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Individual Differences in Willingness to Self-Censor

Abstract

We define self-censorship as the *withholding of one's true opinion from an audience perceived to disagree with that opinion*. Willingness to self-censor can be conceptualized as an individual difference, and we introduce here an 8-item self-report instrument to measure this construct. The measure shows good psychometric qualities in both student and nonstudent populations and can be easily administered in no more than a few minutes in written or oral format. Investigations of the demographic correlates show that compared to people less willing to censor their own public opinion expression, self-censors tend to be older, less educated, and politically conservative. Self-censors also tend to be relatively more anxious about social interaction and communication, more concerned about how other people evaluate them, more likely to look to others for guidance on how to behave appropriately, less argumentative, lower in self esteem, and experience more negative and less positive affect in their daily lives. The measure can serve as a useful research tool for investigators interested public opinion expression, political participation, media effects, interpersonal discussion, and other areas.

Freedom to speak one's opinion is a human right granted to people living in free societies throughout the world, spelled out in such legal documents as the *Bill of Rights* in the United States, Canada's *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and France's *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. Although people in democratic societies should be able to speak without fear of government retribution, this does not always mean that people in free societies will always feel free to speak. Even in free societies people sometimes censor themselves, as there are many forces that prompt self-censorship. Although we may disagree with a colleague or boss, we may not feel it appropriate to question his or her judgment out of fear of professional sanction. Although we may not agree with a friend's opinion, we may not feel comfortable confronting him and risk hurting his feelings or making him feel silly or stupid. Even though we may favor a particular political candidate, we may refrain from expressing that opinion if we think that important others around us support a different candidate.

The fact that people sometimes are willing to silence themselves or to otherwise modify their public expression of opinions counter to their own true beliefs has been the focus of research in several disciplines. Social psychologists have focused on "conformity," which we argue below is a special form of self-censorship. The bulk of research on conformity has focused on the social conditions that lead one to express a majority-held opinion as one's own opinion (Allen, 1965). In the fields of public opinion and communication, researchers have examined "willingness to speak out," typically operationalized as a person's response to questions about whether or how likely the person would be to speak an opinion in a given (and usually hypothetical) situation. Scholars from these two fields have similarly focused on the situational and perceptual factors that affect a person's decision to withhold an opinion or speak it publicly (e.g., Noelle-Neumann 1974, 1993; Scheufele and Moy 2000). Studies in all three of these disciplines have shown that there are indeed many things that affect opinion expression in group contexts, such as the size of the majority, the ambiguity of the judgment task, the presence of a consensus-breaking other in the group, or perceptions of the distribution of beliefs in the public or other reference groups (e.g., Allen 1965; Glynn, Hayes, and Shanahan 1997; Morris and Miller 1975; Moy, Domke, and Stamm 2001; Petric and Pinter 2002)

Such research findings notwithstanding, there is reason to believe that people differ in their willingness to self-censor—that willingness to self-censor can be conceptualized as an individual difference that plays a role in people's decisions to withhold their true opinions from others beyond what situational variables explain. In the research presented here, we describe the development of a psychometric instrument to assess a person's willingness to self-censor and report findings on the demographic and personality correlates of this individual difference. To be sure, there are many existing measures of constructs conceptually related to willingness to speak an opinion. However, none capture what may be the most important and potentially harmful form of self-censorship: failing to express one's own beliefs in an atmosphere that may be hostile to that belief. Although there may be little social harm done by minimizing one's own public communication, (as for example a shy person might be disposed to do), failing to express a viewpoint that an individual perceives might not be widely shared can have negative social consequences. Janis (1983) attributed many of the U.S. government's more embarrassing foreign policy decisions to leaders' focus on maintaining group consensus among the decision makers and both internal and external pressures to not express dissent. Public opinion polls may have a systematic source of bias in favor of majority opinions if believers of a minority position are less willing to pronounce their position truthfully. Participatory democracy can be undermined when the full range of perspectives about a topic are not freely discussed. Indeed, Hollander (1975) argued that the failure to express one's opinion uninhibited by the views of others is detrimental to society and threatens civil liberties, and that the free expression of ideas and opinions is necessary to maintain a free society.

Understanding the causes and consequences of self-censorship at the individual level would seem to be a worthy research goal. But before such research can be undertaken, there needs to be a method of measuring this construct.

The Case for Conceptualizing Willingness to Self-Censor as an Individual Difference

Throughout this paper, we conceptualize self-censorship as the *withholding of one's true opinion from an audience perceived to disagree with that opinion*. This definition has a few assumptions we make in our conceptualization of self-censorship that should be made explicit. First, our use of our term “active” is intentional and important, in that in order for an act to be considered self-censorship, the person must have had the opportunity to express his or her opinion but, for one reason or another, has made the conscious choice not to do so. Not speaking one's true opinion would not count as self-censorship if the structure of the situation does not readily provide an opportunity for the person to express that opinion. Second, our definition focuses on perceptions (either real or imagined) of the audience and the congruence between the beliefs of that audience (either true or assumed) and the person's own beliefs. A person who does not express his or her opinion but makes this decision without assumed or real knowledge about the beliefs of the audience is not engaging in self-censorship. Although it is possible to define self-censorship more generally, without regard to the match between a person's own opinion and the beliefs of the audience, this would confound self-censorship with other, related constructs, such as shyness or communication apprehension (although these may ultimately be impossible to disentangle completely in an empirical sense). Third, our definition of self-censorship does not consider *motivations* for that censorship. There are many reasons why a person may choose to withhold an opinion from a potentially hostile audience, such as attempting to avoid an argument, concerns about offending someone or hurting their feelings, potential retribution such as losing one's job or risk of physical assault, or concerns about appearing to be deviant (see, for example, Hollander 1975; Wyatt, Katz, Levinsohn, and Al-Haj 1996). Such motivations can all lead to self-censorship, but our definition makes no distinction between self-censorship resulting from different motivations even though these motivations can clearly result from different psychological processes. Finally, we make no constraints on audience size. The audience could be as small as a single individual or as large as an entire nation or, indeed, the entire world.

It is important to make a conceptual distinction between self-censorship and “conformity.” Conformity is the expression of an opinion that is consistent with the opinion of the audience but inconsistent with one's own opinion. As such, conformity is a form of self-censorship by our definition, because conformity is the withholding of one's true opinion from people who are perceived to believe differently. In experimental studies of conformity using the Asch (1951), Crutchfield (1955), or similar paradigms, this form of self-censorship is the only option made available to participants. That is, participants are compelled in these studies to express *some* opinion—either the majority opinion or their own. Not expressing an opinion has generally not been an option to participants in past studies of conformity. But in real-world social encounters, people are not typically forced to express an opinion (c.f. Hollander and Willis 1967; Santee and Maslach 1982). People can actively choose to withhold their opinions from others. For example, a person interacting with a group can choose not to let his or her opinion known by remaining silent, can change the topic, or can otherwise dodge the question if his or her opinion is explicitly asked for by another.

Although self-censorship and conformity are not the same things, conformity is one form self-censorship can take, and research on conformity does suggest that willingness to self-censor has the qualities of a trait or disposition. Perhaps the most memorable finding from research on conformity is the surprisingly large frequency of participants who act against their own perceptions or beliefs by expressing an opinion inconsistent with their senses or convictions when facing an audience with a different belief or judgment. The classic and (at the time) remarkable findings of Asch (1951), Crutchfield (1955) and others led psychologists to focus on the social psychological and stimulus factors that affect amount of conformity. This focus on conformity resulted in a lack of any serious attention to the fact that a nontrivial fraction of participants never (or at least rarely) went against their senses and beliefs and instead “called them as they saw them.” However, the existence of nonconformists did not go completely unnoticed, and researchers did ask whether it was possible to identify and describe the “conforming personality” as distinct from those who provided their judgments without regard to the opinions of others (e.g., Barron 1953; Crutchfield 1955, 1964; Mann, 1959). Mann (1959) summarized the state of this earlier literature, claiming that conformers tend to be less well adjusted, less dominant, and less extroverted than nonconformers. More recently, evidence has been reported that conformity can be predicted from such individual differences as shyness, public self-consciousness, and social anxiety (Froming and Carver 1981; Maslach, Santee, and Wade 1987; Santee and Maslach 1982). So research on conformity points to the likelihood that what people bring to a situation plays at least some role in how people respond to social pressures to express certain opinions or judgments over others.

An additional line of evidence supporting the construal of willingness to self-censor as an individual difference comes from Maslach's line of research on the “individuating personality” (Maslach, Stapp, and Santee 1985). Maslach argues that some people more than others strive to be viewed as distinctive from others. This line of research indicates that in a social situation, people who prefer to be individuated actively pursue or are less likely to refrain from behaviors that make them distinctive and different. There are many ways in which a person can increase his or her state of individuation relative to others, but they can be lumped into two broad categories: attention-getting behaviors, and self-disclosure. A person who expresses an opinion that is different from those around him becomes, at least temporarily, a focus of attention and is

perceived to be different and distinct from others. Maslach developed the *Individuation Scale* to assess a person's willingness to engage in behaviors that would individuate him or herself from others (Maslach et al. 1985). Maslach's research has shown that individual differences in willingness to individuate predict how people behave in situations in which social pressures to conform are likely present. More specifically, people with individuating personalities are less likely to express conforming opinions and are more likely to publicly advocate novel or dissenting solutions to problems— solutions not offered or advocated by others in the group (Maslach et al. 1985; Maslach, Santee, and Wade 1987; Santee and Maslach 1982; Whitney, Sangrestano, and Maslach 1994). The same research has shown that individuation is related to other individual differences such as self-esteem and public self-consciousness, suggesting it too has trait qualities.

In the field of communication and public opinion, self-censorship became an important topic of study following the publication of Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory (c.f., Noelle-Neumann 1974, 1993). Spiral of silence theory attempts to explain public opinion as a social process. It postulates that minority viewpoints gain or lose support as a function of how willing people in the minority are to express their opinions publicly, which is affected by both perceptions of support for a person's position in the public and the person's fear of isolating him or herself socially by supporting an unpopular belief.

Fear of isolation is construed in this context as a social constant that everyone experiences. However, Noelle-Neumann did acknowledge that not everyone is actually silenced by the feeling that his or her opinions are not widely shared. One category of people, the *hardcore*, "may get accustomed to isolation" (Noelle-Neumann 1974, pp. 48-49) and "regard isolation as the price it must pay" (Noelle-Neumann 1993, p. 170) for publicly supporting a minority viewpoint. Noelle-Neumann also discusses the *avant-garde*, who "either know no fear of social isolation, or who have overcome it," (Noelle-Neumann 1993, p. 139) or who actually relish the hostility directed at them. Noelle-Neumann (1993, p. 215) also reports findings that opinion expression can be predicted from a person's general susceptibility to embarrassment. So we see in Noelle-Neumann's writings an acknowledgement that there are individual differences that can undermine or inhibit the complete silencing of opinions that are not in the majority, differences that may be issue specific or the result of characteristics that people bring to the opinion expression context. Recent research in public opinion and communication has also taken the perspective that willingness to speak an opinion in a hostile opinion environment can be explained in part from individual-level variables such as communication apprehension and general fear of social isolation (e.g., Scheufele, Shanahan, and Lee 2001; Willnat, Lee, and Detenber 2002).

These lines of thinking and research all suggest that it is appropriate to conceptualize willingness to self-censor as a construct along which people vary. In the remainder of this paper we describe the development of a new measure that attempts to assess a person's willingness to self-censor. We first describe the procedures we followed to develop the *Willingness to Self-Censor Scale* and establish the reliability and factor structure across several independent samples and populations. We then examine the relationship between willingness to self-censor and such constructs as shyness, public self-consciousness, argumentativeness, self-esteem and other individual differences that we expect it would be correlated with, and discuss some initial findings on demographic differences in willingness to self-censor. We end with a discussion of the potential research applications of this measure.

Study 1: Scale Development

The *Willingness to Self-Censor (WTSC) scale* was developed in two initial data collection waves. In these 2 waves, a battery of questions was administered to students at two different universities; questions that did not meet certain statistical criteria were excluded from inclusion on the final measure.

Respondents in the first development wave were 196 students between the ages of 17 and 22 years ($M = 18.8$ yrs.) enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course at Dartmouth College. Fifty two percent of the participants were male. The participants responded to 19 items that were imbedded in a large battery of questions administered to all students during the first week of the term. The entire battery of questions took roughly 60 to 75 minutes to complete, although only a small fraction of that total time was devoted to the 19 items pertinent to this study. The 19 items were generated by the authors and included questions focusing on whether or not the respondent has spoken or was willing to publicly speak an opinion in front of an opposing group, the reasons why he or she may choose to (or not) speak out, and feelings about doing so.

Each participant responded to the questions at a time convenient to him or her through a remotely-accessed and password-protected internet web site. All items were presented on the participant's web browser one by one, and there was no time limit imposed to complete each question. The instructions presented at the beginning requested respondents to "indicate the degree to which you agree with the statement. Please be honest when responding. Don't spend too much time on any question. Simply record your first impression." The statement was presented on the screen and five response buttons were provided ("Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Neither agree nor disagree," "Agree" or "Strongly Agree.") When the respondent clicked a response button, the next question appeared on the screen. After the final question was answered, the respondent's data were sent to a central server for later retrieval. The responses were scored 1 through 5 with scores of 5 consistent with a response that suggested a greater reluctance to speak one's opinion in front of a dissenting audience.

In this first wave, we used several criteria to identify and exclude poor questions from the original 19 constructed. First, we excluded any questions that showed little variability in response or if only a very small percentage of respondents

made a response in a particular direction (e.g., agree or strongly agree). Second, we excluded questions with especially small initial communalities in a principal axis factor analysis. Third, we excluded a question if including it in the final scale substantially lowered Cronbach's alpha relative to when it was included. These criteria resulted in the exclusion of 12 questions.

During the second wave of data collection, 4 new statements were added to the measure and this new measure was administered to 323 students taking an introductory-level communication course at The Ohio State University (51% male, mean age = 20.94 years, minimum = 18, maximum = 54). The 11 statements were presented on a single sheet of paper, and the respondent was asked to respond by indicating the extent to which he or she agreed with each statement using the same format as in the first wave. Using the same statistical criteria described above, 2 of the new questions and one from the first wave were excluded, yielding a final measure with 8 statements with good reliability using Cronbach's alpha as the measure ($\alpha = 0.82$). A principal axis factor analysis yielded a single factor solution using the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalue > 1) as well as a parallel analysis to determine the number of factors to extract (Humphreys and Montanneli 1975; O'Connor 2000). This single factor solution explained 38 percent of the variance in responses. The results of this analysis and the text of the 8 questions are presented in Table 1.

As can be seen, the final version of the Willingness to Self-Censor scale taps a variety of thoughts, feelings, and past behavior relevant to self censorship. All questions in the scale have factor loadings in excess of 0.40 with strong item-corrected correlations with the scale score. The item-total correlations in Table 1 are based on a scoring procedure in which a respondent's WTSC score is defined as the average response over the 8 questions. As described above, a strongly disagree response was scored 1 and a strongly agree response was scored 5, with intermediate scores of 2, 3, and 4 corresponding to intermediate responses, with questions 4 and 8 reverse scored. Higher average scores therefore correspond to a greater willingness to self-censor. We use this scoring procedure throughout the rest of this manuscript.

Study 2: Psychometric Characteristics and Cross-validations of Reliability

The initial development of the WTSC scale yielded an 8-item measure with acceptable reliability using internal consistency as the criterion. But it is possible that these 8 items may have yielded good reliability when combined only because we selected them *post hoc* after examining factor communalities and reliability with and without each item (c.f., Kopalle and Lehmann 1997). It is also possible that the items "hang together" only among our rather restricted sample of Dartmouth and Ohio State students. In this second study, we administered these 8 questions to 4 new samples to assess the replicability of the single factor structure and reliability of the measure. We also use the data from these 4 samples to produce a rough picture of the distribution of willingness to self-censor in community and student populations.

Crossvalidation of Reliability

To rule out the possibility that reliability and single factor structure of the WTSC was achieved only through the post hoc selection of statements that met our selection criteria, we administered these 8 questions to 4 new groups of respondents: (1) undergraduate students enrolled in a mass media course at Cornell University ($n = 232$, 37% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.22$), (2) a new group of Ohio State University undergraduate students enrolled in communication and psychology courses ($n = 744$, 44% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.25$), (3) a random sample of adult residents of Ohio ($n = 531$, 38% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 47.02$), and (4) a convenience sample of adult residents of Columbus, Ohio ($n = 64$, 38% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 38.41$). The Ohio State and Cornell students were approached at the beginning or end of a regularly scheduled lecture period and were asked to fill out the questionnaire as a favor to the researcher. The sample of residents of Ohio was obtained and the questions administered over the telephone with the assistance of a professional opinion polling organization using a random digit dialing method to select respondents. The 8 questions were included in a larger social survey the organization was administering during the period of data collection, and only people 18 years old or older were permitted to respond. The questions were administered orally by reading the statement and requesting the respondent to indicate the extent to which he or she strongly disagreed, agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, agreed, or strongly agreed with the statement. The sample of Columbus residents included employees of The Ohio State University ($n = 21$) and clients of a temporary employment agency who were participating in other studies being conducted at the university during the period of data collection ($n = 43$). These participants filled out a written version of the WTSC scale.

The data from these 4 samples were analyzed separately, first examining reliability of the measure (using Cronbach's α), and then with a confirmatory factor analysis to examine the fit of a single factor solution and to test the significance of the factor loadings. In this confirmatory factor analysis, all error covariances were fixed to zero, and all factor loadings were freely estimated by constraining the factor variance to equal 1. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2. In all 4 samples, the reliability of the measure remained above the 0.70 criterion recommended and often used for defining acceptable reliability (Nunnally 1978). Many researchers using confirmatory factor analysis consider a model to fit

Table 1.

The Willingness to Self-Censor Scale (Statistics from Wave 2 of Scale Development Study)

Instructions: For each statement, please check or mark with an X only one box per statement that reflects whether you *strongly disagree* with the statement, *disagree* with the statement, *neither agree nor disagree* with the statement, *agree* with the statement, or *strongly agree* with the statement. Don't spend too much time on any question. Simply record your first impression.

Q# Statement	item- total r^*	Factor loading
1 It is difficult for me to express my opinion if I think others won't agree with what I say.	0.65	0.73
2 There have been many times when I have thought others around me were wrong but I didn't let them know.	0.45	0.50
3 When I disagree with others, I'd rather go along with them than argue about it.	0.58	0.65
4 It is easy for me to express my opinion around others who I think will disagree with me. (R)	0.61	0.68
5 I'd feel uncomfortable if someone asked my opinion and I knew that he or she wouldn't agree with me.	0.48	0.54
6 I tend speak my opinion only around friends or other people I trust.	0.54	0.60
7 It is safer to keep quiet than publicly speak an opinion that you know most others don't share.	0.48	0.53
8 If I disagree with others, I have no problem letting them know it. (R)	0.58	0.66

* Pearson correlation with scale scores (defined as the average of the 8 responses) after removing item from scale; R = reverse scored.

Note: all statistics are presented after reverse scoring when appropriate

well if the CFI (confirmatory fit index) or a related measure is at least 0.90. Using this criterion, the single factor model fits well in all samples as well as the combined sample. But Hu and Bentler (1999) recently rejected the use of 0.90 as a cutoff and advocated a two-index strategy for assessing fit. One strategy they advocate is that a good model should have a CFI (confirmatory fit index) of at least 0.95 combined with a RMR (standardized root mean squared residual) of 0.06 or less. This strategy tends to retain good models and reject poor ones better than the reliance on a single measure of fit. As can be seen in Table 1, the single factor model met these criteria in 3 of the 4 independent samples as well as in the combined sample. An examination of modification indices showed that in two of the samples, the fit of the model could be further improved by estimating (rather than fixing to zero) the covariance between the errors for questions 4 and 8. Questions 4 and 8 are the two questions in the measure that are reverse coded, so adding an error covariance between them seemed sensible. With this addition, all 4 samples met the Hu and Bentler criteria of fit described above. Finally, all factor loadings were statistically significant and in the correct direction in all samples. In summary, the reliability and single-factor structure of the measure obtained during the initial development of the measure generalizes away from the original sample to both new samples of students as well as sample of the Ohio community at large.

Test-Retest Reliability

The reliability of a new measure can also be established by showing that the scores on the measure are temporally consistent. To assess the test-retest reliability of the WTSC scale, 66 students enrolled in communication courses were

administered the scale twice, with the 2 administrations separated by a 4 week interval. The correlation between the WTSC scores over the 4 week interval was 0.67, $p < .0005$.

Distribution of Willingness to Self-Censor.

Although the psychometric properties of the measure were replicated across 4 samples, this does not mean that all samples responded similarly to the measure. Analysis of variance on the mean willingness to self censor scores yielded an effect of sample, $F(3,1567) = 24.30, p < .001, \eta^2 = .044$. All possible pairwise comparisons between the 4 samples using the Games-Howell method for correcting for multiple tests showed that students (regardless of University) were significantly more willing to censor themselves (student pooled $M = 2.75, SD = 0.68, n = 976$) than were respondents in either of the community samples (community pooled $M = 2.45, SD = 0.68, n = 595$). Figure 1 presents the distribution of the community and student samples graphically as well as summary statistics for the distributions. As can be seen, the center of the distribution clearly is to the left of the theoretical midpoint of the scale (3), but the distribution is remarkably regular around that center. There are more people very low in their willingness to self censor than people very high, although a substantial fraction of respondents in both samples did score above “3” on the scale.

To summarize, the results of this study indicate that the WTSC scale has a replicable single-factor structure with acceptable reliability in both student and community samples. The students in our sample tended to be more willing to self-censor than people in the community in general. It is considerably easier to find people relatively unwilling to self-censor than it is to find those very willing to self-censor, but the latter group of people does exist and is not trivial in size.

Table 2.

Internal consistency reliability and fit of a unidimensional confirmatory factor analytic model in 4 independent samples of respondents.

Sample	n	α	CFI	RMR	$\chi^2(20)$	CFI ⁺	RMR ⁺	$\chi^2(19)^+$
Ohio State students	744	0.83	0.97	0.031	72.07***	0.98	0.027	55.17***
Cornell students	232	0.82	0.98	0.036	31.91*	0.99	0.032	25.03
Ohio residents	531	0.76	0.93	0.056	75.95***	0.98	0.035	30.73*
Columbus residents	64	0.80	0.97	0.054	23.37	>0.99	0.042	12.69
All samples combined	1571	0.81	0.95	0.037	157.00***	0.98	0.024	72.49***

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

+ fit after adding Q4-Q8 error covariance

Study 3: Demographic and Personality Correlates

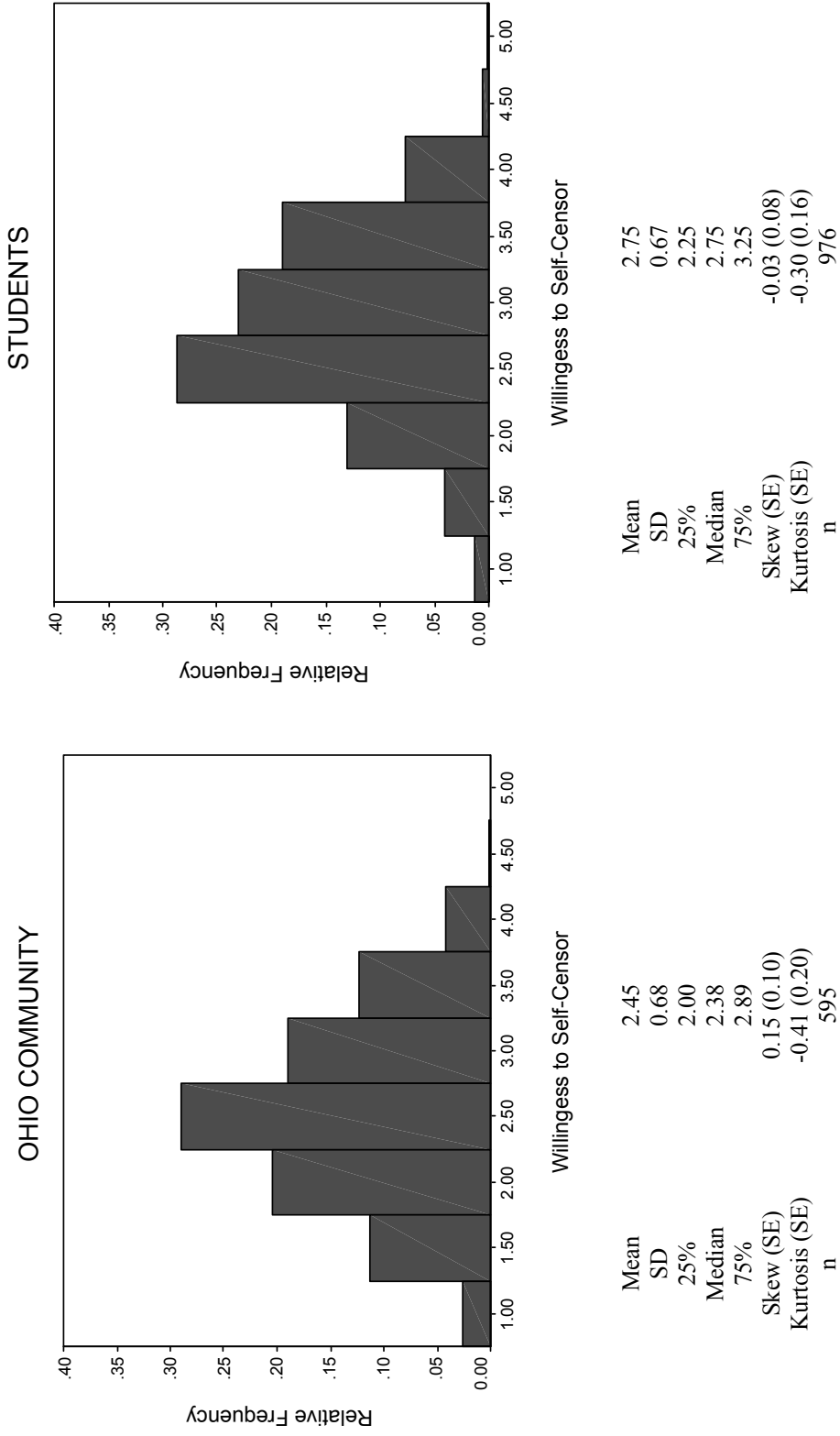
Just what are the characteristics of people more versus less willing to censor their own opinion expression in a hostile opinion environment? Can those more willing to self-censor be distinguished from others by age, education, income, or political ideology? And what kind of social and affective lives do self-censors have? Are they depressed, anxious, and worrisome individuals, or are they well adjusted and largely indistinguishable from those who are willing to confront a hostile audience. Or perhaps self-censors are simply shy people who prefer not to embroil themselves in controversy or stir up interpersonal conflict through argumentation. The data presented in this section shed some light on these questions.

These data not only allow us to paint a picture of the high self-censorer relative to others, but they also allow us to discern the extent to which willingness to self-censor can be distinguished from (or is indistinguishable from) related psychological constructs. The majority of the data in this study come from the samples described in Study 2. Different samples in study 2 were asked to respond to written questions on both the WTSC scale as well as questions from additional personality and behavior inventories described here. Because of the large number of questions that would have been required in order to assess all the individual differences we measured here, not all respondents were asked to respond to all measures.

Demographic Correlates of Willingness to Self-Censor

Included in the battery of questions asked to the random sample of Ohio residents described in Study 2 was a variety of demographic questions. To explore the relationship between demographics and willingness to self censor, these

Figure 1. Distribution of Willingness to Self-Censor in Community and Student Samples



demographics were used as predictors of willingness to self censor in a hierarchical multiple regression. These demographics included gender (female = 0, male = 1), age in years, education (no high school diploma, high school diploma, some college, or college degree), political ideology (7 point scale from 0 = extremely conservative to 6 = extremely liberal), and estimated household income (in dollars). Rather than assuming linearity in the relationship between education and willingness to self-censor, education was entered into the regression using 3 dummy codes, with no high school diploma as the reference category.

At a second stage in the regression, the square of political ideology, age, and household income were entered to assess any possible curvilinear relationships. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 3. At the first stage of the regression, political ideology, education, and age showed significant partial relationships with willingness to self censor, whereas gender and household income did not. Respondents with no high school education expressed a greater willingness to self censor than those with more education. The linear effects of political ideology and age are not interpreted at this stage because, as can be seen in Table 3, both showed significant curvilinear relationships with willingness to self-censor at the second stage. Respondents identifying themselves as extremely liberal (6 on the scale) were least willing to censor themselves (predicted $M = 1.95$, $n = 11$), “lean conservatives” (2 on the scale) were most willing to censor themselves (predicted $M = 2.56$, $n = 127$), and extreme conservatives (0 on the scale) were somewhat less willing (predicted $M = 2.37$, $n = 25$) than lean conservatives but more willing than extreme liberals. The curvilinear effect of age was largely the result of older respondents (older than 60 or so) to be much more willing to self-censor than younger respondents. For respondents younger than 60, the relationship between age and willingness to self-censor was largely zero, whereas the relationship between age and willingness to self-censor was positive for respondents older than age 60.

These results indicate that the relationship between demographics and willingness to self-censor is somewhat complex. Gender and income were unrelated to a person’s reported willingness to self-censor. However, less educated respondents reported greater willingness to self-censor, as did older respondents and political conservatives. However, when taken together demographics explained only 10% of the individual differences in willingness to self-censor that we observed in our sample of Ohio residents.

Concerns about Public Impressions of the Self

The predominant theory of self-censorship in the communication literature is Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann 1993). Noelle-Neumann argues that when the audience is perceived to be hostile to a person’s opinion, people avoid expressing that opinion publicly to avoid the social disapproval and isolation that can result. Indeed, research has shown that people who worry about social isolation are less willing to express their opinions about specific topics publicly (Moy, Domke, and Stamm 2001; Scheufele, Shanahan, and Lee 2001). Such worries are well founded, as deviants are in fact more likely to be rejected by groups (Schachter 1951; Festinger, Schachter, and Back 1950). But what initiates social rejection following the expression of an unpopular viewpoint? Social rejection is, no doubt, the outcome of unfavorable evaluations and feelings that a person simply doesn’t belong. That is, people will socially reject people who are perceived in an unfavorable light as a result of behavior or attitudes that counter a prevailing norm. So admitting to a position that others do not agree with can result in negative evaluations and potential social rejection. People who are willing to express an opinion that an audience doesn’t share may care little about the potential damage to the self that such negative evaluations could produce, including social isolation. In contrast, people more willing to self censor might be especially sensitive to what others think of them and use self-censorship as a form of impression management.

To assess this possibility, several groups of students were administered measures that assess concerns about public impressions of the self. Two hundred and thirty two Cornell students were administered the 6-item Public Self-Consciousness scale. Public self-consciousness refers to a “generalized preoccupation with self-presentation” (Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss, 1975, p. 526) and is typically used as a measure of concern about one’s image in the public eye or awareness of one’s self as a social object. People high in public self consciousness tend to rate as characteristic of the self such statements as “I usually worry about making a good impression” and “I’m concerned about what other people think of me.” An additional 64 residents of Columbus Ohio responded to the short form of the Fear of Negative Evaluation scale (Leary 1983). As the name implies, this measure attempts to assess the extent to which a person is concerned about being evaluated negatively by others. It includes 12 statements for which the person indicates the degree to which the statement is characteristic of the self, such as “I am frequently afraid of other people noticing my shortcomings,” and “I am afraid that others will not approve of me.” Finally, 134 Ohio State University students responded to Lennox and Wolfe’s (1984) Attention to Social Comparison Information scale (ASCI). The ASCI scale was derived from a revision of Snyder’s (1984) self monitoring scale and attempts to assess the extent to which a person looks to others for guidance on how to behave appropriately. It includes 13 statements such as “I try to pay attention to the reactions of others to my behavior in order to avoid being out of place,” and “If I am the least bit uncertain as to how to act in a social situation, I look to the behavior of others for cues.” Respondents indicate how true or untrue the statement is of the self on a 6-point Likert-type scale.

Table 3.
Demographic Predictors of Willingness to Self Censor

	<i>b</i>	β	Proportion of variance explained	Model summary
Step 1				
Intercept	2.904			
Age	0.005	0.110	0.012*	
Gender	-0.105	-0.073	0.005	
Political Ideology	-0.071	-0.149	0.022**	
Income	-0.000001	-0.058	0.004	
Education			0.026**	
No High School Diploma	0	0	-	
High School Diploma	-0.438**	-0.296	-	
Some College	-0.489**	-0.322	-	
College Degree	-0.312+	-0.196	-	
				R^2 0.070***
				Adjusted R^2 0.054***
Step 2				
Age ²	0.00024	0.528	0.009*	
Political Ideology ²	-0.038	-0.470	0.016**	
Income ²	0	0.132	0.004	
				R^2 0.103***
				Adjusted R^2 0.081***
				Change in R^2 0.033**

+ $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .01$
b = raw score regression weight, β = standardized regression weight
Coefficients at first step are from regression model without curvilinear terms
n=418 after listwise deletion of cases with missing data

The correlations between these three measures and responses to the WTSC can be found in Table 4. As can be seen, all three scales showed significant positive correlations with WTSC. Compared to people low in willingness to self censor, those relatively high tended to be more concerned about their public image, fear or worry about negative evaluation to a greater extent, and tend to pay attention to how their own behavior compares to the behavior of other people. Confirming spiral of silence theory, these results suggest that people may choose to censor their own opinion expression from a concern about the negative social costs of speaking an unpopular position and looking deviant, strange, or unusual in the public eye.

Shyness, Social Anxiety, and Communication Apprehension

People differ dramatically in how they interact with other people. Some people are outgoing, talkative, and comfortable in social situations, whereas others find any kind of social interaction anxiety producing. Having to speak an opinion, whether consistent or not with the beliefs of an audience can be overwhelming for some people. The decision to speak or not no doubt will be influenced by preexisting differences about how people feel about and deal with social situations. People who prefer to keep their opinions to themselves may do so simply because any kind of oral communication produces anxiety most easily managed by keeping silent.

To assess the relationship between anxiety or apprehensiveness about social interaction and communication, we administered three dispositional measures widely used to measure this construct. Six hundred fifty nine students at Ohio

State and Cornell University responded to Cheek and Buss's (1981) revised 13-item Shyness scale (Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman 1991). Cheek and Buss conceptualized shyness as different from what they call sociability, or a desire and preference for affiliation with others. They constructed a measure of shyness that focuses not on sociability, as other measures of shyness do in part, but on tension and inhibition resulting from interaction with others. Shy individuals respond affirmatively to such questions as "I feel tense when I am with other people I don't know," and "I feel inhibited in social situations." Second, 343 Cornell University students completed the 6-item social anxiety subscale of Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss's (1975) Self-consciousness scale. The social anxiety subscale was not constructed to be pure of related constructs such as shyness, and probably measures anxiety as well as related constructs (Robinson et al. 1991). Items include "I don't find it hard to talk to strangers," and "Large groups make me nervous." Finally, 85 Ohio State University students filled out McCroskey's Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey 1970), which measures "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated (oral) communication with other person or persons" (McCroskey 1978, p. 192). The 24-item PRCA produces a single communication apprehension score as well as subscores for public, small, group, meeting, and dyadic communication contexts. Questions include "I am afraid to express myself at meetings," "Engaging in group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous," and "I have no fear of giving a speech," to which respondents indicate on a 5-pt Likert scale the extent to which they agree or disagree.

The correlations between these measures of communication anxiety and willingness to self-censor are presented in Table 4. As can be seen, the relationships varied, but all were statistically significant and positive. The strongest correlation was with shyness, whereas the weakest association was between WTSC and public communication apprehension. The results indicate that self-censorship may stem in part from the anxiety that social interaction creates in certain people, an anxiety which is perhaps most easily dealt with by keeping quiet. Although it is tempting to speculate on the source of the differences between the correlations with WTSC across the 4 subscales of communication apprehension, the difference between these correlations was not significantly significant, $\chi^2(3) = 6.03, p > .10$ using a test described by Meng, Rosenthal, and Rubin (1992).

Table 4.
Personality and Affective Correlates of Willingness to Self Censor

Trait	r	Sample	α
Shyness	0.65***	659 OSU/ Cornell students	0.90
Social Anxiety	0.52***	232 Cornell students	0.80
Communication Apprehension	0.56***	85 OSU Students	0.87
Group	0.48***		0.89
Meeting	0.55***		0.91
Dyadic	0.60***		0.80
Public	0.36**		0.91
Blirtatiousness	-0.53***	66 OSU Students	0.71
Fear of Negative Evaluation	0.60***	64 Columbus residents	0.93
Public Self Consciousness	0.27***	232 Cornell students	0.76
Attention to Social Comparison Info	0.34***	156 OSU students	0.83
Argumentativeness	-0.51***	84 OSU students	0.82
Approach	-0.46***		0.83
Avoidance	0.49***		0.83
Positive Affect	-0.30***	225 Cornell students	0.86
Negative Affect	0.28***	225 Cornell students	0.79
Self Esteem	-0.47***	232 Cornell students	0.90

+ p < .10 * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

The size of the correlations between these measures and willingness to self censor might on the surface suggest that the WTSC scale is nothing more than a measure of social anxiety or reticence to communicate. Two lines of evidence speak against this. First, the maximum correlation possible between two measures that are measured with error is equal to the product of the square root of the reliabilities of the two measures (Nunnally 1978). Thus, the maximum correlation that could be obtained between, for example, shyness and willingness to self-censor is around $\sqrt{(0.8)(0.9)} = 0.85$. Expressed in terms of proportion of shared variance, shyness and willingness to self-censor share a bit more than half of the variability that they could possibly share if we assume they are measures of the same thing. Second, we factor analyzed the responses of the 645 participants that responded to all 21 questions on the shyness and the WTSC scales, using the common factor model for factor extraction with oblique rotation and forcing a two factor solution. Using 0.40 as the cutoff for deciding which factor

an item loaded on, 11 of the 13 items on the shyness scale loaded on the first factor, with none of the WTSC items loading on this first factor. The second factor contained only the 8 WTSC items. Two of the shyness items loaded on neither factor. A confirmatory factor analysis showed that this two-factor solution allowing the two factors to be correlated and with no crossloadings fit better ($CFI = 0.936$, $RMR = .047$, $RMSEA = 0.053$, $AIC = 610.049$) than a single factor solution that forced all 21 items to load on a single common factor ($CFI = 0.870$, $RMR = .222$, $RMSEA = .075$, $AIC = 951.017$). Thus, WTSC seems to be measuring something statistically distinct from social anxiety or generalized worry about communicating in social situations.

Argumentativeness

It is sensible for a person to assume that if he or she advocates a position that others may not agree with, an argument or debate may result. Not everyone enjoys arguing with others; indeed, some people actively avoid it. To assess the relationship between willingness to self-censor and a person's general willingness to argue, 84 Ohio State University students enrolled in a communication research methods course responded to Infante and Rancer's (1982) Argumentativeness scale. The argumentativeness scale has two subscales, *Approach* and *Avoidance*. People high on the approach subscale tend to seek out and enjoy arguing with people about controversial topics and respond affirmatively to such questions as "I have a pleasant, good feeling when I win a point in an argument," and "I do not like to miss the opportunity to argue a controversial issue." People high on the avoidance subscale are upset by arguing and try to avoid getting themselves into arguments; they affirmatively respond to such statements as "Arguing with a person creates more problems than it solves," and "When I finish arguing with someone I feel nervous and upset." As can be seen in Table 4, there was a moderate correlation between argumentativeness and willingness-to-self censor. High self-censors tend to score high on avoidance of arguments and low on a tendency to approach arguments. These results suggest that self-censorship can be the result in part of a desire for some people to avoid the social and emotional costs of arguing with others.

It could be argued, that these results are attributable at least in part to the presence of question #3 in the WTSC scale, a question that has obvious content similarity to the argumentativeness construct. To assess this possibility, we computed the correlation between argumentativeness and WTSC excluding question #3. Removing question #3 from the scale had virtually no effect on its correlation with argumentativeness or either of the subscales ($r = -0.49$ for argumentativeness, $r = -0.42$ for approach, $r = 0.49$ for avoidance).

Blirtatiousness

Self-censors presumably reflect very closely on what they are about to say and who they are about to say it to before saying anything. Not all people spend such time mentally deliberating before speaking. Swann and Rentfrow (2001) referred to people who quickly speak what they are thinking as soon as those thoughts occur as "blirts, and they introduced the Blirtatiousness scale to tap this individual difference. The Blirtatiousness scale contains such statements as "If I have something to say, I don't hesitate to say it," and "I speak my mind as soon as a thought enters my head." Self-censors and blirts are very different creatures, and it we expect that people who score relatively high on the WTSC scale would likely be relatively low on blirtatiousness. To assess this possibility, 66 students enrolled in an introductory communication course filled out both the WTSC scale and the Blirtatiousness scale. As can be seen in Table 4, the correlation between the two was negative as predicted. Self-censors tend to be relatively low in blirtatiousness, likely the result of the tendency for self-censors to think first about the possible ramifications of their opinion expression prior to speaking out.

Self-Esteem

Expressing an opinion is more than simply the act of communicating your beliefs. It can also be a statement about your values, the things you feel are important, or even the things that define who you are as a person. Katz (1960) referred to such expression as the *value-expressive* function of attitudes. It is a bold and potentially risky behavior to openly communicate something that reveals something about you as a person that may portray you as unique and different from others. As Santee and Maslach (1982) aptly state, expressing a dissenting opinion is an "emphatic self-defining act." (p. 693). Individuals who feel uncomfortable about their value as a person would probably be more hesitant in taking such a risk than those who recognize their own good qualities. *Self-esteem* is the term typically used to refer to one's feeling of self worth, although it goes by other names, such as self-regard, self-respect, etc. (Robinson et al., 1996). Supporting this hypothesis, Santee and Maslach (1974) found in an experimental context that people with greater self-esteem were more likely to offer solutions to a problem that diverged from the solutions offered by members of his or her group participating in the same task.

To assess the relationship between self-esteem and willingness to self-censor, 232 Cornell University students completed the Rosenberg self esteem index (see Robinson et al. 1996). The Rosenberg scale, well regarded as a measure of self-esteem, is a short 10-item measure that contains such statements as "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself." Respondents indicate their agreement with these statements on a Likert-type

scale. As can be seen in Table 4, the correlation between self-esteem and willingness to self-censor was in fact negative and statistically different from zero. The lower a person's self esteem, the more willing the person was to censor his or her opinions.

Positive and Negative Affect

What kinds of emotional experiences characterize the day to day lives of people who are more versus less willing to self-censor? To answer this question, two hundred and twenty five Cornell University students filled out the 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988) developed the PANAS as a simple means of measuring these two broad categories of affect that show up repeatedly in factor analytic studies of emotional experience. The measure contains 20 mood descriptors (e.g., excited, nervous, hostile, jittery, proud, irritable) to which respondents indicate the frequency with which they experience each mood "in general" on a 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (very frequently) scale. The scale produces a positive affect (PA) score and a negative affective (NA) score. Although intuition would suggest otherwise, PA and NA are typically only weakly related ($r = -.21$ in the 225 students in this sample), reflecting the fact that PA and NA reflect quasi-independent emotional experiences. High scores on PA reflect pleasant energy and activity such as enthusiasm and alertness, whereas low scores on PA reflect dull emotional experience akin to depression, lethargy, and sadness. In contrast, high scores on NA reflect unpleasant excitement reflected in such feelings as worry, anxiety, anger, and fear, whereas low scores on NA reflect the absence of such unpleasant excitement, indicating tranquility, peace, and calmness.

We didn't make any specific predictions about the relationship between willingness to self-censor and affective experience, although some predictions could be offered given the results described previously. For example, to the extent that people who feel anxious in social situations tend to be anxious in general, a positive correlation between willingness to self-censor and negative affect would not be surprising. Similarly, if we assume that people with high self-esteem would tend to experience more positive affect, then this would show up as a negative correlation between willingness to self-censor and positive affect. Indeed, as can be seen in Table 4, this is exactly what we found. People who expressed greater willingness to self-censor tended to experience more negative affect and less positive affect in the course of their daily lives. Relative to those less willing to self-censor, self-censors tend to have emotional lives characterized by more unpleasant excitement (e.g., fear, nervousness, anger) and less pleasant excitement (e.g., enthusiasm, excitement)

Discussion

Communication and public opinion researchers recognize the need to improve not only the theory that drives research in the field but also the importance of developing and improving methodological constructs. The construct discussed here, willingness to self-censor, presents a way to describe individual variance in opinion expression, and we presented here a means of operationalizing this construct. The self-report measure we developed is brief, has good reliability, correlates as it should with theoretically relevant constructs, and its use has the potential to further the development of research and theory in public opinion expression, political participation, and media effects, among other potential areas of application. In this final section we provide some example research applications of this measure.

Self-Censorship as a Moderator of Opinion Expression Predictors. Historically, much research on public opinion has focused on the aggregation of responses from individuals with little understanding of the individual motivations for these responses. These aggregations often are based on the assumption that individuals with no relation to each other "nevertheless behave in approximately the same way, either because they are identical or because they happen to be in an analogous situation" (Galambos and Moscovici 1991, p. 57). Much literature on public opinion has focused on outcomes (e.g., pluralistic ignorance, false consensus, looking glass perception) with less focus on understanding the sources for variance in these outcomes. Failure to acknowledge the individual differences in how people respond to the environments in which they reside may account for some of the inconsistencies in the literature, or the weak effects of variables that intuitively should have been stronger. For example, research on the spiral of silence has shown that the relationship between perceptions of support for one's opinion and willingness to speak out tends to be surprisingly weak and quite variable from study to study (Glynn, Hayes, and Shanahan 1997). This may be in part the result of the tacit assumption that all people will respond equally to the knowledge that their beliefs are not widely shared. Perhaps it is more sensible to conceptualize the spiral of silence as a process that is facilitated or perpetuated by self-censors, who are sensitive to perceptions of the opinion climate, but at the same time inhibited by those less willing to censor their own opinion expression, who care relatively less about the opinion climate when deciding when and how to speak out. Ignoring this important difference between what people bring to social situations by aggregating across individuals yields a relationship between perceptions of the distribution of opinion and opinion expression that is at best weak and at worst totally misrepresentative of the complexity of the process.

This argument predicts that willingness to self-censor may play an important role in the spiral of silence as a *moderator* of the effect of perceptions of the climate of opinion and willingness to speak out. The effects of willingness to self-censor may also be *moderated* by other variables. It would be unreasonable to propose that the self-censoring tendencies of a person would override other potentially important predictors of opinion expression in all circumstances. For example,

someone who is otherwise reticent to disclose an unpopular opinion might nevertheless be willing to do so on an issue that is personally important or involving to the person. Indeed, this is the essence of what Noelle-Neumann referred to as the “hardcore”—people who are not silenced in spite of being in the minority. Willingness to self-censor by involvement interactions in the study of opinion expression are no doubt likely to surface in future research using this measure.

Measurement of Public Opinion. Willingness to self-censor may produce a form of response bias not widely acknowledged by public opinion researchers. The interviewer, as a small but albeit very real audience of the interviewee, has the potential to induce a self-censorship of the very opinion expression he or she intends to elicit. Public opinion polling is ultimately a social activity, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity do not eliminate the fact that at least the interviewer will know how the interviewee responded. Someone who gives their opinion to a stranger on the phone may not be expressing their true opinion, depending on the interviewee’s beliefs about how the interviewer will respond and how the interviewee will be perceived. To what extent do people who think they are in a minority withhold their own opinions from a pollster? If self-censors are more likely to either withhold their minority opinions (by either refusing to answer or answering “don’t know”) or report a majority opinion as their own, this suggests that public opinion polls may systematically underestimate the size of the minority and overestimate the size of the majority, which of course would lead the minority to perceive that their ranks are smaller than they actually are. If the distribution of willingness to self-censor differs geographically (such as regions of a country), such underestimating of minority opinions may be more pronounced in certain areas of a country or community than others. The ability to measure willingness to self-censor makes such possibilities empirically testable.

Media Effects. The wide variability in people’s willingness to speak out versus self-censor has been receiving attention in the media. For instance, in the second war with Iraq, the expression of opinions dissenting from the Bush administration’s policy was often portrayed as a heinous moral failing of those disagreeing with war. Celebrity personalities such as Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon and Michael Moore were shown as fools at best, traitors at worst. Undoubtedly these media portrayals served a social control function, cementing solid public opinion support behind a war that was widely reviled world-wide. How do self-censors react to such portrayals? Do they cement their own tendencies, observing mediated lessons that teach us what is the price to pay for deviant opinion? And how would low self-censors view such models? Would they strengthen their own tendencies in reaction to observing such models, or would they simply conclude that some issues are too dangerous to speak out on?

Political Participation and the Effects of Self-Censorship. Political scientists have been interested in the determinants of political participation, and political scientists and communication researchers have illustrated that there are many correlates or determinants of political activity, including demographic variables such as education, income, and gender, as well as involvement in a particular issue, general political interest, media use, and interpersonal discussion (c.f., McLeod, Scheufele and Moy 1999; McLeod, Daily, Guo, Eveland, Bayer, Yang, and Wang 1996; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). In democratic societies, voting is the penultimate form of participation, but there are many other forms of political participation that are inherently social acts, suggesting social psychological forces and even personality play an important role in political participation. Such forms of participation include demonstration and protest, petition signing, displaying information in the form of lawn signs and bumper stickers, writing letters to members of elected office, giving interviews to media organizations, campaigning for a political candidate, donating time or money to a candidate, and political discussion and debate, for example. All these other forms of political participation and expression can be construed as “public” at some level, although they vary in the degree to a person’s opinion can be uniquely identified from that participation. For example, a person who is participating in a political protest can assume that he or she may be identified either by onlookers or the media and his or her opinions attributed by third parties as consistent with the opinions expressed by the protesters. Even writing a letter to an elected official and donating money are public acts (unless the letter is written or donation sent anonymously) in that there is an audience, both intended (the elected official) and perhaps unintended (the official’s office staff). Several of these forms of political participation inform the audience of the “climate of opinion” and thus can have an impact on elections through a spiral of silence, a bandwagon effect, etc. To what extent does a willingness to self-censor affect a person’s participation in such public political activities, and what effects would such censorship have on local elections as well as the perceptions of the opinion climate by those who affiliate closely with the self-censorer (such as friends, family members, etc). With our measure of willingness to self-censor, such research questions can be examined.

Willingness to Self-Censor as an Outcome Variable. In all the example research applications presented here, self censorship is viewed as a predictor or moderating variable. However, willingness to self-censor can also be construed as an interesting outcome measure. To what extent is the development of a self-censoring disposition related to or affected by culture, family environment, past experiences, or other features of a person’s psychological and social upbringing? And does the media play any role in the development of tendency to self-censor. How does the media portray methods of and strategies for responding to conflict and disagreement, and would exposure to self-censoring models (through the media or elsewhere) lead to the development of a self-censoring response style?

Conclusion

We introduce willingness to self-censor as a person's general reticence or unwillingness to express an opinion to an audience that is likely to disagree. We conceptualize this construct as a measurable individual difference, and show that people who differ in their willingness to self-censor as measured here also differ in ways that previous research and theory suggests they should differ. Researchers interested in studying the role of self censorship in communication processes will find the brevity of the instrument a tremendous advantage, facilitating its use in many different research areas. We hope that this construct and the instrument we provide to measure it will foster a new way of looking at old questions while at the same time stimulating new research into the interaction between personality and the social environment in public opinion expression.

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