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# Reciprocal relationship between workplace incivility and deviant silence—The moderating role of moral attentiveness

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## Abstract

In the present study, we examine the reciprocal relationship between employees' perceptions of workplace incivility and their deviant silence. We also explore the moderating role of moral attentiveness on the relationship between workplace incivility and deviant silence. Utilizing three-waves of longitudinal data from 297 full-time employees working in different industrial sectors in the United States, we find support for the reciprocal model as the best fit to the data, thus validating relationships over time between our study variables. Taken together, our results suggest that workplace incivility at T1/T2 significantly predicted deviant silence at T2/T3. The results also reveal that deviant silence at T1/T2 significantly predicted workplace incivility at T2/T3. Importantly, we found that reflective but not perceptual moral attentiveness significantly reduced the negative influence of workplace incivility on deviant silence in subsequent time periods.

## KEYWORDS

deviant silence, moral attentiveness, reciprocal model, workplace incivility

All authors contributed equally, and authorship has been presented alphabetically.

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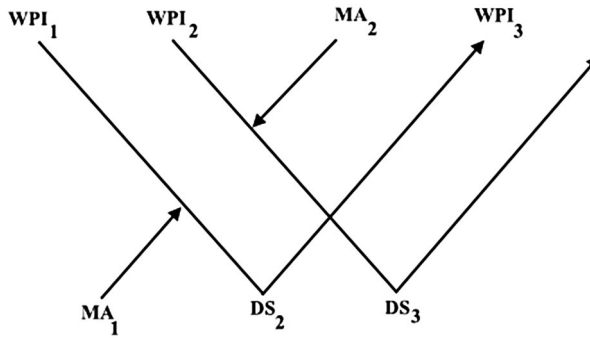
## INTRODUCTION

The question of why employees remain silent and do not voice their concerns has evoked intellectual debate in organizational behavior research (Brinsfield, 2013; Knoll & Dick, 2013). Silence in organizations refers to a state in which employees refrain from calling attention to issues at work such as inappropriate or immoral practices that violate personal, moral, or legal standards (Knoll & Dick, 2013). Recent statistics suggest that 85 percent of employees accepted that such behavior was commonplace in the workplace (Milliken et al., 2003). Despite the fact that researchers have argued that employee silence is a multidimensional construct (Chou & Chang, 2017; Pinder & Harlos, 2001), to date researchers have predominantly focused on the relational, defensive, diffident, ineffectual, or disengaged dimensions of silence. However, one key dimension of silence, deviant silence, that refers to an employee withholding useful information with the intent to harm the organization, supervisor, or colleague (Zellars et al., 2002) has been the subject of limited empirical research in the management literature (Brinsfield, 2013; Khalid & Ahmed, 2016; Teo & Caspersz, 2011).

Silence has been viewed by scholars as undesirable in work contexts as employees not communicating their opinions or useful information may harm organizational interests (Nechanska et al., 2020). A considerable volume of research has shown that silence can stimulate high levels of employee stress, absenteeism, dissatisfaction, and disengagement, which in turn can undermine performance and retention (Bagheri et al., 2012; Morrison, 2014) and morale (Pentilla, 2003). It is therefore essential to understand the causes of employees' silence to minimize its negative influence on organizational outcomes. Although prior work has explored a number of antecedents of employee silence (Morrison, 2014), researchers have almost exclusively explored antecedents associated with the perceived risks faced by employees for speaking up (Brinsfield, 2013; Chou & Chang, 2017).

In the present study, we build on this work by looking beyond such antecedents (Chou & Chang, 2017; Morrison et al., 2011). Specifically, we highlight experienced workplace incivility as an important antecedent of deviant silence (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). The lack of attention given to the effects of experienced workplace incivility (WPI) on employees' attitudes and behaviors is particularly problematic because it is a widespread phenomenon in the contemporary workplace that not only harms employees, but has detrimental effects on organizational performance (Mao et al., 2019; Sguera et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2012). Indeed, prior work suggests that employees who experience WPI are more likely to engage in deviant behavior directed toward both individuals and the organization (Restubog et al., 2011), and this may take the form of deviant silence as employees withhold useful information to punish their organization, supervisor or colleague in retaliation for being treated in an uncivil manner (Zellars et al., 2002). We, therefore, examine the link between experienced WPI and employees' deviant silence, as studying this association may help us to better understand the conditions where targeted employees have something important to say yet feel compelled to remain silent (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Morrison, 2011).

As the occurrence of WPI has been theorized as a reflection of the social exchange relationships that develop among coworkers and between employer and employees (e.g. Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Taylor et al., 2012), we draw on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) to examine the link between WPI and deviant silence, arguing that incivility leads employees to withdraw from the social exchange relationship and respond negatively to the perceived incivility by actively withholding useful information from others that are deviant silence (Donnerstein & Hatfield, 1982). We focus on deviant silence as it is a relatively low-risk covert retaliatory response to experienced incivility, compared with more open reactions which can be very detrimental to the victim and have a negative impact on their psychological wellbeing (Cortina & Magley, 2003).



**FIGURE 1** Longitudinal model of the incivility-deviant silence reciprocity moderated by moral attentiveness. DS, deviant silence; MA, moral attentiveness; WPI, workplace incivility. Numbering refers to longitudinal sample intakes

Our study also explores the spiraling dynamics of workplace incivility. As well as examining whether WPI leads to deviant silence, we also examine whether deviant silence leads employees' to be the target of WPI. From the viewpoint of the target of WPI, however, acting deviantly, even in a silent manner, can represent a challenge to their moral standards. We, therefore, suggest that moral attentiveness (Reynolds, 2008), a personal moral orientation, mitigates the severity of incivility/deviant silence spiral, in that it attenuates the link between WPI and deviant silence.

Our proposed framework presented in Figure 1 makes three key contributions to the business ethics and organizational psychology literatures. First, this study makes an important contribution by highlighting social exchange theory as a unifying framework to understand the dynamic relationship between WPI and deviant silence. In particular, it helps us to explain why employees actively do not speak up with the intention of harming others at work (Chou & Chang, 2017).

Second, the study makes an additional contribution by drawing on panel data across three time points to examine the directionality of the relationship between WPI and deviant silence. This addresses the limitations of prior work that has typically examined the link between WPI and outcomes such as deviant behavior without examining whether deviant behaviors also lead individuals to be the target of WPI (Taylor et al., 2017).

Finally, the study makes a key contribution by examining the moderating effect of moral attentiveness on the spiraling dynamics of workplace incivility. In light of work which suggests that the extent to which individuals pay attention to moral issues is likely to influence their response to mistreatment at work (Hannah et al., 2011), we argue that morally attentive individuals are less likely to behave negatively in response to WPI than those who are less attentive to moral issues (Reynolds, 2008).

## THEORY AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

### Workplace incivility and deviant silence

As highlighted earlier, given that employee silence in the workplace has been found to be detrimental to the interests of the organization, researchers have begun to examine the factors that cause employees to remain silent in organizational contexts (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). For example, empirical work has confirmed a strong link between both employees' personality traits (e.g. extraversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness) and environmental factors (e.g. organizational structure,

organizational climate, and societal cultural values) and employee silence (Frazier & Bowler, 2015; LePine & Van Dyne, 2001; Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Ward et al., 2016). Researchers have also begun to look at the reasons why people remain silent even when they feel the need to voice something. For example, Morrison (2014) argues that employees intentionally remain silent about issues at work because they fear that their work environment is not conducive to speak up, as they may face negative consequences such as being viewed as a complainer, losing respect, obtaining an unsatisfactory performance review, being punished by other organizational members or even getting fired (Morrison, 2014).

Despite growing work on the antecedents of employee silence at work, in trying to understand why employees remain silent, researchers have tended to look at the risks involved in speaking up, and ignored situational factors which predict silence (Morrison et al., 2011). In order to address this, the present study, therefore, examines whether WPI (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) fosters employees' deviant silence. WPI has been defined as a "low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Such behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457). While less intense than workplace harassment or violence, WPI is prevalent in organizations, and has been shown to be negatively linked to performance (Mao et al., 2019), helping behavior (De Clercq et al., 2019), and positively linked to absenteeism (Sliter et al., 2012) and turnover intentions (Lim et al., 2008).

In the present study, the link between WPI and deviant silence is examined. Deviant silence refers to a situation where an employee withholds useful information with the intent to harm the organization, superior, or colleague (Zellars et al., 2002). It is more indirect or implicit than other forms of deviant behavior such as counterproductive work behavior (CWB).

## **A social exchange perspective**

In examining the relationship between WPI and deviant silence (Brinsfield, 2009), we draw on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), in light of prior research on WPI which suggests that victims may respond to WPI by engaging in "tit-for-tat" behavior that is an incivility spiral (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Based on social exchange theory we argue that WPI weakens the quality of social exchange relationships between the employee, their supervisors, coworkers, and the organization, and leads employees who have been the subject of WPI to retaliate by engaging in deviant silence as they withdraw from positive social exchanges with others at work and retaliate against the organization and its members, including those that were the perpetrators of WPI. In other words, WPI may start a vicious cycle of uncivil behaviors and lead victims to engage in uncivil behaviors such as destructive silence (Pinder & Harols, 2001). Accordingly, researchers have considered WPI as a precursor to more intense and aggressive acts (such as deviant silence) in the workplace (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Prior work supports the argument that employees who experience WPI are more likely to engage in deviant behavior directed toward both individuals who conducted the WPI and the organization (Restubog et al., 2011).

Workplace incivility has been categorized depending on the characteristics of social relationships and transactions. Borrowing from Goldstein's (1940) terminology, patterns of social relationships range from encroaching (aggressive) to self-restraining (withdrawing) behaviors. As forms of social exchanges (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), transactions run from covert (surreptitious) to overt (public). Following this terminology, deviant silence, may be considered an aggressive and covert response

to workplace incivility. Its twin characteristics that combine high destructive potential and low detectability make it a pressing challenge for organizations to address.

Andersson and Pearson (1999) stated that acts of incivility have the potential to foster unpleasant exchanges or even lead to more serious behaviors. They describe an incivility spiral wherein an act of workplace incivility on the part of one individual leads to an act of incivility by a second party that may be more intense in that it results in an escalating spiral wherein each act is followed by an increasingly negative act. Situations such as these have the potential to lead to more intense forms of deviance such deviant silence, perhaps resulting ultimately in aggression or violence wherein the intent to inflict harm is indisputable.

Drawing on the social exchange theory, researchers have argued that individuals reciprocate the organization in a favorable manner if they value the exchange (Aryee et al., 2015; Schoenherr et al., 2015). However, if individuals perceive social exchanges with others as being harmful, as may happen after experiencing WPI, they may reciprocate negatively by engaging in deviant behavior as a form of retaliation against the perpetrator (Itzkovich & Heilbrunn, 2016; Robinson, 2008). One way in which employees might retaliate through engaging in deviant silence, a kind of deviant behavior in which an individual withholds useful information with the intent of harming the perpetrator or the organization (Brinsfield, 2009, 2013).

Individuals who are targeted by uncivil behaviors such as being deliberately ignored (ostracization), treated rudely or with disrespect, being talked to in a condescending manner or being insulted, may lose their sense of dignity and respect and feel victimized. In response victims of incivility are likely to respond negatively by decreasing their discretionary behaviors as highlighted by social exchange theory (Gregory et al., 2013). Moreover, research has indicated they may engage in retaliatory behavior where they feel they have been treated unfairly (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997).

In summary, drawing on social exchange theory to analyze the workplace incivility experience, we anticipate that when employees believe that they have been the targets of WPI, they will not only reduce their discretionary behaviors toward the organization and its members, but also may retaliate in the form of deviant silence, a relatively covert and aggressive response to mistreatment. This leads us to the following:

**Hypothesis 1** *WPI relates positively to employees' deviant silence over time.*

## Reciprocity between deviant silence and workplace incivility

As discussed above, social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) suggests that employees reciprocate the behavior (negative or positive) they receive from others. In other words, when they are treated well, they will respond in the form of positive behaviors and attitudes, and when treated badly they will respond in the form of negative behaviors and attitudes. For example, when someone mistreats them in the workplace, they may be directed by negative reciprocity beliefs whereby they believe it is acceptable to mistreat in return (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In the present study, we argue that by engaging in deviant behaviors such as hiding valuable information from their professional environment (deviant silence), individuals are likely to be further mistreated by colleagues or supervisors for violating workplace norms (Anderson & Pearson, 1999; Aquino et al., 2006; Cropanzano et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2016; Lian et al., 2014; Meier & Spector, 2013; Muraven et al., 1998). In summary, we expect there to be a reciprocal relationship between WPI and deviant silence, due to a norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) which leads both parties in a relationship to respond negatively to the other's inappropriate behavior.

Previous studies have confirmed a link between employee silence and negative outcomes such as dissatisfaction, isolation, cynicism, stress, feelings of humiliation, anger, resentment, social rejection, loss of trust, and weakened interpersonal ties (Ashford et al., 1998; Cortina & Magley, 2009; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Perlow & Repenning, 2009; Perlow & Williams, 2003). Yet, most prior findings have typically drawn on cross-sectional data to examine such links, and few have examined how others respond to employees' deviant silence (Zellars et al., 2002).

In order to address these gaps in the literature, we propose a reciprocal relationship between WPI and deviant silence. Specifically, we not only argue that WPI leads employees to respond by engaging in deviant silence, but also expect colleagues and supervisors will respond negatively to deviant silence by engaging in further incivility as the employee no longer invests in social exchange relationships with others in the organization. Although due to its covert nature (Brinsfield, 2013; Khalid & Ahmed, 2016; Teo & Caspersz, 2011), deviant silence might not be as detectable as more overt responses to WPI, we expect people to respond more negatively to it when discovered. In addition, although colleagues may find it hard to detect, employees who engage in deviant silence in response to WPI are likely to withdraw from engaging in social exchange with colleagues who are the subject of deviant silence, which in turn makes them a target for further WPI. We, therefore, propose an additional hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2** *Employees' deviant silence relates positively to WPI over time.*

## The moderating role of moral attentiveness

In their seminal work, Andersson and Pearson (1999) stressed the need to consider workplace incivility as a reciprocal process that develops over time. They postulated an escalating scenario where negative responses from incivility targets would lead to more incivility. Such blow-for-blow reciprocal exchanges would eventually, at a (tipping) point, amplify exponentially from uncivil to coercive behaviors. In this spiraling scenario, the impact of facilitating factors, for example, hot temperament and a climate for informality, are expected to accentuate the incivility spiral. Extending Andersson and Pearson's core arguments, we move from the examination of facilitating factors to explore the influence of factors that mitigate or attenuate the impact of incivility on subsequent behavior. In doing so we focus on the role of moral orientations.

Although research suggests that individual-level moral orientations such as moral attentiveness or moral identity directly influence ethical behaviors (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Rest, 1986; Samnani et al., 2013), there has been limited work examining whether they are likely to attenuate the negative influence of workplace incivility. We, therefore, examine whether a key moral orientation, moral attentiveness, limits the extent to which employees negatively respond to WPI through engaging in deviant silence. Moral attentiveness is a relatively stable, trait-like moral orientation and refers to "the extent to which an individual chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences" (Reynolds, 2008, p. 1028). A self-conscious moral orientation, it is reflected in the internalization of moral concepts and a greater sensitivity to ethical concerns (Jennings et al., 2015). Reynolds (2008) argued that people vary in the level of attention that they pay to moral matters based upon the varying amounts of attention they give to a moral stimulus. Individuals high in moral attentiveness are both alert to ethically charged situations and aware of the moral consequences of ethically charged information (Culiberg & Mihelič, 2016). Distinct from moral sensitivity (Sparks & Hunt, 1998) and moral awareness (Rest, 1986), moral attentiveness is a personal resource (Hobfoll, 2002) that helps individuals categorize information as moral or amoral (Sturm, 2017), and is independent of events in any given context.

Moral attentiveness consists of two dimensions: perceptual and reflective moral attentiveness (Whitaker & Godwin, 2013). While *perceptual moral attentiveness* refers to an individual's propensity to identify or recall moral content in the environment, *reflective moral attentiveness* refers to the extent to which an individual considers and reflects upon moral matters in day-to-day decision making. Moral attentiveness not only helps an individual to judge his/her own behavior, but also helps him/her to assess others' behavior by comparing it to his/her own moral standards (Reynolds, 2008). This specific characteristic enables an individual to detect immoral behavior by processing information from moral cues (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Moreover, it assists him/her to act morally because it fosters perceptions of what is the "right thing to do" (Gils et al., 2015; Reynolds, 2008).

In the present study, we propose that deviant silence is viewed by individuals as unethical, retaliatory behavior that runs counter to an individual's moral values. While Freud (1923) introduced the notion of the *superego* as an unconscious self-monitoring process generated by moral standards, researchers have emphasized how individuals consider ethical matters differently, with varying levels of moral attentiveness (Hannah et al., 2011; Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds & Ceranic, 2009; Sturm, 2017). In the present study, we argue that those with higher levels of moral attentiveness are less likely to react to WPI in the form of deviant silence as they are more likely to reflect upon and think about moral matters, and therefore consider deviant silence as a way of responding to WPI which runs counter to their morality. In other words, when faced with WPI they are less likely to withdraw from the social exchange relationship with the organization and its members than those with low levels of moral attentiveness.

In line with such thinking prior research has established that those with high levels of moral attentiveness are less likely to engage in unethical or deviant behavior (Gils et al., 2015; Reynolds, 2008). Accordingly, we would expect moral attentiveness to lessen the impact of WPI on deviant silence and reduce the potential for the incivility/deviant silence spiral to run out of control. In prior research, few studies have examined the relative influence of perceptual and reflective moral attentiveness on individuals' ethical decision making and behavior. Although prior work suggests that reflective moral attentiveness may mitigate unethical behavior at work to a greater extent than perceptual moral attentiveness (Miao et al., 2020; Reynolds, 2008; Wurthmann, 2013), we might expect both dimensions to limit the extent to which employees respond in an unethical manner to WPI. First, when individuals reflect on moral issues in their daily lives to a greater extent, that is exhibit higher levels of reflective moral attentiveness, they will reflect more on the ethical issues involved when deciding how to respond to WPI. As such, compared to those with low levels of reflective moral attentiveness, they will be more likely to recognize the negative consequences of engaging in deviant silence in response to WPI, and in turn, be less likely to respond in a negative manner. Similarly, when individuals identify and recall moral issues in their daily lives to a greater extent, that is exhibit higher levels of perceptual moral attentiveness, they will show greater awareness and sensitivity to moral topics. As such those with high levels of perceptual moral attentiveness will be less likely to respond hastily and emotionally and be more likely to consider engaging in deviant silence to be an ethical issue, than those with low levels of perceptual moral attentiveness. This in turn might reduce their willingness to engage in deviant silence. This leads us to the following hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 3a** *Reflective moral attentiveness negatively moderates the relationship between WPI and deviant silence.*

**Hypothesis 3b** *Perceptual moral attentiveness negatively moderates the relationship between WPI and deviant silence.*



## METHOD

### Context and data

We undertook a longitudinal study where survey questionnaires were administered at three time points (T1, T2 & T3) in two-month gaps over a period of six months. Full-time employees working in the USA were invited to complete questionnaires through Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing data collection platform. Prior research has confirmed that the quality of the data collected from MTurk is highly reliable (Hauser & Schwarz, 2016). To ensure high quality of data for the current study, we restricted the MTurk sample to include only subjects with high reputation in the system, meaning individuals who have completed more human intelligence tasks (HITs), and with higher HIT acceptance ratios (as recommended by Peer et al., 2014). To deal with subject inattentiveness the use of MTurk Workers' approval ratings has been suggested as an alternative to the use of Attention Check Questions (Peer et al., 2014). Additionally, to deal with subject inattentiveness, during data screening we conducted multivariate outlier analysis and also observed the survey completion time of the survey for each respondent based on the approximate time suggested by Survey Monkey, our survey platform. Such practices comply with the recommendations from previous research (Harms & DeSimone, 2015; Meade & Craig, 2012; Newman et al., 2020). In order to avoid issue of repeated participation, we closely monitored the MTurk Worker IDs and IP addresses before approving the HITs. By using system and customized qualifications we restricted our participants' location to the U.S., their employment status as full-time employees and allowed participants from different industries to make our sample more representative in line with the recommendations of Cheung et al. (2017). The respondents were compensated for their participation and their individual responses were kept anonymous. Specifically, each respondent was paid US \$.60 at time 1 and US \$1 at Time 2 and Time 3. Results of the study were made available to respondents who requested them. At the second and third time points, only those who took part in the first and second waves of the study respectively were invited.

We included items related to WPI, deviant silence, moral attentiveness and demographics in the first questionnaire. The same questionnaire excluding demographics was distributed at the second time point. At the third time point, moral attentiveness was also excluded from the questionnaire. Out of the 297 participants that took part at T1, 239 (80.47% of those at T1) participated at T2 and 171 (57.58% of those at T1) at T3 respectively. We used worker IDs to match different responses of the same participants at the three time points. The final sample ( $N = 171$ ) comprised of 75 men (43.9%) and 96 women (56.1%). The average age of respondents were 37.13 years ( $SD = 10.28$ ). The sample of this study was diverse in relation to marital status and industry. Specifically, in terms of marital status, our respondents were 71 (41.5%) single, 80 (46.8%) married, 19 (11.1%) divorcee and 1 (.6%) widowed. The respondents were employed in the different industries mainly information technology (14.6%), retail (14%), manufacturing (11.6%), healthcare (11.7%) and education (11.1%).

### Measures

#### Workplace incivility

We measured how often participants experienced disrespectful and rude behaviors at work by adapting the seven-item from the Workplace Incivility Scale (Cortina et al., 2001). The scale was modified in terms of time that is from past 5 years to past 60 days. The validity and reliability of the modified

scale were checked as suggested by Heggstad et al. (2019). A sample item included “Over the past 60 days, have you been in a situation where any of your superiors or coworkers put you down or was condescending to you”. Participants provided ratings on a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = Never, 5 = Everyday). The Cronbach's alpha values for the time 1, 2, and 3 were .89, .90, and .87, respectively.

## Deviant silence

Deviant silence was assessed using the 5-item scale developed and validated by Brinsfield (2013). Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale the extent to which they remained silent at work during last two months for purposes such as “getting even with another person”, and “purposefully harming the organization” (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). The alpha scale reliabilities for time 1, 2, and 3 were .88, .85, and .82, respectively.

## Moral attentiveness

To measure moral attentiveness, we adopted the 12-item scale from Reynolds (2008), which comprises seven items measuring perceptual moral attentiveness (MAP) and five items measuring reflective moral attentiveness (MAR). Sample items included “I regularly think about the ethical implications of my decision” (MAP) and “I frequently encounter ethical situations” (MAR). Participants provided ratings on a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The scale reliabilities for moral attentiveness perceptual at time 1 & 2 were .92 and .93, respectively, and for moral attentiveness reflective at time 1 and 2 were .89 and .93, respectively.

## Demographics

Age and gender were included in the study as control variables because researchers have found a link between these variables and workplace deviance and silence (Aquino & Douglas, 2003; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Pletzer et al., 2017; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998; Tannen, 1990). Age was measured in years and gender was coded as 0 = male and 1 = female.

# RESULTS

## Descriptive analysis

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and reliability coefficients of all study variables and correlations between variables. In the table moderate to high correlations in variables can be seen between the variables of WPI, deviant silence, and moral attentiveness (reflective as well as perceptual) as expected.

## Analytical approach

To analyze our longitudinal data, we utilized structural equation modeling (SEM) because such techniques have been suggested as the most appropriate way to test cross-lagged panel models (Little

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations between all study variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	37.13	10.28											
2. Gender	.56	.49	.08										
3. Workplace incivility T1	2.01	.74	.00	-.01									
4. Workplace incivility T2	2.12	.79	-.04	-.08	.79**								
5. Workplace incivility T3	2.00	.67	.03	-.08	.71**	.68**							
6. Moral attentiveness (P) T1	3.78	1.10	-.01	.03	-.31**	-.24**	-.28**						
7. Moral attentiveness (P) T2	3.84	1.15	.06	.10	-.26**	-.15*	-.15*	.59**					
8. Moral attentiveness (R) T1	4.19	.85	-.02	.19*	-.41**	-.24**	-.32**	.49**	.57**				
9. Moral attentiveness (R) T2	3.71	1.21	.05	.03	-.24**	-.13	-.09	.37**	.49**	.42**			
10. Deviant silence T1	2.07	.71	.02	-.12	.73**	.64**	.60**	-.30**	-.35**	-.49**	-.27**		
11. Deviant silence T2	2.09	.72	.08	-.20**	.68**	.56**	.62**	-.33**	-.30**	-.55**	-.23**	.79**	
12. Deviant silence T3	1.98	.74	.00	-.07	.67**	.63**	.58**	-.27**	-.17*	-.32**	-.29**	.66**	.68**

Note: Study variables, that is, workplace incivility, moral attentiveness and deviant silence were measured at 5 point Likert scale ranging 1–5.

Gender was coded as 0 = male and 1 = female.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

et al., 2007; Williams & Podsakoff, 1989). Specifically, our reciprocal relationships were tested using SEM techniques in AMOS (Arbuckle, 2005). To check the distinctiveness of our study variables we conducted an item-level confirmatory factor analysis for each measurement time (i.e. T1, T2, and T3) as suggested by previous research (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Furthermore, we conducted measurement invariance using three measurement models (i.e. configural, metric, and scalar) across three study waves following the recommendations of Byrne et al. (1989).

To test our hypothesized relationships, we used alternative models (i.e. stability, causality, reverse causation, and reciprocal models) as in previous research (Laguna et al., 2017; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). Following previous recommendations to check the model fit we considered various parameters such as chi-square goodness of fit statistics ( $\chi^2$ ), comparative-fit indices (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (Browne et al., 2002; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

## Preliminary analysis

Before testing our hypothesized relationships, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm the discriminant validity of our study constructs and to check for common method bias. Specifically, for study time points T1 and T2 we tested various measurement models in addition to our proposed four factor model that included workplace incivility, deviant silence, perceptual moral attentiveness and reflective moral attentiveness. At time point T3 we tested a two-factor hypothesized model against the single factor model. The results showed that our hypothesized four factor model (i.e.  $\chi^2/df = 1.399$ , CFI = .962, TLI = .957, RMSEA = .048) and ( $\chi^2/df = 1.333$ , CFI = .974, TLI = .970, RMSEA = .044) appeared to be the best fit at T1 and T2, respectively. Single factor models at both time points where all the items were loaded on a common latent factor exhibited poor fit (i.e.  $\chi^2/df = 5.644$ , CFI = .541, TLI = .497, RMSEA = .165) and ( $\chi^2/df = 7.006$ , CFI = .516, TLI = .463, RMSEA = .188). The results of a two factor model at T3 that included workplace incivility and deviant silence showed a better fit (i.e.  $\chi^2/df = 1.497$ , CFI = .973, TLI = .965, RMSEA = .054) than the single factor model (i.e.  $\chi^2/df = 2.472$ , CFI = .919, TLI = .897, RMSEA = .093). In addition to that, we compared four factor model with the three factor model, where items relating both dimensions of moral attentiveness loaded on a single factor, and we still found the four factor model a better fit compared to the three factor model at T1 ( $\chi^2/df = 2.554$ , CFI = .849, TLI = .832, RMSEA = .096) and at T2 ( $\chi^2/df = 3.888$ , CFI = .771, TLI = .742, RMSEA = .130). Although self-report measures were used, given the results presented, there is evidence that this did not overinflate the findings and that there was discriminant validity between study variables.

## Measurement invariance

In order to establish if there were significant differences between study variables across all three time points, we carried out measurement invariance analysis. Firstly, configural invariance models were tested on all variables collected at T1, T2, and T3. These models exhibited good model fit, so after achieving configural invariance between all measurements point the metric invariance model was tested by imposing constraints on all factor loadings. In order to check significant differences between nested models,  $\Delta\chi^2$  and  $\Delta\text{CFI}$  were used as indicators (Laguna et al., 2017). The model comparison between the unconstrained and constrained model showed insignificant variance thus demonstrating full metric invariance. In the last stage, scalar invariance was conducted by adding equivalent

intercepts across all measurement times (Meredith, 1993). The results indicated that there was no evidence of scalar invariance across three waves (Table 2).

## Cross-lagged path analysis

After confirming the measurement invariance across three waves, we tested our hypotheses using cross-lagged path analysis. First, we tested a stability model (M1) which had autoregressive paths as well as synchronous correlation paths from T1 to T2, T2 to T3, and T1 to T3 for the same constructs, and all constructs at the same measurement time were allowed to correlate respectively. Then, in the causality model (M2), cross-lagged paths were added from T1 and T2 workplace incivility to T2 and T3 deviant silence in addition to the baseline stability model (M1). Following this, in the reverse causation model (M3) additional paths from T1 and T2 deviant silence to T2 and T3 workplace incivility were included. In the final reciprocal model (M4), all previous paths were included to test the reciprocal relationships between study variables (Figure 2).

Findings of data analysis confirmed that while the stability model (M1) exhibited acceptable fit, the causality model (M2), and reversed causation model (M3) exhibited good fit. Our reciprocal model (M4) also exhibited good fit (i.e. CMIN = 3.651, DF = 2,  $p = .161$ , CFI = .998 and RMSEA = .070).

TABLE 2 Results of measurement invariance across three waves

Model	$\chi^2$	$df$	$p$	RMSEA <sup>a</sup>	CFI <sup>b</sup>	Model comparison	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$	$p$	$\Delta CFI$
M1 configural invariance	241.150	153	.000	.034	.972					
M2 metric invariance	264.266	173	.000	.032	.971	M1 vs. M2	23.116	20	.283	.001
M3 scalar invariance	362.702	207	.000	.038	.951	M1 vs. M3	121.552	54	.000	.021

<sup>a</sup>Root-mean-square error of approximation.; <sup>b</sup>Comparative fit index.

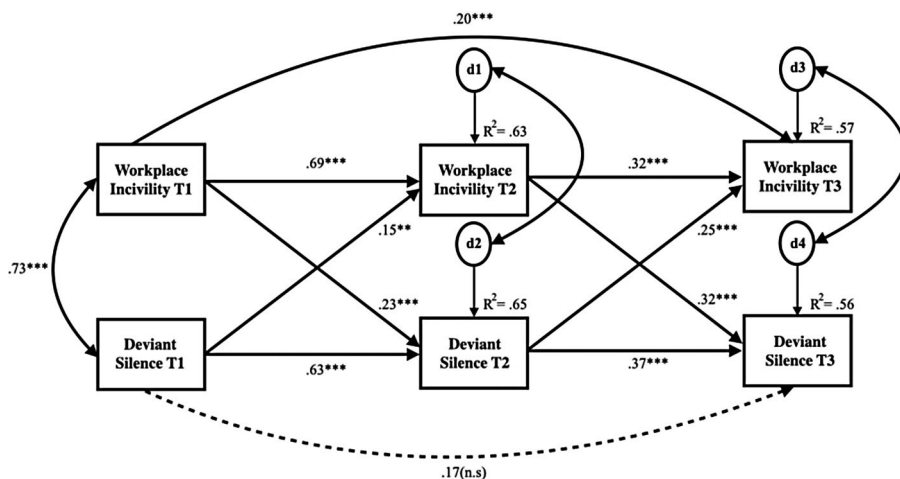


FIGURE 2 Reciprocal model of workplace incivility and deviant silence. T1, time 1; T2, time 2; T3, time 3

TABLE 3 Results of cross lagged path analysis

Model	$\chi^2$	df	p	RMSEA <sup>a</sup>	CFI <sup>b</sup>	Model comparison	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$	$\Delta CFI$
M1 stability model	52.806	6	.000	.214	.938	M1 vs. M4	49.155	4	.144
M2 causality model	20.661	4	.000	.157	.978	M2 vs. M4	17.010	2	.087
M3 reversed causation model	36.412	4	.000	.218	.957	M3 vs. M4	32.761	2	.148
M4 reciprocal model	3.651	2	.161	.070	.998				

<sup>a</sup>Root-mean-square error of approximation.; <sup>b</sup>Comparative fit index.

TABLE 4 Results of moderation analyses

Constructs	$\beta$	SE	p	R <sup>2</sup>	95% Confidence Interval	
					LL BCa <sup>a</sup>	UL BCa <sup>b</sup>
<b>Deviant Silence T2</b>						
W. Incivility T1	.47	.15	.002	.58	.1724	.7747
Moral Attentiveness Reflective T1	-.20	.08	.010		-.3597	-.0474
Incivility T1 × Moral Attentiveness (R) T1	-.13	.07	.049		-.2712	-.0001
W. Incivility T1	.52	.17	.002	.51	.1881	.8632
Moral Attentiveness Perceptual T1	-.08	.04	.091		-.1665	.0125
Incivility T1 × Moral Attentiveness (P) T1	-.13	.09	.142		-.3044	.0441
<b>Deviant Silence T3</b>						
W. Incivility T2	.44	.14	.001	.52	.1705	.7084
Moral Attentiveness Reflective T2	-.11	.04	.003		-.1938	-.0402
Incivility T2 × Moral Attentiveness (R) T2	-.19	.09	.024		-.3688	-.0255
W. Incivility T2	.53	.14	.000	.43	.2583	.8091
Moral Attentiveness Perceptual T2	-.04	.04	.332		-.1180	.0401
Incivility T2 × Moral Attentiveness (P) T2	-.09	.09	.317		-.2810	.0917

<sup>a</sup>Lower limit bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap.; <sup>b</sup>Upper limit bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap.

Compared to all alternative models (M1, M2, and M3), the reciprocal model (M4) appeared to be the best fitting model (Table 3). The structural paths from T1 and T2 workplace incivility to T2 and T3 deviant silence were significant ( $\beta = .23, p < .001$ ) and ( $\beta = .32, p < .001$ ), respectively, in line with hypothesis (H1) that workplace incivility is positively related to deviant silence over time. Similarly, deviant silence at T1 and T2 was significantly related to workplace incivility at T2 ( $\beta = .15, p < .05$ ) and T3 ( $\beta = .25, p < .001$ ), respectively, in line with the hypothesized relationship (H2) that deviant silence leads to workplace incivility over a period of time.

To test the moderating role of reflective and perceptual moral attentiveness on the relationship between WPI and deviant silence, we tested model 1 using the “PROCESS” macro with bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrapping (Hayes, 2018). We found that the first interaction variable (reflective moral attentiveness × workplace incivility) was significant at the 95% confidence interval for both T2 and T3 deviant silence (Table 4). But the second interaction variable (perceptual moral attentiveness × workplace incivility) was insignificant at both measurement times. Thus, the results confirmed the negative moderating role of reflective moral attentiveness.

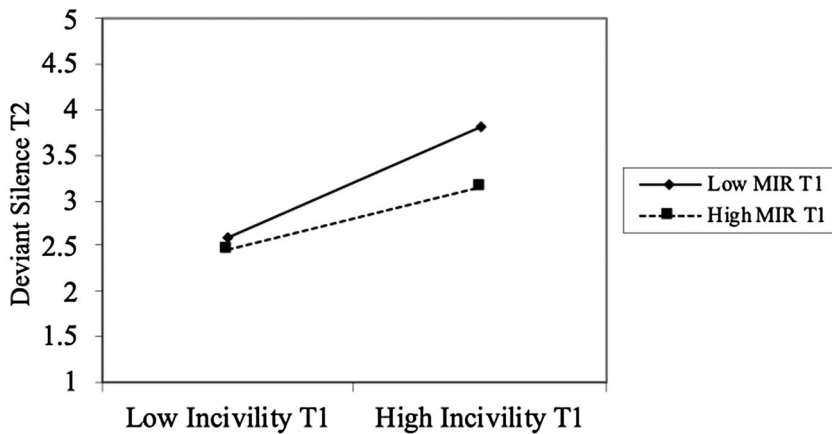


FIGURE 3 Interaction of workplace incivility T1 and moral attentiveness reflective T1

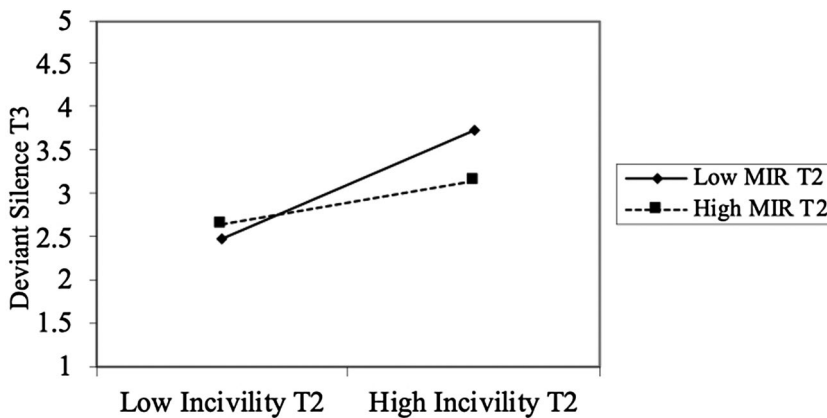


FIGURE 4 Interaction of workplace incivility T2 and moral attentiveness reflective T2

As recommended by Aiken et al. (1991), we plotted the interaction effects of reflective moral attentiveness and WPI t T1 as well as T2 by incorporating slopes having  $\pm 1$  standard deviation above and below the mean scores. The results of slope analysis at one standard deviation above and below the mean scores of T1 & T2 reflective moral attentiveness also confirmed the moderating role of reflective moral attentiveness (Figures 3 and 4). Specifically, when reflective moral attentiveness at T1 was high, the relationship between workplace incivility at T1 and deviant silence at T2 becomes weaker ( $\beta = .36, p < .05$ ), and when reflective moral attentiveness at T1 was low this relationship becomes stronger ( $\beta = .56, p < .001$ ).

Similarly, we plotted the interaction between reflective moral attentiveness at T2 and workplace incivility at T2. The results showed that when reflective moral attentiveness at T2 was high, the relationship between workplace incivility at T2 and deviant silence at T3 becomes insignificant ( $\beta = .20, n.s.$ ), and when reflective moral attentiveness at T2 was low this relationship becomes significant and positive ( $\beta = .67, p < .001$ ).

Our study results fully supported H1 and H2 demonstrating a reciprocal relationship between workplace incivility and deviant silence. However, we only found partial support for the moderating effects of moral attentiveness, in that we found that although reflective moral attentiveness (H3b)

moderated the relationship between workplace incivility and deviant silence, perceptual moral attentiveness (H3a) did not.

## Supplemental analysis

Given we found a negative and significant correlation between gender and deviant silence, we controlled for participants' gender in our reciprocal model (M4) to investigate whether it influenced the analyzed relationship. When gender was included this model exhibited better fit to the data than the reciprocal model,  $CMIN = 5.358$ ,  $DF = 5$ ,  $p = .374$ ,  $RMSEA = .021$ ,  $CFI = 1.000$ ; comparison with the M4:  $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 1.707$ ,  $p < .213$ ,  $\Delta CFI = .002$ , showing a statistically significant effect of gender. It showed that being male was positively related to deviant silence at T2, suggesting that males respond more negatively to WPI than females. To further check the possible moderating role of gender on the linkage between workplace incivility and deviant silence, we tested the interaction effect of workplace incivility and gender on deviant silence. The findings confirmed the significant negative moderating role of gender having interaction with workplace incivility at T1 on deviant silence at T2 ( $\beta = -.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ). But the results showed a negative insignificant moderating effect on the link between incivility 2 and deviant silence 3 ( $\beta = -.07$ , n.s.). We found no significant role of the interaction between gender and deviant silence on workplace incivility. Then we tested the interaction effect of age with the study variables. The results confirmed the positive interaction effect of age and workplace incivility T1 on deviant silence T2 ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but the interaction effect of age with workplace incivility T2 on deviant silence T3 was insignificant ( $\beta = .09$ , n.s.). Furthermore, when testing the interaction effect of age and deviant silence on workplace incivility, we found no significant relationship.

## DISCUSSION

The main objective of the current study was to explore the dynamic relationship between WPI and employees' deviant silence. Based on three-wave panel data, our finding, revealed that WPI was positively related to employees' deviant silence and that employees' deviant silence was positively related to WPI over time. Interestingly, although we found support for the moderating effects of reflective moral attentiveness on the relationship between WPI and deviant silence, we found no moderating effects of perceptual moral attentiveness. More specifically, we found that reflective moral attentiveness weakened the positive relationship between WPI and deviant silence. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings below.

### Theoretical contributions

Our results provide several important theoretical implications. First, we contribute to the employee silence literature by identifying WPI as a key predictor of employees' deviant silence, defined as silence intended to cause harm, a dimension of silence that has rarely been systematically examined in prior work (Brinsfield, 2013). The present study is the first one to explore reciprocal effects of WPI and deviant silence. In line with the SET, our study established that employees respond to WPI by intentionally withholding information that may hurt the perpetrator, colleagues, or the organization more generally, in other words not investing in social exchange relationships with other members of the organization after experiencing WPI. Although a number of other explanations (e.g. perceptions



of interactional injustice, feelings of negative affect) have been provided to explain why people negatively respond to WPI, our study draws on a SET perspective to highlight how people react to mistreatment at work in the form of deviant silence.

In addition, we found that colleagues at work further respond to employees who engage in deviant silence in the form of further WPI, as the social exchange relationships between the employee and others at work break down. In other words, we find evidence of a downward spiral of negative outcomes at work that is instigated by WPI. Although prior research has examined the link between WPI and deviant behaviors (Potipiroon & Ford, 2019; Wu et al., 2014), ours is the first to confirm that employees' negative responses to WPI lead to further WPI, even for deviant silence which is a less direct response to WPI than more direct forms of deviant or counterproductive work behaviors. In examining these issues our research not only highlights the negative consequences of WPI, but also help us determine that deviant silence, as an employee's response to WPI. Although the direct link between incivility and employee silence has been studied before, to the best of our knowledge, prior work has not tested reciprocal relationships between incivility and deviant silence in the workplace setting. Our findings also indicate that the positive relationship between WPI and deviant silence is stable over time (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Potipiroon & Ford, 2019; Wu et al., 2014). Thus, our research helps us to understand why employees remain silent at the workplace in response to incivility and its negative consequence for organizational members.

The second contribution of the present study was made by examining the moderating effects of moral attentiveness on the relationship between WPI and deviant silence. In doing so our study built on previous conceptual work which highlighted the factors which may accentuate the influence of WPI (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), by being one of the first to pinpoint factors that buffer against its negative effects and limit the negative incivility spiral induced by WPI. Although, our study found that the employees' reflective moral attentiveness significantly moderated the relationship between WPI and deviant silence in line with what was hypothesized, perceptual moral attentiveness did not. These findings suggest, that simply being cognizant of ethical issues in one's workplace (perceptual moral attentiveness) does not in itself stop an individual from reacting negatively to WPI. Only actively reflecting on such issues (reflective moral attentiveness) stops individuals from reacting in the form of deviant silence and damaging the social exchange relationship with other employees even further. Reflecting on ethical issues at work assists the employee to understand what they have experienced in a positive manner, consider valid reasons why colleagues may have engaged in WPI, and prevent them from engaging in kneejerk reactions to mistreatment. Although previous research has not examined the buffering effects of moral attentiveness on individuals' responses to negative workplace behavior, our findings are in line with recent work that suggests that reflective moral attentiveness has stronger effects on ethical decision-making and ethical cognitions than perceptual moral attentiveness (Miao et al., 2020; Reynolds, 2008; Wurthmann, 2013).

Finally, the present study also found evidence that an employee's gender influenced his/her engagement of deviant silence after experiencing workplace incivility. In particular, our results suggest that when experiencing uncivil behavior male employees are more likely to show deviant silence than females. Such gender differences might be explained by dispositional antecedents (Campbell & Muncer, 2008) such as a disposition toward impulsivity and lack of inhibitory control (Miller et al., 2003). For example, past research indicates that males can be more reactive (Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010) than females to workplace stressors (e.g. incivility) due to a lack of control. In line with prior research which finds that women engage in less deviant behavior than men (Arnocky et al., 2012; Chernyak-Hai et al., 2018; Spector & Zhou, 2014), our results suggest that male employees react more than females to provocation in the form of WPI.

## Implications for practice

Our findings have important implications for practice. Exposure to WPI induces negative feelings amongst employees which may lead them to intentionally remain silent to harm the organization or individuals within the organization. As highlighted in prior research WPI leads to significant levels of lost productivity per employee (Porath & Pearson, 2013). In order to limit the negative effects of WPI, organizations should find ways of addressing it. For example, organizations might introduce punishment for employees who engage in WPI (Men et al., 2018). Previous literature validating the effectiveness of incivility interventions suggests that organizations may consider introducing training for managers and others in the organization about the need to build positive relationships at work and be respectful when communicating with others in the organization (Hodgins et al., 2014; Leiter et al., 2011, 2012). Finally, as managers are a key source of WPI (Duffy et al., 2002; Potipiroon & Ford, 2019), they should regularly reflect on the influence of their own behaviors toward others at work, and alter their behaviors to ensure they are not seen by subordinates as being uncivil.

Previous research suggests that moral attentiveness can be enhanced by offering effective training programs (e.g. Osswald et al., 2009; Reynolds, 2008). In the light of our findings that reflective moral attentiveness reduces the negative effects of incivility at work, organizations might consider introducing training programs to heighten the moral attentiveness of employees at work. In such training, employees might focus on reflecting on ethical issues at work and how they might deal with them.

## Limitations and future directions

Our study has a number of limitations. First, unlike previous research our study examined the link between WPI and deviant silence, rather than other types of deviant or counterproductive workplace behaviors. As such it would be useful for future research to examine the reciprocal links between WPI and other more direct forms of workplace deviance within the same study, to establish whether employees are more or less likely to respond to WPI in the form of deviant silence or engage in more direct retaliatory behavior.

Second, as we did not measure other factors that have been shown to predict deviant behavior in prior work in the present study, predictors such as employees' psychological traits and environmental factors (Frazier & Bowler, 2015; LePine & Van Dyne, 2001; Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Ward et al., 2016) might be controlled for in future work.

Third, although the present study drew on longitudinal panel data across three time points, the use of self-report measures for all study variables is a limitation that may result in common method bias (Cooper et al., 2020). In future research, we might engage other respondents to rate variables in the model such as WPI.

Our study did not specify whether deviance was actually directed at those who were uncivil. However, previous research indicates that employees may remain silent to wide array of different types of targets (Brinsfield, 2013). In particular, upper management, supervisor, and coworkers were the three most frequently reported targets (Brinsfield, 2013). Based on prior research findings, we might expect due to power issues individuals would react more negatively to WPI from people at similar levels to them than someone more senior (Aquino et al. (2001). Further research should be conducted using social network analysis to capture the specific source of workplace incivility and the target of deviant silence. This technique may allow us to determine whether deviant silence was actually directed at those who were uncivil, or people react more negatively to WPI from supervisors or co-workers.

A final limitation results from the fact that the research was conducted in a single country, the United States. As prior research suggests that culture may influence individuals' moral and ethical value systems (Graham et al., 2016), we call on future research to examine whether the findings of the present study are replicable across different cultural contexts outside the USA.

## CONCLUSION

Drawing on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the present study examined reciprocal relationships between WPI and deviant silence over time. Our findings not only established that WPI is positively related to employees' deviant silence, but also that deviant silence is positively related to WPI. Such findings confirm the spiraling effects of WPI over time. We also found that reflective moral attentiveness attenuated the negative influence of WPI on deviant silence. Our findings underscore the importance of examining how employees respond to WPI over time, how their responses to WPI influence induce subsequent WPI from others in the organization, and how their personal moral orientations such as moral attentiveness influences their responses to WPI.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

Data available on request from the authors.

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