

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Silence and inclusion issues faced during internship: Outlining a research design and methodology

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Internships are important transitional experiences linking academic study with professional practice. At the same time, interns are navigating complex organizational contexts where issues of inclusion and the issue of silence in organizations can have meaningful impacts on intern development and well-being. This paper will provide the research design, methods, and some initial insights from an ongoing study on the challenges of silence and inclusion currently being experienced by interns. Through a review of literature in organizational behavior, social psychology and human resource management, we develop a holistic methodology to explore how aspects of power differences, psychological safety, and perceived organizational justice contribute to the intern's decision to silence their voice and/or experience exclusion. The research is a work in progress and is discussed in this paper as conceptual framework, research questions, and the qualitative-dominant, mixed-methods research design for data collection and analysis. Future publications based on completing the study will present the full findings and conclusions of the study for organizations, educational institutions, and interns to foster more inclusive and supportive psychologically safe internships and internship experiences.

KEY WORDS

Inclusion issues; Silence;
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Introduction

Internships have become an essential part of their professional development, providing students and recent graduates with real-world work experience, networking and relationship building opportunities, and potentially an avenue to a full-time job. Internships are intended to be educational contexts where interns can apply theory to practice, learn new skills, and adapt to the culture of the organization. Unfortunately, the internship experience can often be quite different from this ideal. Interns, by design, occupy a liminal space in contemporary organizations, being both employees and not employees at the very same time, which can make interns especially vulnerable to unique organizational challenges, such as inclusion issues, or organizational silence [1].

Organizational Inclusion is the degree to which employees experience value, respect, and an interconnectedness among the employees in the organization based on the inclusion of all individuals, regardless of relevant background or identity. Conversely, exclusion can occur through incidental micro aggressions, a lack of access to opportunities, or simply feeling like an "outsider". For interns, who are often temporary, junior, and inexperienced individuals in professional development, exclusion can have larger ramifications that impact their learning, commitment, and aspirations for their career [1,2].

Adding to the challenges of inclusion, the idea of silence in organizations is understood as a group-level withholding of legitimate, relevant opinions, worries, or information related to possible issues, from those who might act on these opinions, worries, or information [3]. Silence can result from myriad sources and conditions (that can even occur simultaneously), some of which are the fear of possible ramifications (e.g., not advancing in one's career, being ostracized socially), a cynical notion that raising issues or concerns will most likely result in no intentional changes, or a desire to 'protect' the organization or oneself. While there has been a great deal of research on organizational silence around permanent employees, the dynamics of silence in organizations among interns is still

relatively unexplored. Interns may experience the most pressure to self-censor their views and observations, because of their temporary status, limited power in organizations, or their possible inclination to seek, or 'make' a good impression. Interns' self-censoring reinforces silence in organizations [4].

Examining silence and inclusion issues in the context of internships represents an important area of study. An intern who does not feel included may feel a diminished sense of psychological safety and therefore, is the least likely to raise concerns or offer suggestions. By the same token, an environment that leaves interns silent may unintentionally reinforce exclusionary practices by shutting down feedback that could lead to more inclusive policies or behaviours [4,5]. Understanding these interactions is imperative in terms of knowing how to improve efficacy and equity of internships.

As the study is still in the process of being conducted, this paper describes a research design, methods, and tentative insights. Future publications will present the overall findings and conclusions from the current study [3].

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II summarizes the relevant literature about internships, organizational inclusion, and organizational silence. Section III describes the theoretical context for this study. Section IV outlines the key research questions. Section V describes the research design, sampling strategy, procedures for data collection, and data analysis [6,7]. Section VI discusses preliminary insights and anticipated findings. Section VII considers limitations in the present, and in future work, and Section VIII concludes the paper by reaffirming the significance of this study [2].

Literature Review**The internship experience**

Internships are commonly viewed as impactful experiences for

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career readiness that promote skill acquisition, increase employability, and facilitate professional networking. Internships are typically short-term, hands-on experiences for students or early career graduates, related to their field of study [8–10]. Internships are also important from an organizational perspective, as they develop talent pools for future employment at their organization, while also utilizing the organizational learning and perspectives of the intern [11].

However, the quality of internship experiences can vary greatly. For example, positive experiences involve quality and impactful work, supervision that fits the development stage of the intern, written expectations of roles and responsibilities, and learning or mentorship opportunities. Negative experiences may include mind-numbing work, a lack of supervision or approachability, vague roles and responsibilities, and/or feeling of exploitation [12]. Further, based on the literature, a key determining factor of the quality of interns is their level of integration (social and cultural) within the organizing system. Whereas full-time employees have existing social capital and knowledge of the organization's norms, interns typically come to the organization with little social structure and rely on the organizational context and actions of their immediate team to support their integration [13].

Organizational inclusion and exclusion

Organizational inclusion is a complex notion that refers to the extent to which individuals feel a sense of belonging, value, and authenticity in their workplace. Inclusion is distinct from diversity (the presence of different identities); inclusion implies that there is intentional cultivation of experiences that respect and leverage differences, and individuals feel psychologically safe in being themselves. Common dimensions of inclusion include fairness, belongingness, value, and psychological safety [14].

Absence or opposition to inclusion is exclusion. Exclusion from organizations can take many forms, including blatant discrimination as well as micro aggressions, social isolation, and limited access to resources and opportunities. Scholars note that when an individual perceives exclusion, it can result in detrimental responses such as less job satisfaction, less commitment to an organization, heightened stress, and diminished performance. For individuals in internship positions, nearly always in a period of formative identity development in their professional lives, experiences of exclusion can be especially harmful. They may take in negative messages about their attributes, wonder about their abilities, or become cynical about organizational life, potentially affecting their career decisions and personal well-being. Exclusion can frequently be understood through a lens of power [15]. Individuals in power (the organization) often discharge exclusion onto individuals who are in positions of less power (the intern).

Organizational silence

Morrison and Milliken conceptualize organizational silence as when an employee group fails to speak up (i.e., withholding voice of information, issue and ideas) to those in authority. Organizational silence can be detrimental to organizations because it fails to capture information about issues that need to be addressed, such as the lack of voice contributes to inaction and poor practices, while staving off innovation [2,16]. Van Dyne, Ang and Botero also expand their notion of types of organizational silence.

- **Acquiescent silence:** Withholding ideas or information due to resignation or passive agreement.
- **Quiescent silence:** Withholding ideas or information due to fear, a feeling of futility, or perceived threat.
- **Pro-social silence:** Withholding information out of a desire to protect others or the organization, such as keeping a secret.

There are different antecedents to organizational silence and they typically derive from the organizational climate and managerial behaviour. Causes of silence include an autocratic style of leadership, lack of psychological safety, concern over negative consequences (retaliation for speaking up, being labelled a troublemaker), prior unwanted experiences of speaking up, and the perception that management would not want to hear of any issues or feedback. On an individual level, self-efficacy, risk aversion, and justice perceptions are present too [17]. The consequences of silence can be very damaging to both the individual and the organization, which can lead to less opportunism to learn and improve, reduced trust, diminished commitment to the job, and in the end, organizational demise.

The intersection: Silence, inclusion, and interns

The current literature establishes a robust conceptual relationship between inclusion and silence. When people sense exclusion, their feelings of psychological safety, which is, their sense that they can speak up without ramifications, are severely impacted. This loss of psychological safety likely contributes to a tendency for silence [18]. The impact is heightened for interns, given their positionality.

- **Perceived status:** Interns tend to view themselves, along with others viewing them, as interim and in a marginal status, creating a situation that makes interns feel marginalized.
- **Power disparity:** The inherent power disparity between interns and supervisors/colleagues leads to interns being more worried about being vocal, worrying that speaking up could disrupt their chances for full-time opportunities or good references.
- **Unknown organization:** Since interns are new to the organization, they often do not have the contextual knowledge, or relationships, that would lead them to raise concerns in more meaningful ways.
- **Desire to fit in:** Many interns want to prove that they belong in the organizational space, and would self-censor to avoid coming off as negative or difficult.

While studies have examined exclusion in internships and employees organizational silence, there is a significant gap in research studying exclusion and silence from an intern perspective [19]. Researching this intersection is important to addressing what is underlining negative internship experiences and building supportive and effective learning environments for future professionals.

Research gap

While there is substantial research regarding internships, inclusion within an organization, and organizational silence, a thorough analysis of how silence maintains or follows questions of inclusion for interns does not appear to exist. The studies reported, typically, are focused on permanent employees and separated each of these constructs [20]. This study intends to address this gap by:

- Exploring the lived experiences of interns regarding organizational inclusion and exclusion.
- Identifying the specific instances and drivers of organizational silence among interns.
- Unpacking the complex relationship between feelings of exclusion and the propensity to remain silent.
- Investigating the consequences of this silence and exclusion on interns' well-being, learning, and future career intentions.

By focusing on interns, this research will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how organizational structures and cultures impact individuals at a critical juncture of their professional development [12,15].

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon a multi-theoretical framework to comprehensively understand the dynamics of silence and inclusion among interns [9].

Social identity theory (SIT)

The theoretical framework proposed by Tajfel and Turner, SIT claims that people gain part of their self-concept through social group memberships. At work, employees may identify with their team, department, or organization, and this can be especially complex for interns. If interns see themselves as part of the "out-group" (not included), or if their group identity is not supported by the "in-group" (the permanent employees) they may feel marginalized, which reduces their psychological belonging [11]. The perception of being without a shared identity with the interns on the job may lead to experiences of exclusion and reduced willingness to share their views, as their contributions are at risk of being marginalized by the in-group.

Organizational justice theory

This theory, primarily examined through distributive, procedural, and interactional justice, asserts that the ways in which employees perceive fairness shape their attitudes and tendencies [17].

- **Distributive justice:** Refers to the fairness of a set of outcomes (e.g., work assignments, pay, rewards). If interns feel as though they are assigned excessively trivial tasks or are not adequately compensated for their contributions, they can feel unfairness and develop contempt [14].
- **Procedural justice:** Refers to the fairness of the procedures used to arrive at decisions (e.g., clear selection criteria, grievance procedures). If it appears that opportunities may not be equitably shared or that the feedback process lacks transparency, an employee may feel unfairness.
- **Interactional justice:** Refers to the fairness of treating others fairly and comes in two forms: informational justice (truthfulness and sufficiency of communication) and interpersonal justice (to treat others with dignity and respect). If interns feel disrespected within the interactions of their workplace, and/or experience micro-aggressions, these all contribute to feelings of exclusion and decreased psychological safety, all of which are predicted to decrease speaking up [2,15].

Psychological safety theory

Psychological safety, which was established by Kahn and modified by Edmondson, is defined as a shared belief among team members that the team is a safe environment for taking

interpersonal risks. In a psychologically safe context, individuals feel comfortable bringing forward ideas, concerns, mistakes, and questions without fear of negative consequences to self-image or career [4,6,9]. The fear of such consequences is a primary catalyst of organizational silence. For interns who are typically more vulnerable and hoping to impress, the perceived risk of speaking up can be quite high, leading to self-censorship and silence. An inclusive experience is necessarily one that has high levels of psychological safety, while an exclusive experience diminishes psychological safety [5].

Voice and silence theories

By building upon Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework, contemporary theories of voice and silence provide a more specific lens for understanding why individuals decide to voice an option or remain silent. These theories outline various antecedent categories; individual (e.g., personality, self-efficacy), relational (e.g., trust in supervisor), and climate (e.g., openness to feedback, perceived risks). Students will remain silent when they do not expect their voice will be heard, do not view it as meaningful, or when it carries a risky personal risk (e.g., a poor recommendation). Together, these theories inform a rich framework to investigate how interns' social identity, perceptions of justice and safety within the organization, interplay their experiences of inclusion/exclusion and their propensity to silence [7,9].

Research Questions

To fill the identified research void, this study seeks to address these overarching research questions:

- What are interns lived experiences of organizational inclusion and exclusion during their internship?
- In what particular context and why do interns elect to remain silent during their internship?
- How do interns' experiences of exclusion impact their decisions about voice, or to be silent in the organization?
- What are the perceived implications of silence and exclusion on interns' learning and well-being, and future career intentions?
- What organizational factors (i.e., leadership style, team climate, communication) promote or inhibit interns' voice and sense of inclusion?

These research questions will be used to build a rich understanding of the complex relationship between silence and inclusion, from the interns' perspective [5].

Research Design and Methodology

Research paradigm and approach

This research utilizes an interpretivist paradigm, which acknowledges that members of society actively construct social reality through their subjective meanings and experiences. Considering the multifaceted and delicate nature of silence and inclusion, a qualitative-dominant mixed method approach is most suitable. A qualitative approach will allow for depth of inquiry related to interns lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors that shape their decision to use voice or silence. If it feels useful, a quantitative component may also be incorporated (for instance, survey) to gather additional demographic data of impressions, adding broadness and validation to the qualitative data, though the qualitative data will remain the focus [7,9].

Participants and sampling

The focus population of this study consists of university-registered students or recent graduates who have completed, or are currently participating in an internship in one of a variety of organizational contexts (e.g., corporate, non-profit, government). The qualitative research design will utilize a purposeful sampling strategy followed by a snowball sampling approach for recruiting participants who can offer in-depth experiences of the phenomenon [20].

Take note of the following criteria for potential inclusion:

- Currently enrolled in or recently graduated from a university program.
- Has completed or is currently engaged in an internship that has lasted a minimum of 8 weeks.
- Willingness to openly and truthfully share their internship experience.

We are hoping to recruit a diverse group of participants in regard to their academic background, organizational industry, and demographic characteristics to gain more robust representation of experiences. The target number for qualitative interviews will be 20-30 participants, a range that is often adequate for achieving thematic saturation in qualitative studies [11,12].

Data collection instruments

Semi-structured interviews

This will be the main strategy for data collection. Semi-structured interviews strike a balance between establishing some consistency in questioning while also allowing for some flexibility to explore emerging themes [15]. An interview protocol will be created that encompasses.

- Background and context of the internship (Industry, Role, Duration).
- Experiences pertaining to inclusion and exclusion (e.g., feeling valued, belongingness, fairness in treatment, experiences of marginalization).
- Specific instances where participants chose to withhold their voice (e.g., did not voice a concern, idea, observation).
- Members perceptions that prompted silence (e.g. fear of retaliation, feeling futile, conformity, protecting others).
- Perceived outcomes of silence and exclusion (e.g. learning and well-being impact, effects on professional growth, effect on future career decisions).
- Contextual or organizational factors related to voice and inclusion (e.g., supervisor behaviors, team climate, communication culture).

The interviews will occur online using a secure video conferencing platform; they will be recorded (audio only, with consent from participants), and will be transcribed verbatim. The interviews are expected to take 60-90 minutes [17].

Demographic questionnaire (optional/complementary)

We will conduct a short online questionnaire to gather demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity, academic discipline, organization type, and length of the internship) to contextualize the qualitative data as well as uncover any

possible patterns related to demographic variables. This may be done prior to or after the interview [13].

Data analysis

Thematic analysis

The primary analysis method of qualitative interview data will be thematic analysis, which is a six-phase procedure as described by Braun and Clarke:

- **Familiarization with the data:** Reading and rereading transcripts, and listening to recordings.
- **Generating initial codes:** Identifying interesting features in the data set and assigning some preliminary codes.
- **Searching for themes:** Clustering codes into possible themes that capture some of the important features of the data set.
- **Reviewing the themes:** Refining themes into clear definitions and ensuring that the themes work in relation to the data set (i.e., they make sense, they are distinct, and they faithfully represent the data).
- **Defining and naming themes:** Potentially writing a full definition for each of the themes and determining interesting examples.
- **Producing the report:** Writing the analytical story with vivid quotes from participants.

It is expected that a similar qualitative data analysis software will be used to help manage, code, and organize the data.

Descriptive statistics (for demographic data)

Basic descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) will be used to summarize the demographic data collected.

Triangulation (if survey component is added)

If a larger survey component is implemented in a later stage, the qualitative findings will be triangulated with quantitative data to strengthen the validity and comprehensiveness of the research [4-8].

Ethical considerations

The research will adhere to strict ethical guidelines:

- **Informed consent:** Participants will be provided with an information sheet detailing the study's aim, study procedures, potential risks, and benefits of participation. Written informed consent will be obtained prior to participation in the study.
- **Anonymity and confidentiality:** All participant information will be anonymized. Names and identifiable information will be removed from the transcripts. Data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the research team. Participants will be provided with a guarantee that their responses will not be able to be linked back to them or their organization [3,4].
- **Right to withdraw:** Participants will be made clear on their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
- **Minimizing harm:** Interview questions will be created and framed in a way that is respectful of the experiences that may be challenging to share. Resources for support will be offered to participants who disclose experiences of distress.
- **Transparency:** The researchers will report the process and findings of their research transparently and accurately [6,7].

Preliminary Insights and Expected Contributions

Preliminary insights

Since the study is still in progress, we do not have any conclusive findings. Nonetheless, based on early conversations with potential participants, as well as the literature reviewed, there are a few preliminary takeaways that confirm that this research is important and necessary [8,9].

Fear of consequences

Numerous interns worry that speaking out about issues, particularly negatives, will result in unfavorable evaluations, poor references, or let them lose a job offer. This havoc of consequences appears to be the leading candidate for why individuals remain silent.

Unclear communication pathways

Interns report frequently being confused who to speak with and how to share concerns in an organizational hierarchy. Pre-existing formal grievance processes are often viewed as inaccessible or irrelevant to interns given their temporary status.

Passive exclusion

Instances of exclusion are rarely obvious or overt, but rather apparent through not being considered for meaningful work, not being included in social gatherings with teams, or simply being othered (i.e. being “different” or “less than” regular staff).

Impact professional self-efficacy

Experiencing silence and feeling excluded, undermines people's beliefs in the ability to contribute and/or their self-efficacy, which ultimately affects their developing professional selves [10].

While the preceding are anecdotal examples, they exemplify challenges that face interns, that also relates to issues of silence and exclusion, and warrants systemic inquiry.

Expected contributions

This research is expected to make significant contributions to theory, practice, and policy:

Theoretical contributions

- **Nuanced appreciation of intern vulnerability:** It will enhance understanding of how power dynamics and temporary status make interns especially vulnerable to organizational silence and exclusion [13].
- **Integration of constructs:** It will offer an empirically based conceptual model that outlines the interconnectedness between organizational justice, psychological safety, inclusion/exclusion, and different types of silence in the internship context.
- **Voice and silence literature:** It will expand the theories of voice and silence by studying a new organizational population (interns), which could reveal different antecedents and outcomes.

Practical contributions

- **Improved internship program development:** The data will provide applied lessons for organizations to build inclusive internship programs that support psychological safety and intern voice.
- **Training for supervisors and mentors:** It will inform training programs for supervisors and mentors to effectively transition interns into the organization, recognize exclusion signs, and support a climate of safety for interns to voice their opinions.

- **Intern empowerment:** The research will raise awareness for interns about their rights, potential recourse, using one's voice, and practical realities and risks [19].

Limitations of the Current Phase

Given that this paper describes a study currently in process, it should be noted that there are limitations inherent to this stage:

Lack of empirical findings

The most important limitation is that there are no empirical findings yet. This paper is establishing the foundation for the research, but one cannot evaluate practical implications and reach grounded conclusions until the collection and analysis of the data is complete.

Inherent challenges of qualitative research

Although qualitative research provides a depth of understanding that breadth does not, qualitative research is inherently interpretive and contextual. It will not be possible to generalize findings to all internship experiences, and the findings will specifically express the subjective experiences of the participants.

Self-reported data

Self-reported accounts of interns' experiences may include recall bias or social desirability bias, especially when addressing sensitive topics of silence and exclusion. Attempts will be made to mitigate this bias by guaranteeing anonymity and building rapport during the interviews [9].

Future Work

The immediate next steps for this research involve:

Pilot study

Undertaking a small-scale pilot study involving 3-5 participants to finalize the interview protocol and evaluate its clarity and legitimacy for eliciting the desired information.

Data collection

Systematically recruiting and conducting semi-structured interviews with the target sample (20-30 interns).

Data analysis

Transcribing and analyzing the qualitative data using thematic analysis to identify robust themes and patterns.

Write-up and dissemination

Prepare the full research manuscript detailing all findings, discussion, and conclusions to be submitted for publication in a reputable journal.

Quantitative expansion (possible)

A subsequent phase may be possible depending on emergent themes and resources, which would involve developing a survey instrument based on the qualitative findings to be used to conduct broader-scale quantitative validation.

Conclusion

Internships play an important role in shaping early career paths. However, interns may potentially experience inclusion challenges and the pressure to not speak up that is important but largely unanalyzed area of research. This article has discussed a research design and methodology for a current

study designed to examine each of these interconnected issues. With a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach based on social identity, organizational justice, psychological safety, and voice/silence theories, this research aims to uncover interns' experiential narratives, the antecedents to their silence, and the implications of exclusion.

As the study is still ongoing, this paper expresses the theoretical rationale, research questions, and methodology. The anticipated contributions are substantial and hold promise to enhance theorization, support organizational and educator practice, and develop more equitable, psychologically safe and developmental internship experiences. Future papers will showcase the full findings and implications of this study and provide a critical framework for enhancing the internship experience for future cohorts of professionals.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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