

When Silence Speaks: Exploring Reasons of Silent Treatment from Perspective of Source

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ABSTRACT

The present research aims to explore source's reasons of using silent treatment in context of a relational dyad. The sample consisted of 10 female unmarried participants of 20-27 years of age. In-depth interviews were conducted and thematic analysis was used to identify the recurrent themes. It was found that majority of participants used silent treatment with close others whom they consistently define as someone who accepts them unconditionally. While the reasons for silent behavior varied across different relationships, feelings of hurt, anger and frustration were found to be the most widespread factors that predisposed the participants to using silent treatment. This study also provides novel insights regarding power dynamics between the interactants of silent treatment, an area which remains largely unreported in previous researches.

KEYWORDS: *silent treatment; source; target; close relationships; power dynamics*

Impact statement:

This study enhances the theoretical understanding of the term silent treatment, which a very common behaviour used intentionally for certain reasons but often not consciously as its motives and effects are not always implied by user. This study therefore, explains the various reasons of using silent treatment from the perspective of the people who use it and the motives that are implicated. Also, this study addresses the relevance of silent treatment with regard to power dynamics in different types of close dyadic relationships.

Introduction

Silent treatment refers to a range of behaviors such as removal of eye contact, not talking and listening, which are purported to avoid verbal communication or/and ignore the other person (Williams, 1997). Silent treatment is often used as a colloquial term for social ostracism (Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco & Baumeister, 2001). Silent treatment is a ubiquitous form of social rejection. A research showed that 75 percent of Americans received silent treatment from their loved ones, while 67 percent gave silent

treatment to their loved ones (Faulkner, Williams, Sherman, & Williams, 1997). Even though it is such a frequently used behavior, there seems to be a dearth of literature expounding a clear definition of the term silent treatment, its distinctive usage in different relational contexts, and its effect on the different relationships.

The term "silent treatment" was first used by sailors to refer to social punishment of men at sea (Ferguson, 1944). Similarly, *Meidungis* practiced by the Amish community to socially exclude a person who has disobeyed the religious or cultural codes (Gruter, 1986), whereby, the community members, even close friends and family, are forbidden to speak or interact with the perpetrator. Other terms that have a similar meaning as silent treatment are "cold shoulder", "freezing out", being "sent to Coventry", and in Australian slang "treating with ignore" (Wilkes, 1990).

Understanding the Meaning of Silent Treatment

Even though the term "silent treatment" is not well documented in research literature, various researches

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have explained the use of silent treatment as synonymous to or as a part of a larger phenomenon.

Silent treatment is a form of ostracism

Silent treatment is understood as a form of ostracism (Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco & Baumeister, 2001). Ostracism is a term used to signify ignoring, exclusion, and rejection (Gruter & Masters, 1986b; Snoek, 1962). Apparently, the basic purpose of ostracism is to exclude deviant individual(s) from a group as a punishment which consequently increases the cohesiveness of the ostracizing group (Gruter & Master, 1986a; Schachter, 1959). According to Williams (1997, 2001), ostracism can have different forms such as physical ostracism, social ostracism and cyberostracism, and silent treatment is analogous to social ostracism specified by source's emotional withdrawal from the target which occur in the *physical presence* of the target. However, taking the literal meaning of the term silent treatment into consideration, source's neglectful behavior can extend to a variety of situations which may/may not include target's physical presence such as ignoring the target by leaving the room or avoiding interactions with the target over calls, texts and other forms of social media.

Silent Treatment can be understood as "quiet silence"

A recent research suggests silent treatment can be referred to as *quiet silence* (Zadro, Godwin, Svetieva, Sethi, Iannuzzelli, & Gonsalkorale, 2017). According to Zadro (2004) and Iannuzzelli (2014) ostracism can be distinguished by two different styles referred to as *noisy silence* and *quiet silence*. Noisy silence refers to those behaviors of the source which clearly indicate that he/she wants to ostracize the target such as loudly slamming the door while leaving the room, or announcing that the target is being ignored, etc. Quiet silence, on the other hand, refers to restricting all verbal and non-verbal interactions ignoring target's presence. It involves behaviors such as 1) *Holding back* wherein the source keeps his/her anger to him/herself instead of directly expressing it, 2) *Tuning-out* in which the source distracts his/her attention from the target by pretending to or actually engaging in some tasks, 3) *Shutting down* wherein the source becomes unresponsive to the target as the source is stressed, not necessarily by target's behavior, and 4) *Cutting off* in which the source willfully ignores the target as if he/she does not even exist indicating that the source wants no further interaction with the target. According to Zadro and colleagues (2017), the behaviors in silent treatment are represented by quiet silence. However, if silent treatment is understood holistically, it cannot be

restricted to just one style of ostracism, but should also include both quiet and "loud" behaviors such as in noisy silence which are purported to ignore the target.

Different motives of silent treatment

1. There are five different types of motives for ostracism as perceived by the targets (Williams, 1997) which can be considered as the motives of silent treatment also:

Defensive: Ostracism is perceived as defensive by the target when it is used by the source to avoid getting hurt, ridiculed, threatened or even get ignored by others. By using silent treatment, the source may "reduce the risk of saying or doing something that others might regard negatively... giving others few reasons to reject" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p.520).

Punitive: One of the most widespread motives of ostracism is punishment as the term originated in this very context. "The perceived goal of the punishment may be to correct target's undesirable behavior (rehabilitative), to eject the target from the other individual or group (rejection), or simply to inflict hurt on the target (retributive)" (Williams, 2001, p.54).

Oblivious: When the target attributes the motive of ostracism to his/her own presence as being unworthy to the source, then the motive of silence can be termed as oblivious. Target may feel that the source does not care enough to acknowledge his/her presence because of his/her status, race, religion, etc.

Role prescribed: Ostracism is perceived as role prescribed by the target when the source remains silent under situations where it is expected or socially relevant such as in a library, in an elevator, on roads by a passerby.

Not ostracism: When the target perceives ostracism as unintentional because the source may have been distracted and have not paid attention to the target, this may be interpreted as not ostracism motive.

It is noteworthy that silent treatment is "active, effortful and involving" (Williams, 2001). Thus, the last two motives may not be considered as the motives of silent treatment as the target doesn't perceive source's silence as intentional or motivated. Thus, an ostracism episode can be considered silent treatment only when the source intentionally ignores the target or when the source's silence is motivated.

2. Timeout

Silent treatment can be used with the motive of timeout (Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco & Baumeister, 2001) such as buying more time during conflicts. Instead of participating in heated arguments and

saying mean things an individual may prefer to stay silent and speak later when both are able to use rational judgment. Similarly, when the argument is going nowhere, an individual may keep silent and postpone speech for a more solution oriented discussion.

3. Relational Aggression

Crick, Werner, Casas, O'Brien, Nelson, Grotpeter, and Markon (1999) suggested that silent treatment can be one of the ways in which people use relational aggression against others. Relational aggression includes those behaviors with which an individual threatens to harm or actually causes harm to others or/and their relationship, through in direct actions acts such as gossiping or spreading rumors, or by directly damaging the relationship with acts such as silent treatment (Crick, et al, 1999).

When used for relational aggression, silent treatment includes behaviors such as leaving the room when the target is talking, intentionally avoiding the target, excluding the target from group activities, etc. As such, silent treatment in young children includes more overt behaviors like covering ears while peer is speaking which signifies ignoring, not inviting a peer to birthday party, etc. These behaviors become subtler with age (Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002) across different relationships, for example, in marital relationships, in conflict situations, females use silent treatment by withdrawing their love and affection towards spouse, being inattentive and avoiding conversations (Carroll, Nelson, Yorgason, Harper, Ashton, & Jensen, 2010).

4. Manipulation

Buss, Gomes, Higgins, and Lauterbach (1987) found that silent treatment was one of the tactics individuals use to manipulate their partners in romantic relationships by remaining silent, ignoring and not responding, to stop an unwanted behavior or elicit desired behavior of the partner. A different study showed that parents also use silent treatment as a manipulation technique to influence their children's choice of mate when they are not happy with it (Apostolou, 2013).

5. Power tactic:

Falbo and Peplau (1980) identified 13 power strategies from open ended essays in response to "how I get my (partner) to do what I want" out of which 'withdrawal' that can be equated to silent treatment. It comprises of behaviors such as becoming silent, withdrawing affection, becoming cold and distant. This strategy was classified as *unilateral* and *indirect* where *unilateral* meant doing whatever one wants independent of the partner's

choice/opinion while *indirect* referred to using indirect and less overt ways to influence the partner.

Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson (1980) reported that individuals in an organization used silent treatment as a power tactic to influence their superiors. Certain behaviors in 'blocking' (Kipnis et al., 1980) were similar to giving silent treatment such as threatening to stop working with the target person, stop being friendly and ignoring him/her until the target gave in to the demand of the source. Similarly, Iannuzzelli (2014) and Zadro (2004) found that employees tend to use silent treatment with their managers to avoid negative repercussions of argument.

Since silent treatment is such a pervasive behaviour, it is common in wide range of contexts including close interpersonal relationships, groups, educational settings, workplace etc, However, the present study focuses on silent treatment in context of close dyadic relationships. For this purpose, it is necessary to define what close relationships are.

Close Relationships

Close relationships have been defined as those relationships which are fundamentally dyadic in nature and involve high degree of interdependence (in terms of decision making, financial assistance, care, support etc.) of interact ants on each other. Close relationships have frequent, strong and diverse interconnections that are maintained over extended period of time (Kelley et al., 1983). As such relationship with parents, siblings, friends and partner in a romantic relationship- all are recognized as close. However, these relationships can be distinguished in terms of two key factors- permanence and power distribution.

Relationship with parents and siblings are obligatory and permanent (Berscheid, 1994) characterized by closed field social interactions which imply that the interact ants are not free to exit the relationship. Parent-child connection is an example of authoritative and hierarchical relationship (Barker & Wright, 1955) whereby parents have high power in the relationship children are dependent on parents for guidance, support etc. Sibling relationship is characterized by elements of both vertical and horizontal relationships (Dunn, 1983), however, it is more horizontal than vertical where power difference may be more in favor of the elder child though temporarily when the authority figure (parent or other caregiver) is not available.

Friendship is a voluntary, open field relationship (Palsi & Ransford, 1987) meaning that the interact ants are free to leave the relationship. Initially, friendship is based on maximizing the distribution of

personal benefits but with time, concern and commitment towards each other grow. Friendships are marked by mutuality which is built upon interdependent interactions (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). Friendship is best example of horizontal relationships (Hartup, 1979) which is pervaded by egalitarianism, and mutuality and reciprocity concerns.

Romantic relationships are similar to friendship as they begin voluntarily (Berscheid & Walster, 1969) with open field interactions where interactants are inclined on increasing personal outcomes. However, the interactants may also choose to publicly vouch their commitment (for example, announcements to family and friends that the interactants are engaged in a relationship or getting married) making the relationship involuntary to ensure continuous access to shared benefits. Moreover, gender is an important consideration in power distribution in romantic relationship where traditional gender roles play a major role in determining the power of each interactant (Laursen, et.al., 1997).

Silent Treatment in Close Relationships

In context of parent child relationship, researches have reported that children often used silent treatment with parents to avoid educational conversations about sex. Children used silent treatment by absenting themselves, or becoming unresponsive, avoiding the parents, as the children found these sex education conversations to be parent driven where they could not express their thoughts freely without being disapproved by parents (Hyde, Carney, Drennan, Butler, Lohan, & Howlett, 2010). Another study showed that parents used silent treatment with their children if they did not approve of their choice of mate (Apostolou, 2013).

In friendship, it has been found that individuals often use silent treatment with same sex and opposite sex friends for manipulation (Jonason & Webster, 2012), relational aggression (Crick, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) and peer rejection (Asher & Coie, 1990; Asher & Parker, 1989; Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey, & Brown, 1986). However, these researches are limited to early and middle childhood only.

In context of marital relationships, Gottman (1994) postulated that silent treatment can predict divorce. In his series of work on marriage and divorce, Gottman and colleagues (2008, 2000, 1999, 1994) proposed a negative pattern of behavior which he termed as “the four horsemen of apocalypse”-criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling, out of which stonewalling is similar to silent treatment. During conflict situations, an individual uses silent treatment with their spouse by withdrawing from the

interaction, shutting down and closing himself/herself off from their partner, thus making the conflict very difficult to resolve. Buss and colleagues (1987) described that partners in a romantic relationship manipulated each other to get their way by using silent treatment. Similarly, Falbo and Peplau (1980) explained that individuals, especially women, used silent treatment with their partner in romantic relationships to influence their partner to elicit desirable behaviors. Wright and Roloff (2015) reported that individuals who expect their partners to read their mind and understand the individual’s need without saying it, often use silent treatment to show they are upset with their partner.

Aims of the Present Study

A survey of the existing literature in the area of silent treatment shows that the reasons of silent treatment have been predominantly explored from the targets’ perspectives because of which only partial knowledge of this interpersonal behavior is available. Therefore, in the current study explores the reasons and motives of silent treatment from the source’s viewpoint thus providing a holistic picture of the process.

Also, researches have suggested that silent treatment is used as a power tactic (Kipnis, et al, 1980) to influence others but how power difference is manifested in different close relationships and with what effect silent treatment is used to address this power difference had been barely explained in researches. Thus, the present study also aims to understand the association between the relationship dynamics of the interactants and the use of silent treatment.

Hence, the two main objectives of the present research are 1) to explore the reasons and motives of silent treatment in context of a relational dyad from the perspective of the source 2) to explore the elements of close relationships that create power difference between the source and the target and stimulate the use of silent treatment.

Method

The sample

Purposive sampling was used to select 10 unmarried female participants of age group 20-27 years from different fields of education for interviewing. The inclusion criteria were: Only those people who could consciously recall at least one incident of using silent treatment were included in the sample. Only females were included in the sample as researches suggest that females tend to be more emotionally expressive than males because of their socialization process (Balswick & Avertt, 1977; Scharfe, 2000; Fischer & LaFrance, 2014) and yet they tend to use silent treatment and indirect aggression more often than

males (Zahn-Waxler, 2000; Asher & Coie, 1990; Barner-Barry, 1986; Cairns & Cairns, 1991). It will be interesting to explore the reasons and motives of silent treatment from the perspective of females which can offer explanation to above contradictory research findings. Further, females belonging to 20-27 years of age group were interviewed as researches have postulated that the emerging adulthood period (18-29 years) is the period of identity exploration and self-focus (Arnett, 2000) and thus, interviews with this age group can provide understanding of how silent treatment forms part of their identity and their willingness to use it as a preferred mode of communication. Also, only unmarried females were interviewed as researches on silent treatment in romantic and married couples have been ample (see Gottman, 1994, 1999, 2000, 2008; Buss et al., 1987; Falbo & Peplau, 1980). In line with this point, interview data from only those relationships which fell under the definition of close relationships (parent-child, siblings, and friends) were considered excluding romantic relationships.

Procedure

To conduct the interview, a semi-structured interview schedule was prepared. After taking consent, establishing rapport, and assuring confidentiality, each participant was interviewed were conducted in the following two major areas.

- A. The reasons of silent treatment from the source's perspective.
- B. The relationship dynamics between the interactants:

A preliminary pilot testing was done with 3 participants. Required modifications were made based on observations from the pilot testing.

Data Analysis

The data from each participant was transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to identify the major themes around the core categories mentioned above.

Results and Discussion

The following section discusses the results of the interviews in context of the reasons of silent treatment from the perspective of the participants (sources) and the motives that are implicated:

Reasons and Motives of Silent Treatment

1. Violation of expectations with the target

It was found from the interviews that participants used silent treatment to distance themselves from the target as a reaction to feelings of hurt, disappointment, frustration and anger when certain expectations from the target were not fulfilled. These expectations included:

- **Expectation of love and care from the target**–the participants reported feelings of frustration when their love and care was not adequately reciprocated by the target and thus used silent treatment to communicate their frustration. For example, one participant stated that ‘even if I do a little for others, I expect them to do things in return and it upsets me if the other person doesn't put efforts when I care so much for them, so I don't talk to them’. Another participant said that she feels hurt when her parents organize programs for her brother's birthday and forget to even wish on hers. In such a case, she withdraws herself from others as she blames herself for expecting from others.

Motive: Thus, participants' motive for using silent treatment is to communicate the feelings of hurt and frustration as people prefer equity in their relationships and the feeling of giving more love, care, time, energy, money, etc. than receiving is distressing (Walster, Walster & Berscheid, 1978). Furthermore on giving silent treatment, the participants must feel valued and their self-esteem may get bolstered as the targets make repeated efforts to end the silence (Zadro, 2004).

- **Expectations of Mutual trust**–Trust has been defined as confidence between two individuals in a relationship (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Bateson, 1988) that neither of them will exploit each other's vulnerability (Dwyer & Oh, 1987) and a belief that they are honest and will cause no harm to each other (Kumar, Scheer & Steenkamp, 1995; Ganesan, 1994). Participants explained that they used silent treatment when they experienced breach of this trust. For example, a participant said that ‘it hurts when a person close to you says something unimaginable about you behind your back to another friend, and it hurts even more when that other friend also believes it. It feels that they could have talked to you. But instead they choose to talk among themselves and keep a distance from you...so how can you accept this, it's better to live away from that person.’ Another participant felt the breach of trust because her friend concealed important information from her. She said, ‘she was a friend and she cheated me with my ex...I don't have any problem that you enter into a relationship with him, I don't care because he was my past but at least you should have told me, so that I didn't feel betrayed’. In both of these examples, the participants ended their relationship with the target.

Motive: Here, the participants used silent treatment with punitive motive to reject the target from self and

end the relationship to communicate feelings of disappointment, hurt and anger (Williams, 2001).

- **Expectations from others to follow implicit norms**-One participant mentioned using silent treatment as she felt agitated when certain unsaid but clear norms were not followed for example, she expected her roommate to respect her space and privacy without explicitly stating this but her roommate would rather talk loudly on calls while she was studying which made her feel that “people are very insensitive towards others” and therefore they “deserved” to be treated with silence. The participant said that she felt “disconnected” with her roommate and did not consider her close enough to directly communicate these issues.

Motive: Here, the participant used silent treatment to punish undesirable behavior of the target (Williams, 2001).

- **MindReading Expectations**- Mind reading expectations (MRE) are individual’s expectations from others to understand their unsaid feelings, thoughts and needs (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Eidelson, 1981). One participant said that she expects her *close ones* to understand her feelings of hurt or anger her without explicitly stating it because it took a huge amount of time and energy to accommodate them in her inner circle and now they should be well acquainted with her behaviors and feelings in a given situation. She preferred to use silent treatment when her close ones failed to understand her unstated feelings and expectations. A research also suggests that individuals who have MRE often use silent treatment even when others are not aware that their particular behavior has made the individual upset (Wright & Roloff, 2015).

Motive: Here the motive of silent treatment may be to assert one’s value in other’s life.

2. Emotional blackmail

A participant mentioned with a chuckle that she got angry with her friend even when it was her mistake as she knew that her friend will come back to her. She narrated an incident where she asked her friend to change the display picture on her social media profile and used silent treatment when her friend did not comply because she knew her friend would make attempts to mollify her. This indicates that the participant used silent treatment to emotionally blackmail to elicit desired response from the target which makes the participant feel valued and wanted.

Motive: Silent treatment, here, is used to reassure one’s value in target’s life.

3. When feeling undervalued

Participants reported using silent treatment when they felt they were *not valued*. Participants felt unheard or not understood when the target committed the same mistakes repeatedly even on being told that it’s upsetting, which made them feel undervalued. Consequently, participants preferred to remain silent rather than wasting their words. For example, a participant stated, “...It feels like if you keep on saying things you are not getting valued...so it [silent treatment] is defensive like no one is listening to me”. Thus, silent treatment can also be used as a last resort when the source feels that verbal communication is no longer effective (Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco & Baumeister, 2001).

Motive: Here, silent treatment is used for defensive motives. Not being understood is associated with the same brain regions as social pain and therefore, people want to avoid such interactions which instigate these feelings (Morelli, Torre, & Eisenberger, 2014).

4. Inability to express

- **Lack of communication skill**- Another crucial reason of using silent treatment was participants’ *lack of communication skill* and vocabulary to express themselves without hurting others. One participant used adjectives such as “reserved”, “conservative” “not frank” for herself and yet another participant said “I am somebody who is not emotionally very expressive, even with friends, like I can listen to people but it is very difficult to talk about myself, things I am going through...”

Participants opted for silence as they had a deep-seated *fear of hurting others*. This fear can originate from low self-confidence in terms of communication or bad past experiences. For example, one participant mentioned that ‘not all people understand what is being said, they may take the meaning of words otherwise and get hurt or things can backfire’. Moreover, the fear of hurting others and low self-confidence seems to be *learned* during childhood, as in words of a participant, it is cultivated in form of ‘moral values’ that ‘one should not reply back to others’, which gets adapted in participant’s behavior and generalized to everyone. Another participant reported childhood experiences where primary caretakers were physically distant or emotionally unavailable, so it became inherent part of her personality not to communicate. These experiences may make the sources less confident to communicate freely and effectively with others anticipating that they might hurt others with their words.

Apart from low confidence in terms of communication, it seems that sources have a tendency

to take the perspective of the other person and empathize with them before acting or saying something which helps them to anticipate hurt feelings of targets and makes them more prone to using silent treatment. However, the link between silent treatment and empathy is yet to be explored.

Another reason of the fear of hurting others emerges from— *fear of losing people* which originates from insecure attachment that may not be necessarily experienced in childhood but learned over time during other critical periods of life. For example, Erikson (1963) explains that the psychological crisis during early adulthood period is that of intimacy vs. isolation, and frequent experiences of isolation may be one of the reasons people learn the fear of losing others. For example, a participant explained how she was vocal about everything earlier but learnt to keep her feelings to herself after losing a significant other because of openly expressing her grudges. She said, ‘I don’t know what its (silent treatment) solution is. I wish there were a person with whom I can say anything easily...may be then my trust will be regained that I will be understood and they will not leave me alone.’

Motive: Here, the motive of silent treatment is defensive as the participants want to protect themselves from anticipatory loss of relationships with the targets.

➤ **Displacement of silent treatment**-In tandem with the above observation, it was found that participants prefer silent treatment with ‘close’ others even when they are upset with someone or something else because they feel unconditionally accepted and secure with them. Here, the participants knew that silent treatment can have negative psychological impacts on these close others, but since it’s temporary and they are accepted as they are, they can show their “ugly” sides too. Furthermore, their behavior gets reinforced when the target understands them or approaches them to rebuild contact. One participant said, “Like I have one best friend so I do this thing to her despite her doing nothing. So, I might be pissed off at something else and I will take it out on her because she is the one that I can actually show my emotions to and not the third party who has actually done it to me”.

Motive: The motive of silent treatment is to communicate the feeling of being upset.

5. Timeout

When participants felt emotionally flooded, i.e., overwhelmed with emotions due to some external or mental event, they preferred to distance themselves

from others by taking a *timeout* to manage the situation better and understand self. For example, a participant said, ‘whenever I feel negative thoughts in my mind, I don’t talk to anyone...when I am already disturbed because of my own reasons and then if someone upsets me, I prefer not to talk’. This is similar to Iannuzzelli’s (2014) conception of *shutting down* as a category of quiet silence.

Motive: Here, the motive of silent treatment is simply to take a break from the outward situations and sort out one’s thoughts.

Also, timeout can be taken to avoid getting an argument escalated. As a participant stated, ‘when someone does wrong and it’s excess for me, I speak for it in the beginning then I become silent when I can’t take it anymore. I keep silent to avoid a clash with the person’.

6. Protective buffering

Protective buffering is a concept used to explain people’s behavior in which they hide their emotions from their partners and pretend that everything is fine during conflict situations (Langer, Brown, & Syrjala, 2009; Trost, 2005). Protective buffering can be used with self-protective intentions during cognitively taxing situations to avoid the negative emotional experience or upsetting conversations (Winter held, 2017). Silent treatment can also be used to this end. Rephrasing what a participant said, “like I got emotional and told my roommate that she is very special for me then after one or two days she poked me and said that I got *sent* that day, so if I feel that emotion again I feel like crying again... so I would rather not feel things’. She further added, ‘If I get into a conflict with someone, I would not talk about it even if it is killing me inside. If you talk about it all the emotions will erupt again so maybe I avoid that’.

Motive: Thus, the motive of silent treatment is defensive here as reliving an emotion again can make one feel vulnerable and needy which may not be very rewarding.

7. Response to humiliation

The participants mentioned feeling humiliated and “small” in target’s eyes, when the target said something negative which did not match their self-identity. Humiliation is an emotion which is felt when one’s status is lowered in front of other (Otten & Jonas, 2014). EEG studies have shown that humiliation is much more negative than anger and intense than happiness (Otten & Jonas, 2014). A participant said, “it feels how can the other person think like that when I am not like that, it feels as if I have fallen down in the eyes of that person, I feel small at that particular moment.” In such a case, the

participant prefers to use silent treatment when having such an overwhelming experience. This can be further explained by self-verification theory (Swann & Read, 1981), which states that individuals prefer to be viewed by others as they perceive themselves and gravitate towards those relationships and interactions which confirm their self-views. Therefore, participants who feel that they are being ‘misunderstood’ may withdraw from such relationships using silent treatment to maintain their perception of self.

One participant mentioned that she completely stops any kind of communication when she feels angry when someone accuses her of doing something she was not even involved or related to.

Motive: The motive of silent treatment here is defensive as the participants want to protect themselves from being misunderstood (Morelli, Torre, & Eisenberger, 2014).

8. For punishment

The most common and cited reason in present and previous researches for silent treatment is punishment (see Williams, 2001; Knippenberg et al., 1999; Buss et al., 1987; Gruter, 1986). A participant said that she thinks that wrong behaviors should not be tolerated and one cannot engage in letting out behaviors or unnecessary outbursts due to social norms. She added that she feels so angry that she wants to slap the other person and therefore uses silent treatment as she

cannot tolerate the presence of the other. She also uses silent treatment to *terminate a relationship* as punishment for unacceptable behaviors from target.

9. Reciprocal silent treatment

Participants also mentioned using silent treatment in reciprocation of silent treatment. For instance, a participant stated, “I often stopped talking to people because they have scolded me or stopped talking to me, so in return I also stop talking even if I have done the mistake.” This can be done for defensive purposes (Sommer et al., 2001).

One’s self esteem may be compromised when receiving silent treatment in spite of repeated efforts to connect with the source (William, 2001). Thus, the target may succumb to perceived indifference and silent treatment by other and may use silent treatment in return. Also, making continuous efforts to communicate is tiring and emotionally challenging. As a participant mentioned, ‘I felt that the person is not talking to me then too I tried to talk, I approach for the second time also, then in third fourth time I feel when the person in front is not talking then why should I continue’.

Motive: The motive of silent treatment is defensive to protect the self-esteem which gets compromised on receiving silent treatment (Williams, 2001).

The reasons and motives of silent treatment from the perspective of the source are summarized below in the following Table 1.

Motives of Silent Treatment	Reasons of Silent Treatment from the perspective of the source.
<i>Assert value in other’s life</i>	1. Violation of expectation of love and care
	2. Mindreading expectation
	3. Emotional blackmail
<i>Defensive</i>	1. When feeling undervalued
	2. Inability to express because of lack of communication skill
	3. Protective buffering
	4. Response to humiliation
	5. Reciprocal silent treatment
<i>Timeout</i>	1. Timeout
<i>Punitive</i>	1. For punishment
	2. Expectation to follow implicit norms
	3. Violation of expectation of mutual trust
<i>Communicate distress</i>	1. Violation of expectations of: I. love and care II. mutual trust III. to follow implicit norms IV. mindreading
	2. Displacement of silent treatment because of inability to express

Table 1: Shows the reasons and motives of silent treatment from perspective of source.

Relationship dynamics and the use of silent treatment

The following section discusses the elements of relationship dynamic and power differences between the source and target of silent treatment that stimulates the usage of silent treatment.

1. Silent treatment is preferred with close others

It was found in the interviews that 8 out of 10 participants used silent treatment *exclusively* with close ones, while the other 2 participants used silent treatment with everyone including acquaintances and close others. These close others included friends, parents and siblings. For participants, the term closeness meant reliance on others for - "comfort", "connection", "peace and security", "care", "understanding" and expectation of emotional "availability" and "unconditional acceptance" from the other person. Researches in the area of power in close relationships explain this as *relational dependence* whereby the person who is more dependent on the other automatically assumes lower power in the relationship (Kelley et al., 2003). It has also been found in researches that people having lower power in a relationship may show behavioral inhibition and refrain themselves from speaking their opinion (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002) lest they run the risk of sabotaging their relationship, and removal of rewards and benefits (Operario & Fiske, 2001; Hall, 1984). Also, people having lower power in relationship may experience more anger but may not directly express it (Hecht & LaFrance, 1998). This can be corroborated with observations from the interview data that participants often used silent treatment with close others when they felt anger, frustration, hurt or disappointment but were unable to express it because of fear losing the other person which was when they perceived themselves as incompetent in communication. Thus, silent treatment can be used to communicate such negative feelings in a subtle manner when having lower power in the relationship.

A contradictory explanation for using silent treatment with close others is also possible. Participants used silent treatment with close others as they experienced a sense of permanence in their relationship. One of the participants mentioned that 'closeness is of two types- one, which is genetic that includes family, and the other one which comes from caring and spending time with the other person'. When closeness is perceived as *unconditional acceptance* or, as originating from genetic bonds or, from repeated interactions over time, there is a sense of permanence associated with it. Permanence in relationship is related with constructs like kinship and commitment

to continue the relation, where interactants do not worry about implications of each social interaction (Larsen & Bukowski, 1997). As such participants may feel an increased sense of personal power that they are free to express anything and anyway they want because the other person would not exit the relationship. Thus, participants used silent treatment as an emotional blackmail strategy to assert situational power over the target because the participants were aware that the target will come back to them. However, silent treatment may not necessarily be used as a power tactic to influence others; instead it may be simply used to convey negative feelings to close others because they feel safe and powerful enough to use it in their relationship. That is why some participants mentioned using silent treatment with their close ones when they were distressed even though the targets were not the cause of it.

Thus, it seems that the use of silent treatment is contingent on the perception of permanency and security in the relationship by the source. If the source feels accepted and that the target won't exit the relationship, sources use silent treatment to assert power or simply to showcase certain feelings which may not be necessarily related with the target, while if the source experiences the fear of losing the relationship with the target then she/he uses silent treatment to show disagreement and subtly communicate their negative feelings with the target.

The two participants who used silent treatment with close others as well as with acquaintances seemed to be inherent users of silent treatment. Existing literature suggests that such people may be referred to as *perpetual sources* as they use silent treatment as a preferred mechanism of dealing with the situation over any other behavior (Zadro, et al., 2017).

2. Investment and commitment to the relationship

The investment model of relationship commitment (Rusbult, 1980, 1983) suggests that high investment into a relationship in terms of energy, time, emotions, money, etc. and lower quality of relationship alternatives allows more commitment to each other in a relationship. The person investing less in the relationship and having more alternatives will be less committed and have more power as compared to the other person in the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996; Simpson et al., 2013). When participants felt that they were undervalued as other person was not investing enough in terms of energy, emotions or time, they reported using silent treatment to regain the sense of balance in power. For example, a participant stated her reason

for using silent treatment with friends as ‘In real, I expect a lot from others in a relationship, if I feel that I care for the other while the other person is not, then I feel hurt..’. When the target makes repeated attempts to end the silence and make things ‘normal’, the participant may feel valued and sense of power may also be regained.

Another example here would be of a participant who reported using silent treatment with friends and acquaintances when she got angry, to punish them or to even end the relationship. She said that she did not share her experiences and personal details with anyone while others confided in her. As such she invested less in the relationships and did not feel committed to anyone. She said ‘I don’t give a lot of importance to anyone in my life. Friends and parents have different values in life...if someone comes next to parents in life then I can compromise for him/her but not for everyone’. She assumed higher power in her relationship with friends and acquaintances and felt free to exit the relationship at any time using silent treatment. Thus, silent treatment can also be a display of power of presiding over the relationship and as a threat to others to end the relationship.

Conversely, a participant reported ending the silent treatment episode because she was committed to her friend and she had no other person to go to share her feelings. In this context, a participant said that the target is very important to her and that is why she has to end her silent treatment. She said “...and then you also start feeling that hollowness and emptiness because you just have that one person whom you tell everything. So, if there are more people with whom you are sharing that important stuff I don’t know how the dynamics would be but since I have this one person and I am not even able to tell her that all this happened...”.

Thus, participants used silent treatment when feeling undervalued to regain the situational sense of power in the relationship; or to end the relationship when they felt they had more power by investing less in the relationship; and ended the silence episode when they felt they had no better alternatives in terms of people.

3. Involvement in decision making

Ability to control joint decisions is one of the most significant ways in which power is manifested in a relationship (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983). This way the person who presides over the decision-making process and has the final say in the decision has greater power in the dyadic relationship than the other person (Farrell, Simpson, & Rothman, 2015).

Parents have authority and higher power in the parent-child relationship and the children are

dependent on the parents for care, support, protection, monetary help, etc. The children cannot go against parents’ decisions, more so in India where children are expected to be obedient and respectful to parents and elder siblings (Sinha, 1984). Thus, participants chose to show disagreement with parent’s decisions through the use of silent treatment. For instance, a participant said “if they are not allowing me to go out or whatever the situation is, I should respect their decision and it is not good to ignore their decisions because most of the time they allow me so at that point I feel I should use silent treatment”.

Another participant explained using silent treatment with elder sister where sister played an important role in the major decisions of participant’s life. She said ‘If I feel bad for some behavior or something from my sister’s side, I would keep silent in defense and during that period I analyze her reasons and intentions apart from my own views then I start feeling injustice and I try to keep my point in front of her but then it is perceived as argument and that I am younger or “*badtameez*” (insolent), so I have to remain silent as I can’t do anything about it.’ Although the latter part where the participant keeps silent as she is regarded as argumentative does not strictly fit into the definition of silent treatment which is “active, effortful and involving” (Williams, 2001) but still it can be regarded as silent treatment since she remains silent deliberately (“I would keep silent in defense”). Thus, this shows how silent treatment is used to convey a difference of opinion with authority figure.

Friendship is a mutual relationship (Hartup, 1979). Thus, as stated above, power in a relationship can sway in favor of the person who controls joint decisions. Person having higher sense of personal power in this context may use silent treatment coercively when she/he does not approve of a certain behavior or to get desirable behavior done by the other person. For example, a participant described her relationship with her friend in which she mostly took the decision as when and where to go. She reported using silent treatment with her friend when she would not comply to her suggestions even if it was something as trivial as changing the picture on social media.

Thus, participants used silent treatment to show disagreement with parents and elder siblings as they possessed lower power in the relationship. In case of friendship, the participants used silent treatment to emotionally blackmail their friends when they assumed higher power in terms of decision-making.

4. Who approached to end silent treatment

Research in the area of silent treatment has shown that the sense of control of the sources is fortified

when using silent treatment as apparently, they decide when to start the silent treatment episode and whether or not to end it (Zadro, et.al., 2008).

In majority of cases in the interviews, it was the target who approached initially to communicate and end silent treatment. If the behavior was used with punitive motives then the silence took a longer time to end. A participant said she has to end her silent treatment because it starts affecting the health of her friend negatively.

While in cases where the participant felt dependent on the target, a slight provocation from the target to communicate ended the silent treatment episode. Due to constant approach from the target the participant may feel valued and terminate her silence.

A summary of the above themes is presented below in Table 2:

Table 2: showing the observations on link between relationship dynamics and usage of silent treatment (ST):

Relationship dimension	When source has lower power in relationship		When source has higher power in relationship	
	Reasons for having lower power	Reason for ST	Reasons for having high power	Reason for ST
Closeness	Source has higher <i>relational dependence</i> on target.	ST is a form of behavioral inhibition as source cannot risk the loss of relationship and contingent rewards. ST is done to show anger in subtle way.	Source has a sense of permanence	ST is used to assert situational power to emotionally blackmail the target or to show that one is upset.
Investment and commitment to the Relationship	Source has poor relationship alternatives and has invested more in the relation in terms of time, energy, emotions	When source feels undervalued, ST is used to show situational power by creating distance. It is also used to express hurt reactions and anger when target does not show similar investment and commitment.	Source has invested lesser than the target in the relationship	ST is used for coercive purpose or to end a relationship.
Role in decision making	Parents and elder siblings have higher authority than the sources.	Since elders are respected, disagreement with their decisions and opinions are shown through silent treatment.	Having upper hand in taking joint decisions.	Coercive use of silent treatment
Who approaches to end ST	Sense of control is fortified as the source decides when to start and end the silent treatment. No approach from either side may be a power display from both sides.			

Conclusion

The present study aimed to 1- understand the reasons and motives of silent treatment from the perspective of the sources which are classified in Table 1 and 2- explore the elements of close relationships that create power difference between the source and the target and stimulate the use of silent treatment which are

In case of two participants, where their trust was breached, neither the target nor the participant tried to approach each other and the relationship ended. A probable explanation is that since the participants' sense was personal power was temporarily compromised because mutual investment of trust and honesty was not shown by the targets, the participants may have used silent treatment to regain the sense of power. On the other hand, the target may have felt a lowering in their self-esteem due to failed initial attempts to approach the source (Williams, 2001) and thus may have felt lowering of their power and self-esteem in the relationship (Kipnis, 1972). Hence, they may deal will the situation by not approaching further. Thus, it may be a power display from both sides in a subtle way.

summarized in Table 2. Thus, the present paper offers two different explanations as to why silent treatment is used from the perspective of the source, providing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Table 1 classifies the different reasons of using silent treatment and the motives behind them. Although,

several researches have postulated different reasons and motives of silent treatment, which can be as many as the number of interpersonal situations the interactants find themselves in, so far this is the first study that has classified clear reasons of silent under different motives.

Table 2 shows the different dimensions of close relationships that contribute to power difference between two individuals in the relationship and how the participant used silent treatment when they had lower and higher power with regard to each of these dimensions. Previous studies have shown how silent treatment is used as a power tactic in marital relationship to influence one's partner (Falbo, et. al., 1980), or in an organization to influence one's superiors (Kipnis, et.al., 1980; Iannuzzelli 2014; Zadro 2004). However, these researches lack in the details of the power dimensions and how silent treatment is used in specific contexts. Also, these previous studies were restricted to romantic and marital relationships thus ignoring the role of silent treatment in other close relationships which the present study has covered. Researches have also suggested that one of the consequences of silent treatment on the source is that his/her need of control is fortified (Williams,1997; Zadro, Arriaga, & Williams, 2008; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2005) hence, probably one can use silent treatment to this end to assert control over the relationship. However, the present research shows that silent treatment may not always be used to assert control over the relationship; instead sometimes silent treatment can be used when having lower power in the relationship to show disagreement with the target without making the target angry and risk losing the relationship and contingent rewards.

As previous researches in the area of silent treatment focused mainly on the target's perspectives, this made the source appear as the perpetrator of a as their silence had deteriorating effects on target's psyche. The present study provides new insights about this pervasive behavior from the point of view of the source which clarifies that silent treatment, in the first place, may be initiated because the source herself/himself is hurt and s (he) doesn't know how to communicate this without hurting others. Therefore, sources are not necessarily "bad" people but they may be using silent treatment as a coping mechanism. Thus, this study contributes to different levels of understanding of silent treatment in context of close relationships.

The present paper investigated the reasons of silent treatment as used in daily life using in-depth interviews with the sources which offers advantage

over experimental methods of studying silent treatment in laboratory. First of all, these interviews were based on the first-hand experiences of the sources of silent treatment and not simulated conditions which restrict the choices and motives of the source. The present research used a qualitative approach to understand silent treatment, a phenomenon that has largely been studied using experimental methods and even though the sample size is small, it may not completely lack generalize ability as the reasons of using silent treatment investigated from a larger population can be further categorized under the classification system in the current research. Thus, the present paper provides significant contribution to theoretical and conceptual understanding of silent treatment.

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