How Koreans and Americans Use Voice and Silence to Restore Equity in Workplace Friendships

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〈Abstract〉

Workplace friendships develop because of increased proximity at work, creating the potential for inequity across both work and personal roles. Using communication to manage inequity in workplace friendships contributes to

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- Date of submission: February 10, 2017
- Date of revision: March 21, 2017
- Date of confirmation: March 28, 2017
positive organizational outcomes. An experimental survey was conducted to learn more about voice and silence responses to inequity in workplace friendships in both Korea and the United States. This study extends equity theory across two cultures in the context of workplace friendships and communication responses. Message access exclusivity was also tested as a potential precursor to voice and silence responses. Working adults from both the U.S. and Korea were surveyed to learn their responses. Findings of the study are reported and implications of the findings are discussed.

Key Words: equity theory, voice, silence, workplace friendship, cross-cultural

I. Introduction

Workplace friendships are, in some ways, the foundation of organizational success. In a study of managerial perceptions of workplace friendships, Berman, West, and Richter (2002) found the majority of managers perceived workplace friendships as positive and believed that workplace friendships improve communication, help workers obtain support from each other, make difficult jobs better, and generally improve the workplace environment. Although workplace friendships can be beneficial, they can present a challenge to workers because the workers must balance the complex demands of these relationships. The competing demands of both task and social spheres create relational dialectics (Bridge & Baxter, 1992) that can pull workers in different directions. Berman et al. point out workplace friendships “thrive on generosity and symmetry of contribution” (emphasis added: 218). These two features highlight the competing demands of multidimensional friendships; friends should be generous, but they should also be sure to maintain symmetry, or equity.
Despite conflicting demands in multidimensional friendships, the need to maintain equity is a driving force in workplace friendships.

Equity is maintained when both partners in a relationship have an equal ratio of inputs to outputs. Equity is different from equality in that both partners do not necessarily receive the same outputs from an equitable relationship. For example, if one partner puts in 80% of the effort and gets 80% of the reward from the relationship, and the other partner’s ratio is 20% effort to 20% reward, the relationship is not equal, but it is equitable. Equity theory (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973) makes predictions about what happens in relationships when inequity occurs. For example, equity theory predicts that when inequity occurs, people will experience discomfort and will do something to restore equity, including taking action (e.g., making the other person work more on the next task), or psychologically restoring equity (e.g., by decreasing liking for the other person).

Previous research on workplace friendships (Kingsley Westerman, Park, & Lee, 2007) has examined behavioral and psychological responses to inequity and some communication responses (direct and indirect communication; Westerman, 2013). This study builds on that work by investigating more specific communication responses and what motivates them. Responses such as voice and silence (Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003) are important for organizations because of their potential to help alleviate problems or bring new ideas to light. Voice is defined as expressing or speaking up about ideas, opinions and problems (Van Dyne et al., 2003), and silence is defined as withholding input, information, or opinions (Morrison & Milliken, 2003). Knowledge of the tendency to utilize voice or silence could help individuals manage better in situations
where shared tasks are necessary and inequity is experienced at work. Relatedly, whether communication about inequity is done in a private or public manner may also be important. Kramer and Hess (2002) found certain unspoken rules for appropriate communication in the workplace. Private or public confrontation may be chosen strategically in efforts to evoke certain responses; voice and silence responses to these different methods of confrontation will likely be different.

Workplace friendships are important not only in the United States, but in other countries and cultures as well. In a study of Korean workers, Song and Olshfski (2008) found the more opportunity for friendships and the higher the quality of the friendships, the more positive attitudes employees had toward achieving organizational goals. Western and eastern cultures tend to be quite different in terms of individualism-collectivism as well as other cultural dimensions (cf. Hofstede, 2001). The current study compares the U.S. and Korea to determine if differences exist in how individuals from these two countries respond to inequity. This study does not encompass interactions between members of different cultures but, rather, examines the responses of individuals in each culture to coworkers of the same culture. Literature on workplace friendships, equity theory, cross-cultural differences, and voice and silence will be reviewed, followed by a description of the method and results, and finally discussion of the findings.

1. Workplace Friendships

An increase in work hours has led to the formation of more workplace friendships (Parris, Vickers, & Wilkes, 2008); as Sias and Gallagher
(2009) eloquently put it, the workplace is a “natural ‘incubator’” (p. 3) for the development of these relationships. Factors known to contribute to friendship development, such as similarity (Byrne, 1961a) and proximity (Byrne, 1961b), are inherently parts of the workplace and help create the “incubator” environment. Although workplace friendships develop at work, they intersect both social- and task-related spheres. Bridge and Baxter (1992) refer to this kind of relationship as blended friendship and define it as a relationship characterized by mutual positive regard that involves interaction both at work and outside of work. Sias, Gallagher, Kopaneva, and Pederson (2012) define workplace friendship based on two conditions: first, by its voluntary nature, and second, by a focus on the relational partner as a whole person rather than just an organizational role. Taking these definitions in concert, it can be said that workplace friendship is voluntary, involves mutual positive regard, and involves interaction outside of work in both a psychological sense (seeing the “whole person”) and a physical sense (interacting outside of work).

Workplace friendships are generally considered to be beneficial to employees and organizations. Mao, Hsieh, and Chen (2012) determined that workplace friendships are positively correlated with employee perceptions of job significance. Among teams, enhanced workplace friendships were positively correlated with high-quality leader-member exchange relationships (Tse, Dasborough, & Ashkanasy, 2008). Sias (2009) also found workplace friendships were positively associated with employee satisfaction, career development, creativity, and decision-making influence. Learning how people tend to respond to inequity in their workplace friendships and the motivation behind their responses can help organizations manage workplace friendships to achieve positive outcomes.
2. Equity Theory

Equity theory is based on the principle that individuals will attempt to achieve maximum rewards with minimal costs. As noted above, a relationship is deemed equitable when individuals perceive that their own ratio of inputs to outcomes is equal to their partner’s ratio of inputs to outcomes (Walster et al., 1973). Equitable relationships are preferable, but when relational outcomes are deemed inequitable, the individual perceives that he/she is either underrewarded or overrewarded. According to Walster, Walster, and Berscheid (1978), being overrewarded or underrewarded is based on an individual’s perception of his/her outcomes in comparison to a partner’s. The underrewarded partner perceives that he/she receives too little in comparison, whereas the overrewarded partner perceives that he/she receives too much. In response to inequity, individuals can either seek to restore actual or psychological equity or terminate the relationship (Walster et al., 1978).

This study extends previous research and tests equity theory by examining communication-based attempts to restore equity in workplace friendships. Here, it is proposed that communicative acts are an integral part of restoring equity. More specifically, the use of voice or silence in response to an inequitable situation could help people restore the actual balance (e.g., by persuading the partner to change his/her behavior) or the psychological balance (e.g., by publicly confronting the partner to regain power) in their workplace friendships.
3. Cultural Differences

Equity and equality are commonly researched across different cultures. As described earlier, equity is different from equality, in which the rewards are based on absolute outcomes (Walster et al., 1973). Past cross-cultural research has focused on equity or equality as reward allocation strategies (e.g., see Murphy-Berman, Berman, & Çukur, 2012). Instead of comparing rules for allocation, this study focuses specifically on how people respond to inequity in different cultures.

The U.S. and Korea provide a useful comparison because of their opposing cultural orientations. According to the Hofstede Center (“What about South Korea?”), Korea’s greatest difference in comparison with the U.S. is in terms of the individualism-collectivism dimension, which reflects a cultural orientation toward concern for oneself versus concern for society or larger groups as a whole. The U.S. is a strong individualist culture and Korea is heavily oriented toward collectivism. Other research provides additional evidence of Korean tendencies toward collectivism. Chen and Chung’s (1994) research on cultural influences in the workplace showed that Koreans’ workplace communication and relationships held a cultural bias toward a more collectivistic pattern. Korean individuals were conscious of the communication they used based on the type of relationship and the positions of those with whom they were in contact. Korean individuals were also linked to valuing the overall well-being of the organization rather than their own individual goals. Likewise, Yoon and Lim (1999) found that Koreans in the workplace were encouraged to express emotions and sentiments as a group and not as individuals.

Other research looking at the differences of cultures showed that
behaviors or treatment of those in interpersonal relationships were different across these two cultures. In other words, U.S. Americans and Koreans exhibit different behaviors in interpersonal interactions. A meta-analysis of relationships by Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002) highlighted differences in treatment of coworkers between European Americans and Koreans. More specifically, Koreans reported having greater separation between relationships than Americans. Similarly, after highlighting Koreans as collectivists and U.S. Americans as individualists, further analysis showed that Koreans were more likely to use indirect communication styles versus Americans who preferred direct or goal-oriented communication.

Another cultural dimension that demonstrates the differences between the U.S. and Korea is long-term orientation. According to Minkov and Hofstede (2012), long-term orientation (LTO) reflects a dynamic orientation to the future (reflected in perseverance and thrift) in contrast with a static orientation to the present or past (reflected in personal stability and reciprocation of greetings, favors, gifts). In Minkov and Hofstede’s analysis, Korea scored the highest of 38 countries on this dimension (100 out of 100); the U.S. scored a 39 of 100; Korea tends toward a dynamic focus on the future, whereas the U.S. tends to have a more static view of the present/past. The differing cultural dimensions between Korea and the United States provide an excellent contrast for studying equity in workplace friendships. Next, voice and silence will be discussed, followed by predictions for voice and silence behaviors across cultures.
4. Voice and Silence

Recent research has provided evidence that voice and silence are distinct and multidimensional constructs. Voice involves expressing or speaking up about ideas, opinions, and problems (Van Dyne et al., 2003), and can be expressed in writing (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Silence is defined as withholding input, information, or opinions (Morrison & Milliken, 2003). Silence is not equivalent to a lack of speech; rather, it is an active process of not sharing (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Because it is not an absence of participation but rather an active choice not to participate, silence can be used strategically in the workplace (Van Dyne et al., 2003). For instance, when employees feel that discussing an opinion or information would negatively influence how they are viewed by other members (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003), they might choose to remain silent. Voice can also be used strategically in the workplace. For example, when employees feel they are being maligned by their team members for taking over a project, they might choose to speak up. Van Dyne et al. (2003) fleshed out the idea of three motives that influence the use of voice and silence.

The first motive is acquiescence, which takes place when employees passively agree with a solution or are reserved in their consent. Acquiescent silence relates to a suppression of opinions about alternatives, and thus a passive acceptance of circumstances (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). To enact acquiescent silence, employees withhold information because they believe sharing the information will not change their circumstances. An example is when an employee passively agrees with a decision by an organization and withholds alternative ideas. To enact acquiescent voice, employees voice opinions or information in a manner that is not meant to
be constructive or promote change (Van Dyne et al., 2003). For example, an employee may voice agreement with the feedback she receives, but it is out of a feeling that she cannot change the way she has been evaluated, so she might give in.

The second motive is defensiveness. Defensiveness is when an employee reacts based on fear or in the interest of self-protection (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Defensive *silence* occurs when employees withhold information or opinions to protect themselves or out of fear. An example is an employee who withholds his/her opinion out of fear of rejection by his/her supervisor. Defensive *voice* occurs when employees voice information in an effort to protect themselves or out of fear. An example is employees speaking out about a problem that could make them appear incompetent.

The third motive is prosocialness. Prosocialness is defined as a motive to cooperate with the organization or other members (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Prosocial *silence* is withholding information to benefit others or the organization. An example of prosocial silence is an employee not speaking up when another employee does not follow a policy. Prosocial *voice* is defined as expression of information or opinions for proactive or other-oriented reasons. For example, an employee might speak up with a good idea for a project to help out her team. Acquiescence, defensiveness, and prosocialness can explain why employees choose silence or voice.

In the case of inequity, voice can be considered to be a more functional response (see Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982) because speaking up would seem to be an effective way to restore equity. Conversely, silence may be considered dysfunctional in that remaining silent might not change the equity status of a workplace friendship. In Guerrero, La Valley, and
Farinelli’s (2008) study, underrewarded people reported using destructive, antisocial emotional expression and overrewarded people reported using both prosocial and antisocial emotional expression. However, Dainton and Gross (2008) suggested that in the context of relationship maintenance, in some cases negative maintenance behaviors (such as remaining silent about an affair or jealousy) can be employed to as much effect as positive maintenance behaviors (such as asking a partner to change his/her behavior). Sias et al. (2012) found that workplace friends tended to use indirect communication strategies such as avoiding personal topics and avoiding interaction outside of work to allow their (no longer desired) workplace friendships to dissolve; this demonstrates the strategic use of passive strategies similar to silence.

Equity theory posits that underrewarded partners will tend to be angry; research supports this prediction (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2008). Guerrero et al. (2008) found that underrewarded partners were the least satisfied with their marriages when compared to overrewarded and equitably treated partners. Because they are angry and unsatisfied, underrewarded partners might be expected to speak up. However, because of their underrewarded status, they are the disadvantaged and less powerful partners. Their low-power status might lead them to avoid bringing up problems because they fear retaliation from the more powerful partner (see “the chilling effect,” Cloven & Roloff, 1993). This would suggest that the underrewarded partner would be generally more likely to use acquiescent voice (e.g., just going along with the partner), and more likely to be defensively silent than the overrewarded partner. The following hypotheses are proposed:
H1: Underrewarded partners will be more likely than overrewarded partners to engage in acquiescent voice.

H2: Underrewarded partners will be more likely than overrewarded partners to engage in defensive silence.

Equity theory also predicts that overrewarded individuals will feel guilt; research supports this prediction as well (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2008). Expected responses to guilt include actions such as apologizing, justifying, or appeasing (Benetti-McQuoid & Bursik, 2005). Of the voice responses, it might be expected that overrewarded people would enact prosocial silence or prosocial voice as a way of appeasing or making up for being overrewarded. In addition, overrewarded people may be more likely to use defensive voice in response to the guilt they likely feel about being overrewarded at the expense of their friend. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Overrewarded partners will be more likely than underrewarded partners to engage in a) prosocial voice, b) defensive voice, and c) prosocial silence.

Overrewarded partners may also tend to be silent out of acquiescence because they may not feel the need to do anything about inequity (Sprecher, 1986). If their partner (who is underrewarded) initiates a discussion about the relationship, the overrewarded partner may agree but may not say much because the inequity is not as problematic for the overrewarded partner (Dainton, 2003). The following hypothesis is proposed:
H4: Overrewarded partners will be more likely than underrewarded partners to engage in acquiescent silence.

5. Effects of Culture

Korea has more collectivistic values than the U.S. which has more individualistic values (Gudykunst et al., 1996). Collectivism is related to interdependence and the more interdependent one is, the more he/she is affected by interpersonal relationships and interactions (Singelis & Brown, 1995). Collectivistic individuals are more likely to choose compromising and integrating patterns during a conflict (Cai & Fink, 2002) while individualists are likely to choose more aggressive attitude (Forbes, Zhang, Doroszewicz, & Haas, 2009) and less willingness to withhold their opinions (Huang, Vliert, & Vegt, 2005). Frankel, Swanson, and Sagan (2006) also find the same result, saying collectivist individuals are less likely to talk about (dis)satisfactions while individualistic cultures, such as United States, are open to discuss whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied. One reason for that may be the fact that collectivist cultures are more likely to keep their silence in order to avoid conflict or harming their relations with others (Dedahanov, Lee, Rhee, & Yusupov, 2016).

Therefore, it is expected that participants from Korea will show more prosocial predisposition due to their concern to the relationship with their coworkers and overall concern for the organization whereas participants from the U.S. will tend to have more defensive responses in efforts to protect their individual and immediate interests. Thus the hypotheses are proposed:
H5: U.S. participants will be more likely to respond defensively than Korean participants. This will be evident for both a) voice and b) silence.

H6: Korean participants will be more likely to respond prosocially than U.S. participants. This will be evident for both a) voice and b) silence.

People from individualistic countries are found to be less likely to respond with acquiescence (Johnson, Kulesa, Cho, & Shavitt, 2005) while Rhee, Dedahanov, and Lee (2014) disclose that collectivism is related to acquiescent silence in their study on South Korean companies. Korean participants will also tend to be more acquiescent because of their belief that the future is dynamic and the situation may improve if given time. The hypothesis is as follows:

H7: Korean participants will be more likely to respond with acquiescence than U.S. participants. This will be evident for both a) voice and b) silence.

6. Message Access Exclusivity

One goal of this work is to extend equity theory by examining communication-based efforts to restore equity. A relevant feature of communication interactions is whether the interaction is public or private. This feature of communication is also known as message access exclusivity. Cohen, Bowman, and Borchert (2014) define message access exclusivity as “the extent to which public others can read a message, often
understood in terms of completely private to completely public” (p. 2). People may strategically choose to deliver a message publicly or privately to achieve certain outcomes, and it is likely that the degree to which communication about inequity is public or private will influence the response of receivers.

Public confrontation about inequity might be considered an inappropriate behavior for the workplace, and rules for appropriate communication in the workplace exist in the culture of the workplace. Organizational culture, in the simplest definition, is “the shared beliefs and values guiding the thinking and behavioral styles of members” of an organization (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988: 245). It is affected mostly by the CEO of the organization. If the CEO is nonconventional, culture is more open to new ideas and test runs (O’Reilly, Caldwell, Chatman, & Doerr, 2014). Organizational culture can be an important factor for job satisfaction (Belias & Koustelios, 2014) and thus, job performance (Ilyas & Abdullah, 2016). Therefore, it is an important subject in organization-related studies. Organizational culture is made up by many norms which people believe are right or wrong to do (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988).

Each organization has their own culture; culture is based in behavioral norms that apply specifically in each organization. As can be seen in Crossman’s (2015) recent study of self-disclosure in workplace, although self-disclosure is good for motivation and trust building, it can be destructive if it is about spiritual identity in Australian culture. As another example, in one organization friendly touch will be appropriate while in another, inappropriate (Bonaccio, O’Reilly, O’Sullivan, & Chiocchio, 2016). Finally, in a study of workplace emotions, Kramer and Hess (2002) found communication rules for organizations: people should express
emotions that are appropriate to the business environment, and it is appropriate to mask negative emotions and speak in a neutral volume. There may also be normative expectations for the kind of interactions considered to be appropriate for public or private consumption. Whittaker, Frohlich, and Daly-Jones (1994) found that individuals’ length of communication with each other changed depending on if they were in a private area or office, or a common area within the workplace environment. In other words, the depth of conversations changed depending on the work setting.

It seems likely that people will prefer to handle confrontations about inequity in their workplace friendships privately. However, it is not clear how they will tend to use voice and silence to respond when their partner initiates a discussion about inequity in a public or private setting. Given the differences between Korean and U.S. culture, it is likely that individuals from these different cultures will respond differently when confronted publicly rather than privately. The following research question regarding these responses is advanced.

RQ1: How will message access exclusivity affect people’s voice and silence responses?

II. Method

A 2 (inequity: underreward vs. overreward) × 2 (message access exclusivity: private vs. public) × 2 (culture: Korea vs. U.S.) fully crossed experimental design was utilized to examine the relationship between
workplace friendships and communication responses to inequity. Participants first were asked to read and report on liking for a friend and perceptions of fairness based on an equitable workplace friendship described in a vignette. Following this, participants read one of four inequitable vignettes (underreward/private, underreward/public, overreward/private, overreward/public) and were asked to report on several different perceptions of the inequitable vignette.

1. Participants

Participants consisted of working adults from the U.S. and Korea. To qualify as working adults, participants were required to work 35 or more hours per week and to have been at their current job for one year or more. The U.S. sample consisted of 96 workers ranging in age from 21 to 71 ($M = 43.29$, $SD = 13.50$). This sample was composed of 46.9 % males and 53.1 % females, and was 93.8 % Caucasian, 4.2 % African American, 1.0 % of mixed race, and 1.0% of other races. The participants’ work hours ranged from 35 to 80 hours per week ($M = 46.32$, $SD = 9.65$), and from one to 42 years at their current job ($M = 9.99$, $SD = 9.74$). Eighty-eight of the 96 reported having a “coworker who is also a friend.”

The Korean sample consisted of 118 working adults. This sample ranged in age from 22 to 66 ($M = 34.76$, $SD = 7.85$) and included 40.7 % males and 59.3 % females. The participants reported a range of 40 to 85 working hours per week ($M = 47.34$, $SD = 9.43$) and having been at their jobs from one to 40 years ($M = 6.44$, $SD = 6.74$). One hundred and five reported having a “coworker who is also a friend.”
2. Procedure

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method. U.S. participants were provided a weblink to an online survey. The first visible page was the IRB-approved consent form. Clicking on the button to enter the survey indicated informed consent and randomly assigned each participant to one of the four conditions. Each participant went through and completed the survey at his/her leisure. Korean participants consented and completed a paper and pencil survey. Like the U.S. participants, they were randomly assigned to one of four possible conditions and completed the survey at their leisure.

3. Vignettes

Participants were presented with two vignettes depicting a workplace friendship. First, they read a vignette describing an equitable relationship. They responded to scales measuring fairness perceptions. Then, each participant read one of four inequitable vignettes describing either an underrewarded or overrewarded friendship involving a public or private confrontation about the inequity. Following this, they again responded to the scales for fairness. After reading the second vignette participants completed scales for acquiescent, prosocial, and defensive voice and silence.

The equitable vignette described a workplace friendship with “Chris” [or “정현(Junghyun)” for the Korean participants], a fictional same-sex friend with whom the participant ostensibly works and shares some tasks, including a monthly budget report. Chris is described as holding the same
level of position as the participant, so they are on equal footing at work. The monthly budget report is completed equally by the participant and Chris in this vignette, and there is no confrontation about re-establishing equity.

In the vignettes depicting underreward and overreward, the initial paragraph introduced the same friendship with Chris. However in the second paragraph, inequity was introduced via the monthly budget report. Either the participant does the entire report with no help from Chris (underreward for the participant) or Chris does the entire report with no help from the participant (overreward for the participant). Regardless of whether Chris and the participant shared the load or one party did the report alone, the credit for completing the report was shared by both. These vignettes were previously used to induce perceptions of equity and inequity in another study by Kingsley Westerman et al. (2007).

In this study, a new factor was introduced: private or public confrontation about the inequity. After the inequity was presented, a third paragraph read as follows: “One day, you’ve just arrived in the conference room and are preparing for a meeting. Chris comes in to the conference room and, in front of your coworkers, says; ‘We need to talk about how we share the work for our supply closet report’ (public confrontation). In the private confrontation condition, Chris comes into the participant’s office, closes the door, and delivers the same message. Chris was set up as the initiator of the confrontation in all cases, regardless of whether the inequity was overreward or underreward.

Each vignette was in the participant’s native language and used a gender neutral name (“Chris” for the U.S. participants and “Junghyun” for the Korean participants) to describe the person. The vignettes given to
Korean participants had previously been used in Kingsley Westerman et al. (2007) and minor additions were made for this study. The procedure for translating those vignettes is described in Kingsley Westerman et al., and the additions to the original vignettes were subjected to a similar process, involving translation and backtranslation by fluent Korean speakers to ensure semantic meaning and fluency.

4. Measurement

All measures used a Likert-type response format (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) unless another response format is indicated. Higher scores indicate a higher propensity toward the given response.

1) Voice: Fifteen items measuring voice were adapted from Van Dyne et al. (2003). Three different types of voice were measured, including acquiescent, defensive, and prosocial voice. Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) was conducted separately for the U.S. and Korea samples. The CFA model tested all three voice scales together using AMOS software. For the U.S. sample, two items were dropped as a result of low factor loadings (a comparative fit index (CFI) = .91). The same two items were dropped for the Korean sample (CFI = .90). Details on each subscale are provided below and in Appendix A.

Each of the three scales consisted of five items. The reliability (Cronbach’s α) for acquiescent voice was .81 for the U.S. and .85 for the Korean sample. The reliability (Cronbach’s α) for defensive voice was .88 for the U.S. and .78 for the Korean sample. The reliability (Cronbach’s α) for prosocial voice was .95 for the U.S. and .87 for the Korean sample.

2) Silence: Fifteen items measuring silence were adapted from Van
Dyne et al. (2003). Three different types of silence were measured, including acquiescent, defensive, and prosocial voice. CFA was conducted separately for the U.S. and Korea samples. The CFA model tested all three voice scales together using AMOS software. For the U.S. sample, two items were dropped as a result of low factor loadings (CFI = .98). For the Korean sample (CFI = .90), three items were dropped. Details on each subscale are provided below and in Appendix A.

Each of the three scales consisted of five items. The reliability (Cronbach’s α) for acquiescent silence for the U.S. sample was .40 and for the Korean sample was .86. With the U.S. data, the scale could not be improved upon any further with the addition or removal of items. This reliability for the U.S. sample was too low for the measurement to be acceptable, so the U.S. data for acquiescent silence was dropped from all further analyses.

One item was dropped from the defensive silence scale for both samples due to a low factor loading. The reliability (Cronbach’s α) for defensive silence was .82 for the U.S. and .75 for the Korean sample. Two items were dropped from the prosocial silence scale for the Korean sample due to low factor loadings. The reliability (Cronbach’s α) for prosocial silence was .84 for the U.S. and .69 for the Korean sample.

5. Manipulation Checks

1) Fairness: The fairness scale was a seven-item measure based on a previous study by Kingsley Westerman et al. (2007). This scale was administered twice, once following each of the equitable and inequitable vignettes. Three CFAs were conducted using AMOS software, including
one for the equitable fairness scale, one for the underreward fairness scale, and one for the overreward fairness scale. Because of the way the items are worded, the responses to these items can be expected to differ based on whether the participant has read the underreward or overreward vignette; for this reason, they are treated separately in the measurement analyses. For the equitable fairness scale, the same three items were eliminated for both samples due to low factor loadings, resulting in a four-item scale (U.S. CFI = 1.00; Korea CFI = 1.00). For the underreward scale, one item was eliminated from both samples, resulting in a four-item scale (U.S. CFI = 1.00; Korea CFI = .99). For the overreward scale, two items were eliminated, resulting in a three-item scale (U.S. CFI = 1.00; Korea CFI = 1.00). The scale included seven items such as, “I am getting more benefits from the relationship.” For the equitable fairness scale, the reliabilities (Cronbach’s α) were .86 (U.S.) and .79 (Korea); for the underreward fairness scale, the reliabilities (Cronbach’s α) were .79 (U.S.) and .78 (Korea), and for the overreward fairness scale, the reliabilities (Cronbach’s α) were .85 (U.S.) and .65 (Korea).

To determine whether participants viewed the vignettes appropriately (as fair or unfair), paired samples t-tests were run to compare perceptions of fairness of the equitable vignette with the inequitable vignettes. In the U.S. sample, the inequitable vignettes (M = 2.53, SD = 0.73) were viewed as significantly less fair than the equitable vignette (M = 4.05, SD = 0.60), t (95) = 14.24, p < .01, η² = .68. In the Korean sample, the inequitable vignettes (M = 2.92, SD = 0.91) were also viewed as significantly less fair than the equitable vignette (M = 3.35, SD = 0.76), t (117) = 3.80, p < .01, η² = .11. These tests indicate that the manipulation was successful.

2) **Privacy:** Eight items measuring privacy were adopted from
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Westerman and Westerman (2013). These items were measured on a semantic differential scale with scores ranging from 1 to 7, with higher numbers indicating the delivery was more public. Example items included “restricted” to “unrestricted” and “closed” to “open”. CFA was conducted on this scale using AMOS software. Two items were eliminated from both samples due to low factor loadings. Six items were retained (U.S. CFI = .97; Korea CFI = .93). Reliabilities (Cronbach’s α) for this scale were .85 (U.S.) and .97 (Korea). In the U.S. sample, the vignettes where Chris confronted the participant publicly (M = 3.48, SD = 1.51) were rated as more public than those where Chris began the confrontation privately (M = 2.84, SD = 1.04), t (94) = -2.35, p < .05, $\eta^2 = .06$. In the Korean sample, the vignettes where Chris confronted the participant publicly (M = 6.01, SD = 0.80) were rated as much more public than those where Chris began the confrontation privately (M = 2.48, SD = 0.80), t (116) = -22.44, $p < .00$, $\eta^2 = .81$.

Ⅲ. Results

In order to test the hypotheses and research question, six 2 (U.S. vs. Korea) x 2 (underreward vs. overreward) x 2 (public vs. private confrontation) ANOVAs were performed. Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics for the dependent variables are reported in Table 1. H1 predicted a main effect for type of inequity on acquiescent voice such that underrewarded partners would use it more than overrewarded partners. The data were not consistent with this hypothesis; in terms of their propensity to use acquiescent voice, underrewarded partners ($M = 1.87$, SD
were not statistically different from overrewarded partners \((M = 2.02, SD = 0.73), F (1, 206) = 2.10, p = .15, \eta^2 = .01\).

**Table 1**  Bivariate Correlations & Descriptive Statistics for Silence and Voice

|                | AV  | DV  | PV  | DS  | PS  |
|----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Acquiescent voice(AV) |     |     |     |     |     |
| Defensive voice(DV)   | .67**|     |     |     |     |
| Prosocial voice(PV)   | -0.48**| -0.50**|     |     |     |
| Defensive silence(DS) | .52**| .67**| -0.46**|     |     |
| Prosocial silence(PS) | .13* | .30**| -0.11| .46**|     |
| \(M\)             | 1.94| 1.97| 4.02| 2.26| 2.97|
| \(SD\)            | .77 | .72 | .74 | .71 | .74 |

Notes. **p < .01

H2 predicted a main effect for type of inequity on defensive silence such that underrewarded partners would engage in defensive silence more than overrewarded partners. The data were not consistent with this hypothesis. In terms of their propensity to use defensive silence, underrewarded partners \((M = 2.21, SD = 0.74)\) were not statistically different from overrewarded partners \((M = 2.31, SD = 0.66), F (1, 206) = 0.78, p = .38, \eta^2 = .00\).

H3a predicted that overrewarded partners would be more likely than
underrewarded partners to engage in prosocial voice. The data were not consistent with this hypothesis. In terms of their propensity to use prosocial voice, overrewarded partners \((M = 4.03, \ SD = 0.67)\) were not statistically different from underrewarded partners \((M = 4.02, \ SD = 0.79)\), \(F (1, 206) = 0.01, \ p = .93, \ \eta^2 = .00\). H3b predicted that overrewarded partners would be more likely than underrewarded partners to engage in defensive voice. The data were consistent with this hypothesis. Overrewarded partners \((M = 2.11, \ SD = 0.70)\) were more inclined to use defensive voice than were underrewarded partners \((M = 1.84, \ SD = 0.71)\), \(F (1, 206) = 6.82, \ p < .01, \ \eta^2 = .03\). H3c predicted that overrewarded partners would be more likely than underrewarded partners to engage in prosocial silence. The data were consistent with this hypothesis; overrewarded partners \((M = 3.13, \ SD = 0.74)\) were more inclined to use prosocial silence than were underrewarded partners \((M = 2.83, \ SD = 0.71)\), \(F (1, 206) = 10.66, \ p < .01, \ \eta^2 = .05\).

H4 predicted that overrewarded partners would be more likely than underrewarded partners to engage in acquiescent silence. Because the measurement of acquiescent silence in the U.S. sample was considered unacceptable, this hypothesis was tested with the Korean sample only. The data were not consistent with this hypothesis. In the Korean sample, overrewarded partners \((M = 2.18, \ SD = 0.85)\) were not statistically different from underrewarded partners \((M = 2.01, \ SD = 0.77)\) in their propensity to engage in acquiescent silence, \(F (1, 114) = 1.04, \ p = .31, \ \eta^2 = .01\).

H5a predicted that U.S. participants would respond with more defensive voice than Korean participants. The data were not consistent with this hypothesis. In fact, the U.S. participants \((M = 1.82, \ SD = 0.67)\) were less
inclined to use defensive voice than Korean participants ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 0.73$), $F (1, 206) = 6.69$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$. H5b predicted that U.S. participants would respond with more defensive silence than Korean participants. The data were not consistent with this hypothesis. In fact, the U.S. participants ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 0.63$) were less inclined to be defensively silent than were the Korean participants ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 0.73$), $F (1, 206) = 12.23$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$.

H6a predicted that Korean participants would respond with more prosocial voice than U.S. participants. The data were not consistent with this hypothesis. Korean participants ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.74$) were less inclined to use prosocial voice than U.S. participants ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.71$), $F (1, 206) = 6.26$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$. H6b predicted that Korean participants would respond with more prosocial silence than U.S. participants. The data were marginally consistent with this hypothesis. Korean participants ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.73$) were more likely to be prosocially silent than U.S. participants ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.72$), $F (1, 206) = 3.75$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$.

H7a predicted that Korean participants would respond more with acquiescent voice than U.S. participants. The data were not consistent with this hypothesis. Korean participants ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 0.89$) were not statistically different from U.S. participants ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 0.59$), $F (1, 206) = 0.39$, $p = .53$, $\eta^2 = .00$. H7b suggested Korean participants would respond more with acquiescent silence than U.S. participants. This hypothesis was not tested because the measurement of acquiescent silence in the U.S. sample was unacceptable.

Both main effects on prosocial silence were qualified by an interaction effect between type of inequity and country. Underrewarded U.S.
Americans \((M = 2.59, SD = 0.66)\) were less likely than underrewarded Koreans \((M = 3.03, SD = 0.69)\), overrewarded U.S. Americans \((M = 3.16, SD = 0.68)\), and overrewarded Koreans \((M = 3.10, SD = 0.79)\) to employ prosocial silence, \(F(1, 206) = 5.92, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03\). There were no other significant interaction effects among the three independent variables on any of the dependent variables.

Research question one asked how message access exclusivity would affect people’s voice and silence responses. None of the voice or silence responses approached significant statistical differences based on whether equity resolution was attempted publicly or privately. Message access exclusivity did not yield any significant interactions with either type of inequity or country for any of the voice or silence responses.

### IV. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate communication responses to inequity in the context of workplace friendships in both the U.S. and Korea. Although equity theory has been used in some studies of workplace friendships (e.g., Sias et al., 2012), the study of voice and silence responses to inequity is a new avenue in this area. This study also investigated the impact of message access exclusivity on tendencies to use voice and silence. Our results suggest some useful guidelines for dealing with inequity in workplace relationships. All people want to behave prosocially in organizations; Americans are inclined to use prosocial voice while Koreans are more likely to use prosocial silence in any given situation (under- or overrewarded). Silence and voice are both used for the
sake of the organization and relationships. This shows that individualist cultures prefer solving problems quickly in order to continue while collective cultures give more importance to relationship preservation. Defensive silence or voice is more commonly preferred by Koreans than Americans, and defensive voice is especially high for overrewarded people. Finally, acquiescent voice or silence is not used much in any situation, likely because it has no effect on the situation in a relational or tactical way.

1. Voice

1) Type of inequity: Interestingly, only the tendency to use defensive voice differed for those who were overrewarded versus underrewarded. The overrewarded individuals tended to favor the use of defensive voice more than those who were underrewarded. Perhaps the overrewarded individuals had a sense that they were getting the better end of the deal and felt some guilt as expected from equity theory predictions and prior research (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2008), so it makes sense that they would speak up with a goal of self-protection. Neither acquiescent voice nor prosocial voice was preferred differently for those who were overrewarded versus those who were underrewarded. However, the mean ratings for the use of voice suggest that prosocial voice was considered a more viable option across the board, with much higher mean scores (approx. 4) than acquiescent voice (approx. 2). In general, prosocial voice is a helping behavior, so higher scores may simply indicate that people think it is a good idea to be helpful to one’s coworkers, regardless of any inequity. The low scores on acquiescent voice suggest it is generally not a
preferable response regardless of what type of inequity one experiences. Also, people may be more likely to enact prosocial voice because it has an equity restoration function, whereas acquiescent voice may not do anything to restore equity.

2) Cross-cultural comparison: As expected, there were some differences in the preferences of U.S. Americans when compared to Koreans. For example, Koreans were more inclined to prefer defensive voice than U.S. Americans. Although we predicted that U.S. Americans would tend more toward defensive voice than Koreans because of their individual orientation, looking at the measurement items (see Appendix A) for defensive voice suggests why Koreans scored higher on defensive voice. The questions focus not on arguing vehemently for one’s own ideas, as we would expect from a more individualistic culture, but rather on using voice to deflect the attention away from oneself. Put in this light, it seems more logical that Koreans tended to score higher on defensive voice—because they were using it to deflect attention away from themselves.

Yet U.S. Americans were more inclined to prefer prosocial voice than Koreans. This may be because prosocial voice involves actively making suggestions, contributing solutions and the like. Given the discussion above about LTO, it makes sense that Koreans, with their LTO, tended toward this “problem-solving” response less than did U.S. Americans, who are trying to get things to happen for them now, rather than looking to the future and waiting relatively passively for things to improve.

Finally, there was no difference between U.S. Americans and Koreans in their preference for using acquiescent voice. Equity theory predicts that people experiencing inequity will do something to restore equity, either active or psychological. Acquiescent voice may not be a popular response
simply because it does nothing to restore equity in any way.

2. Silence

1) Type of inequity: Overrewarded individuals did not differ from underrewarded individuals in their preference for defensive silence. Both were equally likely to keep silent to protect themselves. This may indicate simple self-preservation. Regardless of whether your work friend is taking advantage of you, or if you are taking advantage of him/her, it probably does not look good for you. This may be why both groups were equally likely to employ defensive silence.

Acquiescent silence was only tested with the Korean sample because of measurement issues with the U.S. sample, but within the Korean sample, there were not significant differences in the responses of overrewarded and underrewarded individuals. Acquiescent responses for both groups were similar, and below the midpoint of the scale, indicating this was not seen as a desirable response. Again, this may be because acquiescent silence seems to do nothing to restore the balance of equity.

2) Cross-cultural comparison: In keeping with Oyserman et al.’s (2002) work, Koreans rated the use of defensive silence more highly than U.S. Americans. Oyserman et al. found that Koreans preferred indirect styles of communication whereas U.S. Americans preferred direct or goal-oriented communication. This finding seems to agree with the findings of Oyserman et al., indicating some consistency of Korean preferences. This is also in keeping with the greater LTO of Koreans; they are more likely to keep problematic information to themselves and wait to see if the situation will change over time.
3) Interaction effect: The main effects for equity type and country on prosocial silence were qualified by an interaction effect between the two, which indicated that underrewarded U.S. Americans rated their likelihood of employing prosocial silence lower than did the other three groups (underrewarded Koreans, overrewarded Koreans and overrewarded U.S. Americans), which all scored about the same. From an equity theory perspective, the overrewarded individuals may have preferred keeping silent as long as it was “for the good of Chris”. Prosocial silence could represent a psychological method of restoring equity (i.e., I am keeping quiet about this imbalance in our relationship because if I speak up, my friend will look incompetent). However, the underrewarded Koreans responded similarly to overrewarded individuals across culture. This could be explained by the tendency of Koreans to be more collectivistic and oriented toward the organization rather than the individual. Keeping quiet for the good of the organization may be more in keeping with a group orientation, whereas the underrewarded U.S. Americans responded with less prosocial silence, probably because they perceived they were being treated unfairly.

3. Message Access Exclusivity

Surprisingly to us, there were no differences at all based on the public or private confrontation about inequity, and no interactions between message access exclusivity and either type of inequity or country. Past research (e.g., Westerman & Westerman, 2013) would suggest that confrontation in front of coworkers would be seen differently than confrontation in private. However, the data collected in this study suggest
that both voice and silence responses did not change based on the
initiation of equity restoration in public or private.

It could be suggested that there was a problem with the manipulation of
message access exclusivity, but the manipulation check showed that the
participants clearly noticed whether they were being confronted in a public
arena (in front of colleagues) or in a private arena (in their office with the
door closed). Interestingly, the Korean participants seem to perceive this
difference more keenly than the U.S. Americans, as the U.S. Americans
showed a mean difference of only about 1 point, whereas the Koreans
scored the public confrontation more than 3 points higher (i.e., more
public) than the private confrontation. Both were significant differences,
but it seems clear that the degree of privacy or publicness of the message
is important and noticeable to Koreans, even if it did not affect their voice
and silence responses. Perhaps other outcomes would be affected by the
publicness or privacy afforded for interactions about inequity at work.
These might include relational variables, such as relational satisfaction, use
of relational maintenance strategies, relational escalation or de-escalation,
or more task-related variables such as job satisfaction, coworker
performance, or organizational commitment. Future research should strive
to learn more about the impact of delivering messages and holding
interactions in more or less exclusive ways. This may include not only
study of face-to-face interactions, but can expand to explore the
affordances and drawbacks of mediated channels for managing conflict in
the workplace.
4. Practical Implications

The results of this study suggest some directions for dealing with inequity in workplace friendships. First, the use of discussion to resolve inequity should be encouraged but it should be noted that those using defensive voice are probably holding the power in the relationship (i.e., they are overrewarded). Employees trying to resolve inequities at work should be aware of this defensive tendency, not allow the use of defensive voice to avert attention from solving the problem, and try to create a safe environment to restore balance.

Second, across all conditions, people seem to want to behave prosocially. For employees, this prosocial tendency is positive news. Employees experiencing inequity can have confidence that prosocial tendencies are likely to prevail in a discussion about restoring balance with their coworkers. Further, employees can open a discussion about inequity publicly or privately and expect prosocial responses.

Managers and organizations should give employees opportunities to behave prosocially, particularly regarding work distribution. Employees may not normally be involved in discussions about work distribution, but allowing them the opportunity to make suggestions for distribution and improvements can facilitate prosocialness and potentially resolve or even prevent imbalance in their coworker relationships. This kind of opportunity should be framed differently for those in different cultures; perhaps in the U.S., employees might be asked to share ideas focused on immediate improvement for workers, whereas in Korea, employees might be asked to share ideas focused on improving the work culture and the organization over the long term.
Finally, managers may want to observe employees so they can personally identify inequity even if the employees employ silence. In particular, managers in Korea should be aware of a stronger tendency of employees to respond to confrontation about inequity defensively with both voice and silence. In some cases, coworker relationships will rebalance over time, but in other cases it may be necessary for the manager to motivate and mediate a discussion about the balance of work duties among friends.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation noted for this study is related to the items used to measure acquiescent silence. This measurement did not work for the U.S. sample and ultimately was not used in testing the hypotheses. It could be that this sample simply cannot fathom a response that involves apathy and helplessness. As a result, they did not answer consistently, which could be the source of unreliability in the scale. Future research should attempt to improve the measurement for this variable, which could involve the use of pretesting or modifying the individual items.

Another limitation of the study is the use of vignettes to generate responses. Generally, the use of an experimental manipulation to study workplace friendships is a tradeoff; the researchers achieve control of the conditions of the study but this method lacks some of the characteristics associated with field work such as the study of ongoing relationships. Some of the responses of interest may be more of a product of a long-term, ongoing relationship, which the experimental vignette fails to simulate. Future research may want to collect data from ongoing,
entrenched coworker friendships to learn more about perennially inequitable blended friendships and if there are other characteristics of naturally existing coworker friendships that are relevant to dealing with inequity.

The investigation of communication responses proved useful and interesting; future research should continue this avenue. The differences in how people use voice and silence were illuminating, but also of great interest was the lack of differences to the public versus private confrontation. This was unexpected but intriguing and suggests that more work is needed. Further work in this area can demonstrate how the field of communication contributes something new to the discussion of equity theory. There may even be room for an extension to the theory dealing with communication responses in addition to the already-known behavioral and psychological responses. More research and investigation of communication responses will be required in order to take this step.
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[Appendix A]. Voice and silence measurement

Acquiescent Voice

1. I would just support whatever Chris says because I would be indifferent.*†

2. I would just express agreement with Chris but not give any new ideas.

3. I would agree and go along with Chris because I would be resigned to whatever Chris says.

4. I would agree with Chris because I don’t think it would make a difference for me to make suggestions.

5. I would agree with Chris about his/her solutions to the problem.

Defensive Voice

1. I would not express anything except agreement with Chris, based on fear.

2. I would express ideas that shift attention off me, because I would be afraid.

3. I would provide explanations that focus the discussion on others in order to protect myself.*†

4. I would go along and communicate support for Chris, based on self-protection.

5. I would express agreement with whatever Chris says, because I would be motivated by fear.

Prosocial Voice

1. I would share my opinions in an effort to help improve our work.

2. I would want to help my organization, so I would make an effort to contribute solutions to the problem.

3. I would give solutions to problems with the cooperative motive of benefiting my organization.

4. I would speak up with ideas for new ways of distributing work that might benefit the organization.

5. I would suggest ideas for change, based on constructive concern for my organization.


**Acquiescent Silence**

1. I would be unwilling to speak up with suggestions for change because I would be indifferent.

2. I would not say anything because I would be resigned to whatever Chris says.

3. If I have ideas about solutions to the problems Chris wants to discuss, I wouldn’t bother sharing them.

4. I would keep any ideas for improvement to myself because I don’t think it would make a difference.*

5. I would withhold my ideas about how to improve the work distribution because I don’t really care.

**Defensive Silence**

1. I would leave out any information that would make me look bad.

2. If I thought my job or reputation was in danger from this conversation, I wouldn’t mention negative information about myself.*†

3. I would not speak up or suggest ideas for changing our distribution of work, based on fear.

4. I would leave out relevant facts in order to protect myself.

5. I would avoid expressing ideas for improvements, based on wanting to protect myself.

**Prosocial Silence**

6. If I thought someone else’s job or reputation may be in danger, I wouldn’t mention negative information about them.†

7. If I knew Chris wasn’t doing so well, I wouldn’t bring it up to my supervisor.†

8. I would keep quiet rather than “rock the boat” by bringing up things that will cause problems for Chris.

9. I wouldn’t mention negative information about Chris to avoid looking like a tattletale. (RC)

10. I would refuse to divulge information that might harm Chris.

* dropped for CFA (U.S. data); † dropped for CFA (Korea data); RC = recoded