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### A Reparatory Model of Ethical Silence

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## Abstract

Drawing from the appraisal theory of emotion and self-conscious emotions literature, this study proposes a reparatory model of ethical silence at work. We posit that when employees maintain silence on ethical issues, they experience feelings of guilt. This guilt, in turn, propels them to engage in ethical performance as reparatory behaviors. Results from a multisource, three-wave field study supported these hypotheses. Overall, this research contributes to silence literature and provides insights into how and when ethical silence may, paradoxically, facilitate more ethical performance later on.

## Introduction

Occasionally, individuals may choose to withhold their own opinions about questionable workplace behaviors and practices due to specific concerns such as protecting their self-interests (Milliken et al., 2003; Van Dyne et al., 2003). However, the allowance of continual undesirable behaviors by staying silent may eventually result in severe damage to the organization.

Especially given that silence on ethical issues is occasional and that employees may reflect upon their silence due to its unethical nature (Bird, 1996), there are both theoretical and practical benefits for researchers to explore whether, how, and when ethical silence may lead to subsequent reparatory behaviors and what mechanism drives such reactions.

Drawing from appraisal theories of emotion and the literature on self-conscious emotions, we posit that employees may feel guilty after engaging in ethical silence. In particular, because ethical silence imposes allowance of unethical behaviors and thus fails to prevent undesirable harm to others, employees may recognize the unethical and norm-violating nature of their ethical silence (Bird, 1996), and accordingly experience guilt as a kind of self-conscious emotion (Tangney et al., 2007; Tracy et al., 2008). Once guilt is experienced, individuals are likely to engage in subsequent reparatory behaviors such as ethical performance to make up for their prior wrongdoings (Tangney et al., 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2004).

Figure 1. Theoretical Model.



## Methods and Materials

We conducted a 3-wave survey with a one-week interval in between. At Time 1, participants reported their demographics, ethical silence, and moral attentiveness. At Time 2, participants reported their felt guilt. At Time 3, their supervisors evaluated their ethical performance. After matching supervisor and employee data, our final sample contained 453 supervisor-employee dyads. Of the employees, 52.5% were male. In terms of education, 21.4% of them received 12 years of education, 47.0% held Bachelor's degrees, 29.8% had Master's degrees, and 1.8% held MPhil degrees. Their average age and average tenure were 37.89 (SD = 8.15) years and 3.05 (SD = 1.40) years respectively.

We adopted structural equation modeling in Mplus 8.7 to examine all our hypotheses. We controlled for gender, age, education, and tenure, as previous studies have demonstrated their impacts on voice behaviors (Liang et al., 2012; Takeuchi et al., 2012). Additionally, because unethical behavior can be associated with the feelings of guilt (e.g., Tang et al., 2020), we included this variable at time one to rule out its possible influence in our model. Finally, we controlled for state shame at time one to exclude its potential impact on employees' reparatory behavior (i.e., ethical performance).

## Results

Through a three-wave field study in different cultural settings, we adopt a paradoxical approach and found that ethical silence, a morally unacceptable response, can lead to morally praiseworthy responses—ethical performance via employees' feelings of guilt. These indirect relationships are further moderated by moral attentiveness, such that employees with high moral attentiveness were more likely to feel guilty due to their prior ethical silence than those with low moral attentiveness.

Figure 2. The Interaction of Ethical Silence and Moral Attentiveness on Felt Guilt.

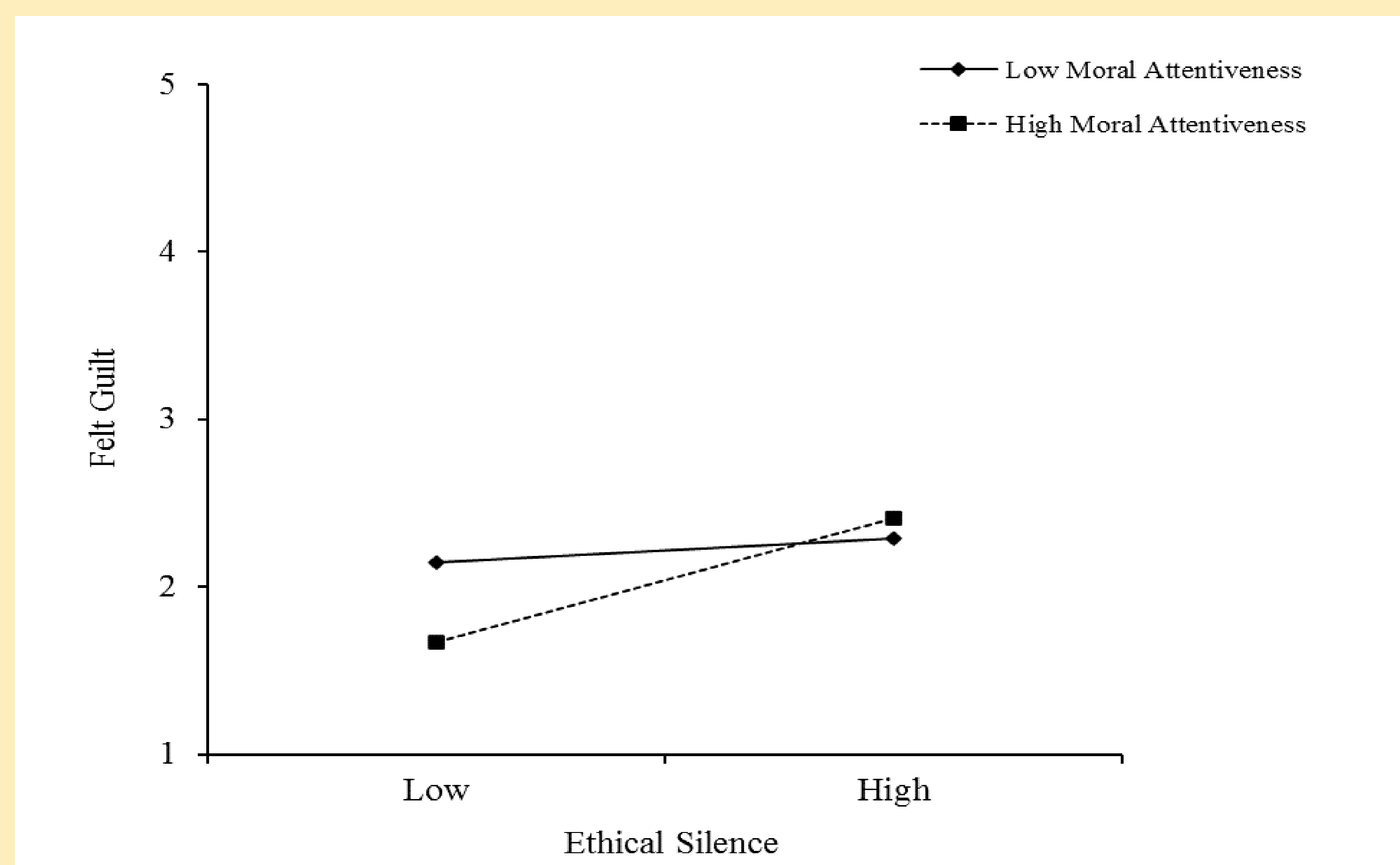


Table 1. Hypothesis Testing Results

	B	SE
<i>Direct paths</i>		
Ethical silence → Felt guilt	.27**	.07
Felt guilt → Ethical performance	.25**	.06
Ethical silence → Ethical performance	.04	.07
<i>Indirect paths</i>		
Ethical silence → Felt guilt → Ethical performance	.07**	.02
<i>Moderated Paths</i>		
Ethical silence * Moral attentiveness → Felt guilt	.27**	.07
Ethical silence * Moral attentiveness → Felt guilt → Ethical performance	.07**	.02

Note: \*n = 453; Unstandardized coefficients are reported.

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01.

## Discussion

Organizations should cultivate an organizational culture in which employees are encouraged and protected to speak up about their concerns and opinions (Verhezen, 2010). Employees sometimes are afraid of possible negative consequences of speaking up publicly. In this respect, organizations can create voice channels where the voice can be given anonymously or kept confidential so that employees would feel safe to express their true concerns and opinions. In doing so, organizations can reduce the risks and hesitation that prevent employees from offering their genuine suggestions to upper management.

Organizations can add screening tests during employee recruitment to select candidates with high moral attentiveness. Alternatively, organizations may help employees develop moral attentiveness by holding ethics seminars or workshops to teach employees to identify and pay close attention to moral issues at work and to find the right way to address these issues (Reynolds, 2008).

## Conclusions

We found that employees experience guilt following their ethical silence, especially those high on moral attentiveness. The feelings of guilt, in turn, motivates employees to achieve higher ethical performance. In so doing, we advance the silence and behavioral ethics literature by revealing how employees' ethical silence rather than silence, in general, may affect enactors' workplace ethical behaviors.