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Review Article

The multiple meanings of silence in social psychology

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on research-based discourse, this article provides an updated overview of what silence means in social psychology. Such meanings can be viewed from an interpersonal dimension and an intrapersonal dimension. That is, silence can be externally or internally generated. The external process sees silence as a response to the social environment, while the internal process views silence as an individual choice. The article argues that silence has a sociological nature. When a silent person sends out a silent message to the public (such as showing resistance or alienation), this person not only expresses their personal view but also acts on behalf of others. The article rests on the ideal of sociological imagination to argue that an individual's issue of concern or trouble, seemingly a limited social experience, may not be a single case but can represent the concern of a group or a society. This means that the lives of individuals can signify the status and reaction of their community. By presenting silence from various individual perspectives, the article showcases the richness of what silence means and what it does in social contexts.

Keywords: silence; choice; culture; power; dialogue; protection; isolation; withdrawal; solitude

1. Scope of the article

The article looks at the multiple meanings of silence in interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions. The former refers to silence resulting from exposure to society; the latter signifies a dialogue with the internal self. Silence has many voices. Unfortunately, it is often not easy to hear them unless one is interested in recognising what they say, where they come from, how they emerge, what they mean, with whom they connect, and why they matter. This article reviews how collective forces influence such voices and the sociopsychological context in which silence occurs. It explores silence in a range of social and individualistic functions.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart once said that silence at the right moment is golden. Without silence, music would turn into chaos and become utterly unhearable. This observation not only applies to music composition but also carries significance in social communication and personal resourcefulness. Despite seemingly being absent of sound, silence holds incredible importance in social psychology. While silence is sometimes misleadingly associated with a lack of communication, there are various nuanced meanings attached to this phenomenon that we must know. This article aims to explore the multiple dimensions of silence, shedding light on its psychological impact, personal and interpersonal implications, and the socio-cultural contexts shaping our interpretations of silence. Mills[1] proposes the idea of sociological imagination whereby a personal

case might represent the view and concern of a group or a society. Petkova's[2] case study also reveals that the lives of individuals can signify the status and reaction of their community.

2. Methodology

This article rests upon a textual research approach for academic inquiry, which covers two distinctive stages. In the first stage, 111 academic texts from the discourse on silence were selected from a pool of several hundred texts. The selection is based on the presence of five criteria, that is, the selected works must contain (a) empirical research, (b) historical narratives, (c) latest development, (d) current appeals, and (e) fullest debates.

In the second stage, these texts were process through four techniques including (a) content analysis (looking at content for patterns), (b) discourse analysis (looking into context for ideologies), (c) hermeneutics (interpreting meanings), and (d) close reading (extracting information). This step allows both synthesis of information and identification of perspectives. These methods of processing data help foster a deep understanding of historical views on silence and contribute to the ongoing interpretation and revision of this theme. The approach act as a bridge connecting researchers with the knowledge and wisdom of the past or present. By unraveling historical narratives to interpreting literary works and exploring social phenomena, the approach offers valuable insights and contribute to the wider academic discourse on silence.

3. Social views on silence

In public discourse, to this day, the silence theme does not enjoy a positive presence in mass media and everyday conversations alike. In most available online resources, inspiring speakers with high expertise either need to show more interest in silence or perceive it as a harmful phenomenon. For instance, if one browses through a popular talk-video website such as: Ideas Worth Spreading and types 'silence' into the search engine, out of the first 100 results that come up, only ten mention silence, including:

- The danger of silence;
- Break silence for suicide attempt survivors;
- My 17-year vow of silence;
- Ways of transmuting sound and silence;
- Let's end silence around suicide;
- Let's end silence around abuse;
- Sound of forgiveness;
- Someone forgets to silence their cell phone;
- Hope or motivation hidden in one's heart;
- Silence-inspired design.

Out of these, only two seem optimistic, that is, silence as inspiration in design and silence as hope; three remain neutral, that is, silence in performing arts, forgiving, and good behaviour. The remaining six talks connect silence with problems such as danger, suicide, restraints, and abuse. If one continues to search for the next 100 and beyond, still not a single speaker connects silence with education. Out of 200 thoughtful ideas worth spreading, none states the function of silence as a tool for learning or thinking. This observation denotes the widespread caution around silence as a sensitive theme in public discourse and interest.

Sometimes, I overhear a teacher praising their silent students: "My class is very quiet but they are hardworking." This compliment implies that it is more common to see hardworking verbal students, but this time, good virtue also applies to a quiet group. This reminds me of what a neighbour of mine once said when I was living in the United States: "I'm proud to see many Black students going to Harvard." This comment

seems to suggest that, in my neighbour's thinking, only white students are typically considered qualified to go there. These comments, which tend to occur only in casual conversations when people speak their minds, are also found in scholarly writing. One such example is data discussion from a research project, which states that the "silent students are, despite their silence, quite intellectually active"[3]. In the researcher's mind, typically, they are not.

4. Silence studies in psychology

Scholarly interest in silence as a research theme did not start in psychology alone. Instead, silence carries significance in our rational life, allowing this theme to expand across various fields of study. Although early studies on silence started among psychologists and philosophers, the theme has taken on a highly interdisciplinary nature as it extends across the fields of psychology, philosophy, anthropology, education, and communication. The origin of silence studies dates to nineteenth-century psychology and philosophy with among European philosophers' and psychologists' early interests in inner speech[4,5]; silence research has become most visible in education since the early 1970s[6] with the works of Bugelski[7], Sokolov[8], Paivio[9], and John-Steiner[10], which investigate mental processing and inner speech. Subsequent exploration by Ushakova[11], De Guerrero[12], De Guerrero and Villamil[13], and McCafferty[14] continues to position inner speech (without sound) along the line of self-talk (with sound of whispering to oneself). Although the term 'silence' seldom appeared in scholarly investigation in these years (the 1970s to mid-1990s), this budding line of studies has established a foundation for understanding what silence encompasses to this day. In the meantime, other scholars such as Jaworski[15], O'Keefe[16], and Jaworski and Sachdev[17] look into silence in psycho-linguistic contexts.

The legacy of such groundwork work has gradually flourished from the 1970s until recently, growing in humble quantities but with plural diversity. However, it was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that the term 'silence' began to make its regular entrance into the scope of many projects. When the theme was broadened from 'inner speech' to 'silence,' researchers also started covering a broader spectrum of topics. New topics emerged, such as reflection[18–20] and silent engagement[3]. In unprecedented ways, silence research also made novel connections with affect, perception, experiences, cultural traits, physical settings, and communication dynamics.

Although scholars in the 1940s began to disturb the idea that silence was being treated as the mere absence of speech[21,22], it was not until the 1970s that awareness of the diverse roles of silence became more visible in the discourse[23]. Silence evolved into an essential theme in the literature of anthropology, psycholinguistics, and communication with the works of Basso[24], Bruneau[25], Noelle-Neumann[26], and Johannesen[27], among others that provided insights into the complex meanings of silence and appealed for further research commitment. In one early conceptualisation, silence is classified into three forms, namely psycholinguistic silence, interactive silence, and sociocultural silence[25]. Psycholinguistic silence refers to hesitation or discontinuity of speech to convey supplementary meanings in speech and to assist the decoding process, very much in the same way as punctuation functions in writing. Interactive silence is employed to acquire attention, reflection, interpretation, and judgement from others, to provide space for thinking, responses, or appreciation, and even to establish or prevent further development of a relationship. This type of silence can serve as a learning tool if exercised properly. Sociocultural silence is part of the cultural patterns of communication within a society that can be highly valued and, depending on their contexts of use, might have various communicative functions such as demonstrating acceptance, faith, respect, protest, power, and other social attitudes.

The 1980s continued to see increasing awareness of silence as being shaped by a multiplicity of meanings in speech communication[28], including, for example, a statement of refusal to communicate[29] or a form of control and resistance[30]. Despite such attentiveness, for three decades, from the 1970s to the 1990s, few empirical studies addressed the function of silence in communication[27,31]. During these years, the occasional appeal for empirical investigation into the function of silence in educational realities frequently fell into oblivion.

In recent literature, silence does not necessarily refer to complete quietness but loosely denotes minimal talk during classroom discussion[32]. In societies where silence is valued, it is considered equally significant to speaking as it provides space for reflection on the communicated word[33]. It also indicates respect, harmony, 'attentive listening and active thinking'[34]. In many cases, silence even functions as a form of talk. Suppose talk is sometimes referred to as externalised speech[35] or interactive speech[36]. In that case, silence can be the space for articulatory rehearsal mechanism, internalised speech[35], sub-vocal articulation[37], and internalisation of speech patterns[38].

Scholarly efforts have been made to look at silence and talk in more complex ways than simply treating them as sound and muteness. Dealing with silence in education is dealing with a complex assortment of voices. There has also been a recent effort to interact with the discourse before silence research was conducted. For example, silence has recently been classified into multiple manners and purposes, including confirmation, discussion, debate, social chat, lecture, negotiation, critique, inquiry, negation, and so on. As much as talk can fall into meaningful talk, irrelevant talk, high-quality talk, and low-quality talk[39], there can be meaningful, irrelevant, and multiple-quality silence. If appropriate talk is sometimes defined as "the speech of educated people"[39], then appropriate silence can also be defined as the silence of educated people.

Scholarly appeals for taking silence into account in education have been an enduring request for seventy years now. However, only the past two decades indeed witnessed responsive research efforts. If most appeals during the 1950s–1990s asked for a consideration of the overall study of silence as a meaning-making mechanism[21,31,40–42], the yearning for silence research since the 2000s has become increasingly concrete through tangible suggestions for investigating social communication.

Over the past couple of decades, the research discourse on silence has engaged in the quest for a more profound understanding of silence. Recent contributions to research-based knowledge include the consideration of misperceived silence in communication[43,44], the reinterpretation of silent behaviour in multicultural contexts[45,46], the dynamics of frustration with silence in intercultural communication[47–49], the process of negotiating multiple identities[50], the range of meanings decoded in silent experiences[23,51,52], and the modifiability of behaviour[53–55].

5. Defining silence

The conceptualisation of silence ranks among the most mysterious areas of all the non-verbal constructs in academic research. After all the debate and controversy relating to the construct, it seems impossible to capture silence in any one adequate definition. This is because silence is fluid and can only have comparative, rather than absolute, meanings. Although the literal sense of this concept signifies the absence or inaudibility of sound or words, researchers for a long time have realised that the broader sense of silence does include sound and words in it. For instance, while one person is keeping quiet, others may be speaking out simultaneously, which causes words and silence to overlap in time.

The concept 'silent' is often employed in a relative sense and does not mean that someone is entirely mute[56]. According to German psychologist and philosopher Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), language is a

mental product comprising two dimensions: an internal and outer domains. Silence, which is deeply connected to social speech, is an interactive process that responds to the conduct of other human beings[57]. Since social communication is heavily monitored by the inner formulation system, focusing on speech production alone would only partially understand social communication[58,59].

Since humans differ considerably in self-perception[60], someone who perceives themselves as speaking moderately might be perceived by others as being more talkative or quieter than desirable. Silence is part of an internal dialogue between the listener and the speaker[61]. While being attentive to someone else's verbal contribution, the listener not only tries to comprehend the message but also quietly interacts with that message. In addition, partners in a conversation might absorb each other's behaviour to some extent[62]. For example, someone who knows how to inspire and lead a discussion can help an introvert open up more effectively than someone who does not know how to do so.

In today's social media settings, such as in an online forum chat or email exchange, where no sound is being created, silence can be identified as not typing ideas in the shared communication space[62]. Online learning contexts require ways of documenting silence to be modified so that the conceptualisation of silence as the absence of speech is no longer essential. When written communication takes over and dominates the learning environment, the act of silence then refers to non-participation in scripted modes. For instance, if someone posts words on a discussion forum, they should be seen as 'speaking.' When they resist texting or cease engaging in a virtual dialogue, they can be captured as being 'silent.' Regardless of the context, however, the nature of silence in both virtual and face-to-face settings continues to be equally complex, as silence might represent either the unwillingness to contribute or the need to incubate thoughts and prepare for participation.

Some scholars portray silence according to what it performs in the mind. For example, when silence is perceived as mental rehearsal, according to empirical research by De Guerrero[12], silence takes on seven characteristics: ideational (creating thoughts), mnemonic (memorising words or retrieving them from memory), textual (organising the structure of a text), instructional (applying linguistic rules), evaluative (monitoring and self-correcting language), interpersonal (visualising how to talk with others), and intrapersonal (practising inner speech). Other theorists characterise the functions of silence by connecting it with at least one more element, such as communication or gesture. It is then recaptured as eloquent silence, which is intended to express or communicate a meaning[63,64], or semiotic silence, which is coupled with visual elements such as gestures, facial expressions, designs, colours, flowers, and traditional artefacts which serve as 'silent proverbs,' most of which require cultural knowledge and ability to decode and interpret[64,65].

Several theorists prefer to build a dichotomy for silence by framing it in opposites, such as active and passive silence (also known as busy or idle silence[66]). The former happens when learners choose to be silent, and the latter happens when they are unable or not allowed to speak. There is also a dichotomy between weak and strong silence. The former is a form of punishment imposed on students if they misbehave; the latter, by contrast, allows personalised space for learners to develop interests and learning discovery[67]. Others identify silence by removing the conceptualisation of sound from it altogether, arguing that silence is not about the absence of sound but is about the absence of shared ideas. For example, in today's social media context, such as in an online forum chat or email exchange, where neither talk nor sound is being created, silence can be identified as not typing ideas in the shared communication space. If we type words such as 'interaction' and 'chat' into Google search, their meanings often take on a digital connotation. Likewise, the concept of 'silence' has altered its meaning as the nature of communication in the digital age constantly changes. As much as the concepts of social presence and social interaction have been modified[68,69], silence can also refer to the state of being quiet from writing rather than from talking[70].

All these conceptualisations come in a wide variety and without consensus. Together, they have unpacked the word 'silence' into an endless range of notions, to the extent that makes it less possible for silence to stay as one concept anymore. Despite all this, some scholars still choose to keep the meaning of silence incredibly concise and make efforts to rename silence as something else. Each term arguably denotes a particular stance towards silence, in the sense that silence can become a peculiar tool to be employed for a specific purpose.

6. Silence with interpersonal meaning

6.1. Silence as human nature

Humans are creatures of routine. While some people feel safe and comfortable with highly sociable activities, others prefer a balance between being with the self and being with others[71]. We are private social beings who do not wish to disclose our thoughts and emotions for many legitimate reasons. Similar to the need for physical space away from the crowd and disruption to relaxation, humans occasionally need to take a break from the speeches of others for the mental space to renew brain power and generate fresh ideas[72].

By and large, humans spend much more time silent (but mentally active) than we do articulating thoughts. We are private and social beings who, for many legitimate reasons, do not wish to disclose our very thoughts and emotions. Although silence is often considered soundless, it is connected to the spoken word. Even when someone is silent, within the person's mind, there may be an inner voice going on[73]. That voice, though inaudible to everyone else, is unquestionably audible to the thinker. As Clair[31] expounds, "voice is not independent of silence." With its inseparability from speech, silence can hardly be identified and conceptualised as a standalone construct. What makes silence even more complex also comes from what happens within the silent space itself.

Silence is highly interpersonal. Sometimes, a person who attempts to immerse into a new culture but happens to be observed by their own culture might feel intimidated and refrain from such effort. A study by Bao and Tomlinson[72–74] reveals an anecdote in which a Japanese wished to adapt to the Australian context but was being watched by other Japanese at that time. This person then became shy and gave up the attempt to integrate.

Silence is deeply situational. How much someone needs to use silence varies according to communicators' personalities, sociocultural climate, and the cognitive load of communicative content[75]. For example, those who are highly verbal in their mother tongue can be very quiet when it comes to foreign languages[76]. Similar to talk, silence is not context-free[58]. If words need to be socioculturally appropriate depending on who, where, when, what role, and what content, silence as part of language also shares similar needs for one to be welcome, accepted, valued, and understood rather than to cause confusion and misinterpretation.

6.2. Silence as a personal decision

There is empirical evidence showing that silence can be a self-made decision. Some individuals may remain silent to exercise self-control, self-discipline[71], and cautiousness[77]. Others keep quiet to protect themselves, particularly in contexts where expressing opinions or personal information may be perceived as risky or undesirable. For example, a study by Shachter and Haswell[78] reveals that when faced with competing cultural influences, the Japanese tend to opt for a silent safe zone. Another study by Umino[79] of Japanese students studying abroad reveals that individuals become silent because they are unable to express their true selves.

An incident reported in research by Liu and Martino[80] demonstrates that in many cases, children employed non-verbal communication to express their voices and choices. Telling opinions verbally or non-

verbally can be seen as child agency in early childhood education. By remaining silent, individuals can maintain privacy or avoid potential conflict or negative consequences. In certain situations, silence can also be a deliberate tactic employed to convey a message or express dissent. By withholding verbal communication, individuals can signal their non-agreement or disapproval, forcing others to acknowledge their presence or viewpoints differently.

6.3. Silence as culture

Laden, with cultural values, silence can be viewed by one culture as normal and by another as abnormal in social communication. In a 2019-released BBC television series titled Duty/Shame, there was a scene in which two characters, a Japanese man named Kenzo and an Irish woman named Sarah, met in a cafe. After exchanging some knowledge about each other's families, Sarah suddenly asked: "Do you have any scars?" Kenzo mentioned one on his arm but was curious: "Why do you want to know?" She replied: "I'm not sure why. I just feel the need to fill in the silence between us." Kenzo became more interested: "Why are you not comfortable with silence?" to which Sarah had no explanation. The incident demonstrates a simple reality: silence does not mean the same thing between cultures. It seems natural to one but unusual to another.

In Japanese society, silence is a tool to maintain social harmony, defy, avoid or signal embarrassment, or simply represent an individual's true feelings[51]. In Nordic countries such as Sweden, Finland, and Norway, silence is appreciated and considered an essential aspect of communication. Nordic people evaluate others' competence based on deeds rather than speech behavior[81]. Many Native Americans employ silence to shield their identities from dominant paradigms, and such silence can be positively felt as a sign of resilience rather than timidity[82]. The Amish, a traditionalist Christian group, value silence as a means of living a simple and humble life. They often prioritise quiet reflection and meditation to focus on their faith and community[83]. Silence is also highly esteemed in many Buddhist traditions, such as in Tibet, and is seen as a pathway to inner peace and enlightenment. Silent meditation, mindfulness, inner peace, and self-awareness practices are central to Buddhist philosophy and hold significance in spiritual practices[84].

As far as personality is concerned, silence may indicate a desire to remain humble. To some individuals, speaking minimally denotes refined manners, while talking generously might mean showing off knowledge or excessive confidence[85]. In some cultures, such as Japanese and Turkish, silence signifies modesty in everyday social situations and educational settings, whereas a high volume of verbalism often reveals superficiality. Being cautious with articulation means one internalises the need to avoid being irrelevant, intrusive, confrontational, wordy, and impolite. Empirical research by Bao[23] and Nakane[46] on Japanese communication styles, as well as by Rachel Zhou et al.[86] on Chinese communication styles, attributes the motive for silence to respect and self-modesty. Many keep a low profile to avoid peer tension and potential conflict.

Other cultures historically value speech over silence. Western cultures in North America, such as the United States and Canada often prioritise open expression and verbal communication, which is self-evident in encouraging free talk. In his speech addressing the army on 15 March 1783, George Washington said: "The freedom of speech may be taken away, and, dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep, to the slaughter."

Many Latin American cultures, known for their passion and expressive nature, also embrace vibrant communication and conversation, valuing speech as a means of establishing connections. Mediterranean cultures, such as those in Greece, Italy, and Spain, often emphasise lively conversations and animated discussions, where speaking out is a way to engage and establish rapport. Indian culture places importance on verbal communication, particularly in the form of storytelling, debates, and scholarly discourses. Speaking skillfully is valued as a sign of wisdom and knowledge. Many African cultures often have strong oral traditions,

with storytelling, proverbs, and lively discussions forming integral parts of their heritage, to the extent that impromptu speech training has become an essential component in personal development[87].

6.4. Silence as empowerment

Achino-Loeb[88] defines silence as a metaphor for power, which refers to the ability to control others. This feature inspires many movie directors to employ silence as a creative tool to manage the audience's emotions. When there is no sound except the character's breathing of anxiety, the viewers are made to feel empathy. When silence replaces speech and soundtrack, a void is created for the audience to fill in with their desire and imagination. Alberto Cavlacanit, a Brazilian-born French film director, once said: "Silence can be the loudest of noises, just as black, in a brilliant design, can be the brightest of colors."

Someone in a conflicting situation may confuse the opponent, causing them to struggle to figure out what the other party's next move is going to be. The manipulation offered by silence arises from its obscurity and makes the other feel anxious and vulnerable. Sometimes, the ultimate hero is one with few words while the weaker one often talks excessively. In the film Enemy at the Gates, directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud in 2001, the young sharpshooter Vassili Zaitsev conveys his intelligence and determination through close camera angles on his eyes in complete silence, sometimes even without a soundtrack. The stillness of those scenes when Vassili was waiting for the opponent to show up was highly intense and complex. Although Vassili's skills as a snipper were unparalleled, his silence carries a great deal of weight that accentuated the confrontational suspense. Along this line, Achino-Loeb[88] argues that power is not an objectifiable entity but the result of relational processes.

In real-life situations, silence can be a commanding tool in social influence. For instance, choosing to remain silent during a conversation can create anticipation and heighten the impact of the next words. By strategically leveraging pauses, one can make their statements more impactful, allowing your words to sink in and leaving a stronger impression on the listener. Studies have shown that influential silence, such as that employed by leaders and authoritative figures, can emphasise and amplify the impact of subsequent spoken words. Silence also plays a role in impression management, as individuals strategically utilise pauses and silence strategically to enhance persuasiveness, credibility, and perceived knowledgeability. Silence can be authoritative and distressing when its underlying reason seems complicated for others to interpret[89,90].

6.5. Silence as powerlessness

When silence denotes negligence, such as not listening or not caring, a sense of powerlessness might result. For example, research by Bosacki et al.[91] shows that adolescents often feel unhappy and stressed when they feel they are not listened to by peers and family. Such experiences, which involve judgemental attitudes and a lack of care from others, easily cause youth to develop loneliness and a sense of low self-worth, which would affect one's identity and direction in life. This phenomenon is also captured as social anxiety. In research on child mutism by Zebdi and Monsillion[92], social anxiety can develop into psycho-somatic symptoms such as headache, stomachache, sleep disturbances, and excessive worries, including school refusal, isolation, and depression. The case of Roma minorities in Petrova's case study[2] is another vivid example of individuals who are subject to prejudices and whose humanity is rejected by the dominant society. Not only are they denied from having a voice, but they are also discouraged from being themselves.

Schools, besides teaching and learning, can be a political site where power is distributed or repressed and voices are nurtured or silenced. Such characterisation might lead to social inclusion or exclusion whereby one's dignity is either respected or disadvantaged. For instance, social equity suffers when an introverted student who enjoys quiet reflection on issues is forced to speak or when an outgoing student who wishes to share their

view is ignored and must remain silent. These students would feel isolated and lose their sense of belonging in the community.

Educators hold the power they may need to be made aware of. In Alerby and Brown's research[93], for example, teachers can determine who speaks and who stays quiet, whose voice is heard and whose voice is subdued, who remains visible, and who becomes invisible. When being suppressed or treated unfairly, strong-minded people can resist, and those who feel weak might get subjugated. Research by Umino[79] reveals that students' self-inhibition and a lack of self-expression often result in undesirable silence. Those who suffer from such feelings tend to hide behind the wall of silence characterised by shyness, embarrassment, and even internalised shame, as revealed in a project by Takahashi[94] on Japanese students. Based on a similar study on silent students, Harumi[95] suggests that sometimes it may be helpful to allow writing, rather than speaking, to ease tension among those who are not ready to articulate their thoughts. Along this line, through empirical research, Shachter and Haswell[78] suggests building a social network and a support system to help students increase their self-esteem and fight depression.

7. Silence with intrapersonal meaning

7.1. Silence as a self-dialogue

Some 2300 years ago, Plato had already identified thought as a kind of speech, a conversation with the soul. Early research into the dynamic of inner speech was inspired by Vygotskian theory during the 1960s. Through empirical efforts, Sokolov and other researchers[8,10–12] have recognized the presence of inner speech in processes such as reading texts, improving language, mental processing, and learning experiences. One important argument developed by this line of research is that when learners listen to speech, they do not just hear but also speak in a quiet dimension. At some point, learners stop listening to the speaker's words but start hearing their own. They use the 'psychic ear'[96] that allows a natural shift from exposure to an external voice to creating an inward voice.

Psychological research has produced extensive evidence of how personality types affect communication. While extroverts enjoy open discussion and interaction with others, introverts find it more comfortable to listen, reflect, and respond only when they feel it is essential[97]. For many, whispering in the mind, known as inner speech or self-directed functioning[5], is part of introverts' important routine.

Such silence may not take a linguistic form but can be thoughts without words[98]. When a thought has words, that thought may move one step forward and become private speech[99]. Such fluidity allows this construct to travel from the abstract to the concrete, serving as a pathway for turning thoughts into words. While elusive inner speech may not reach conscious awareness, robust inner speech can emerge into a conversation. Tomlinson[73] highlights that the use of inner and private speech can be strongly connected to external speech if one is willing to articulate their thoughts.

Khutorskoy[100] reports a case of students who resist digesting standardised information that others had pre-selected and adapted. Instead, the students prefer to construct their own meaning as aligned with their goals and needs. This behaviour happens when the students are confronted by an educational system they perceive as containing externally determined, alienated, and standardised content of education. By having a dialogue with the self, students reserve the ability to discover new knowledge and understanding for themselves.

7.2. Silence as solitary enjoyment

In recent years, there has been more awareness of silence due to the rise in popularity of mindfulness and meditation for and within education as an activity[101]. Silence allows one to explore one's inner world and

discover potentials one might not have known before[102]. Silence can be a playground for one to learn the value of being alone. This understanding is found in a case study by Dubas[103] of a small group of individuals who experience learning about and coping with being alone. Another study by Webster[104] looks at children's experience with guided reading during the pandemic as an enjoyable and productive way of meta-social immersion through isolation.

Silence can signify complacent solitude. According to Musaio's[105] observation, although the digital age allows getting in touch with anyone anywhere on the planet instantly, humans continue to live in a time of loneliness and complicated human relationships. Despite being in close contact with others, we defend our spaces for fear of being invaded by others, and we place limits on the relationship.

Research by Bosacki et al.[91] reveals that solitude plays a vital role solitude plays in adolescents' lives. It provides a safe space for different activities, and how adolescents spend time alone may have implications for their well-being. Meanwhile, social withdrawal is an indispensable part of normative adolescent development. This understanding is new in the discourse because solitude is often conceived as primarily negative in adolescence, and past studies have focused mainly on negative aspects such as loneliness or peer exclusion.

Silence can be practised individually or collectively. Being a solitary, idiosyncratic process within every individual, it can also become a collective space for mutual understanding. When someone feels contented with solitude and quietness, that person in their consciousness is utilising silence for a meaningful reason. When two people experience a silent time together and feel comfortable, this might show evidence that empathy or bonding exists. When a group of people choose to be unanimously silent, they may demonstrate a collective attitude such as resistance or acceptance. One society may value silence more than another society because the former practise silence very much in the same way the latter practices speech. Besides, silence can be social or personal. It is social when one chooses not to speak, such as to avoid talking nonsense; silence is personal when one decides to clear the noise in their mind, such as to bring self-peace. Silence can signify mindfulness when one uses it actively for mental processing, but silence can also characterise mind-emptiness when one needs to relax by taking a break from constant thoughts.

7.3. Silence as social withdrawal

In the fairytale, 'The Invisible Child,' by the Finnish author Tove Jansson, a writer famous for her stories of the Moomin trolls, the child Ninny was made silent and invisible as a result of her ill-treatment by the woman responsible for her care. Silence becomes an act of resistance. Someone quiet for an extended period may become invisible[93]. If silence has been forced upon them, that person may seek invisibility as an act of self-protection.

Although the social policies of many societies aim to promote local languages and cultural diversity, different communities experience challenges in social integration. Take the Roma and Gypsy in Europe as an example, who are the prototype of the Nomadic people being defined as those of loss and longing for a homeland[2]. As a result, these minorities become prejudiced, marginalised, and silenced. They struggle to speak up without being heard, as they do not have much political and economic power. Eventually, they tend to give up expressing their concerns in public, a phenomenon which is sometimes known as self-silencing. Self-silencing among the poor and the powerless can harm mental health and well-being. It can contribute to feelings of frustration and a lack of autonomy. Research suggests that self-silencing increases depression and anxiety and decreases overall psychological well-being. In a word, silence can result from oppression, ignorance, or as a demonstration of power.

Silence may occur due to anxiety relating to others during social communication and interpersonal relationships[106]. People resort much better to online communication as a way of hiding themselves. A study

by Karas and Uchihara[107] shows that individuals with anxiety can become more active in online discussions where they can prepare and edit their statements. Along this line, a case study by Turnbull[108] tells the story of how Daniela, an adult immigrant from Mexico, adapts to the social context of the United States by struggling with anxiety and language separation, social isolation, power disparity, and economic pressures.

8. Silence as kindness

Kindness can be expressed both interpersonally and intrapersonally. We treat others with benevolence, and we treat ourselves with consideration. Friendliness and respect make us kind. Silence can serve as social orientation, reflecting individual stances, decisions, and actions toward society or the self. As discussed throughout the article, silence is not necessarily negative, but one can learn to utilise it to become more productive and improve the community. Silence, for instance, can represent a way of confronting social discrimination, tolerance, or forgiveness and expressing the truth.

8.1. The art of being truthful

Silence has become the art of being truthful. Fjeld[109] describes such moments as when art speaks the truth. It is through silence that art presents us with a way to approach truth and knowledge that has a non-necessary relation to words and speech. In many cases, communication is not about a set of verbalisation but can be a pantomime that perform more showing than telling. When that happens, meanings are grounded in a mimetic, silent communication that is not always sufficiently grounded in words. There is so much in the mind that stay as non-word thoughts. As Korol[110] contends, "a person is not a clean slate to be filled by the noise of somebody else's writings but the seed of an unknown plant".

8.2. Confronting social discrimination

Silence has served as a way of confronting social discrimination. In research by Takahashi[111] of a drama scene performed by a team known as Shizuoka No-Borders, the actors employ gestures and movements without speech. In this play, everyone in the acting group work together without distinguishing between who are members of disabilities and who are able-bodied members. Instead, everyone belong to only one category: they are all performers. From this perspective, audiences can focus on individuals rather than the classification or category of people with disabilities. The audiences are steered not to view the performance as a disabled performance but can rather understand it as a situation of diversity.

8.3. Tolerance and forgiveness

Silence has denoted forgiveness. Some audiences of the drama form mentioned above may feel sorry for the performers with disabilities. The silence causes viewers to feel awkward and makes them hesitant to laugh or react to the scene. However, other viewers also experience another feeling resulting from the silence: forgiveness. The audience is permitted to laugh in response to the scene even when they feel awkward or hesitate. The scene was designed and produced based on the concept of equality. Audiences may be unconsciously bound by the belief that they should not laugh at people with disabilities and their awkwardness. However, the director openly invites everyone to enjoy the comedy regardless of the presence of disabilities. Some characters, who are people with disabilities, and the audience can laugh together rather than at each other.

9. Limitations of the study

Two constraints on the textual research approach are worth mentioning. One, every selected article was written from the author's individual perspective and thus cannot represent the views of all the scholars in silence studies. To minimize potential subjectivity, the author of this article has made a conscious effort to synthesize differing views by combining and contrasting their nuances. For example, the silence of the Roma

minority was not conceptualized by itself but was interpreted in relation to the conduct of the dominant group. When a minority voice was suppressed by power, that voice could not be heard but resulted in social withdrawal. In a word, the significance of silence in this article was mostly presented in relation to the presence of various social forces that shape it.

Two, every research work has been devoted to a specific context. Because of this, the selected articles may not be able to represent the meaning of silence across all social settings. To self-guard against such potential predisposition, the project takes great care to contextualise every meaning of silence rather than jumping to any arbitrary conclusivity. For example, when the value of silence was acknowledged, that silence was positioned within its relevant contexts such as Japanese and Nordic cultures. When silence was less favoured, that meaning was then situated within North American and Latino American societies. In this way, readers are not misled to accept the meaning of silence in a vacuum but rather comprehend it through well-informed contextualization.

10. Implications and future directions

Much of the discussion in this article has derived from the latest research evidence rather than mere conceptualisation or individual views. The article balances the historical development of silence studies over the past decades and the most updated evolvement of insights. Silence deserves more understanding by society and more attention in scholarly research. Silence carries connotations for individuals as much as it plays a role in the life of communities. Deeply influenced by collective forces and the sociopsychological context, silence contains hidden voices waiting to be heard. It is packed with diverse meanings, nuances, attitudes, functions, and resources to be researched and discovered further.

What this article has discussed is only a light sketch of what needs to be further explored. Our knowledge about silence still contains many blind spots waiting to be uncovered. *The Journal of Silence Studies in Education*, for example, has listed eighty different topics for silence research and indeed there should be more than that. Silence is a complex academic, linguistic, sociocultural, psychological, political, and communicative system. Unlike speech, silence is not hearable and observable. Scholars have continually appealed for the need to move beyond audible speech and listen more to the inarticulate rather than leaving non-voice data outside of qualitative research. The article, despite intensive efforts to illuminate a range of meanings, has not uncovered enough about what silence means and the field continues to be relatively open.

Silence, like speech, is situated practice. Silence would be best studied in its environment rather than being isolatedly examined within a person. It is the constantly changing environment that activates how someone's silence is being exercised and what it means. Because of this, silence will not make any sense unless we look at both ends of the process to see where it comes from and how it finishes. Silence, after all, is more concrete than we thought: it has both a trigger and an outcome.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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