Social Capital and the Spiral of Silence

Francis Dalisay¹, Jay D. Hmielowski², Matthew James Kushin³ and Masahiro Yamamoto⁴

¹School of Communication, College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH, USA; ²Department of Communication, The University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA; ³Department of Communication, Shepherd University Shepherdstown, WV, USA; and ⁴Communication Studies Department, University of Wisconsin—La Crosse, La Crosse, WI, USA

Abstract

This study explores the role of social capital in the spiral of silence process and investigates whether (1) individual-level indicators of social capital are associated with willingness to express opinions, (2) individual-level indicators of social capital are associated with the perception that others support one’s opinions, and (3) perceived support for one’s opinions mediates the proposed relationship between individual-level social capital and willingness to express opinions. Three commonly examined individual-level indicators of social capital were analyzed—civic engagement, trust, and neighborliness. Results of a representative survey conducted on Guam showed that civic engagement had a direct effect on willingness to express opinions. Neighborliness and trust had direct positive effects on perceived support for one’s opinions, which in turn, were positively related to willingness to express opinions. Implications were discussed.

It was over four decades ago when Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann first introduced public opinion researchers to the spiral of silence theory. A key proposition of this theory is that a positive relationship exists between citizens’ perception that the majority supports their opinions and their willingness to express those opinions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This key proposition has been supported by various studies for a wide range of issues (e.g., Glynn & McLeod, 1984; Gozenbach & Stevenson, 1994; Scheufele, 1999). However, two meta-analyses have shown the relationship between perceived support for one’s opinions and

All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Francis Dalisay, PhD, School of Communication, College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences, Cleveland State University, MU 233, Cleveland, OH, USA. E-mail: fdalisay@gmail.com.
outspokenness to be weak at best (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997; Shanahan, Glynn, & Hayes, 2007). This has increased skepticism regarding the key proposition of the spiral of silence and stimulated a renewed interest in augmenting the theory. As a result, researchers have shifted their focus to other variables that might affect outspokenness—which include, among others, one’s interest in politics (Kim, Han, Shanahan, & Berdayes, 2004), attention to news (Lee, 2007), efficacy (Huang, 2005), communication apprehension (Neuwirth, Frederick, & Mayo, 2007), willingness to self-censor (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005), and dispositional fear of isolation (Matthes, Hayes, & Shen, 2009).

In the backdrop of the growing body of spiral of silence research, recent studies have established social capital as a variable that enables citizens to develop norms of trust and reciprocity, which are necessary for successful engagement in collective activities (see Putnam, 2000). For example, research shows that social capital is associated with higher levels of political participation (e.g., La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). Despite the growing literature on social capital, few studies have examined whether it serves as an antecedent of political outspokenness. Research on social capital is important because social factors beyond one’s assessment of public opinion may affect individuals’ willingness to express opinions. Scholars have criticized the spiral of silence for treating the individual as socially isolated, and failing to account for affiliation in social groups (Kennamer, 1990; Oshagan, 1996). Oshagan (1996), for instance, found that individuals rely on reference groups to assess the climate of opinion. Individuals are likely to express opinions when their opinions align with those of their reference groups, and less likely to do so when they do not.

The present study argues that social ties are essential when examining the spiral of silence process. Given that extant research suggests social capital facilitates political participation (La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998), and that people tend to seek out others who agree with their opinions (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), which ultimately reduces diversity in their social networks (Portes, 1998), we expect individual-level indicators of social capital to play an important role in the spiral of silence. Specifically, our study analyzes three commonly examined individual-level social capital indicators—civic engagement, trust, and neighborliness (e.g., Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004; Beaudoin, 2007; Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Shah, 1998)—and their relationships with willingness to express opinions and perceived support for one’s opinions. We argue that greater social capital is related to a greater willingness to express opinions and higher levels of perceived support for one’s opinions. Furthermore, we examine a mediation model whereby perceived support for one’s opinions is hypothesized to transfer the prior effect of social capital on willingness to express opinions.
We test our propositions on the Western Pacific Island of Guam. Guam’s local residents adhere to collective values such as interdependence and social consensus (Perez, 2002; Rogers, 1995; Underwood, 1984). Because research suggests that the spiral of silence is more prominent in collectivistic than individualistic cultures (Huang, 2005; Scheufele & Moy, 2000), Guam’s collective nature makes it an ideal research context to examine the spiral of silence.

The Role of Social Capital in the Spiral of Silence

Social capital is composed of informal and formal social connections, or social ties, which are facilitated through participation in political, civic, religious, and work-related activities. According to Putnam (1995), social capital refers to the “features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (pp. 664–665). Although conceptualized as a societal-level factor (Putnam, 1995), numerous scholars have emphasized the importance of examining the production and manifestation of social capital at the individual level (e.g., Beaudoin, 2007; Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004; Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Shah, 1998). As a community is the aggregate of individuals, macro-level manifestations of social capital should also be present in the individuals who comprise the community (Brehm & Rahn, 1997). Following this reasoning, this study uses three commonly examined individual-level indicators of social capital: trust, neighborliness, and civic engagement (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Shah, 1998; Beaudoin, 2007).

Trust is a norm of generalized reciprocity. It is characterized by a glue-like quality that facilitates participation in formal and informal social networks. Trust has been shown to be empirically separable from local social bonds rooted in kinship, friendship, and acquaintanceship ties (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004). Citizens who trust others are more likely to volunteer, give to charity, and participate in politics and civic organizations (Putnam, 2000).

Neighborliness refers to the behavior that occurs in the interactions between people who live close to each other (Mann, 1954). Neighborliness involves various forms of informal contact with neighbors, which include visiting, inviting friends for dinner parties, borrowing or exchanging things (e.g., yard tools), and watching over neighbors’ properties (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004; Mann, 1954). Neighborliness correlates with participation in formal social groups, such as community organizations (Perkins, Brown, & Taylor, 1996).

Civic engagement refers to “membership in formal community groups and participation in social activities” (Shah, 1998, p. 477). Civic engagement involves the process of improving one’s community through nongovernment
action. This includes activities such as church attendance and participation in community projects (Putnam, 2000; Shah, 1998).

To summarize, consistent with the conceptualization of social capital, neighborly ties and trust can foster shared expectations among members of a community and civicly beneficial, cooperative behavior. Similarly, activities such as volunteering and participation in community projects and organizations cultivate a sense of civic duties and responsibilities and facilitate collective actions for the interests of a community (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert et al., 2001).

Social Capital and Willingness to Express Opinions

Previous studies have shown relationships between social capital and political participation (La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). Forms of political participation include institutional (e.g., voting and working for a candidate or party) and deliberative (e.g., opinion expression) participation (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Scheufele & Eveland, 2000). The existing evidence focuses mainly on institutional forms of participation (e.g., Klesner, 2007; La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998), whereas the effects of social capital on willingness to express opinions (i.e., deliberative participation) are not entirely clear. The present study extends the literature on the spiral of silence by first assessing whether three individual-level indicators of social capital are directly related to opinion expression. Given the consistently strong relationship between social capital and institutional forms of behavior, it is expected that a similar relationship should exist between social capital and deliberative participation.

Trust is an important element that facilitates collective action for common purposes (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). To the extent that people are linked collectively by trust, their willingness to engage in cooperative actions is increased (Sampson et al., 1997), and these actions might include those that generate controversies within a social network. A study conducted by Cho and McLeod (2007) found that trust is associated with higher levels of group involvement and electoral, civic, religious, and protest participation.

Neighborliness promotes informal mechanisms by which residents voluntarily act for each other, such as helping people in need (Freudenburg, 1986). Intimate neighborly ties foster participation in civic and political groups (Perkins, et al., 1996) and enable people to share and openly exchange opinions.

Putnam (1995) argues that civic engagement is positively linked with both democratic participation and vibrancy. Extant research indicates that civic engagement is associated with political participation (Wilkins, 2000). Although the reasons for this are multifaceted, from an interpersonal communication perspective, greater civic activity goes hand-in-hand with greater interpersonal discussion, and evidence suggests that discussion of political topics often arises as a byproduct of nonpolitical discussion (Walsh, 2003).
Greater interpersonal political discussion is associated with increased political participation as individuals gain political efficacy, knowledge, and sophistication, all of which lead them to refine and solidify their political opinions through dialogue (Katz, 1992; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999 and McLeod et al., 1999; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002).

Based on the literature reviewed earlier, individuals who have greater trust in their community, are neighborly, and are engaged in their community should feel more comfortable about speaking out. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

\[ H1: \text{(a) Trust, (b) neighborliness, and (c) civic engagement will be positively associated with willingness to express opinions.} \]

Social Capital and Perceived Support for One’s Opinions

We also propose that these individual-level indicators of social capital are positively associated with the perception that others support one’s opinions. Research indicates that people tend to flock to similar others. In essence, people tend to form and join groups that they perceive as possessing a set of values similar to theirs. For example, people often choose a church with the expectation that the values preached from the lectern are similar to their own. With this expectation comes the perception that others share similar views of the world. It is possible that as people increase their level of social capital, they will perceive that those around them share their opinions on important issues. This expectation is based on two theoretical lines of social capital research: homophily and social control.

Nevertheless, because greater social integration lends itself to increased involvement in associations, an argument could also be made that a gain in social capital increases the number of people in one’s social network who hold opposing opinions. However, the relationship between having diverse social interactions and political outcomes is less clear. Some research has supported the notion that greater heterogeneity leads to political participation (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999 and McLeod et al., 1999; Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004), whereas others show that homogeneity is more strongly linked to political participation (Eveland & Hutchens, 2009; Mutz, 2002).

Social network theory demonstrates that individuals tend to self-select their connections, which results in people associating with similar others (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; McPherson et al., 2001). This sociological phenomenon is termed homophily and is widely supported in the literature across a number of demographic variables, including race, age, gender, religion, education and occupation (McPherson et al., 2001). Homophily is central to the concept of social capital. As Mouw (2006) stated, it may be that social capital’s
effects are reflective of selectivity in forming homophilous social groups. Associating with a group articulates a set of values and beliefs, which likely leads to perceived similarities between members of the group (Jussim & Osgood, 1989; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). For instance, research shows that people generally self-segregate in the communities where they live, and that people tend to form bonds with like-minded neighbors (e.g., Lee, Campbell, & Miller, 1991). Consequently, the homophilous structure that makes up close social networks potentially limits an individual’s experiences and access to information, minimizing their exposure to a diversity of ideas.

Along similar lines, Portes (1998) stated that a basic function served by social capital is social control, which can be defined as the capacity of a social group to enforce norms and, as a result, regulate itself according to common ends (Janowitz, 1975; Reiss, 1951). One source of social capital is bounded solidarity. This bounding tightens groups of similar individuals (e.g., immigrants and minorities), induces norms of expectation and reciprocity, and promotes compliance and discipline to norms. When social capital functions as a form of social control, it renders formal or overt controls unnecessary. Coleman (1988) stated that norms constitute a form of social capital by facilitating particular actions, yet constraining others. As a case in point, Coleman explained the norm that people should act in the interests of their collective and forgo their self-interests constitutes a form of social capital, and this norm is “reinforced by social support, status, honor, and other rewards” (p. 104).

Prior research has shown, for instance, that social capital components including trust, neighborliness, and civic engagement increase the social control capacity of a community, reducing rates of crime in neighborhoods (Bellair, 2000; Hawdon & Ryan, 2009; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Veysey & Messner, 1999). Through trusting in others, strong neighborly commitment, and higher civic engagement, individuals may defer their self-interest and act in a way consistent with the group. This integration may act as a way to conform people to hold similar attitudes and beliefs as those around them.

In sum, as the principle of homophily states, “birds of a feather flock together.” It is logical to expect that citizens who are strongly connected with others, and have high social capital, as demonstrated through trust, neighborliness, and civic engagement, would perceive that others hold opinions similar to theirs. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

\[ H_2: (a) \text{Trust}, (b) \text{neighborliness}, \text{and} (c) \text{civic engagement will be positively associated with perceived support for one’s opinions.} \]

The Mediating Role of Perceived Support for One’s Opinions
The relationship between perceived support for one’s opinions and opinion expression is a key proposition of the spiral of silence theory. The theory
states that the decision to express an opinion is influenced by surveillance of the social environment to gauge whether the majority shares the opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). As noted earlier, previous studies have demonstrated this relationship, and recent meta-analyses confirm the relationship as significant (Glynn et al., 1997; Shanahan et al., 2007). In line with these studies, we also test the following hypothesis:

\[ H_3: \text{Perceived support for one's opinions will be positively associated with willingness to express opinions.} \]

Finally, perceived support for one's opinions is posited to mediate the relationship between individual-level indicators of social capital and willingness to express opinions. Perceived similarities serve as a catalyst for starting conversation (Walsh, 2003), which is critical to assessing the opinions of social contacts. The reference group research supports this reasoning, showing that reference groups, rather than society at large, are key factors that influence citizens' perceptions of the climate of opinion (Oshagan, 1996). Based on the hypotheses outlined thus far, it is possible that there is an indirect effect of our three individual-level indicators of social capital on citizens' willingness to express opinions through their perceived agreement with others. In essence, people's perception of others' opinions explains the relationship between individual-level indicators of social capital and people's willingness to express opinions.

A mediation model is designed to explicate the underlying process by which a presumed independent variable is related to a subsequent outcome via a third explanatory, mediating variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hayes, 2009). The hypotheses proposed earlier provide the conceptual framework for our mediation model. Specifically, we posited that our individual-level indicators of social capital (i.e., trust, neighborliness, and civic engagement) should be related to our proposed mediator, people's perception that others support their opinions (see hypotheses 2a through 2c). Moreover, hypothesis 3 posits that perceiving others to hold similar opinions should lead to a greater willingness to express opinions. Based on this rational, a final set of mediation-based hypotheses is proposed:

\[ H_4: \text{Perceived support for one's opinion will serve as a mediator of the association between (a) trust, (b) neighborliness, and (c) civic engagement and willingness to express one's opinions, with trust, neighborliness, and civic engagement leading to greater perceived support for one’s opinions and greater willingness to express one’s opinions.} \]

The Research Context: Guam and the Military Buildup

We test our predictions in the context of local public opinion expression concerning an impending U.S. military buildup in the Western Pacific
Island of Guam. This military buildup involves the relocation of 8,600 U.S. Marines and more than 10,000 of their dependents and civilian support from Okinawa, Japan to Guam (estimates cited in Fuentes, 2009).

Guam is located roughly 2,000 miles north of the tip of Australia, 3,700 miles west of Hawaii, and 1,500 miles east of the Philippines. Its population is estimated at 154,000 residents, composed of 44.6% Pacific Islanders, 32.5% Asians, and 6.8% White-Americans (U.S. Census, 2004). As the largest island in Micronesia at 30 miles long and 12 miles wide, Guam has served as a site for bases and installations of the U.S. Air Force and Navy. The U.S. military presence on Guam serves a vital role in sustaining the island’s economy. Historically, Guam has relied on a tourism industry, with most visitors arriving from Japan. However, due to Japan’s recent economic circumstances, Guam’s tourism industry has struggled, resulting in a sharp economic downturn. Local leaders and residents have sought to increase U.S. military presence with the hopes of revitalizing the island’s economy. Although a majority of Guam residents support the military buildup for economic purposes, some have expressed concerns about its potential negative impacts to the island’s environment and culture (Murphy, 2008). Yet two polls conducted on Guam indicated that a majority endorses the buildup (Guam Variety, 2011; Tamondong, 2009). A poll conducted in 2009, during the same year in which data were collected for the present study, indicated that 70% of the island supported the military buildup, and 82% believed it would bring in tax revenue and create jobs (Tamondong, 2009). For a spiral of silence to occur, a critical criterion that a majority must be supportive of a controversial issue (Scheufele & Moy, 2000) must be met, hence we chose the context of Guam, as a majority of the island’s residents support the buildup.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The final sample composed of a representative 319 registered voters of Guam. Results show that 56% of the respondents were female. The mean age was 48 (SD = 15.97). The population was relatively educated, with most respondents completing “some college, no degree” (n = 87, 27.4%) or having a college degree (n = 73, 23%). The three ethnicities most represented in the sample were Chamorro (i.e., indigenous residents of Guam) (n = 169, 53.3%), Filipino (n = 99, 31.2%), and Caucasian (n = 26, 8.2%).

A co-author of this study traveled from the U.S. mainland to Guam in the summer of 2009, and collected data through a self-administered mail survey of a systematic random sample of registered voters on the island. Names and postal addresses of registered voters on Guam were obtained from the Guam Election Commission (GEC). The GEC director stated that there are roughly
52,000 registered voters on Guam (personal communication, March 7, 2009). Surveys were sent to 1,100 registered voters. Strategies from Dillman, Smyth, and Christian’s (2009) *Tailored Design Method* were adopted to implement the mail survey.\(^1\) The present study used only two of the five compatible contacts recommended by Dillman and his colleagues. Respondents were first sent a survey packet during the first week of June 2009. The packet included a detailed cover letter explaining why a response was important, the questionnaire, a self-addressed stamped return envelope, and a $1 token incentive. The cover letter was personalized, printed on institutional letterhead displaying the name and logo of the sponsoring U.S. mainland university, and assured respondents that their answers would remain confidential. A week after the packet was sent, respondents were mailed a thank you postcard. This expressed appreciation for responding, and reminded those who had not returned the survey to do so.

One hundred seventy-three of the survey packets were undeliverable (i.e., the address did not exist, the respondent had relocated or no longer received mail in the address, the respondent was deceased), reducing the sampling frame to 927. Total response rate was 34.4%, as calculated using the American Association for Public Opinion Research’s (2009) response rate formula. Data collection ended July 3, 2009. Questionnaires returned after this date were not included in the analyses. One-way analyses of variance showed no significant differences in item scores between questionnaires that were returned during the first, second, third, fourth, or fifth week. This indicated that the pattern of responses did not change over five weeks.

**Measures**

**Independent variables\(^2\)**

*Trust.* Trust was measured with one item adapted from Beaudoin and Thorson (2004), “Most local people on Guam can be trusted” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; \(M = 4.79, SD = 1.61\)).

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\(^1\)The authors thank Dr. Don A. Dillman for the advice he provided on how to best implement a mail survey on Guam. Dillman is familiar with the cultural dynamics on Guam and has been to the island to serve as a research consultant.

\(^2\)A series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted looking at the items measuring civic engagement, neighborliness, and trust using Mplus version 6.11. Specifically, the CFAs tested a one-factor model in which all the items were part of the latent construct of social capital, a three-factor model in which trust, neighborliness, and civic engagement were three separate variables, and a final model in which the three variables were part of a higher order latent variable of social capital. The results showed poor fit for a one-factor model. The analysis did find adequate fit for the three-factor model that treats our variables as separate constructs. Finally, the CFA for the higher-order, 3-factor model did not converge. The reason this final model did not converge is because civic engagement was not correlated with neighborliness and trust. Although these variables were not part of a higher order factor of social capital, the results do show that neighborliness was highly correlated with trust. Moreover, the lack of relationships between trust/neighborliness and civic engagement may speak to the theoretical standpoint of bridging and bonding social capital.
**Neighborliness.** Neighborliness was measured with three items adapted from Beaudoin and Thorson (2004): (a) “within the last year, how often did you borrow or exchange things with your neighbors,” (b) “within the last year, how often did you visit your neighbors,” and (c) “within the last year, how often have you and your neighbors helped one another with small tasks, such as repair work” \( (1 = \text{not often}, 7 = \text{very often}) \). The items were averaged to form one index \((\alpha = .87, M = 4.20, SD = 1.80)\).

**Civic engagement.** Seven items were adapted from Cuillier (2008) to measure civic engagement. Respondents rated the level of importance that certain activities have in their lives: (a) “giving blood,” (b) “signing community petitions,” (c) “attending public meetings, rallies, or speeches,” (d) “attending religious services,” (e) “contacting and talking to elected officials,” (f) “volunteering for community organizations,” and (g) “contributing money to a political or public interest campaign” \( (1 = \text{not important at all}, 7 = \text{very important}) \). The items were averaged to form one index \((\alpha = .79, M = 4.75, SD = 1.69)\).

**Mediating variable**

**Perceived Support for One’s Opinions.** Perceived support for one’s opinions was measured by asking respondents about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the following people shared their opinions on the buildup: (a) family, (b) friends, (c) the present majority of Guam, and (d) the future majority of Guam \((1 = \text{strongly disagree}, 7 = \text{strongly agree})\). The items were averaged to form one index \((\alpha = .79, M = 4.93, SD = 1.26)\).

**Dependent variable**

**Willingness to Express Opinions.** Respondents were asked how willing they were to express their opinions about the buildup in four public contexts: (a) a community meeting, (b) a TV interview, (c) a barbecue,\(^3\) and (d) a restaurant \((1 = \text{not willing}, 7 = \text{very willing})\). The items were averaged to form one index \((\alpha = .84, M = 4.67, SD = 1.60)\).

**Control variables.**

Previous research shows that those who are interested in politics (Kim et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2004), are knowledgeable (Shamir, 1997), and pay attention to media (Lasorsa, 1991) are also more likely to be outspoken. Thus, these

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\(^3\)This item, along with the “restaurant” item, are adaptations of the hypothetical “train” and “bus” scenario question used in previous spiral of silence studies. There are no trains on Guam, and because public transportation is minimal, particularly by bus, respondents may not have been able to provide appropriate answers if they were asked the question of whether they would be willing to join a conversation among others they were riding in a public mode of transportation. It is far more common for Guam’s residents to attend barbecues and frequent public restaurants. Therefore, these settings are more appropriate and culturally relevant.
variables were measured and added to the regression models as controls. Political interest was measured by asking, “How interested would you say you are regarding issues on the buildup?” (1 = not interested, 7 = very interested; M = 5.35, SD = 1.70). Perceived knowledge was measured by asking, “How knowledgeable would you say you are regarding issues on the buildup?” (1 = not knowledgeable, 7 = very knowledgeable; M = 4.63, SD = 1.47). Respondents were also asked how much attention they pay to the following news media to stay informed or to learn about the buildup: (a) the Pacific Daily News (a local newspaper with the largest circulation size on Guam) and (b) local TV and radio newscasts (1 = not much attention, 7 = lots of attention). These two items were highly correlated (r = .67, p < .001) and averaged to form a single index (M = 5.21, SD = 1.55).

For descriptive and control purposes, personal support was measured by asking respondents about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “I support the military buildup” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; M = 5.11, SD = 1.96). Demographics were also included in the analyses and measured by asking respondents to report their sex, age, household’s income before taxes, highest level of education, and race. The race item was turned into a dichotomous variable (1 = Chamorro, 2 = non-Chamorro).

Analyses

To analyze the data and test the proposed hypotheses, a series of OLS regression models were created. These models tested the proposed relationships between the individual-level indicators of social capital (i.e., trust, neighborliness, and civic engagement) and willingness to express opinions (H1a–H1c). These models also tested the relationship between trust, neighborliness, and civic engagement and perceived support for one’s opinions (H2a–H2c). An additional model examined the relationship between perceived support for one’s opinions and willingness to express opinions (H3). Finally, the MEDIATE macro developed by Hayes and Preacher (Under Review) was used to simultaneously estimate the indirect effects of the individual-level indicators of social capital (trust, neighborliness, and civic engagement) on willingness to express opinions through the mediating variable of perceived support for one’s opinions (H4a–H4c).

Results

Hypothesis 1 proposed that (a) trust, (b) neighborliness, and (c) civic engagement would be associated with greater willingness to express opinions. As Table 1 shows, results supported H1c, which focused on civic engagement (β = .142 [SE = .064], p < .05). However, there was no support for H1a or
H1b, which respectively proposed that trust (β = .071 [SE = .041], p > .05) and neighborliness (β = .006 [SE = .067], p > .05) would be associated with willingness to express opinions.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that (a) trust, (b) neighborliness, and (c) civic engagement would be associated with greater perceived support for one’s opinions. As Table 2 shows, results supported H2a and H2b, which respectively proposed that trust (β = .074 [SE = .035], p < .05) and neighborliness (β = .152 [SE = .058], p < .05) would be associated with perceived support for one’s opinions. However, there was no support for H2c, which proposed that civic engagement would be associated with perceived support for one’s opinions (β = .033 [SE = .055], p > .05).

Results also support H3. The analysis showed that perceived support for one’s opinions is associated with greater willingness to express opinions (β = .237 [SE = .068], p < .05).

The final set of proposed hypotheses examined whether perceived support for one’s opinions mediates the relationship between trust, neighborliness, and civic engagement, and willingness to express opinions (H4a–H4c). Using Hayes and Preacher’s MEDIATE macro, one analysis was conducted that simultaneously estimated the indirect effects of each independent variable through support for one’s opinion on willingness to express opinions. Results show support for H4a and H4b, which respectively proposed that
there would be an indirect effect of trust (point estimate = .028, 95% CI: .005 to .058) and neighborliness (point estimate = .025, 95% CI: .005 to .050) through perceived support for one’s opinions on willingness to express opinions. However, there was no support for H4c, which proposed the same indirect relationship for civic engagement (point estimate = .011, 95% CI: -.021 to .044) on willingness to express opinions.

### Discussion

This study explored how individual-level indicators of social capital fit into the spiral of silence process. We investigated whether (1) these indicators were positively associated with willingness to express opinions, (2) whether these indicators were positively associated with the perception that others support one’s opinions, and (3) whether perceived support for one’s opinions mediates the proposed relationship between these individual-level indicators of social capital and willingness to express opinions. These hypotheses were tested in the context of local public opinion expression regarding a U.S. military buildup that may occur on Guam.

Several conclusions can be derived from the present findings. First, civic engagement had a direct effect on people’s willingness to express opinions. This finding reinforces Putnam’s (1995) notion that civic engagement is linked with both democratic participation and vibrancy, and research indicating that civic engagement is associated with political participation (e.g.,

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**Table 2**

*Predicting Perceived Support for One’s Opinions*

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*Note.* Table presents unstandardized coefficients and standard errors.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.*
Wilkins, 2000). Civic engagement fosters opinion expression likely because voluntary action and institutional participation often benefit the larger community such as helping people in need, community safety, and decision making that reflects the common good (Swaroop & Morenoff, 2006). To the extent that civic engagement rests on a pro-social mentality oriented toward the betterment of a community, people show a greater willingness to express opinions.

Second, neighborliness and trust had direct positive effects on perceived support for one's opinions. Strong neighborly ties and trust form the perception that others share one's opinions because intimate social interaction and identification tend to stem from networks that rest on strong bonds among group members (Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Portes, 1998). People rely on their reference groups rather than society at large when making judgments about the opinion climate (e.g., Oshagan, 1996). Third, consistent with the literature (e.g., Glynn & McLeod, 1984; Glynn et al., 1997), perceived support for one's opinions had a direct effect on willingness to express opinions. These findings support a key proposition of the spiral of silence theory stating that when citizens perceive that others support their opinions, they will feel more comfortable expressing their opinions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Finally, neighborliness and trust were indirectly associated with willingness to express opinions via perceived support for one's opinions. On the other hand, civic engagement did not have an indirect effect on opinion expression through perceived support for one's opinions. These findings may be interpreted within the context of different dimensions of social capital. Scholars have distinguished bonding social capital from bridging social capital (Lin, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Bonding, or homophilous social capital, is the strong ties with kin and close friends that offers social support, builds collectivity, and is shared among people with similar values and goals (Lin, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Bridging, or heterophilous social capital, on the other hand, is goal-oriented and offers networking opportunities and access to external resources via extra-community ties (Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Putnam, 2000).

For example, the indirect effects of neighborliness and trust suggest that these individual-level social capital indicators are linked with bounded solidarity (Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Portes, 1998). Dense neighborly interaction and trust lead to the formation of the perception that others in their networks share their opinions, as association with a group serves to articulate a set of values and beliefs and therefore fosters perceived similarities between members of the group (Jussim & Osgood, 1989; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). This may explain why neighborliness and trust were not directly associated with willingness to express opinions. These results indicate that people with close ties to others in their community may find it important that others support their opinions before deciding to express those opinions.
In contrast, our finding of only a direct (but not indirect) effect of civic engagement on opinion expression further highlights a potential difference between bonding and bridging social capital. It might be that civic engagement is more conducive to connecting people across social divides (e.g., race, class, religion) than reinforcing ties in a closely-knit group of people (e.g., family, friends). Participating in civic activities such as community organizations and public meetings could enable people to meet and interact with those from different social and cultural backgrounds, and learn different ideas and perspectives that they may not regularly encounter in everyday life. This bridging quality of civic engagement, combined with its orientation to larger social goals, may enable people to overcome the expectation that others hold similar opinions to their own. It is possible, therefore, that the quality and consequences of social relationships rooted in civic engagement are different from social relationships that rest on strong bonds among group members. That is, a stronger relationship may exist between civic engagement and heterogeneity than homogeneity, as has been shown in some political participation research (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999 and McLeod et al., 1999; Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004).

In addition to highlighting the contributions of this article, it is important to acknowledge this study’s limitations. First, because the present study aimed to investigate individual-level indicators of social capital, we did not specifically measure differential effects of bonding and bridging social capital on opinion expression. Given the potentially differential effects of bonding and bridging social capital on opinion expression noted earlier, future research should further explicate the mechanisms by which they promote or constrain a person’s willingness to express opinions. Second, the present sample was restricted to registered voters, which might limit the generalizability of the results to the entire adult population of Guam. For example, registered voters may have higher levels of political interest or political involvement compared with unregistered voters. Third, although our measure of perceived support for one’s opinions was reliable, we recommend that future research also examine results using additional measures of this variable, such as those used by other studies (e.g., Glynn & McLeod, 1984). Fourth, we believe scholars should use a better measure of trust in future research projects. Although we found statistically significant findings, it would be ideal to use a multi-item trust index instead of the one item used in the present study (see Uslaner [2002] for items). Fifth, although suggestive, the present study’s use of cross-sectional data limits what can be said about causality between these variables. Our goal was to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these variables work within our proposed communication model. Our mediating model was theoretically derived from the literature on homophily and social control aspects of social capital (e.g., Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Portes, 1998), which suggest that people develop shared expectations of how others feel and
respond through social and cognitive involvement. Thus, it was reasonable to expect that perceived support for one’s opinions would be cultivated through the three indicators examined in this study, without which it would be difficult for people to form common values. Nevertheless, alternative models are equally plausible such as one in which perceived support for one’s opinion, or perceived opinion diversity (Wojcieszak, Baek, & Delli Carpini, 2010), leads to opinion expression through civic engagement (Wojcieszak et al., 2010), neighborliness, and trust. Thus, future studies should specify and test a set of theoretically plausible models in quasi-experimental settings that allow for causal inferences. Sixth, there is a lack of consensus on how best to measure social capital at the macro, micro, and meso levels (see Claridge, 2004). Although the individual-level measures used in the present study have been affirmed in prior research and have been shown to have a social control function, future research should assess the role of other individual-level indicators of social capital such as life satisfaction (Shah et al., 2001) in affecting opinion expression. Future research should also seek to clarify the link between outspokenness and social capital from a social control perspective. Finally, the unique nature of our sample begs the question of generalizability. Guam’s local residents adhere to collective values such as interdependence, social consensus, respect for old age, reciprocity, and family obligation (Rogers, 1995), all of which speaks to close ties between reference groups. This suggests that the island’s social structure is homophilous; therefore, these findings could be unique to cultures that are exclusively collectivistic and homophilous (e.g., other Pacific Islands, islands around the world). Furthermore, research indicates the spiral of silence is more prominent in collectivistic than individualistic cultures (e.g., Huang, 2005). It could thus be that collectivistic and homophilous cultures would facilitate opinion climates that are more susceptible to the spiral of silence, whereas cultures that are individualistic and heterophilous would facilitate climates that are less susceptible. This potential needs to be further examined in cross-cultural studies.

Despite the earlier limitations, this study concludes by noting that individual-level social capital serves as a protective factor against the spiral of silence. Those with higher levels of individual-level social capital, as measured with our indicators, may be more likely to perceive that their opinions are held by the majority and more willing to express their opinions; those with low capital may be less likely to perceive that their opinions are held by the majority and less willing to express their opinions.

References


**Biographical Notes**

Francis Dalisay (PhD, Washington State University) is an Associate Lecturer at the School of Communication at Cleveland State University. His research interests include social- and individual-level communication processes and effects in international and intercultural contexts.

Jay D. Hmielowski (PhD, The Ohio State University) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at The University of Arizona. His research interests include the study of science communication, with interest in how specific message factors generate attitudinal ambivalence, and how ambivalence affects information processing, information seeking and political engagement.

Matthew James Kushin (PhD, Washington State University) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Shepherd University. His research interests include political campaigns, civic and political engagement, online media, and social media.

Masahiro Yamamoto (PhD, Washington State University) is an Assistant Professor in the Communication Studies Department at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse. His research interests include mass media and community social organization, public health, and new media and politics.