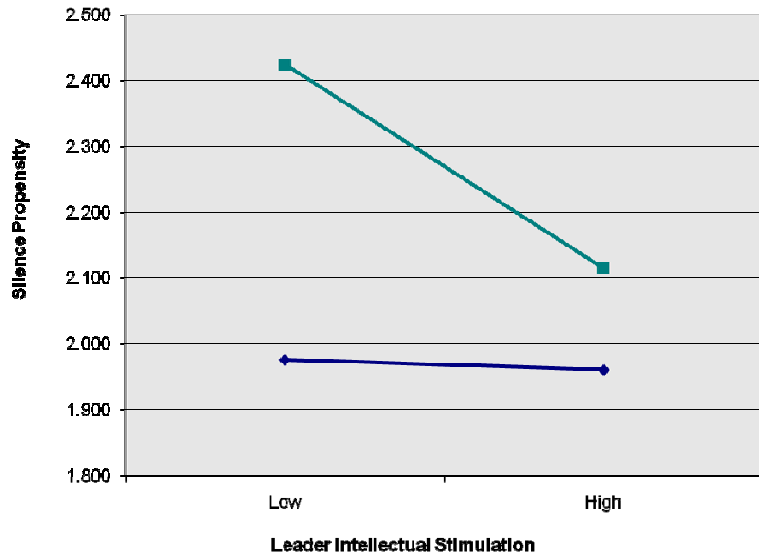
Proposed interaction form for Intellectual Stimulation x IVTs





Do leadership styles interact with IVTs?

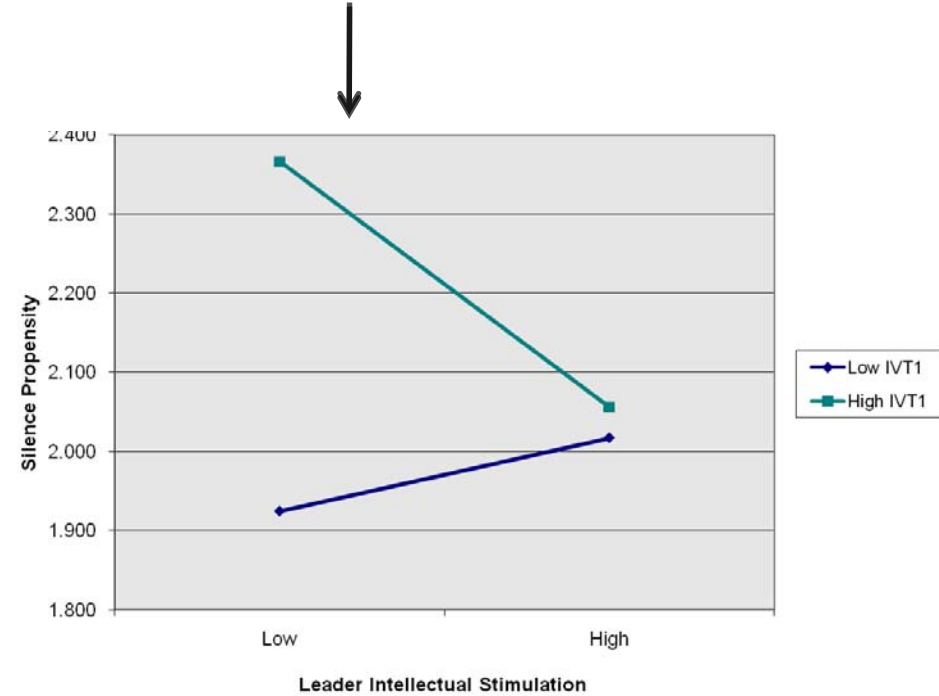
SOME EVIDENCE FOR INTELL. STIM.



Low IV14
High IV4

← Don't embarrass the boss downward IVT

Perceived target identification IVT



Low IVT1
High IVT1

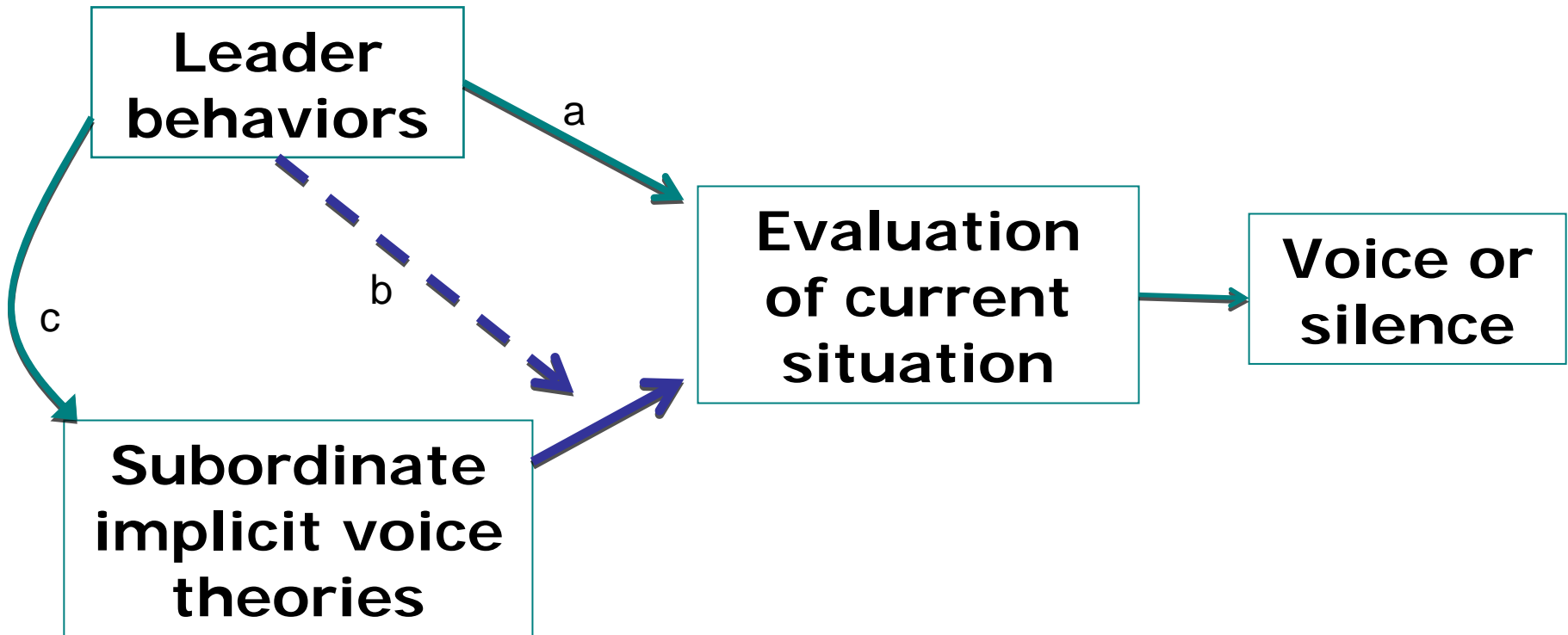


Proposition 1

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Toward a more complete theory of “leadership influences” on voice/silence





Future Directions

- **Categorizing IVTs & identifying others**
 - *WHAT* you shouldn't speak up about
 - *WHERE/HOW* you shouldn't speak up
 - *CONSEQUENCES* of speaking up
- **Uncovering the sources/development of IVTs** (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino, & Edmondson; 2009, *ROB*)
 - Distal past or prior work experiences
 - Prior experiences with hierarchy



Proposition 2

- **Explicit, eliciting leadership is necessary to stimulate behaviors involving personal risk for subordinates; more passive forms of leadership – no matter how “positive” or “kind” – will be insufficient for creating learning organizations**



Initial evidence from a fourth study (w/ E. Burris & D. Harrison)

- **Goal:**
 - **Examine relationship between different leadership tactics – ranging from relatively passive to very active – and subordinate voice**
- **Context:**
 - **Credit union industry**



How to get subordinates to speak up?

More passive; little effort by focal manager

Active elicitation; high effort by focal manager



Formal mechanisms

Meetings

MBWA

Managerial “openness”

Managerial “closing the loop”

Managerial “elicitation”



Correlations

	Self-reported Voice to Boss	Manager- reported Voice from Subordinate
Formal Mechanisms	.25**	.07
Meetings	.26**	-.01
MBWA	.27**	.13
Managerial Openness	.31**	.19*
Managerial Closing the Loop	.34**	.15
Managerial Elicitation	.45**	.27**



Regressions on Manager-reported Voice

1. Tenure, gender, age, proactive personality, have ideas	$r^2 = 7.5\%$				
2. + Formal mechanisms		$\Delta r^2 = 1.4\%$			
3. + MBWA and informal meetings			$\Delta r^2 = 1\%$		
4. + Closing the loop				$\Delta r^2 = 2.5\%$	
5. + Elicitation					$\Delta r^2 = 4\% *$

* significant F Δ



Regressions on Self-reported Voice

1. Tenure, gender, age, proactive personality, have ideas	$r^2 = 13\%*$				
2. + Formal mechanisms		$\Delta r^2 = 10\%*$			
3. + MBWA and informal meetings			$\Delta r^2 = 4\%*$		
4. + Closing the loop				$\Delta r^2 = 1\%*$	
5. + Elicitation					$\Delta r^2 = 9.5\%*$

* significant F Δ



SUMMARY



Summary

- A leader's influence/impact may be as much or more about how s/he deals with follower beliefs about 'leaders' than about causing followers' current beliefs or behaviors
- Generating optional, effortful, potentially risky behaviors from subordinates requires highly active leadership; well-intended and positive, but passive, actions are insufficient



Thank You

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