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The More the Merrier: How Psychological Standing and Work Group Size Explain Managers' Willingness to Communicate About Unethical Conduct in Their Work Group

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Abstract

Business ethics research has long examined the dichotomy between remaining silent or reporting ethical misconduct to a third party. Little is known, however, about ethical conversations within a work group after observing misconduct. Specifically, we do not know how many members of their work group individuals choose to communicate with. These conversations could have important implications for creating an ethical workplace. We propose that psychological standing is an important driver of individuals' decisions not to remain silent and to instead raise moral concerns with a greater number of others in their work group. In addition, integrating existing work on structural power, psychological standing, and the bystander effect, we develop a moderated mediation model with both structural power position and work group size as contextual drivers of psychological standing. Our model is supported across four studies using different designs and methodological approaches. Our results contribute to the understanding of when and why individuals raise moral concerns, and they provide insights into how an ethical context is created in organizations.

Keywords Number of targets · Psychological standing · Power · Bystander effect

Introduction

People count as being silent when they choose not to voice the moral concerns they have (Bird, 1996; Chen & Treviño, 2023). An example of moral silence in organizations is when employees witness others in the organization violating certain regulations but choose not to say anything about it to them or anyone else at that time or afterwards. Understanding the dynamics around ethical discussions after the occurrence of ethical misconduct¹ is important for two critical reasons. First, employees are generally more knowledgeable about ethical issues that arise in their teams, and it is thus essential that they do not remain silent but rather voice their

concerns. Second, when employees are willing to bring ethical considerations to bear in relevant and constructive ways, this may de facto discourage others from engaging in further unethical behavior and help to preemptively mitigate ethical scandals or prevent smaller crises from growing into larger scandals (Bird, 1996; Chen & Treviño, 2023; Miceli et al., 2008).

When individuals choose not to remain silent, there are different ways in which they can communicate with others to voice their moral concerns. The vast majority of business ethics research has heavily focused on whistleblowing, in which organization members formally report ethical misconduct to those within and outside of the organization who can take action (Miceli et al., 2008). Recently, research has also explored more informal and internal ways in which individuals can raise moral concerns at work, including internal whistleblowing (e.g., Mayer et al., 2013) and a moral

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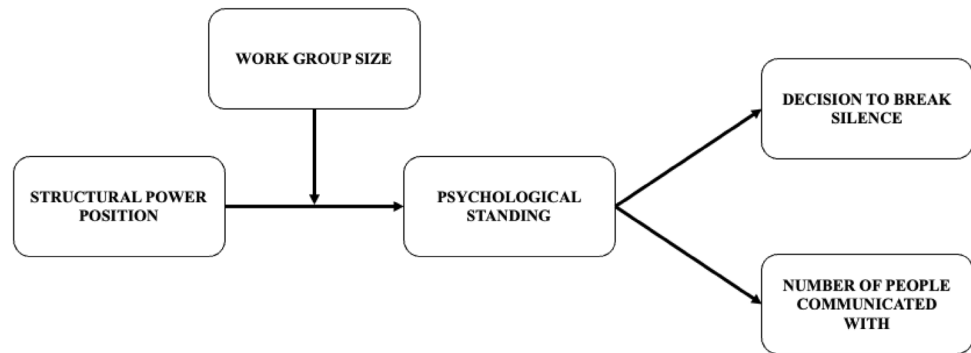
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¹ Consistent with the business ethics literature (e.g., Akaah, 1996; Bird, 1996; Sims, 1992; Treviño and Victor, 1992), we define unethical conduct as activities that go against one's conscience or that violate the law or their organization's standards of ethical conduct. Some examples include calling in sick to take a day off, using company services for personal use, and taking extra personal time.

Fig. 1 Hypothesized model



voice (e.g., Chen and Treviño, 2022; Lee et al., 2017). This research explores whether individuals direct their moral concerns to a *target* (e.g., a manager or co-workers). Chen and Treviño (2023) define targets as “the intended recipient(s) of the voice—a manager or coworker(s) to whom the ethical voice is addressed and who the voicer believes can make a decision or take action on the issue of interest” (p. 2). This definition acknowledges that individuals may initiate discussions with multiple targets. However, little is known about the dynamics of ethical discussions within a workgroup after misconduct. Specifically, we do not know how many members of their work group individuals may discuss their moral concerns with, and why.

We know that the extent to which individuals communicate with each other not only shapes how they view the world and think about themselves (Wallace & Tice, 2012), but also helps them build and maintain a sense of shared reality (Jost et al., 2008; Lau et al., 2001). As individuals try to determine what new, specific incidents might mean to them, they come to share their subsequent reactions to those events (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). How individuals form moral judgments and consequently react to others’ misconduct is no different (e.g., Arnaud & Schminke, 2012; Martin & Cullen, 2006; Victor & Cullen, 1988). In fact, because misconduct often occurs at lower levels of the organization and not everyone is aware of others’ ethical misconduct (Paruzel-Czachura et al., 2021; Wager et al., 2009), interpersonal conversations can raise awareness and result in important attitudinal and behavioral changes. Thus, the number of targets that individuals communicate with can have important implications for the development of ethical organizations (Warren and Smith-Crowe, 2008).

Where does this leave us? Research in the moral voice domain generally suggests that individuals may prefer moral silence owing to its lack of futility or based on fear of retaliation or losing their privileged position (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Kennedy and Anderson, 2017; Miceli et al., 2008; Morrison, 2023). However, recent work suggests that an ethical voice can lead to both negative and positive outcomes.

For example, individuals at work can feel both elevated and threatened by an ethical voice (Chen and Treviño, 2022). Therefore, there likely exists a complex set of internal predictors of moral voice. We propose that psychological standing, or “the subjective sense of legitimacy or entitlement to act” (Miller & Effron, 2010, p. 137), can help individuals not only break their moral silence but also communicate with more people within their work group. When individuals believe that it is their place to voice moral concerns about the misconduct they have witnessed, we expect they will be less likely to remain silent and more likely to communicate with the transgressor(s), victim(s), and other group member(s) to ensure that ethically questionable behavior is addressed and that others are aware of the misconduct.

Integrating research on structural power (e.g., Tost, 2015; Tost & Johnson, 2019) with research on psychological standing (e.g., Miller & Effron, 2010; Sherf et al., 2017), we further propose that structural power and work group size are important contextual drivers of psychological standing in an organizational context. Specifically, we expect that managers will experience greater psychological standing than nonmanagement employees because managers will be more likely to believe that they have a larger material and moral stake in addressing the ethical misconduct. We also expect that the work group size will moderate the effect of structural power on psychological standing by strengthening its effect in larger (versus smaller) work groups (see Fig. 1). We know that individuals are less likely to offer help to a victim of a transgression when there are other people who are equally capable of effectively intervening (i.e., the bystander effect; Latané & Darley, 1970; Latané & Nida, 1981). Although meta-analytic findings show that the bystander effect is more pronounced with an increased number of bystanders (Fischer et al., 2011), those with structural power appear to be immune to this effect (Baumeister et al., 1988; Schwartz & Clausen, 1970).

We aim to make three important contributions to the literature. First, we seek to extend the body of work on moral silence and moral voice internally within an organization, in particular within the work group. Most existing research

in this area has examined whether individuals voice moral concerns to a specific target, most commonly their manager (Chen & Treviño, 2023). However, we believe that the number of targets with whom individuals discuss the ethical misconduct also has important implications for how that incident is addressed and similar future incidents are limited. Ethical discussions at the group level can create an ethical culture wherein employees speak out and speak up. Second, we move beyond the existing theoretical arguments that link the perceived futility of moral voice and fear of retaliation and loss of privileges to moral silence and the lack of an ethical voice (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Kennedy and Anderson, 2017; Miceli et al., 2008; Morrison, 2023; Wellman et al., 2016). Instead, we theorize psychological standing as an alternative, distinct mechanism that explains not only why individuals may choose not to remain silent but also the number of individuals with whom they will share their moral concerns. Third, and finally, by integrating the research on psychological standing and structural power with research on the bystander effect, we advance our understanding of the contextual factors that influence individuals' standing with respect to initiating important ethics-related conversations. In doing so, this research also replicates other findings related to bystander effects on voice in different domains of organizational life (e.g., Hussain et al., 2019).

The Effect of Psychological Standing on Moral Silence

How do employees' psychological standing impact their decision not to remain silent and the number of individuals with whom they communicate? The findings of Effron and Miller (2015) suggest that individuals with a higher standing may not refrain from raising moral concerns with others in the work group if they have a material and/or moral stake in the issue of interest. They told their study participants about a constitutional proposition that would, if legalized, transfer funds from a worthy to a nonworthy cause. To manipulate the material stake, participants in a vested condition were informed that the worthy cause benefitted only their own sex, while those in the nonvested condition were informed that the worthy cause benefitted only the opposite sex. To manipulate the moral stake, participants in the treatment condition were also asked to read a text in which an activist group discussed the proposition using moral terms and pressed others to contest the proposition, acting on their core values and moral convictions. In contrast, participants in the control condition either read a similar text that lacked such moral language or read no text. The findings revealed that participants in the nonvested condition reported that they were less comfortable in publicly expressing their privately held attitudes to others. However, the discomfort found

among the nonvested participants disappeared when others used moral language to discuss the issue. Furthermore, there was no difference in how likely vested and nonvested participants were to publicly express their opinion to others when they had a moral stake in the issue. This effect of psychological standing on raising concerns about an issue of interest or supporting a cause has been also demonstrated in other contexts, including gender-parity or pro-choice initiatives (Sherf et al., 2017) and anti-equality policies (Dahling et al., 2016).

In our context, we argue that when individuals feel that they have the standing to raise their concerns after observing others' ethical misconduct, they are likely to initiate a conversation with more members of their work group (including the transgressor, the victim, and other members of the work group). They will do this because they believe they can contribute to the development of an ethical environment in their organization and create a more supportive social environment for everyone (Selvanathan et al., 2020; Smith & Johnson, 2017). Specifically, those with higher psychological standing will communicate with the transgressor to ensure that ethically questionable behavior is addressed, with the victim(s) to aid and comfort those who are harmed by the unethical act, and with other group members to ensure that others are also aware of the misconduct and how it has been addressed. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1. Psychological standing and speaking about moral concerns are positively associated, such that individuals with higher psychological standing are more likely to (a) break silence and (b) communicate with a larger number of people in their work group after observing misconduct.

The Effect of Structural Power on Psychological Standing

One of the predominant criteria used to differentiate individuals from one another in organizations is whether they occupy a structural power position (i.e., manager vs. non-management employees; Tost, 2015). Research on power reveals that structural power likely increases egocentric orientation (Galinsky et al., 2006) and helps individuals act consistently with their moral values (Kraus et al., 2011). Thus, structural power is likely to be important in determining the amount of psychological standing that individuals experience.

Similar to how the court system determines whether one has the legal standing to bring a case against another individual, within groups the individuals themselves determine whether they have the standing to say or do anything about a specific issue (Miller & Effron, 2010). In

most cases, harmed individuals believe that they have the license to act publicly (Miller & Effron, 2010; Sherf et al., 2017). For example, men have been shown to participate less than women in gender-parity or pro-choice initiatives not because they are less concerned about the cause, but rather because the issue does not directly affect them and they do not feel that it is their place to talk about it (Sherf et al., 2017). However, individuals may feel that they have standing not only when the issue at hand causes them harm, but also when they have a moral stake (Ratner and Miller, 2001). For instance, heterosexual employees who identify with the LGBTQIA + community can experience moral outrage and engage in collective action on behalf of that community against anti-equality policies that their organizations adopt (Dahling et al., 2016).

We expect managers to experience greater psychological standing than employees for at least two reasons. First, structural powerholders have been shown to be more sensitive to material rewards (Keltner et al., 2003). They might feel that the unethical actions of others prevent them from enjoying material benefits under the existing system (e.g., Cable et al., 2019). Additionally, unethical actions—even though some may appear to advance organizational interests—can be threatening to the interests of the group (Treviño & Victor, 1992) or even the group’s survival (Moore, 2008; Sims, 1992). Because managers are more concerned with the survival of their work group (Freeman et al., 2007), unethical actions are likely to be a greater concern for them. Second, managers will be more concerned with their hierarchical intragroup position and may find any action that upsets the social and moral order of their group more threatening (Miller, 2001). By intentionally acting in ways that are counter to the shared group rules or norms, transgressors affect the power dynamics within their existing work groups. As Murphy and Hampton (1988) stated, “intentional wrongdoing insults us and attempts (sometimes successfully) to degrade us” (p. 25). Managers may perceive transgressors as placing themselves above everyone else in the group and threatening their own structural position. Thus, employees (compared to managers) may feel that ethical misconduct affects them less, both materially and morally, and likely experience a feeling of less psychological standing to raise moral concerns after observing misconduct. We therefore hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2. Structural power and psychological standing are positively associated, such that managers experience greater psychological standing than employees to raise moral concerns after observing misconduct.

Hypothesis 3. Psychological standing mediates the relationship between structural power and individuals’ decisions (a) to break silence and (b) to commu-

nicate with a greater number of people in their work group after observing misconduct.

The Moderating Role of Work Group Size

Even though we expect employees to be more likely to remain silent and communicate with fewer people, individuals’ perceived psychological standing after the occurrence of misconduct also likely depends on the context in which the misconduct took place. As noted above, individuals’ decision to break their silence or choose to voice moral concerns has a complex set of predictors and depends on various factors, including individual differences, past experiences, situational variables, and the composition of the group (Morrison, 2023). The literature on the bystander effect suggests that the work group size or the total number of people in one’s social group can be such a contextual driver of why individuals might remain silent after they observe misconduct.

Individuals are less likely to react to an event when others are present who are equally capable of stepping in and responding to that event (Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Nida, 1981). For instance, the presence of others has been shown to reduce individuals’ likelihood to help others in critical emergencies including injuries (e.g., Latané & Darley, 1970) or illness (e.g., Darley & Latané, 1968), or even in relatively less serious situations (Hurley & Allen, 1974). The bystander effect has been further studied in public good dilemmas where one individual’s action can benefit everybody else in the group, despite the time, effort, and risks involved for the actor (e.g., Diekmann, 1985; Franzen, 1999).

An employee’s decision not to remain silent and to communicate with others mimics the situation that potential volunteers face in public good dilemmas. Although employees can help the functioning of their group by raising moral concerns, they might experience social costs associated with their voice (e.g., Bashshur and Oc, 2015; Chen and Treviño, 2022; Wellman et al., 2016). When witnessing another individual’s unethical behavior, employees may look to their manager and others to resolve the reward–risk tradeoff they face and potentially wait to see how others respond (Franzen, 1999). When individuals know there are others who have the same knowledge of events as they do, they may be less willing to accept the risks of being the first to act (Diekmann, 1985). If this is the case, how will individuals react, psychologically and behaviorally, when witnessing misconduct in smaller versus larger work groups?

In one of the early efforts to examine the conditions under which the bystander effect unfolds, Schwartz and Clausen (1970) designed an experiment to examine how

quickly individuals act to help in a medical emergency. They manipulated several variables: (a) the number and (b) competence of bystanders, (c) the presence of information describing appropriate action, and (d) bystanders' general tendencies to deny personal responsibility. Two of the findings are of interest for our arguments here. First, those who accepted responsibility intervened more quickly than those who denied responsibility. Second, the number of bystanders affected only those who denied responsibility, such that they became less likely to intervene in larger versus smaller groups. Extending these findings, Baumeister et al. (1988) demonstrated that those who were assigned to a structural power position were more likely to come to the victim's help in a simulated emergency, even when doing so meant violating the rules of the study that participants had been instructed to follow.

Coupling these findings with the research showing that managers tend to overclaim their stake in issues in larger groups (see Schroeder, 2017 for a review), we posit that the work group size should moderate the effect of structural power. Specifically, we expect managers to experience higher psychological standing in larger (versus smaller) groups, as they have been shown to be unaffected by the bystander effect as they claim more responsibility for the output of the groups they manage. In contrast, we expect employees to experience less psychological standing in larger (versus smaller) groups because they are more prone to the bystander effect. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4. Work group size moderates the positive association between structural power and psychological standing, such that employees experience less psychological standing than managers in larger (versus smaller) work groups.

Hypothesis 5. The indirect relationship between structural power and speaking up about moral concerns is significantly stronger for larger work groups than for smaller work groups.

Overview of the Studies

We tested our theorized model in four complementary studies. In a lab experiment, we initially tested the direct effect of structural power on the likelihood of individuals remaining silent and the number of people with whom they will communicate in their group (Pilot Study 1). Further, consistent with recommendations for establishing causality among study variables and demonstrating true process mediation (Spencer et al., 2005; Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008), we performed an additional Pilot Study 2. We manipulated psychological standing to show its effect on our dependent variables. Due to space limitations, we report these studies on

the project's Open Science Framework (OSF) page (https://osf.io/x9tdn/?view_only=9d9054516ae64e9390c5dfaa96ca20a9).

In Study 1, we conducted a scenario-based experiment with full-time working adults to test Hypotheses 1–3 and examine the association between structural power, psychological standing, and speaking about observed misconduct. In Study 2, we used a retrospective design to replicate our findings in Study 1 and tested the entire hypothesized model. The data and syntax used for all studies can be found on the OSF page.

Study 1

Sample

We recruited 381 full-time working adults (23% female) who reside in the United States through ClearVoice Research® for pay. The average age was 46.4 years ($SD = 10.8$). This allowed us to test our research question using employees from a wide range of jobs and occupations who had been prescreened to ensure that they were employed full-time. We used the G*Power software (Erdfeiler et al., 1996) to conduct a power analysis to determine the sample size needed for detecting a small effect ($f = 0.20$) with two groups and 95% power. This analysis determined that the sample size should be 327. Four recruited participants failed to correctly respond to comprehension questions and thus were removed from the analyses. This left us with a sample of 377 who provided complete responses and passed the comprehension questions.

Procedure

We adapted the hypothetical “Side Business” scenario created by Flynn and Wiltermuth (2010). All participants were asked to imagine themselves to be part of a small project team in a large marketing firm. Depending on the condition to which they were randomly assigned, we then informed them that they were either supervising (i.e., had structural power, as a team leader) or working with (i.e., had no structural power, as a team member) five different employees (Alex, Sarah, Sam, Jennifer, and James) who had different job titles, duties, and levels of work experience. We then provided the participants with the following information about one of the team members, Alex, who had been working on the team during the last two years:

Alex's primary role is to create marketing materials (e.g., flyers). Alex has good marketing instincts in general. You have noticed that Alex could contribute great ideas to team meetings or make a good case for

several marketing pitches. Alex frequently teams up with Sam and they generally complete the assigned projects on time with a reasonable level of quality. You also have seen Alex socialize well with people in the office. Most recently, however, three of you (Jennifer, James, and yourself) have noticed that while at work, Alex sometimes works on personal side projects that are not for your company, and you know for a fact that Alex is being paid well for this. You three also have witnessed that Sam had to work harder and had to go through everything more carefully due to some of the mistakes (e.g., typos, grammar mistakes) Alex occasionally makes. Furthermore, Sam and Sarah are totally unaware of Alex's personal side projects.

We informed participants in the team member condition that James was their team leader, and we informed participants in the team leader condition that James was one of their subordinates. Participants were then instructed that they were concerned about their team's recent declining performance and were contemplating how they should react in this situation, and were asked to respond to questions regarding how they would feel and react, considering their role in such a situation, along with demographic questions.

Measures

To measure *psychological standing*, we adapted Sherf et al.'s (2017) five-item scale ($\alpha=0.87$). Participants were asked to report the extent to which they felt that it was legitimate or appropriate for them to raise their concerns regarding Alex's unethical action.

Consistent with our hypotheses, we included two outcome variables. For *participants' decision to break their silence*, we coded any response as 1 when participants indicated that they would contact at least one of their team members and/or team leader about Alex's action. In contrast, when participants indicated that they would remain silent, we coded their response as 0. For *the number of people communicated with*, we coded each decision to send a message to another specific member of the work group and created a sum score. The range of these responses coded as 1 varied from 0 to 5.²

Results

We conducted a path analysis to test Hypotheses 1–3 and estimated the full hypothesized model using the maximum

likelihood estimator with robust estimates of the variance. We tested mediation through a test of the statistical significance of the indirect effect and its associated confidence interval (MacKinnon, 2008).³ In support of Hypothesis 1, psychological standing was positively associated with participants' decision to break their silence ($B=1.37$, $SE=0.21$, $p<0.001$, $OR=3.94$) and with the number of people they communicated with ($B=0.31$, $SE=0.04$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.10$). Furthermore, the results revealed a significant positive coefficient for the experimental condition ($B=0.94$, $SE=0.13$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.11$), suggesting that those in a structural power position would experience greater psychological standing in response to transgressors' actions (Hypothesis 2). Participants in the team leader condition reported that they would experience higher psychological standing ($M=6.00$, $SD=1.13$) than did participants in the team member condition ($M=5.06$, $SD=1.46$). Finally, consistent with Hypothesis 3, the indirect effect of having a structural power position on the decision to break silence (*indirect effect* = 1.29, $SE=0.23$, $p<0.001$, $CI=[0.83, 1.75]$) and on the number of people to communicate with (*indirect effect* = 0.29, $SE=0.06$, $p<0.001$, $CI=[0.17, 0.40]$) were both significant.

Study 2

Study 1 provides initial evidence for the mediating role of psychological standing between structural power and individuals' actual decision to speak about their moral concerns to others in their work group after observing an unethical act (Hypotheses 1–3). In Study 2, we replicated our findings and tested the entire hypothesized model in a field sample using the critical incident technique (CIT).

Sample

We recruited 228 full-time working adults (61% female) who reside in the United States through ClearVoice Research® for pay. The average age was 43.8 years ($SD=9.4$). We again used the G*Power software (Erdfelder et al., 1996) to perform an a priori power analysis for four groups, two predictors, and 95% power to detect a medium effect ($f^2(v)=0.40$). We expected the effect size to be larger compared to Study 1, as our participants made real (versus hypothetical) moral choices (FeldmanHall et al., 2012). This analysis determined

² We also performed the analyses by excluding James, who was either the team leader or another team member, depending on the condition. The significance and directions of the results were the same.

³ We performed the analyses by excluding fifteen participants (4%) who rated Alex's behavior on the ethical spectrum of the scale, resulting in a final sample size of 362 participants. The direction of the findings and the significance levels were the same when excluding these participants from the analyses.

that the sample size should be 235. Respondents provided us with complete responses and passed an attention check question included in the study.

Procedure

In this study, we employed CIT, which has previously been used by researchers to study individuals' reactions to moral events and unethical behavior (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2015; Wellman et al., 2016). Participants were instructed to recall a time during the past year when they personally observed a colleague or colleagues in their work group engaging in actions that went against their conscience or that they thought may have violated the law or their organization's standards of ethical conduct. Participants who were able to recall such an event were allowed to continue in the study and reported the nature of the ethically questionable behavior (see Appendix A under Study 2 on the OSF page for response options, e.g., Akaah, 1996). Participants were then asked to write a description of the event, recounting what they recalled most vividly, as if they were reliving the event and remembering how they felt during the experience. Participants then reported when this event occurred and how long they had been acquainted with the individual(s) who committed the morally or ethically questionable act. They also responded to demographic questions as well as questions about the characteristics of the event they witnessed, the transgressor(s), and their organization.

Measures

Participants' *structural power position* was determined according to whether they were managers and personally supervised anyone at work (designated as a "structural power position") or held nonmanagement positions and had direct supervisors (designated as a "no structural power position"). Consistent with previous work (Price & Mueller, 1986), we measured the *work group size* using the number of people in the participants' immediate work unit. In the case of managers, we included their direct reports and themselves, and in the case of nonmanagement employees, we included their manager, their peers, and themselves. The average group size was 13.00 people ($SD = 15.62$) and treated as a continuous variable. We measured participants' *psychological standing* using the five items developed by Sherf et al. (2017) on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*; $\alpha = 0.92$).

We operationalized participants' *decision to break silence* and *the number of people they communicated with* using options adapted from Olson-Buchanan and Boswell's (2002) response-to-unfair-treatment scale, and we sorted these into six categories based on the target of their voiced concern: (0) (a) ignored it or (b) avoided the individual(s) who

committed the ethical misconduct; (1) (c) discussed it with the individual(s) who committed the ethical misconduct; (2) (d) discussed it with the person(s) who was (were) harmed by the ethical misconduct; (3) (e) discussed it with others in their work team who were not involved; (4) (f) communicated with or sought assistance from their supervisor. We used a binary variable to operationalize participants' *decision to break silence*: When a participant selected either (0) (a) or (b), we coded that as 0; otherwise, we coded the response as 1. When participants selected (1), (2), (3), or (4), we coded each of these selections as 1; otherwise, we coded the selection as 0. To operationalize the number of people with whom the participants communicated, we summed the numbers for these responses so that the range of their responses varied from 0 to 4.⁴

Because we relied on real incidents, we could not randomly assign our participants to different conditions. Considering that individuals may self-select themselves into leadership positions in organizations, it is plausible to expect systematic differences in the characteristics of the event the participants in each condition recalled and how they reacted to that event. If this was the case, unmeasured variables can provide alternative explanations for the effect of structural power on participants' decision to break their silence and communicate with others in their work group (Sigall & Mills, 1998). To address this concern and consistent with previous research that has used this methodology (e.g., Wellman et al., 2016), we decided to run analyses including control variables. We relied on a previous meta-analysis on whistleblowing to guide us in our search for variables (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). As a proxy for closeness to the transgressor, we included participants' *liking of the transgressor(s)* (Wayne et al., 1997; $\alpha = 0.90$) as a control variable. Additionally, we included *perceived violation of a behavioral norm* (Reynolds, 2006; $\rho = 0.57$) and *frequency of wrongdoing* to account for possible differences in the nature of the wrongdoing and their potential impact on the participants' ethical judgment. Finally, we included whether the company had a formal written policy and/or procedure that allows employees to raise their concerns about perceived illegal, immoral, or unethical behavior within the organization (0 = No, 1 = Yes) and management responsiveness to voice (Spencer, 1986; $\alpha = 0.87$) as contextual control variables because of the role that organizational climate, policies, and procedures play in individuals' decisions to report wrongdoings.

⁴ We also performed the analyses by excluding the fourth selection option. The significance and directions of the results were the same.

Table 1 Path Analysis Results, Study 2

	Psychological standing		Decision to break silence		Number of people communicated with	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Explanatory variables						
Structural power position (SSP)	0.91**	0.26	0.55	0.49	0.19	0.16
Work group size (WGS)	-0.02*	0.01	-0.00	0.02	-0.01†	0.00
SSP × WGS	0.04**	0.01	0.00	0.03	-0.00	0.01
Mediating variable						
Psychological standing			0.61**	0.11	0.24**	0.03
Control variables						
Liking of the transgressor(s)			-0.27*	0.13	-0.04	0.05
Violation of a behavioral norm			-0.01	0.13	-0.08†	0.04
Frequency of wrongdoing			0.02	0.11	0.03	0.03
Company policy/procedure			0.04	0.43	-0.02	0.15
Management responsiveness			0.11	0.25	0.05	0.08
<i>R</i> ²	.18		0.22		0.25	

N = 228. Structural power position dummy coded as 0 = team member condition, 1 = team leader condition

***p* < .01, **p* < .05, †*p* < .10 for a two-tailed test

Results

We conducted a series of preliminary analyses, including a test for multicollinearity and endogeneity tests. The results revealed that multicollinearity and endogeneity were not issues that we needed to address in our analyses. We report the findings of these analyses along with the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables in Appendixes B and C under Study 2 on the OSF page.

We performed a path analysis to test our hypotheses and obtain estimates for the full hypothesized model using the maximum-likelihood estimator with estimates of the variance that are robust to heteroskedasticity. We tested (moderated) mediation via a test of the statistical significance of the conditional indirect effects and their associated confidence intervals (MacKinnon, 2008). Specifically, we used bootstrapping with 5,000 samples to generate a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval around the estimates of the conditional indirect effects of occupying a structural power position. We report the unstandardized regression coefficients for the direct effects in Table 1 and estimates of (conditional) indirect effects in Appendix D (see Study 2 on the OSF page).

The results supported Hypothesis 1. Psychological standing was positively associated with participants' decision not to break silence ($B = 0.61$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$, $OR = 0.55$) and the number of people they communicated with ($B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.15$). Hypothesis 2 was also supported. Managers ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 1.13$) reported experiencing greater psychological standing in response

to transgressors' actions than did employees ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.46$); $B = 0.91$, $SE = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$. In support of Hypothesis 3, psychological standing mediated the effect of structural power on speaking about the observed misconduct. The indirect effects of occupying a structural power position on participants' decision to break silence (*indirect effect* = 0.55, $SE = 0.19$, $p = 0.002$, $CI = [0.20, 0.91]$) and on the number of people they communicated with (*indirect effect* = 0.22, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.002$, $CI = [0.08, 0.35]$) via psychological standing were significant.

Consistent with Hypothesis 4, the interaction term was significant ($B = 0.04$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = 0.012$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$), such that the effect of structural power was stronger when the group size was larger (slope = 1.90, $t = 6.34$, $p < 0.001$) than when the group size was smaller (slope = 0.82, $t = 2.74$, $p = 0.01$). See Fig. 2 for a plot of this interaction. Finally,

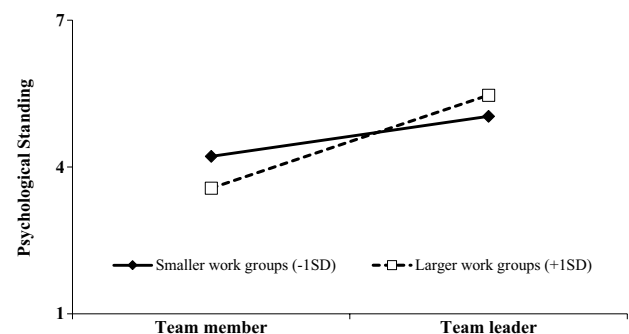


Fig. 2 Plot of two-way interaction, study 2

in support of Hypothesis 5, the indirect effect of structural power on participants' decisions to break silence (coefficient = 1.15; 95% CI [0.66, 1.65]) and the number of people with whom they communicated (coefficient = 0.45; 95% CI [0.28, 0.63]) was significant and stronger for the larger work groups than for the medium and smaller size work groups (see Appendix D under Study 2 on the OSF page). In addition, the index of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015) for breaking silence and the number of people with whom they communicated was 0.02 ($SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.01$, $CI = [0.01, 0.04]$) and 0.01 ($SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.01$, $CI = [0.00, 0.01]$), respectively.⁵

General Discussion

This research proposes that the dynamics of ethical discussions after observing ethical misconduct within a work group are theoretically relevant and practically important for organizations. We posit that psychological standing may offer a novel alternative to the prevailing explanation of why some individuals (especially managers vs. employees) are more likely than others to break their moral silence and communicate about observed misconduct with more people in their work groups.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The theoretical implications of our research are relevant to several areas of research. First, business ethics research has mainly studied whether individuals voice their moral concerns to a specific target when they decide to break their silence (Chen & Treviño, 2023). Yet the number of targets they communicate with has important implications for fostering and maintaining an ethical organization (Warren and Smith-Crowe, 2008). When individuals reach out to several different targets, their voice can ensure that others are aware of the misconduct and that it is addressed. This is a first attempt to understand how many members of their work group employees may discuss their moral concerns with, and why.

Second, previous work shows that fear of retaliation and losing privileges as well as the perceived futility of raising concerns are among the key mechanisms explaining why some individuals are more likely to remain silent after observing ethical misconduct (e.g., Detert & Edmondson,

2011; Kennedy and Anderson, 2017; Miceli et al., 2008; Morrison, 2023; Wellman et al., 2016). We extend these arguments and propose psychological standing as an alternative mediating mechanism of this relationship. We also theorize that structural power is an important determinant of psychological standing and that psychological standing can explain why managers are more likely than employees to break their moral silence.

Third, we examine work group size as a theoretically relevant moderator for why managers may experience greater psychological standing. Consistent with previous research (Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané and Darley, 1968; Latané & Nida, 1981), we show that those who hold a position of structural power are less vulnerable to the bystander effect than those who do not. We found that in larger (versus smaller) work groups, employees experienced less psychological standing for raising their moral concerns and thus were more likely to remain silent. Thus, we were able to replicate similar findings related to bystander effects on voice in different domains of organizational life (e.g., Husain et al., 2019).

From a practical perspective, organizations may consider the impact of the company's formal, written policies as well as their responsiveness to their employees' voiced concerns about employees' psychological standing. Although not explicitly hypothesized, we did find in Study 2 that managerial responsiveness correlates positively ($r = 0.16$, significant at $p = 0.02$) and the existence of company policies correlates negatively ($r = 0.52$, significant at $p = 0.04$) with psychological standing. On the one hand, managerial responsiveness to voice may enhance employees' perception of their psychological standing and their likelihood of voicing moral concerns to others. In such cases, organizations may want to protect employees who report misconduct through anti-retaliation programs and monitoring. On the other hand, the presence of company policies and procedures may enhance the bystander effect insofar as employees will expect others to act against unethical conduct. In such cases, organizations may want to delve deeply into their policies to understand their real impact on employees and, if necessary, train them.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Even though we conducted four studies to test our hypotheses (two of which we report on the OSF page) in which we employed different samples and methods to add robustness to our findings, there are several limitations. First, individuals can express themselves differently along various dimensions such as content, style, or tone (e.g., Norton, 1978). For instance, those in a structural power position may not only be more likely to raise their concerns to transgressors but may also express themselves differently in terms of their

⁵ We again wanted to ensure that the events participants recalled were indeed unethical. Fourteen participants (6%) rated the severity of the ethical violation in their description of the event on the ethical spectrum of the measure. The direction of the findings and significance levels did not change when we excluded these participants from the analyses.

speech style and tone of voice. In this research, unfortunately, we could not consider these dimensions, as the messages participants sent to others were quite short. We believe that future research should consider these different dimensions of communication.

Second, in our studies we did not probe the amount of time our participants took to react after they observed their team members' unethical conduct. Understandably, not every individual will choose to react immediately to misconduct. Some may prefer to wait a little longer or see how others react to the misconduct before they decide to do so (Whiting et al., 2012). In addition, the "spiral of silence" theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) suggests that employees may be more poised with their moral voice when they realize that their concerns are shared throughout their work group. On the other hand, if employees realize that their concerns are disliked by their group members, they are likely to be reserved and remain silent. Thus, future research should also examine the timing of individuals' communication with different parties.

Third, we explored individuals' psychological standing as the mediating mechanism and work group size as the boundary condition for why managers (vs. employees) are more likely to voice moral concerns. However, the decision to remain silent or speak about what has been observed is likely to depend on context and personality. For instance, due their structural power position, managers may want to discuss ethical transgressions with others to seek additional evidence as well as their support and advice regarding how to address them. Furthermore, whether managers are motivated by prestige or dominance may shape their reactions. In contrast, extraverted employees or those with stronger referent and expert power may believe that they can exert greater influence over others via their voice (Oc & Bashshur, 2013) and thus feel that they have the right and/or obligation to speak up and out. Alternatively, closeness between the observer and the transgressor may blind the observer to the unethical nature of a friend's transgression (Forbes & Stellar, 2022) and reduce their likelihood to raise moral concerns. Even if they perceive an act as unethical, employees may still choose to remain silent to maintain workplace relationships and to avoid upsetting group norms and cohesion (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Other possibilities for questions related to underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions for moral silence abound.

Finally, we did not explore the consequences of speaking about moral concerns. When individuals reach out to more people in their work group and initiate an ethics-related conversation, such efforts should contribute to creating stronger ethical climates in organizations (Bird, 1996; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Future research can explore whether there is a critical number or a percentage

of coworkers that one needs to reach out to in order to meaningfully influence the group's shared understanding of how they should react to transgressors and whether such transgressions can be prevented in the future.

Conclusion

This research has explored the dynamics around ethical discussions at work after the occurrence of ethical misconduct. We show that psychological standing is a robust underlying mechanism explaining why individuals choose to speak with different people about misconduct they have observed.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Human and animal participation All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with APA guidelines or comparable ethical standards.

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