



DISRUPTING SILENCE

Laura Chavira Razo | GATE Fellowship

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Executive summary

This project aims to understand how to disrupt silence when discriminatory events happen in academic and workplaces as well as the determinants that lead people to speak up or not and its effects. This project emerged from a personal experience about discriminatory events that happened in an academic space and aims to turn it into an actionable path to disrupt silence. To achieve the project's goals, I used a qualitative approach and conducted 16 interviews with students and professors at the Rotman School of Management. The *results* show that victims and bystanders make a rapid assessment to determine if they will speak up or not. While bystanders generally focus on the risks and overlook the positive effects of speaking up, victims need confidence and evidence that there is a safe space and support to speak up. Also, people who experienced discriminatory events reported a higher emotional burden after the event happened. Nevertheless, the bystander's support was key to lighten that burden. Moreover, one of the effects of not speaking up was that the discriminatory event would repeat in the future. Finally, speaking up is a learning journey for victims and bystanders. People should not wait to speak up until they are "perfect" because the goal is not to excel their first attempt but start the learning journey. More specific recommendations for bystanders and victims are given in the results section of the report¹. In *conclusion*, disrupting silence is a collective effort. It is not enough that only victims speak up. Bystanders and institutions need to step forward against discrimination by identifying it, breaking the silence, and providing a psychologically safe space and skills to employees and students to speak up.

¹ This report contains two infographics that summarize the project's results and key recommendations to disrupt silence when discriminatory events happen.

Background

Discrimination in work and academic spaces

Equity, diversity, and inclusion policies in Canadian academic institutions have become a priority over the past ten years (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). However, the focus of schools remains on the recruitment process, particularly on attracting international students. Tamtik and Guenter (2019) report an imbalance between recruiting diverse students and ensuring a supportive and inclusive space for them to thrive. In 2019, 47% of students in Canadian post-secondary institutions reported having witnessed or experienced discrimination in their schools (Burczycka, 2020).

Similarly, there have been efforts to increase diversity and inclusion in the workplace in Canada. Deloitte reported that in 2014, 71% of the Canadian companies they interviewed embraced diversity and inclusion beyond the compliance level required by national regulations (Garr et al., 2014). However, challenges remain. For instance, in 2016, 19% of women and 10% of men referred experiencing harassment in their workplaces (Hango & Moyser, 2018).

Although it is illegal to discriminate against people in the workplace and school overtly, there are many subtle types of discriminatory behaviours that tend to be overlooked but that cause a significant negative impact on people's lives (K. P. Jones et al., 2017). Moreover, experiencing discrimination in the workplace or at school has been linked to significant adverse effects on people's physical and mental health (Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Williams et al., 2019).

Silence (and voice)

The terms voice and silence are used to refer to “the expression of ideas, information, opinions, or concerns” or the act of “withholding them”—respectively (Brinsfield et al., 2009). Previous research on silence in organizations has focused on understanding the communication components and roles involved when people speak up or not.

Voice and silence in organizations have been analyzed from multiple perspectives. One approach analyzes the stakeholders that are at the center of that phenomenon—i.e., an individual, a group, or an organization. Another analytical perspective focuses on the type of situation or need that led to the silence or voice reaction, which ranges from the need to express an idea to the need to deliver negative information, disagreeing, or after witnessing wrongdoing, among others (Brinsfield et al., 2009).

Brinsfield et al identify three main waves of research on voice and silence in organizations. The first wave explores employees' responses towards dissatisfaction—i.e., by using their voice, quitting their jobs, or silencing their opinions. The second wave aimed at analyzing multiple forms of speaking up behaviours—e.g., whistleblowing, organizational dissent, complaining, etc. The third wave dives into various forms of silence—e.g., organizational silence, employee silence, job withdrawal, etc.

Research on silence and discrimination is scarce and is mainly focused on describing how organizations—particularly in education—avoid speaking about several discrimination issues (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) (Nieto, 2010). Many publications in scientific journals are personal stories or essays from researchers reflecting on their experiences within their academic or work institutions (Chen, 2018; B. L. Jones, 2021; Premkumar et al., 2018). From these stories, a common factor that perpetuates discrimination is silence. Silence can come from any of the stakeholders involved in a discriminatory event: those who are a target of it, people who witness it, or the institution where the event happened. According to Bingham (2019) up to 77% of people who witnessed discrimination in the workplace do not report it. Regarding students who are target of discrimination in Canadian academic institutions, less than 1% speak about it with someone from the school (Burczycka, 2020).

During 2020, I witnessed and experienced discriminatory comments towards the LGBTQ2S+ community and other minority groups in an academic space. Silence was a constant I perceived from multiple stakeholders, including the people who were target and those who witnessed those events. This project will focus on understanding these two stakeholders' discriminatory experiences and turning them into an actionable path to disrupt silence.

Research question

This qualitatively driven project aims to answer the following research question: How can stakeholders² disrupt silence when discriminatory events³ happen in academic or workspaces?

To address the previous research question, I first focused on understanding the factors that lead a person to speak up or not and the effects of disrupting silence or not after a discriminatory event happened.

² Victims and bystanders

³ For this project, discriminatory events involve direct aggressions, microaggressions, or offensive written or verbal comments towards another person, group of people, or to the general public in academic or workplaces.

Methods

To answer the research question, I followed a qualitative approach. I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with students and professors at the Rotman School of Management from December 2020 to January 2021. I also attended one workshop and three webinars relevant to the project (Bannister et al., 2021; Bond & Haynes-Baratz, 2020; Fowler, 2021). The interview guide focused on exploring scenarios where participants experienced or witnessed discrimination in the past; dived into the factors that led people to speak up or not and the effects of disrupting silence; and explored the role models and characteristics that the participants admired from other people when addressing discriminatory events.

I conducted a qualitative thematic analysis. All interviews were transcribed using the software Otter.AI and were coded using the software MAXQDA11plus. I developed a codebook with 11 codes (e.g., discrimination experiences, outcomes after speaking up, actions towards direct discrimination, etc.). After coding the information, I synthesized it and then identified patterns, similarities, and differences among victims and bystanders by developing two matrices. Finally, the research findings were contrasted with the existing literature about silence and psychological safety in organizations, and with the experiences shared in the workshop and webinars described above (**Figure 1**).

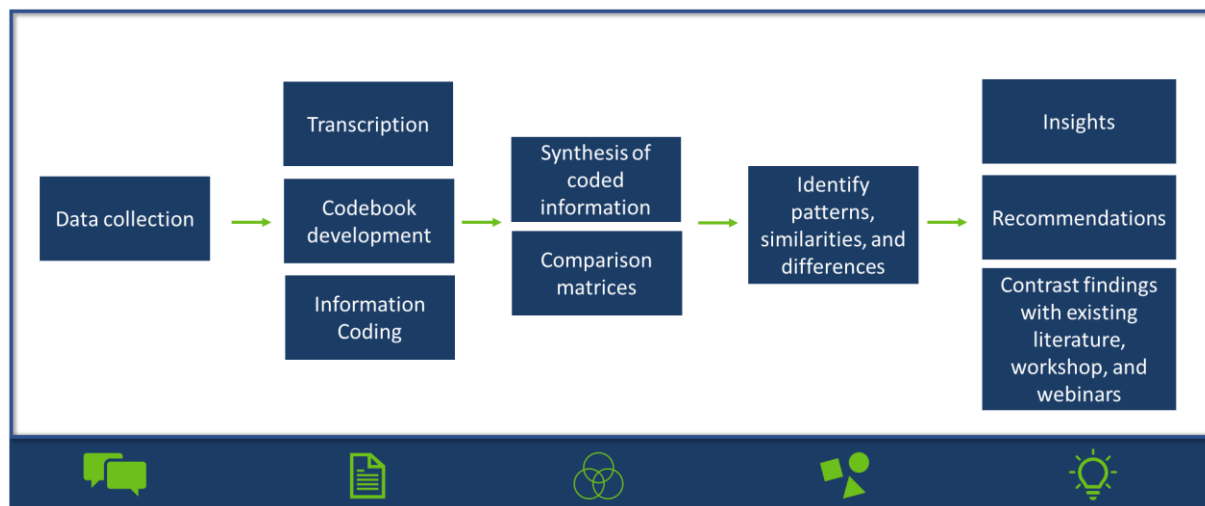


FIGURE 1. ANALYSIS PROCESS

Results

Participants' characteristics

Of the 16 interviewees, one-quarter of the sample were professors, and the rest were students. Half of the total sample were female participants, and the other 50% were male (**Table 1**). People played four types of roles regarding discrimination: bystander, victim, both, and none (**Figure 2**).

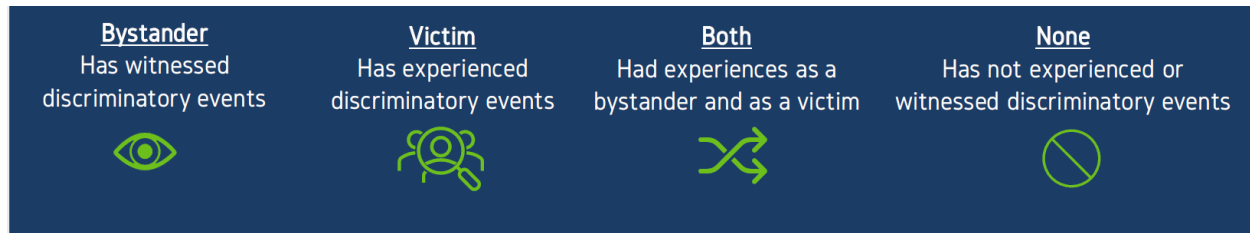


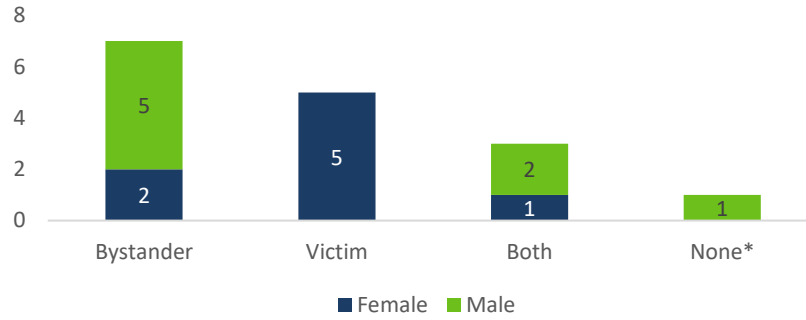
FIGURE 2. DISCRIMINATION EXPERIENCES

In the project's sample, women had more experiences as victims of discriminatory events, and men had more experiences as bystanders (**Figure 3**). Both gender groups had similar experiences about speaking up or not. However, more female participants had experiences of both voicing their thoughts and remaining silent (**Figure 4**).

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANTS' CHARACTERISTICS

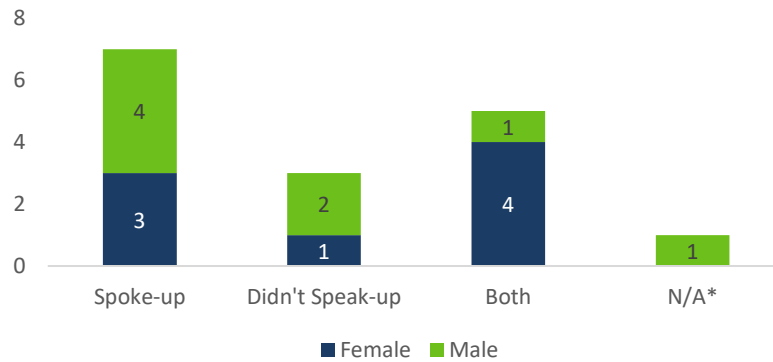
CHARACTERISTICS	PARTICIPANTS (N=16)
GENDER	
Male	8
Female	8
ROLE AT SCHOOL	
Student	12
Professor	4
ROLE(S) IN DISCRIMINATORY EVENTS	
Bystander	8
Victim	5
Both	2
None*	1
REACTION(S) TO DISCRIMINATORY EVENTS	
Spoke up	7
Did not speak up	3
Both	5
N/A*	1
*Never experienced or witnessed discriminatory events	

FIGURE 3. ROLE(S) WHEN EXPERIENCING DISCRIMINATORY EVENTS BY GENDER



**Never experienced or witnessed discriminatory events*

FIGURE 4. REACTION(S) TO DISCRIMINATORY EVENTS BY GENDER



**Never experienced or witnessed discriminatory events*

What determines if a person will speak up or not?

- Victims and bystanders make a rapid assessment to determine if they will speak up or not
- Bystanders tend to focus on the risks and overlook the positive effects of speaking up
- Victims need confidence and evidence that there is a safe space and support to speak up

Victims and bystanders made an assessment—in a matter of seconds—to decide whether they would speak up or not. Participants made this evaluation at a personal, interpersonal, and context level. During this assessment, people gave more importance to the risks implied if speaking up than the benefits of doing so. For instance, victims and specially bystanders weighted much more the potential negative repercussions that their intervention would have on their careers, their current job, and their relationship with their co-workers. **Table 2** and **Table 3** summarize the multiple factors that influenced if victims or bystanders spoke up or not.

“...a lot of the time I didn't speak up because I was worried that it would impact my own reputation and cause potential repercussions like loss of job.”

(Bystander)

At the *personal dimension*, people who experienced discrimination focused on assessing their confidence to control their emotions and their ability to effectively articulate and communicate their ideas when addressing the incident. However, few of them skipped this assessment phase and immediately responded to the aggression.

“I wish I knew what to do in that moment, how to control my emotions, or where to go after the incident happened...”

(Victim of a discriminatory event)

On the other hand, bystanders evaluated the benefits they would gain from intervening and their level of knowledge and passion about the incident to decide whether they would speak up or not. Something that helped both victims and bystanders to speak up was having an action plan or knowing how to address the situation. Also, it was relevant having the energy to speak up and engage in a conversation, and most importantly, not feeling at risk. Several victims and bystanders referred that their privileged positions gave them the confidence to speak up without fear of repercussions.

“...I'm also an extremely privileged individual, for me to speak up is not a very risky activity.”
(Bystander)

At the *interpersonal dimension*, some participants who experienced discrimination were encouraged to address the issue and explain why and how it impacted them, particularly when the person who made the aggression was someone that the victim respected and cared about because they wanted to continue that relationship.

By contrast, the first step for a bystander to speak up was being aware that a discriminatory event happened. Some participants realized that something discriminatory occurred days or years after the event took place. Also, some bystanders spoke up when they were in a position of power and considered that their duty was to speak up and set the standard in the room. Other bystanders decided not to speak up when they felt in a lower position of power with respect to the person who made the discriminatory comment or when they wanted to prioritize the victim's voice.

“...where I'm the leader, the onus to speak up is very very strong because I'm in charge, and I have to set the tone for what's acceptable...”
(Participant with a leadership position)

Determinants from the *contextual dimension* were more present among people who were target of discriminatory events. Victims spoke up when they perceived that their peers would support them or when they found explicit and constant messages in the organization saying that it was safe to speak up and not face any retaliation or ridicule. However, some factors disincentivized victims from speaking up, for example, when feeling that they were a minority in the room in terms of race, age,

gender, or sexual orientation, or when being in a large meeting and did not want to “interrupt” or disrupt the session.

“I think two factors (made me not speak up), first being a little more junior than a lot of people in the workplace. Also being part of the minority group. It's kind of harder to speak up if you know you're not gonna get a lot of support from the people in the room.”
(Victim of discriminatory events)

TABLE 2. DETERMINANTS OF SPEAKING UP

Dimension	People speak up when...	Victim	Bystander
Personal	-Feeling confident	◆	-
	-Knowing what to do	◆	◆
	-Not being afraid of repercussions	◆	-
	-Having the energy to address the issue	◆	◆
	-Not overthinking and having an immediate reaction	◆	-
	-Not feeling at risk because of their privilege or position of power in the situation	◆	◆
Interpersonal	-The aggressor was someone they respected or cared about	◆	-
	-Perceiving that someone is being discriminated against	-	◆
	-Being in a position of power and perceiving that speaking up is part of their duty	-	◆
Contextual	-Perceiving a diverse and psychologically safe environment	◆	-
	-Perceiving peer support	◆	-

TABLE 3. DETERMINANTS OF NOT SPEAKING UP

Dimension	People DON'T speak up when...	Victim	Bystander
Personal	-Being uncertain about the impact of their intervention	◆	-
	-Not perceiving a personal negative impact of the aggression	◆	-
	-Not having the energy to call someone out	◆	◆
	-There is a language barrier to express their thoughts	◆	-
	-Not seeing an incentive to speak up	-	◆
	-Not feeling fully knowledgeable or passionate about the issue	-	◆

	-Being unaware of the incident: <i>"I didn't see the issue in that moment"</i>	-	◆
	-Being afraid of negative job/career repercussions	◆	◆
	-Not feeling in control of their emotions	◆	◆
	-Not knowing how to handle the situation	◆	◆
Interpersonal	-Prioritizing the voices of those hurt	-	◆
	-The aggressor had more power than the victim and the bystander	-	◆
	-The victim asked them not to speak up	-	◆
	-Thinking they need a position of more power to speak up	◆	◆
Contextual	-The script of the place/moment of the aggression was to not interrupt (e.g., during large meetings)	◆	-
	-Being a minority in the room	◆	-

What happens after speaking up or not?

- People who experienced discriminatory events have a higher emotional burden after the event happens, either if they speak up or not. However, the bystander's support is key to lighten that burden
- One of the effects of not speaking up is that the discriminatory event will repeat in the future

Speaking up

After victims and bystanders spoke up, they experienced several effects at a personal and interpersonal level. At the *personal dimension*, both victims and bystanders were satisfied with having acted according to their values. They were always considering ways to improve how they would speak up in the future. For instance, some wanted to be more articulate, and others intended to be more strategic and conciliatory. However, victims had a higher negative emotional burden after speaking up.

They felt upset or unsettled after what happened. After addressing several discriminatory events, they referred to be tired of being the ones who had to constantly “correct people” (Table 4).

“After a while I would get tired, and I would be hoping that there will be other people who speak up. So, it always comes up in my head like: Oh boy, me again!”

(Victim of discriminatory events)

At the *interpersonal dimension*, both victims and bystanders did not see an immediate change in the aggressor after speaking up. On the contrary, the aggressor would immediately withdraw from the conversation after being called out and the victim would face a backlash from the aggressor. However, a very powerful effect was that when bystanders spoke up the victim felt supported and heard (Table 4).

“...a lot of the times they (aggressors) would just laugh it off, or just say that I’m being like too sensitive.”

(Victim of discriminatory events)

TABLE 4. EFFECTS OF SPEAKING UP

Dimension	What happens after speaking up?	Victim	Bystander
Personal	-Feels upset or unsettled	◆	-
	-Gets tired of constantly “correcting people”	◆	-
	-Satisfaction of acting according to their values	◆	◆
	-Want to improve or change how they speak up in the future	◆	◆
Interpersonal	-Aggressor would react surprised or downplay the intervention	◆	-
	-Victim feels heard and supported by the bystander	-	◆
	-Do not observe an immediate change on the aggressor	◆	◆
	-The conversation with the aggressor would end suddenly	◆	◆

Not speaking up

After deciding not to speak up, at the *personal dimension*, both victims and bystanders referred having regrets because of not calling out the discriminatory behavior. However, victims had even a higher emotional burden. They felt angry and unsettled because of the discriminatory event that happened and powerless and frustrated because they did not speak up (**Table 5**).

“...I can think back, and there's still times when I hadn't spoken up, but still to this day, they bug me. I still have some regrets.”
(Victim of discriminatory events)

At the interpersonal dimension for both victims and bystanders, the most important effect of not speaking up is that the discriminatory event would repeat. Since the person who made the discriminatory action or comment did not receive any feedback or warning saying that what they did or said hurt other people, it is likely that the behavior will persist (**Table 5**).

TABLE 5. EFFECTS OF NOT SPEAKING UP

Dimension	What happens after NOT speaking up?	Victim	Bystander
Personal	-Feels angry and unsettled	◆	-
	-Feels powerless and frustrated	◆	-
	-Have regrets for not having spoken up	◆	◆
Interpersonal	- The incident or discriminatory comments keep happening	◆	◆

How to disrupt silence? (Recommendations)

Knowing your journey

- Speaking up is a learning journey for victims and bystanders
- Don't wait to speak up until you are "perfect"
- The goal is not to excel your first attempt but to start the learning journey
- Every time that you try, you will learn to do it better

Disrupting silence is a journey. It is not a dichotomic phenomenon for both victims and bystanders. Among those who have spoken up, they transitioned from being silent to express their dissent. During this transition, many started speaking up emotionally or aggressively. Others began speaking up more often until some of them experienced "speaking up fatigue" when they were the only ones addressing discriminatory events at work or school. In all cases, there was a desire to make changes or improvements in the future. For instance, control their emotions better, be more selective regarding the situations where they would speak up, be more articulate, or be more conciliatory or compassionate.

For those who have not spoken up, their main desire is to start speaking up in the future. Even though those participants had not expressed their thoughts when they experienced or witnessed discriminatory events, they clearly identify role models or characteristics they admire from people who speak up. Some characteristics include being articulate, controlling their emotions, being compassionate, and being focused on the facts when speaking up.

"There wasn't a lot of thought behind it, I would characterize my response as emotional. So, I think in the future I would like to put more thought into my responses."

(Bystander)

Disrupt silence as a victim

First, it is important to assess where the person stands within the organization and the school by identifying the alternatives that they have to address the discriminatory event. For instance, victims can

Speak up directly to the aggressor or complain through confidential channels in the organization. Then, it is key to learn about their rights as students or employees and the anti-discrimination policies available at their work or academic place. Second, for those who have not spoken up or who struggle with doing so, it is important to identify role models or examples of people who speak up often to learn and identify strategies and options to address those events. Finally, it is essential to find safe spaces to learn how to speak up, get feedback, and practice. Once a person starts practicing, they can refine it and gain more confidence.

Disrupt silence as a bystander

The first and most important step to disrupt silence is learning to recognize discrimination. Then, leverage the power or privilege that bystanders have and be aware of the benefits of speaking up and the negative effects of not doing so. Then, similarly to victims, bystanders need to know the alternatives they have to speak up and know their school and workplace policies and regulations against discrimination. Also, it is important to identify other examples or role models of bystanders who speak up to learn from them. Finally, it is imperative to find safe spaces to practice speaking up and get feedback.

Conclusions

One of the recommendations of this project on how to disrupt silence is identifying safe spaces to learn, practice, and get feedback. I believe that academic institutions can be those places. Almost all the participants identified the school as a much safer space than the workplace to express their opinions. Also, most of the discrimination events that participants shared happened in their workplace. Schools can leverage their learning environment to prepare, empower, and give students the necessary skills to address discrimination once they join the workforce.

The Spiral of Silence Theory is part of the first wave of the studies on silence and voice in organizations. This theory proposes that people assess their environment before speaking up to look for clues and guess what the majority might think. People's fear of isolation makes them restrain from sharing their voice when they suspect that the majority thinks differently from them (Brinsfield et al., 2009; Noelle-Neumann, 1991). The project findings regarding the determinants that lead people to speak up are consistent with what this theory proposes and add few more nuances to the assessment

component. I found that people make a quick evaluation not only about the potential isolation they will face but also about their ability to contain their emotions and articulate a message.

One of the most important factors for victims to speak up was having evidence that their environment was safe to speak up and perceiving peer support. This finding is consistent with the psychological safety literature, which proposes that people are more comfortable with sharing their ideas when there is no fear of retaliation or ridicule (Newman et al., 2017).

Even though the evidence on the effects of not speaking up is more empirical, the findings of this project are consistent with what has been reported (Chen, 2018; B. L. Jones, 2021; Premkumar et al., 2018). Particularly, I found that after not speaking up, the discriminatory event would repeat in the future, which echoes what those stories state: silence perpetuates discrimination. Also, consistent with what the workshop and webinars addressed, role models are essential for victims and bystanders to learn how to speak up.

Finally, this project found that victims look for evidence that they have support and that there is a safe space to speak up. They also face a higher emotional burden when experiencing discriminatory events, but the bystander intervention is critical to lighten this weight. Therefore, another important message of this project is that disrupting silence is a collective effort. It is not enough that only victims speak up. Bystanders and institutions need to step forward against discrimination by identifying it, breaking the silence, and providing a psychologically safe space and skills to employees and students to speak up.

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