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### Conversational Flow

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# Chapter six

Resounding Silences:

Subtle Norm Regulation in Everyday Interactions

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## Abstract

In this article we suggest a mechanism for norm regulation that does not rely on explicit information exchange or costly reinforcement, but rather on the sensitivity of group members to social cues in their environment. We examine whether brief conversational silences can (a) signal a threat to one's inclusionary status in the group and (b) motivate people to shift their attitudes to be in line with group norms. In two experiments—using videotaped and actual conversations, respectively—we manipulated the presence of a brief silence after group members expressed a certain attitude. As predicted, attitudes changed relative to the norm after such a brief silence. Those highly motivated to belong changed their attitude to become more normative, whereas those less motivated to belong shifted away from the group norm. The results suggest that social regulation may occur through very subtle means.

*Resounding Silences:  
Subtle Norm Regulation in Everyday Interactions*

Social and behavioral research on norms often focuses on explicit norms that are regulated by social control mechanisms that are also explicit, and often costly (e.g., Axelrod, 1986; Fehr and Gächter, 2000; Festinger, 1950; Horne, 2001a; Moscovici, 1991). In the present article, we suggest that norms can also be more implicitly inferred from the behaviors or expressions of others (e.g., Bandura, 1977; Cialdini, 2001). We focus on the possibility that conformity to such group norms can be reinforced by subtle mechanisms, such as a mechanism of silence, which need not be costly.

We define social norms as generally accepted prescriptions for beliefs and behaviors within a certain group (cf. Morris, 1956). Social norms are generally shared among group members and guide expectations about how members should think or behave. Although social norms can be explicit (e.g., because people are explicitly informed of rules and expectations), group members are also able to induce tacit group norms from the interaction, even in the absence of explicit cues to behavior (Festinger & Thibaut, 1951; Postmes et al., 2005; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). In fact, the spontaneous inference of social norms from the observation of others' behavior appears to be a generic social learning mechanism (e.g., Bandura, 1977; Cialdini, 2001). Thus, the acquisition of group norms appears to be, at least in part, a process occurring in the background of regular social interactions during which group members implicitly gain knowledge about social standards.

Although norms often appear to emerge more tacitly, this does not mean that they would be less influential. Group members are often inclined to follow tacit group norms, if only because deviation from them (whether they be prescriptive or descriptive, explicit or tacit) exposes one to risks of derogation or ingroup rejection (Marques & Paez, 1994).

Focusing on the question of how norms, once established, are maintained, one can again observe an important distinction between more explicit or more tacit processes. On the explicit side, social norms may to some extent be maintained through regulation and the exertion of social control (e.g., Festinger, 1950; Homans, 1961; Horne, 2001a, 2001b; Moscovici, 1991). In conversations for instance, members may discuss values and norms that are important to their group (Festinger & Thibaut, 1951; Smith & Postmes, 2011) or make correcting remarks when opinions are expressed that deviate from them (Feldman, 1984).

However, research suggests that in many group settings, explicit regulation is quite rare. Even when prescriptive norms are blatantly violated (and when an explicit corrective response would appear to be called for), signals of group disapproval tend to be rare and subtle. Classic studies of people's responses to violations of norms in queues showed that most often, people do nothing when someone cuts in line or jumps the queue (Mann, 1969; Milgram et al., 1986). Similarly, recent research observed reactions of members of the public to confederates drawing graffiti in an elevator or littering in the park (Chekroun & Brauer, 2002). Again, in almost half of the cases there were no visible responses to the norm-deviant behaviors. And if responses did occur, the most frequent signs of disapproval were quite subtle (e.g., sighs or angry looks). Only in 18 percent of the cases was an explicit response made. Taken together, the literature suggests that social control is only rarely exerted through explicit behavioral corrections.

### **Theoretical Argument**

The absence of an explicit response to a norm violation is often easily interpreted as a defect in norm regulation (e.g., Chekroun & Brauer, 2002). But despite this apparent absence of overt regulation, people do tend to adhere to social norms when expressing their opinions (Kitts, 2003; Turner, 1991). So how to explain the apparent absence of corrective behavior in many public settings? One explanation may be that norm regulation takes place at a much more subtle level. In this article we suggest a possible mechanism for norm regulation within

groups that does not rely on explicit social sanctioning, but rather on the sensitivity of group members to social cues in their environment.

In conversations for instance, a person may become aware of being a deviant not just because one is criticized for expressing certain opinions, but also (and perhaps more often) because of subtle cues that alert a person to possible social exclusion. A provocative statement often merely disrupts the continuity and flow of a conversation, for example because the audience remains silent for a brief period while searching for an appropriate response.

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Although such brief interruption of a fluent conversation by an unexpected silence can be seen as a lack of action, it may also be interpreted as “off-record” behavior. Off-record communication cannot be unambiguously attributed to one clear communicative intention (Brown & Levinson, 1978) and thus offers the “actor” the ability to deny any intent to harm or threaten the recipient with social exclusion (e.g., one would rarely be challenged for not speaking, and in the unlikely event this would happen one could always claim being momentarily distracted or pondering what to say). Thus, for the actor the brief silence has few potential costs and decreases the risk of retaliation by the recipient. But for the recipient, the actor’s brief inaction may send a powerful signal; silence can be deafening.

### **The Meaning of Silence**

A silence can have many meanings, ranging from acceptance to rejection and from doubtfulness to a simple reflection of a person’s normal rate of thinking (Johannesen, 1974; Tannen, 1993). Because silences can be ambiguous, the context in which a silence occurs often determines which meaning should be attached (Hasegawa & Gudykunst, 1998; Jaworski, 1993).

In social conversations, people often seek to validate their opinions with those of others (Festinger, 1954; Goethals, 1987). Our prior research suggests that a smoothly flowing conversation implies that there is agreement on an issue— people feel that they are on the same

wavelength and their opinions are shared among group members (Koudenburg, Postmes, & Gordijn, 2013a, *Chapter 4*). On the other hand, the occurrence of a brief silence after an actor has stated his or her opinion tends to be experienced negatively and raises questions about the consensus between actor and ingroup (Koudenburg et al., 2011a, *Chapter 3*; Pomerantz, 1984). When others remain silent, the actor infers that something he or she said was problematic and is left guessing as to what the issue may be. In some sense, a silence may be an extremely persuasive signal: One cannot argue or reason with a warning that remains tacit. Moreover, in group settings an explicit sanction tends to be imposed by one individual, but a silence by definition can only occur when all members of the group remain silent. Thus, a silence may be experienced as a collective disapproval.

But silences appear to do more than just signal potential disagreement. The feelings of distress and unease that often co-occur may also be explained by the implicit threat that a silence poses to one's inclusion within the group (Koudenburg et al., 2011a, *Chapter 3*). Research suggests that humans possess a highly sensitive monitoring system for detecting threats of social exclusion (Kerr & Levine, 2008; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004; Wesselmann, Nairne, & Williams, 2012). Similarly, an unexpected silence raises questions about the relation of the speaker to their audience: It signals to group members that certain conventions or norms may have been violated and thus that there is a latent threat of expulsion from the group.

In sum, previous research has shown that subtle silences in group conversations may (a) threaten feelings of belonging and (b) raise concerns over a lack of consensus (Koudenburg et al., 2011a, *Chapter 3*). The current article focuses on the consequences of such brief silences for normative alignment within groups. We expect that in order to cope with the threats to inclusion, group members should be more likely to adjust their views to the implicit group norm. Of course this presumes that people are motivated to belong to the group in the first place. This motive may not be equally strong for all individuals in all situations.



## The Motive to Belong

In general, humans are highly motivated to form and maintain strong interpersonal bonds and to belong to groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Being excluded from valued groups (Jetten, Branscombe, Spears, & McKimmie, 2003) and even total strangers is often highly aversive (Williams, 2001). In psychological research, having close social ties correlates with subjective well-being and self-esteem (Baumeister, 1991; Howell et al., 2014; Leary et al., 1995), as well as health (Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2011; Stansfeld, Bosma, Hemingway, & Marmot, 1998).

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When belongingness is being threatened, group members often engage in behavior aimed at reestablishing their inclusionary status (Williams, 2009). One way to improve one's chances for (re)affiliation is to attune to social information (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000). Indeed, a high (or threatened) motive to belong has been shown to increase one's ability to accurately identify nonverbal signals of affiliation (Bernstein, Young, Brown, Sacco, & Claypool, 2008) and to monitor and remember social information (Gardner et al., 2000; Pickett et al., 2004), and has been associated with greater behavioral mimicry (Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008). This increased sensitivity to social cues has been argued to help people navigate the social environment more successfully (Pickett et al., 2004).

We propose that such increased social sensitivity—resulting from the motive to belong to a group—can also serve norm regulation. Research shows that people often rely on norms to accurately understand and effectively respond to social situations. In order to increase their inclusionary status, group members may assimilate their behavior and attitudes to these norms (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Moreland & Levine, 1989; Turner, 1991). We therefore suggest that group members' social sensitivity may enable norm regulation without the need for explicit social sanctioning.

But although conformity would be high among group members who want to belong, not everyone may be keen as to conform. In fact, seeking distinctiveness can also be very desirable and have positive consequen-

ces for the self-concept (Blanton & Christie, 2003; Brewer, 1991; Hornsey & Jetten, 2004; Turner, 1991). Indeed, the classic conformity studies of Asch (1956) were designed to examine the phenomenon of nonconformity, and this was actually the dominant response. In particular, we do not expect people who have a low motivation to belong to respond to a brief silence by assimilating to the group norm.

## Two Experimental Studies

The studies presented in this article examine whether brief conversational silences can (a) signal a threat to one's inclusionary status in the group and (b) motivate people to shift to group norms. We suggest that by implicitly raising the prospect that normative boundaries may have been violated, brief silences can serve as a mechanism for norm regulation. Moreover, we hypothesize that if we would indeed find that respondents align their attitudes with implicit group norms for reasons to do with inclusionary status, the predicted effects should be especially observable in group members who are highly motivated to belong. People who are less motivated to belong to the group will be less likely to make adjustments toward the group norm. If anything, the rejection that is implied by the silence may reinforce their feeling of being distinct from the group and therefore motivate them to remain distinctive from group norms.

Study 1 was designed to examine these hypotheses in a controlled experimental setting, where people watch a videotaped conversation while imagining that they are one of the communicators. Both threat and attitudes were measured after watching the video. Study 2 examined the same phenomenon in actual conversations to test whether people feel threatened and change their preexisting attitudes as a result of a brief silence. In both studies we expected no attitude shifts in the conversational no-silence condition: As there was no threat of disagreement or exclusion, participants had no reason to change their attitudes. When there was a brief silence, however, we expected motivation to belong to the group to predict the degree to which participants adjusted their attitudes to the group norm.

## Study 1

### Methods

**Participants.** In Study 1, 134 Dutch students in the social sciences (M age = 19.70, SD = 2.54, 107 female) participated for partial course credit.<sup>18</sup> They were randomly assigned to the conditions of a study in which silence (no-silence vs. silence) was manipulated. Motive to belong was measured and used as a continuous predictor.

**Procedure and independent variables.** We tested our hypotheses with a video paradigm (see also Koudenburg et al., 2011a, *Chapter 3*). Participants were seated behind personal computers in individual cubicles. They were instructed to watch a six-minute video of three female students—who knew each other superficially—having a conversation about relationships. Before watching the video, participants were presented with a photograph of the three students and instructed to imagine being one of the conversation partners (named Linda). Participants were presented with the following information: “People often have certain motives in conversations. It is possible that Linda has certain motives in the conversation with her peer students. We would like you to imagine being Linda. To what extent do you think that you, if you were in Linda’s situation, would have the following motivation?” Then, participants indicated their agreement with the statement “I would be motivated to belong” on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree).

After four minutes of ongoing conversation Linda said: “Recently, I heard about a teacher having sex with students. I think that this should not be allowed, such a teacher should be fired immediately.” In the no-silence condition the other group members smoothly continued the

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<sup>18</sup> The data of 41 participants has been previously analyzed in Koudenburg et al., (2011a, Study 2) to show that a brief silence can decrease feelings of belonging and social validation. In the present study, we increased the sample size ( $n = 134$ ) to enhance the statistical power to test for the interaction of silence and motive to belong on attitudes. As with the first 41 participants, belongingness and validation measures were included in the questionnaire before assessing attitude change. However, we decided not to report these measures (that replicate the previous findings) here, as the focus of this article is on conformity effects rather than on feelings of belonging and social validation.

conversation on a topic indirectly related to Linda's statement but without responding explicitly to her statement. Their agreement was thus left ambiguous. The conversation continued approximately two more minutes with no further reference to Linda's statement. In the silence condition, the statement was followed by four seconds of silence, after which the conversation continued. Editing of the duration of this single silence ensured that no discontinuities were discernible. Except for the duration of the silence, the two videos were identical.

**Dependent variables.** After watching the video, participants filled out an online questionnaire. Threat was measured with a single-item, "I feel anxious," which was embedded in a questionnaire about emotions (e.g., angry, happy). To measure post-conversation attitudes regarding teacher-student relationships we constructed a four-item scale (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) with items: "A teacher who engages in a romantic relationship with a student should be fired immediately" (reverse coded); "Whether teachers have an intimate relationship with a student in their spare time is their business, as long as the relationships at work are strictly professional"; "Sexual relationships between teachers and students are acceptable"; "An intimate relationship between teachers and students is never acceptable" (reverse-coded, scale alpha = .83).

During the video conversation, Linda expressed her disapproval of teacher-student relationships. A silence after this statement may be perceived as a disagreement by the other group members, implying that the group norm is tolerance regarding teacher-student relationships (see also Koudenburg et al., 2011a, *Chapter 3*). More tolerant post-conversation attitudes would thus reflect adjustment to the implicit group norm.

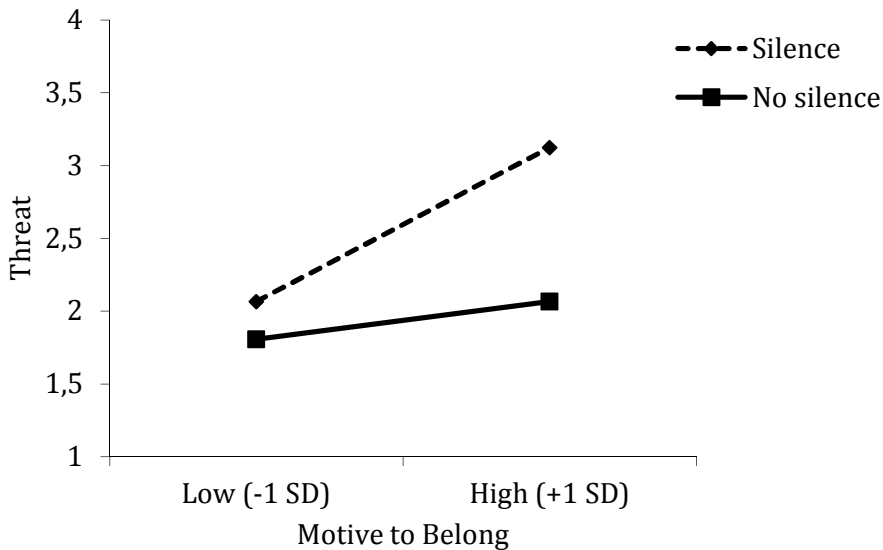
## Results and discussion

**Threat.** Scores on motive to belong ( $M = 4.96$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) were standardized prior to analyses. Threat was regressed onto motive to belong, silence (0 = no-silence, 1 = silence), and the motive to belong by silence interaction. No main effect for motive to belong was found ( $t < 1$ ). Silence had a significant effect on threat,  $B = .27$ ,  $t(133) = 3.38$ ,  $p =$

.001, such that participants experienced more threat when there was a silence in the conversation, rather than when there was no silence. Importantly, we also found the predicted interaction,  $B = .23$ ,  $t(133) = 2.03$ ,  $p = .04$ , see Figure 6.1.

Simple slope analysis revealed that for participants who were highly motivated to belong (+1  $SD$ ), a silence led to more threat than no silence,  $B = .43$ ,  $t(133) = 3.82$ ,  $p < .001$ , whereas participants who had a low motivation to belong (-1  $SD$ ) experienced no more threat in the silence than in the no-silence condition ( $t < 1$ ). Moreover, in the no-silence condition, motivation to belong did not predict threat ( $t < 1$ ), but in the silence condition higher motivation to belong was associated with higher feelings of threat,  $B = .43$ ,  $t(133) = 3.86$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Figure 6.1** Feelings of threat predicted by motive to belong for the different conditions of silence (Study 1).



**Conformity.** Attitude scores were regressed onto motive to belong, silence, and the motive to belong by silence interaction. As predicted, regression analysis showed no main effect of silence or motive to belong on attitudes ( $ts < 1.34$ ). However, the predicted interaction of motive to

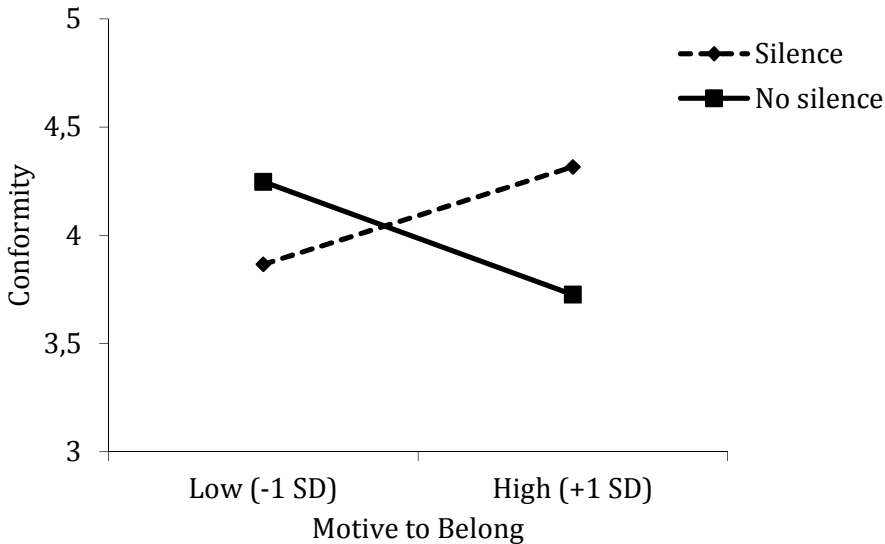
belong and silence was found,  $B = .24$ ,  $t(133) = 1.98$ ,  $p = .05$ . Figure 6.2 shows that the pattern of means was as predicted, although none of the simple slopes themselves were significant at  $p < .05$ . That is, when conversation is disrupted by a brief and uncomfortable silence, the pattern suggests that motivation to belong to the group positively predicts the alignment of attitudes with the group norm—which is implied to be opposed to the expressed statement,  $B = .16$ ,  $t(133) = 1.34$ ,  $p = .18$ .

The opposite trend was found when there was no silence in the conversation,  $B = 2.18$ ,  $t(133) = 21.47$ ,  $p = .15$ . In this condition, the flow of the conversation indicated that there was consensus on the expressed statement (Koudenburg et al., 2011a, *Chapter 3*). Therefore, assimilation to the group norm was reflected by less tolerant attitudes regarding student-teacher relations. The pattern thus suggests that in the no-silence condition attitudes also became more in line with the group when motivation to belong increased.

Furthermore, a marginally significant simple main effect suggests that the silence instigated an attitude shift in the direction of the group norm for participants with a high motive to belong (+1 *SD*),  $B = .21$ ,  $t(133) = 1.71$ ,  $p = .09$ , compared with a slight counter-normative shift in attitudes for participants with a low motivation to belong (−1 *SD*),  $B = 2.14$ ,  $t(133) = 21.107$ ,  $p = .27$ .

Although the interaction on attitudes was significant, the simple main effects were not. This could be due to the fact that participants were not actually participating in the conversation and therefore did not express their own attitudes—some participants might have found it difficult to empathize with Linda and distanced themselves from Linda's expressions. Although the interaction effects of silence with the motivation to belong suggest that participants were able to imagine this situation, it is theoretically possible that people would respond differently when imagining being in this situation, rather than being in the situation themselves. Second, attitudes were not premeasured, thus we could not correct for pre-discussion attitudes in order to assess actual attitude change.

**Figure 6.2** Attitude conformity towards implicit group norm (tolerance regarding student-teacher relationships) predicted by motivation to belong for the different conditions of silence (Study 1).



## Study 2

A second study was conducted to examine the hypotheses in a higher impact and more realistic setting, namely, in an actual conversation. This enabled us to test whether the effects on opinion change would be stronger when participants expressed their own opinion in a group.

## Methods

**Participants.** In Study 2, 69 Dutch students participated in a confederate study in the laboratory for partial course credit or a reward of five euros. Participants ( $M$  age = 20.90,  $SD$  = 4.11, 52 female) were randomly assigned to the conditions of a study in which the presence of silence (no silence vs. silence) was manipulated. Motive to belong was measured and used as a continuous predictor, and threat was measured right after the conversation. Attitudes were measured both before and after the conversation.

**Materials and procedure. Premeasure.** Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants and confederates were instructed about the procedure of the study. In groups of three (one participant, two confederates) they were informed that they would have a conversation in which they would discuss several issues. Then, before starting the conversation, participants individually completed a premeasure assessment of their attitudes on a list of topics, in which a single item was embedded to measure the target attitude “heavy smokers should be placed at the bottom of the waiting list for organ donation” (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree). In addition, we asked participants about their motivations for the conversation with their peer students. Participants read: “Indicate for each motive to what extent you have this motive in the conversation with your peer students: Are you motivated to belong?” on a 7-point Likert-scale (1 = not motivated at all, 7 = very motivated). To avoid making this specific motive too salient, it was measured with a single item embedded in a larger questionnaire about different motives.

**Conversation.** Participants and two confederates were then asked to sit down in three chairs. These chairs were placed in a way that minimized nonverbal interaction: Partners faced away from each other. Participants had a four-minute conversation with the two confederates in which silence (no silence vs. silence) was manipulated. Each conversant was assigned a topic for discussion: The confederates were assigned the topics “People who are mentally challenged should not have children” and “People should be able to get a driver’s license at the age of 16” (in the Netherlands, the legal age to drive a car is 18). The participant was assigned the topic “Heavy smokers should be placed at the bottom of the waiting list for organ donation.” All conversants were asked to describe their opinion on their topic in one sentence, after which the group members discussed this topic together. Confederates were instructed and trained to avoid interruptions in turn-taking and to avoid silences. First, the topics of both confederates were discussed. Then, the participants gave their opinion on their topic, after which in the no-silence condition, the confederates smoothly continued the conversation by discussing whether or not such a policy was already in use in the Netherlands and how the donor system was arranged in other countries. In the silence condition however, confederates remained



silent for four seconds after which they continued the conversation in a way similar to the no-silence condition. Importantly, they did not reveal their own opinion on the topic.

**Dependent variables.** After the conversation, the participant filled out a computerized questionnaire in a cubicle, which the confederates ostensibly filled out in different cubicles. Threat was measured as in Study 1. Afterwards, participants' attitudes regarding discriminatory policies against smokers in organ donation were again assessed on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree. This time with a three-item measure: "Heavy smokers should be placed at the bottom of the waiting list for organ donation," "Heavy smokers should have the same rights concerning donor organs as other people" (reverse coded), and "Nonsmokers should be given priority concerning donor organs" ( $\alpha = .83$ ). The premeasure was shorter because we did not want to make the attitude topic highly salient at first and we wanted to avoid the possibility of participants strongly committing themselves to a prior attitude.

Because we could not a priori control what attitude participants would express, we searched for a topic on which a clear a priori norm existed. A pilot test using the same three-item 7-point scale among 53 psychology students confirmed that participants perceived a group norm in favor of discriminating policies against smokers in organ donation ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ , which differed significantly from the midpoint of the scale,  $t(52) = 3.07$ ,  $p < .005$ ). Importantly, to assess the perceived norm, participants in the pilot were asked to what extent they perceived others to be in favor of these policies, rather than answering this question for themselves.

**Attitude conformity.** As this study aimed to assess the subtlety of norm regulation, the norm was not explicitly stated in the conversation. In order to conform, participants would have to search for cues to locate the group norm. One source of information would be a priori expectations about the group norm. These were in favor of discriminating smokers on the waiting list for organ donation. Another source would be to find out whether discussing such discriminatory policies would be a taboo. Because group members started discussing how the issue is handled in different countries, there seemed to be no

taboo on the subject. Group members were allowed to express their preference for such policies. Shifting attitudes toward the group norm would thus be reflected by a shift in favor of discriminatory policies against smokers.

As the perceived norm was in favor of discriminatory policies, we would expect this effect to be largest for participants who initially disagreed with such policies. For these participants ( $n = 29$ ), a silence would confirm that their expressed opinion was anti-normative, and it would be likely that they would align their attitudes with the group norm depending on whether they were motivated to belong. On the other hand, for participants who expressed an attitude in line with the norm (i.e., in favor of discriminatory policies against smokers,  $n = 30$ ), a silence was difficult to interpret. After all, their expressed attitude did not deviate from the perceived group norm. We therefore also analyzed the data separately for different attitude groups.

**Manipulation check.** Conversations were videotaped. To check whether silences occurred in the appropriate conditions, videos were coded for silence versus no silence by a trained coder who was blind to the conditions of the study. In addition, participants were asked to estimate the time between their expressed opinion and the moment the others responded. After filling out the questionnaire, participants were fully debriefed.

## Results

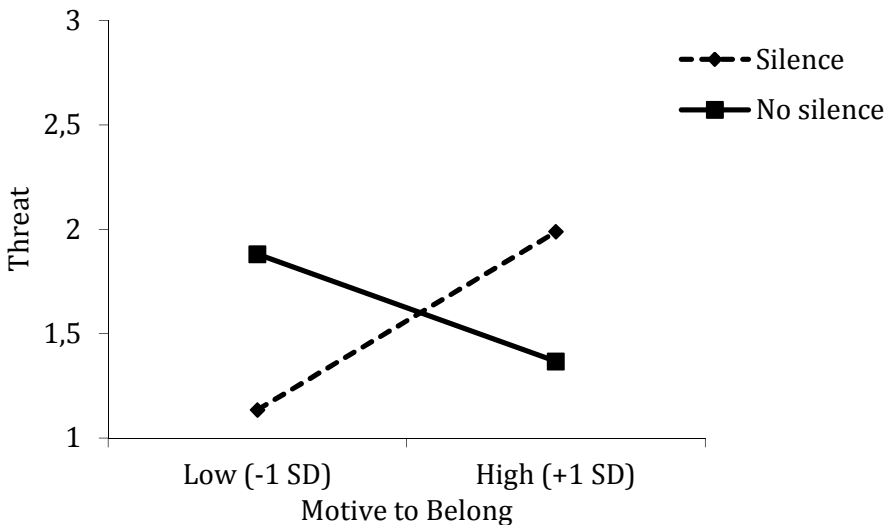
**Manipulation check.** Video codings showed that silences occurred only in the intended condition. Moreover, participants' estimates of the duration between the expressed opinion and the response of the others were log-transformed to attain a normal distribution. Participants in the silence condition perceived the time before others responded to be longer ( $\text{Duration}/g = 1.59$ ) than participants in the no-silence condition ( $\text{Duration}/g = 1.21$ ),  $F(1, 67) = 4.80$ ,  $p = .03$ .

**Threat.** Scores on motive to belong ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) were standardized prior to analyses. Threat was regressed onto motive to belong, silence (0 = no silence, 1 = silence), and the motive to belong by

silence interaction. There were no significant main effects for motive to belong ( $B = .26$ ,  $t(64) = 1.66$ ,  $ns$ ) or silence ( $t < 1$ ). However, as predicted, the silence by motive to belong interaction was significant,  $B = .45$ ,  $t(64) = 2.88$ ,  $p = .005$ , see Figure 6.3.

Simple slope analyses revealed a marginal effect showing that for participants who were highly motivated to belong (+1  $SD$ ), a silence increased feelings of threat compared to no silence ( $B = .31$ ,  $t(64) = 1.88$ ,  $p = .06$ ). Unexpectedly, participants with a low motivation to belong (-1  $SD$ ) experienced less threat in the silence than in the no-silence condition ( $B = -.38$ ,  $t(64) = 22.23$ ,  $p = .03$ ). Furthermore, as expected, motive to belong did not predict threat in the no-silence condition ( $B = .226$ ,  $t(64) = 21.66$ ,  $ns$ ), but in the silence condition, threat was predicted by motivation to belong ( $B = .43$ ,  $t(64) = 2.37$ ,  $p = .02$ ).

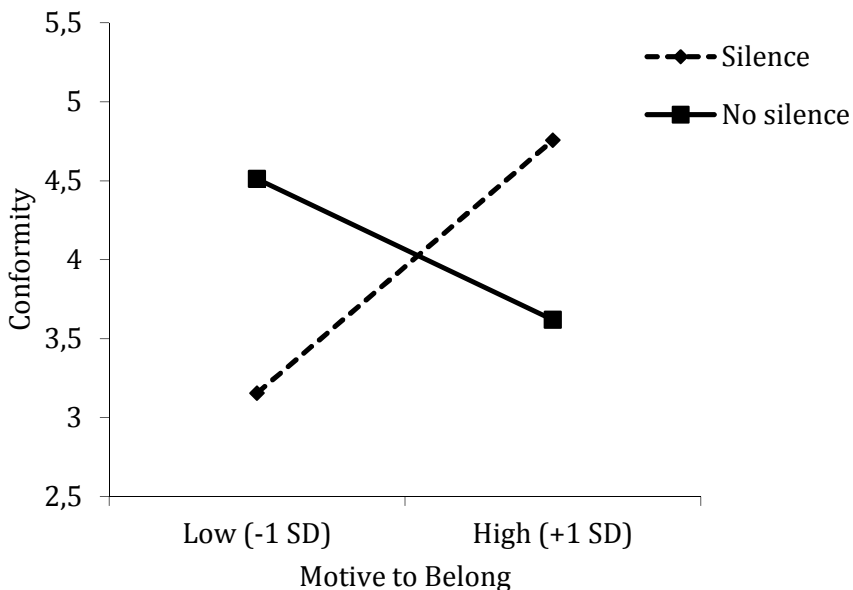
**Figure 6.3** Feelings of threat predicted by motivation to belong for the different conditions of silence (Study 2).



**Attitude conformity.** Post-conversation attitudes were regressed onto silence (0 = no silence, 1 = silence), motive to belong, and the silence by motive to belong interaction. Premeasured attitudes ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ) were included as a covariate. No main effects for silence

or motive to belong were found ( $ts < 1$ ). However, the predicted silence by motive to belong interaction was found,  $B = .29$ ,  $t(64) = 2.89$ ,  $p = .005$ .<sup>19</sup> Simple slopes analysis revealed that in the no-silence condition, motivation to belong did not predict attitude change ( $t < 1$ ). In the silence condition however, motivation to belong positively predicted whether people shifted their attitudes toward the group norm,  $B = .61$ ,  $t(64) = 3.40$ ,  $p = .001$ . Further analysis of the simple slopes showed that as a result of the silence, participants with a high motive to belong (+1 *SD*) shifted their attitudes in a normative direction,  $B = .36$ ,  $t(64) = 2.24$ ,  $p = .03$ , whereas participants with a low motivation to belong (-1 *SD*) shifted their attitudes away from the group norm,  $B = .44$ ,  $t(64) = 22.65$ ,  $p = .01$  (see Figure 6.4).

**Figure 6.4** Attitude conformity towards group norm (discriminating policies against smokers in organ donation) predicted by motivation to belong for the different conditions of silence (Study 2).



<sup>19</sup> When pre-measured attitudes were not included as a covariate, a similar significant interaction effect appeared,  $B = .52$ ,  $t(65) = 3.43$ ,  $p = .001$ , while main effects were non-significant ( $ts < 1.89$ ).

The separate regression analyses for the different attitude groups were consistent with the hypotheses. Indeed, for participants who expressed a normative attitude (in favor of discriminating policies), the motive to belong by silence interaction did not predict conformity,  $t(28) < .1$ . However, for participants who expressed a deviant attitude (against discriminating policies), motive to belong predicted conformity after a silence,  $B = .60$ ,  $t(27) = 2.62$ ,  $p = .015$ .

## Discussion

Replicating the findings of Study 1, Study 2 shows that subtle conversational silences can regulate normative behavior in groups. By examining students' own attitudes in an actual discussion setting, this study reveals that students whose expressed opinion is met with a brief four-second silence shift their attitudes according to the group norm when they are highly motivated to belong but distance their attitudes away from the group norm if their motivation to belong to the group is low.<sup>20</sup>

### General Discussion

The present research examined whether norms in group interaction can be regulated by subtle conversational characteristics other than the content of communication. Two studies showed that brief conversational silences elicit normative attitude change to the extent that a member is motivated to belong to a certain group. More specifically, when the expression of an opinion results in a

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<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, one could explain the attitude shift of group members with a low motivation to belong as an attempt to gain a sense of control or meaningful existence. This suggests a negative correlation between these motives and the motive to belong. In Study 2 the motive to "control the course of the conversation," "influence the direction of the conversation," (both relating to the need for control) and "think positively about oneself" (somewhat related to the need for meaningful existence) were included in the premeasured motives. However, no support for the alternative explanation was found, as the motive to belong and the motive to control did not correlate:  $r = .03$ , *ns*, and the relation between the motive to belong and the motive to think positively about oneself was positive:  $r = .25$ ,  $p = .04$ . In addition, neither the control motive nor the meaningful existence motive nor their interactions with silence predicted conformity (all  $t$ s  $< 1$ , *ns*).

conversational silence, this raises questions about the consensus in the group and the acceptability of what was said (Koudenburg et al., 2011a, *Chapter 3*). The present research shows that if such a silence occurs in a conversation, the level of threat experienced by the speaker depends on his or her motivation to belong to the group. Moreover, a person's motivation to belong positively predicts the extent to which group members assimilate their attitudes to the group norm after the occurrence of a silence.

Importantly, in neither of the studies did participants reveal their attitudes on the posttest publicly to the other group members. This suggests that silences affect attitudes held privately, rather than merely inducing group members to publicly assimilate to group-normative attitudes.

The results extend previous research on the development of norms through group conversation (Festinger & Thibaut, 1951; Postmes et al., 2005; Smith & Postmes, 2011). We show that beyond the explicit discussion of group norms, and the inference of group norms from observed behavior, there are also very subtle conversational characteristics that can effectively regulate or influence attitudes within the group. The current pattern of the findings suggests that people who are highly motivated to belong respond to a brief conversational silence with a subtle change of attitudes: The silence prompts them to attend to, and infer, group norms. Thus, when a person is highly motivated to belong to a group, norms are regulated not just because of any overt actions of the group toward the individual, but also because the individual is eager to discover what is normative in situations that are unexpected.

Interestingly, those who are less motivated to belong respond to a silence by contrasting their attitudes from the inferred group norm. This finding needs to be interpreted with some caution. In both studies, we used a unidirectional measure of belonging that asked participants to indicate their agreement with the statement "I am motivated to belong" during the conversation with (my) peer students. Although high scores on this measure can be interpreted without much ambiguity, it is not entirely clear how we should interpret low scores on this measure. Disagreement with the statement can either mean that one is indifferent

toward group membership or that one has a negative attitude toward the group. If we measure indifference, it would be unlikely that this influences one's behavior. However, we actually find evidence for distancing from the group norm among participants who score low on motive to belong. This could be explained by a priori negative attitudes toward the group, which have not been appropriately captured by the scale. It is also possible that when participants signal that others hold different opinions than themselves, they are inclined to devalue these others (Festinger, 1954), which in turn may lead to group dynamics that foster polarization between members (Macy, Kitts, Flache, & Benard, 2003). In a sense, for those who are less motivated to belong, a silence would serve as a subtle cue for what is normative in the group, but they may use this not to assimilate but rather to signal their distinctiveness from the group (e.g., Postmes et al., 2001). Future research is needed to examine the group dynamics that come into play when members have a low or even negative motivation to belong.

We note that because we measured attitudes shortly after the conversation, no conclusions can be drawn about whether attitudinal shifts induced by the silence remain stable over time. However, the moderation by the motive to belong suggests that the findings can be interpreted as at least short-term attempts to reaffiliate with the group.

### **Implications for Theory**

The present studies develop a complementary perspective on norm regulation. In previous research, norm regulation has often been seen as a process that necessarily involves sanctioning of deviant behaviors (e.g., Axelrod, 1986; Horne, 2001a, 2001b). However, such sanctioning can be costly in terms of resources and risks involved, and perhaps this is why many group members refrain from punishing others (Chekroun & Brauer 2002; Coleman, 1990; Flache & Macy, 1996).<sup>21</sup> On the basis of

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<sup>21</sup> To overcome the situation in which no one sanctions, new norms can arise where group members are encouraged to sanction deviant behavior (so-called metanorms; Axelrod, 1986; Horne, 2001a, 2001b).

the research findings, we suggest that there are more subtle forms of norm regulation that may, in everyday social settings, play a very important role in regulating social interactions. We propose that people (especially those who have a strong desire to belong) are very sensitive to cues that signal potential social exclusion (see also Leary et al., 1995; Pickett et al., 2004). Brief conversational silences may pose subtle threats to belonging, thereby encouraging conformity. We focus here on conformity to opinion norms that are implicit within the interaction. Although future research should examine whether similar processes can explain conformity to standards that are more explicit, we see no reason for the processes to be any different for tacit or explicit norms.

There is some research suggesting that implicit cues may even be more efficient at regulating norms than are explicit cues. Recent studies revealed that whereas explicit social rejection leads to withdrawal from social contact, implicit social exclusion (i.e., being ignored) is more likely to promote reengagement in social contact (Molden et al., 2009). In a sense, our research merely confirms that subtle threats to exclusion promote conformity among those with a stronger need to belong. Important to take into account here is that in natural interactions such brief hiccups and interruptions may be quite commonplace, whereas we know that the costly reinforcements that have hitherto received more research attention (e.g., Axelrod, 1986; Horne, 2001a, 2001b) are not as common. Thus, there is a real potential for subtle signals to have the stronger social effects overall.

Identifying a subtle mechanism for norm regulation may provide insight in the relationship between group cohesion and norm regulation. Although a general consensus has been reached that norms are more effective in tightknit communities (e.g., Hechter, 1987; Hechter & Kanazawa, 1993), the role of sanctioning in explaining this relation has been equivocal. Some scholars have proposed that sanctioning is more frequent in cohesive groups (Horne, 2001a). Others have suggested the opposite because sanctioning within cohesive groups would create the risk of losing important relationships (Macy, Kitts, & Flache, 1997). A third explanation concerns the effectiveness of sanctioning in cohesive groups: Sanctioning may have a greater impact to the extent that deviants are more dependent on the group (Homans, 1961). The



ambiguity of these findings may point to the importance of alternative mechanisms of norm regulation as explored in the present article. The subtle cues for norm transgression identified in the present studies could explain formation and maintenance of norms even in contexts in which explicit sanctioning appears to be, at first blush, completely absent. Importantly, the only requirement for such regulation to be effective is for group members to have a high motivation to belong (as one would expect in cohesive groups). Future research on norm regulation should therefore consider looking beyond explicit forms of sanctioning.

Besides focusing on the effects of silences, it is also of interest for future research to consider the intentions of those who remained silent. It could be that silences are intentionally imposed upon the deviant, so as to “request” conformity or (more likely) to signal disapproval without harming the relationship. It seems also likely, however, that the audience remains silent for a brief period because it is searching for an appropriate response or because it is surprised by a deviant and therefore unanticipated statement. In this way, norm regulation could be a by-product of naturally occurring behavior and have no intentional component at all (see Pettit, 1993 for a similar reasoning).

Irrespective of the potentially unintentional nature of its effects, conversational silence may provide a mechanism through which social inequalities are maintained. Previous research revealed that nonverbal behaviors differ between members of high and low status within the group (e.g., Leffler, Gillespie, & Conaty, 1982; Smith-Lovin & Robinson, 1992). People high in status talk more, claim more space with their bodies, and attempt more interruptions. Research has shown that these nonverbal behaviors serve to maintain social structures (Dovidio & Ellyson, 1982; Ridgeway, Berger, & Smith, 1985; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). A silence, for instance, can be interpreted as a strategic mechanism to maintain (or gain) social control. By responding in silence after someone has given an opinion, high status people can implicitly request conformity to the opinions that they consider normative. Indeed, recent research has shown that silences are experienced as especially disruptive by people who possess a lower status within the group (Koudenburg, Postmes, & Gordijn, 2013c, *Chapter 7*).

Finally, in conversational analysis, two forms of silence have been distinguished. The first concerns a silence that occurs within the turn of a single speaker; the other occurs between two speakers' holdings of the floor (Goffman, 1981). Whereas the first type of silence can be attributed to a single speaker, the latter can be problematic for the relationship between speakers (Koudenburg et al., 2011a, *Chapter 3*). Gibson suggests that turn-taking often occurs by means of allocation of the next speaker (Gibson, 2003, 2005). Within a group, the next speaker is likely to be selected on the basis of friendship or status positions, which suggests a relation between two successive speakers (Gibson, 2005; Robinson & Balkwell, 1995). A silence therefore suggests a literal break in the conversation: The allocated next speaker (be it someone specific or the group) rejects the invitation to speak and therefore undermines the relationship. Moreover, the collective nature of the disruption—a silence only occurs when everybody remains silent—may increase its impact.

In conclusion, this article provides insight into one subtle channel through which groups guide their members to conformity. Counternormative behavior in conversations may be dealt with by rebuking someone or by expressing explicit disagreement; it may be handled by voicing an alternative opinion that the deviant group member can learn from, but it can also be effectively handled without the exchange of any explicit information whatsoever. The data suggest that merely allowing a brief uncomfortable silence to fall may send a strong relational signal that regulates group members' attitudes. For those who are motivated to belong, this subtle signal provides an opportunity to enhance their inclusionary status by accommodating the implicit group norm. Thus, overt actions and explicit utterances are not the only form of behavior of interest in social groups: In many instances, inaction and silence may speak volumes.

