

Review

Information management under stigma: When protective silence complements willful ignorance

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This article examines protective silence as a complementary strategy to willful ignorance, where individuals withhold information to protect themselves or their group from stigma. Drawing on evidence from intimate partner violence in LGBTQ+ and Black communities, we examine how social and structural pressures shape information management, preservation of bias and perpetuation of harm. By examining protective silence alongside willful ignorance, we aim to better understand how withholding information serves as a social defense, much like avoidance of information functions as an individual defense. We argue for an integrated theoretical framework that accounts for the relational and contextual roots of strategic ignorance, and outline implications for research, intervention, and policy.

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Introduction

Why do people sometimes avoid knowing the consequences of their actions and withhold information that could protect themselves or others? We can understand this through what is called ‘willful ignorance’ which refers to the deliberate avoidance of inconvenient or threatening information [1,2]. It allows individuals to remain unaware by selectively avoiding information that could induce cognitive dissonance [3], guilt [4], challenge their self-image [5,6**], or induce blame for unethical behavior [6**]. We can also make sense of this

through protective silence - the deliberate withholding of information to protect oneself or one’s group - from external threats [7–9]. Protective silence is an active strategy that becomes particularly salient in intergroup contexts marked by discrimination, marginalization, and the social production of minority status [10]. It shifts the focus from the intraindividual motivation of avoiding internal discomfort to the intergroup motivation of managing external threats, such as derogation, ostracism, stereotyping, or institutional neglect [11].

This paper explores the social psychological drivers and consequences of protective silence in relation to willful ignorance - how individuals consciously avoid sharing or seeking information in response to social pressures. These drivers include self-protection or group protection and can lead to biased perceptions, inaction, and ethically questionable decisions. Focusing on intimate partner violence in LGBTQ+ and within Black communities in predominantly white societies, we show how management of information serves immediate self-protective functions but contributes to long-term risks through sustained ignorance and perpetuation of bias, with critical implications for public health and policy interventions.

From avoidance motivation to protective silence

Willful ignorance has been widely studied in behavioral and organizational psychology. In an experimental paradigm, Dana et al. [12] showed that when participants could avoid learning the social consequences of their actions, 44 % chose to remain ignorant, resulting in less altruistic behavior. Vu et al. [6**], in a meta-analysis of over 33,000 decisions, confirmed that around 40 % of people actively avoided freely available information when it could reveal harm caused to others. This avoidance significantly decreased altruistic behavior, highlighting how willful ignorance is driven by self-image concerns: By not knowing, individuals can act in their self-interest while avoiding internal moral conflict [5,6**]. In contrast, protective silence refers to the active decision not to share information, often to avoid stigma, retaliation, or negative social consequences [8,9]. It is thus a way to preserve ignorance within both the (minority) ingroup and outgroup audiences. While willful ignorance - choosing not to know - occurs on the

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receiver's end, protective silence - choosing not to tell - is enacted by the source. In this regard, protective silence and willful ignorance are complementary strategies for blocking the potential transmission of information that may challenge self-perceptions and impressions conveyed to relevant audiences.

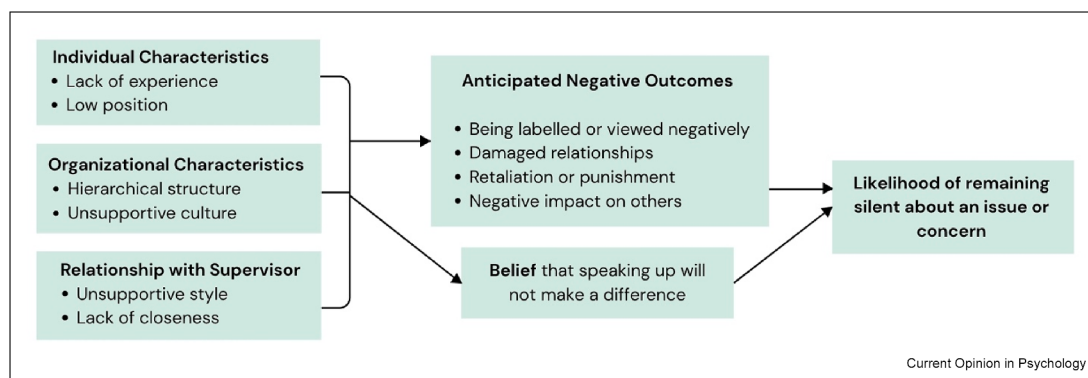
Organizational psychology has also extensively studied silence as a reaction to perceived risk. Milliken et al. [7] found that employees often remain silent due to fear of backlash, damaging relationships, or punishment. Their model (see Figure 1) shows how individual characteristics (e.g., low status), relational factors (e.g., unsupportive supervisors), and organizational culture (e.g., rigid hierarchies) jointly predict the likelihood of silence. The belief that “speaking up won’t make a difference” reinforces the decision to remain silent, even when the issue is ethically or practically important. Van Dyne et al. [9] also conceptualize silence as either acquiescent (based on disengagement), defensive (based on fear), or prosocial (motivated by group loyalty or care). This typology of silence offers a lens on how willful ignorance may echo or diverge from these functions. Acquiescent silence reflects forms of willful ignorance rooted in resignation, particularly when individuals perceive they have little control over outcomes and therefore avoid information that would otherwise prompt action [13]. Defensive silence also overlaps with willful ignorance, as both serve impression management purposes [5]. However, willful ignorance tends to diverge from prosocial silence: While the latter preserves group cohesion, the former often reduces altruistic behaviors [6**]. Although willful ignorance is typically conceptualized as an individual-level process and protective silence as an intergroup-level one, they share a common foundation: Both are socially shaped strategies of information management under normative and relational constraints. Individual decisions to remain ignorant or silent can serve socially strategic functions, such as impression management or group protection.

In line with this, recent experimental studies about the social construction of ignorance reveal that people often suppress or adapt inconvenient information for interpersonal and self-regulatory reasons. For example, some informers choose not to share negative information out of concern for the receiver’s feelings or at the receiver’s request [14**]. Others can exaggerate or downplay the impact of their actions to persuade others or to justify their own inaction, thereby preserving a favorable self-image or managing anticipated judgment [15]. Soraperra et al. [16**] show that willful ignorance is not limited to individual decisions but can emerge through social interactions: Some senders suppress relevant information, while some receivers avoid well-informed messengers. These dynamics lead to assortative matching between those who avoid inconvenient information and those who withhold it, reinforcing selective exposure and socially co-constructed ignorance. Recent work suggests that willful ignorance can also serve to protect a threatened social identity and that individuals may avoid information that threatens the image or cohesion of their group rather than just their individual self [17]. This highlights how moral decision-making and information flow are shaped not only by individual cognition but by relational dynamics, identity concerns, and normative expectations.

Protective silence and willful ignorance under stigma: the case of intimate partner violence

Protective silence often occurs as a means to avoid stigmatization and further harm for oneself and the ingroup. A clear example of this is intimate partner violence (IPV) occurring within minoritized communities, where victims of IPV and members of minority communities may withhold information to prevent reinforcing negative perceptions or exposing their communities to additional threats. In LGBTQ+ communities, non-disclosure of IPV can help avoid tarnishing the collective image of sexual minorities [18*–20],

Figure 1



A model of the choice to remain silent [adapted from Milliken et al., 2003].

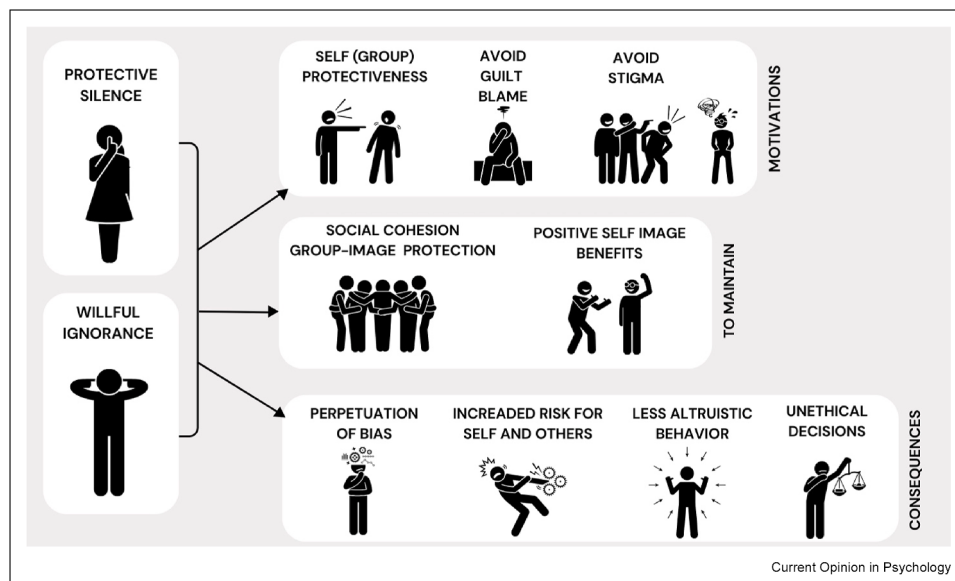
especially in socio-political contexts where anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment is prevalent and legal protections are under threat [21–23]. In such environments, withholding information is a deliberate strategy to avoid fueling hostile discourse and reinforcing stigma [24]. Giorgio [25] notes that victims of IPV may even struggle to voice their experiences due to cultural silencing and lack of institutional recognition. Moreover, shame and awareness of systemic oppression can further inhibit disclosure [20,26,27].

Yet this silence comes at a cost. Disclosing IPV may threaten the fragile legitimacy of LGBTQ+ relationships in a society that often views them as deviant or unstable [28], while remaining silent reinforces heteronormative assumptions that IPV occurs only in heterosexual relationships [29,30] and only perpetrated by men [31,32]. These costs intensify when victims of IPV seek help as formal systems frequently invalidate LGBTQ+ relationships, leading to mistrust and further avoidance [33*–35]. In IPV contexts, as same-sex families face legal disparities [36], LGBTQ+ parents may avoid reporting abuse [24] for fear of losing custody, particularly when not the biological parent. Similar mechanisms are at play in Black American communities. Here, protective silence around IPV, also called the “code of silence” [37], reflects a complex interplay of racial loyalty, institutional mistrust, and structural racism [38,39]. Although disproportionately affected by IPV, Black women are less likely to disclose or seek help than their white counterparts [40]. Shame, fear of criminalization, prior experiences of racial injustice [41], anticipated stigma [42], and concern

about reinforcing negative stereotypes - especially those portraying Black men as aggressive - [43,44*] contribute to this silence [45]. Research confirms that many Black victims of IPV view institutions as unsafe and unresponsive, with police involvement often worsening the situation [44*]. This deep mistrust discourages disclosure, as speaking out may be perceived as ineffective and potentially harmful. Also, speaking out may be seen not just as risky, but may be seen as betrayal of one’s community [46] because Black communities are often racialized as inherently violent, disclosing IPV can be perceived as risking further harm to the community’s collective image [47].

The minority stress framework [48] helps explain how silence operates as an adaptive, though costly, coping strategy under structural and interpersonal stressors. Anticipated stigma, especially when it targets a salient identity, is linked to increased psychological distress [18*,49,50] and reduced likelihood of disclosure [51]. While silence may offer short-term protection by preserving group cohesion and shielding individuals from external threat, it ultimately contributes to the long-term invisibilization and minimization of IPV. That is, the violence itself persists and remains unaddressed, hindering both recognition and intervention with far-reaching consequences for safety and health [52,53]. Thus, the collective management of stigma sustains broader social ignorance: For minoritized communities, speaking out about violence may entail risking further marginalization, violate group loyalties, or reinforce harmful stereotypes. Gómez and Gobin [54] shows how racial trauma, intragroup loyalty, and fear of betraying

Figure 2



Management of information and production of ignorance.

one's community can inhibit the ability to speak up. These risks are even more acute at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities: Racialized LGBTQ+ individuals [55,56] face compounded barriers to recognition, support, and safety [35].

In both contexts, protective silence is driven by fear of negative judgment, institutional mistrust, while managing social identity and group loyalty. Protective silence functions as a paradoxical mechanism: It shields communities from immediate threats but exacerbates risks and bias.

Policy implications

Protective silence and willful ignorance both carry significant consequences for interpersonal relationships and public health. This silence does not only have a psychological impact but it has structural effects, especially for marginalized populations already facing heightened stigma [48,49], health disparities [57,58], institutional neglect [59] and limited access to adequate care [60,61]. Both willful ignorance and protective silence are driven by protective motives: Preserving self and ingroup image, regulating emotional exposure, and avoiding blame (see Figure 2). As Ehrich and Irwin [62] have shown, willful ignorance serves as a stress-management strategy, an insight equally applicable to protective silence in the face of stigma. In LGBTQ+ and Black communities, protective silence functions as a socially embedded response to threat. In the context of IPV, withholding information, whether to protect oneself or one's group, can delay intervention, reduce access to resources, reinforce existing biases, and compromise safety.

Crucially, to design effective public health responses, it is essential to understand how altogether stigma, fear, image concerns, and mistrust drive the avoidance and suppression of information. Addressing the psychological roots of both willful ignorance and protective silence is crucial to mitigate their detrimental effects on already-vulnerable populations. Clarifying the interplay between individual motives and social constraints deepens our understanding of how ignorance is maintained, with critical implications for policy interventions and future research across diverse sociopolitical contexts which can influence information management. Effective interventions must therefore combine trauma-informed and stigma-reducing strategies with narrative interventions that legitimize minority victimhood as a new prism of knowledge [63]. Furthermore, policy frameworks should be co-designed with and led by victims of IPV to challenge institutional mistrust, particularly for those at the intersection of multiple forms of marginalization [42]. Only by confronting the cognitive, affective, and behavioral roots of ignorance can we meaningfully hope to reduce harm and interrupt the reproduction of willful ignorance and protective silence within social systems.

Conclusion

Protective silence and willful ignorance are distinct yet interconnected strategies of information management. Shaped by fear of judgment and image concerns, both reflect adaptive responses to perceived or real threat. While willful ignorance involves avoiding information, protective silence involves withholding it, often to protect a group's image, safety, or cohesion. Yet in doing so, both contribute to sustained ignorance and to the invisibilization of harm. This calls for a broader approach to intervention, one that does not only target information avoidance, but also transforms the conditions under which information suppression becomes a rational, though harmful, choice. Future research should further explore how stigma regulates access to knowledge, and how disrupting silence can transform both well-being and policy interventions [9].

Credit author statement

Eyraud Fiona: was responsible for the conceptualization of the article, the development of the theoretical framework, and the original drafting of the manuscript, including its structure and arguments. She also produced the visual elements (figures) accompanying the text.

Olivier Klein: provided supervision throughout the development of the manuscript, offered critical feedback, and contributed to the revision and refinement of the text.

Annalisa Casini: jointly supervised the project, reviewed successive drafts, and suggested key improvements in terms of content and clarity.

Note: The last two authors contributed equally to this work and jointly supervised the project.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

Some sections of this manuscript were revised using an artificial intelligence tool (ChatGPT by OpenAI) to improve grammar and stylistic consistency. As the authors are not native English speakers, this assistance aimed to enhance readability. All content was originally written by the authors and has been carefully reviewed and validated.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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- * of special interest
- ** of outstanding interest

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Further information on references of particular interest

6. This meta-analysis synthesizes findings of research on willful ignorance across experimental paradigms. It shows that people often avoid relevant information when it threatens self-image and thus reduces altruistic behavior, reinforcing the idea that ignorance is not a passive state but a motivated and strategic act. The study serves as a foundational reference for theorizing ignorance as an adaptive psychological process.
14. This experimental study explores the conditions under which individuals share or suppress ethically relevant but inconvenient information. It finds that senders often transmit what they themselves find decision-relevant, and may also suppress negative information to protect others' feelings. These findings help to understand how interpersonal factors can interact with intrapersonal factors in the sharing and suppression of information.
16. This paper provides experimental evidence that willful ignorance is socially co-constructed. It shows how senders may suppress information and decision-makers may actively avoid informed sources. The findings reveal assortative matching mechanisms and show that ignorance can be collectively produced and maintained through social interaction.
18. This review examines the specific barriers to disclosure among LGBTQ+ survivors of sexual assault, emphasizing the impact of anticipated stigma, community protection and fear of exclusion of one's community, but also minority stressors. It offers critical insight into how protective silence may emerge in marginalized populations.
33. This qualitative research synthesis shows that survivors from diverse marginalized communities perceive the disclosure of violence to police as unsafe or dismissive. These experiences

contribute to protective silence and illustrate how structural mistrust can discourage formal help-seeking behaviors of minority populations with large implications for health, as it can lead them to an increased risk of harm.

44. Drawing upon large focus groups, this paper provides a deep
* understanding of the perception of Black survivors of IPV, showing

that they often avoid disclosing abuse due to inadequate system responses, anticipated stigma or discrimination. It also highlights how survivors actively adapt how and to whom they disclose the violence, underscoring the important role of interpersonal and intergroup dynamics in the decision to withhold sensitive information about one's community.