Don’t talk about it: Active avoidance in organizations

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Don’t talk about it: Active avoidance in organizations

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Abstract

We introduce a new construct—active avoidance—that can be beneficial for organizations. Active avoidance is motivated by situational incongruence and takes two qualitatively different forms—pretending and bypassing, depending on the salience of outcome versus process expectations in an aversive situation. Active avoidance can lead to positive consequences by facilitating process inventions that involve increased efficiency and helpful accommodations. We discuss the conditions under which organizations can harness the positive results of active avoidance.
Many of us face tasks on a daily basis that we do not want to do -- take out the garbage, talk with an unpleasant co-worker, or finish a difficult or tedious task. When faced with an aversive situation, we have several options: we can ignore our distaste for the task and do it anyway, change the situation to make it less unpleasant somehow, or avoid it. Research has cast situations in which people choose to persevere (Hamel & Valikangas, 2003; Luthans, 2002) and/or make organizational change (Bennis, 1963; Kanter, 1983) as particularly heroic. By contrast, avoidance of negative experiences has been largely viewed as a passive response with negative implications, especially in organizational research (Ashforth & Lee, 1990; Harris & Sutton, 1983; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). We offer a different perspective, arguing that avoidance can be a useful strategy with positive effects under certain conditions. Toward this end, we introduce the idea of "active avoidance," in which individuals implicitly search for and covertly pursue alternative strategies in order to reduce their experience of aversion. Active avoidance can have informational value for organizations and can lead to the discovery of novel methods for handling situations that individuals would otherwise find aversive, possibly in a more effective manner than simply encouraging individuals to give voice to concerns, and particularly when the extent of a problem and its potential solutions are not well understood.

By introducing the construct of active avoidance, we intend to advance organizational literature in the following ways. First, active avoidance is a common but unrecognized method that employees use to cope with aversive situations that arise in organizations as a result of incongruence between situational demands and employees’ preferences, perceived roles, or expected work processes. Second, avoidance has typically been understood to have negative consequences, but we argue that, when employee and organizational goals are aligned, active avoidance can lead to positive consequences for organizations involving process inventions that increase efficiency and create helpful accommodations for employees to deal with situational incongruence. Third, active avoidance can lead to useful organizational inventions by building a
larger pool of alternative solutions from which to choose, made up of the local adaptations that employees have made to deal with their own personal situation.

We first review literature relevant to active avoidance, and discuss how active avoidance differs from more traditional views of avoidance, as well as from more overt, change-oriented approaches to dealing with aversive situations. We then discuss the antecedents of active avoidance, particularly the role that process versus outcome constraints in organizations play in influencing the shape of active avoidance strategies. Next, we discuss two categories of active avoidance strategies, namely pretending and bypassing. Finally, we discuss the consequences of active avoidance, focusing particularly on the conditions under which active avoidance will lead to process inventions that enhance efficiency and accommodation of differences. We conclude by making suggestions for future research based on this construct.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

People face aversive situations in organizations all the time. Aversion, which refers to the experience of repugnance or intense dislike that creates the impulse to move away (Merriam-Webster, 1991) is a common experience, since the constraints and expectations inherent in the requirements to conform to an organizational role and to coordinate with others restrict the freedom of organizational actors in ways that can create a sense of loss of control and interpersonal friction (Katz & Kahn, 1978). For example, expectations related to work processes often lead employees to feel like they are being watched (Markus, 1978), whereas expectations related to outcomes can create performance pressures (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Locke, Latham, & Smith, 1990), which some may find aversive. One less recognized source of aversion individuals experience in organizations is situational incongruence, or the lack of fit between an individual’s preferences, perceived role, or expectations about work processes and outcomes. Situational incongruence can arise from the presence of organizational constraints that individuals cannot easily reconcile. For
example, in the case of a preference incongruence, an employee may prefer to work a later schedule (e.g. to come in later in the morning and stay later) but be required to work with others who start the day and schedule meetings earlier. Role incongruence is experienced when responsibilities or situational demands are at odds with an individual’s organizational or societal role, such as when the traditional gender roles of the actors are incongruent with the demands of the situation {Bear, 2010 #1945; Eagly, 2002 #1946}. Incongruence between work processes and outcomes occurs when the prescribed set of practices is at odds with desired outcomes; for example, police who are attempting to apprehend a criminal quickly are frequently required to follow a set of rules and procedures that slow the process down. When these sources of situational incongruence are large, we argue that the traditional conceptions of avoidance as withdrawal take hold, as actors see no means of reconciling the incongruence. However, when the gap is perceived as moderate but manageable, we argue that individuals will employ a range of active avoidance strategies to accommodate the incongruence between the demands of the situation and their individual preferences and expectations.

Despite what we maintain is the preponderance of active avoidance in response to these types of aversive situations in organizations, the dominant focus of organizational literature has been on proactive responses, such as overtly promoting organizational change. This is in the face of mounting evidence from research in social cognition and clinical psychology that calls into question the value of focusing on and discussing problems in every situation. Proponents of positive psychology and solution-focused brief therapy have convincingly argued that focusing on negative states of mind is not the same as creating positive states (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and that discussing solutions does not depend directly on fully explicating problems (de Shazer, Berg, Lipchik, & Nunnally, 1986; Trepper, Dolan, McCollum, & Nelson, 2006). In addition, research on the efficacy of coping methods has shown that problem-focused coping can lead to frustration, especially when a stressor is intractable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Even the act of asking
individuals to think about problems may increase their salience and lead people to overlook solutions (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000). Furthermore, there are costs to individuals who raise problems and "complain" in organizations. Despite extensive attempts by organizations to create a climate in which members are invited to raise issues, evidence suggests that they do so at significant cost to interpersonal relationships and careers (Near & Miceli, 1986).

In addition to the drawbacks of inculcating a problem focus in individuals, organizations are also not particularly adept at dealing with the type of information that tends to surface when problems are discussed. Collectives are particularly weak in diagnosing and distinguishing big/system-wide/long-lasting problems from small/local/short-term problems (Forrester, 1994; Senge & Sterman, 1992) and projecting the potential value of novel solutions in the absence of demonstrable evidence (Jackson, Golub, & Building; Surowiecki & Silverman, 2007). Thus even when problems are surfaced, the likelihood that accurate diagnosis and useful change will follow as a result of having collectives talk about them is small (Surowiecki & Silverman, 2007). By contrast, collectives can deal very effectively with observable evidence—sensing that a new approach or direction is better than the current one and following suit, until what starts as a subtle tendency becomes a swarm (J. Kennedy, Eberhart, & Shi, 2001).

Therefore, we counter the notion that individuals can and should always raise problems for collective consideration by offering a different perspective, one that highlights the potential value in implicitly seeking out more subtle and local solutions in problematic situations, which can yield important benefits to organizations under certain conditions. Toward this end, we introduce the concept of active avoidance, which is the implicit search for and use of alternatives motivated to reduce the negative experience of aversion. In other words, active avoiders are addressing an aversive situation by doing something other than what is expected or prescribed, and they are doing it without discussing it with others. Active avoidance can be positive because it enables individuals to make short-term adaptations in the face of situational incongruence, but to do so in such a way
that they can forego the negative interpersonal discomfort and relational consequences of raising problems. Additionally, given the challenges associated with collective problem diagnosis and projection of novel solutions, active avoidance can be beneficial to organizations by allowing individuals to make short-term adaptations to locally aversive situations, which provides some level of relief to them in the short term, and over time can provide system-wide diagnostic information (if many individuals are avoiding the same sorts of things) as well as demonstrable evidence of potential solutions (if individuals have innovated and tested new ways to handle a situation).

Active Avoidance versus Traditional Conceptions of Avoidance

Traditional conceptions of avoidance involve withdrawal or inaction. At its most basic, avoidance is an innate response to a threat or an aversive situation (Cannon, 1932; Thorndike, 1898). On a psychological level, pursuing pleasure versus avoiding pain--the hedonic principle--is a basic tenet of psychology (Freud & Hubback, 1922). In organizational research, avoidance has also been viewed largely as withdrawal and examined with respect to turnover and exit in response to job dissatisfaction. Empirical evidence has shown that job dissatisfaction is a significant predictor of withdrawal from organizations (Mobley, 1977; Tett & Meyer, 1993). When complete withdrawal is not an option in organizations, neglect, meaning the passive disregard of performing expected behaviors, may occur. Examples of neglect include calling in sick, coming in late and allowing errors to occur due to negligence (Farrell, 1983; Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous Iii, 1988). In addition to withdrawal and neglect, researchers in OB have identified indefinite delay as another way that actors remove themselves from undesirable situations in organizations (Izraeli & Jick, 1986). Similarly, Harris and Sutton (1983) identified "task procrastination" as a common form of non-action in organizations, primarily due to the aversive nature of certain tasks, namely unappealing, difficult, ambiguous and unimportant tasks.
The view of avoidance as inaction has been called into question by more recent research in psychobiology and basic psychology. Past research on the physiology of avoidance has centered on seminal work by Gray (1970) on the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) and the Behavioral Activation System (BAS). While avoidance was initially associated with BIS and thus equated with behavioral inhibition and inaction, more recent work has focused on the more active approaches of behavior motivated to forego aversive experiences. The BIS is still understood to be the neuropsychological epicenter of anxiety. However, while previously serving to regulate responses to conditioned aversive stimuli, it is now understood to be activated by sources of conflict among any inputs that might activate both the BAS and the "Fight, Flight, or Freeze System" (FFFS). As such, the BIS is no longer considered solely a punishment system, but rather a conflict detection and resolution device. Thus, BIS-engagement elicits search behavior designed to resolve these conflicts (McNaughton & Corr, 2004). In the psychology literature, the approach versus avoid dichotomy has also been found to be more complex than was originally conceived. Dollard and Miller (1950) first theorized about the ways in which goals often contain both desirable and undesirable components, resulting in approach-avoid conflicts. Higgins and colleagues (E. Higgins, 1987, 1989; E. Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994) subsequently showed that the classic, hedonic principle is an oversimplification of motivation and self-regulation, and that, within the broader goal of pursuing desired results, people implement promotion-focused or prevention-focused strategies depending upon the particular goal. Rather than conflate approach with pleasure and avoidance with pain, regulatory focus takes a broader view of the ways in which people self-regulate in order to obtain both achievement and security goals (see Higgins (1997) for a review). Thus, the existing literature provides some indication that avoidance is not only passive as previously conceived and that a one-sided view of avoidance as withdrawal or passive, negative behavior is too narrow.

To supplement the literature on avoidance in organizations, which tends to focus on what the actor is *not* doing, i.e. avoiding engaging in an aversive task or withdrawing from an
organization, active avoidance reflects the active pursuit of less aversive alternatives in an implicit manner, which has not been captured in previous, related research. Active avoidance occurs when individuals judge that the aversive situation they face is not insurmountable, and that changing the situation will yield benefits over not changing the situation, but that doing so explicitly will be personally costly or unsuccessful. Trying to make an explicit change to the organization can be costly in the interpersonal domain, where interpersonal judgments and sensitivities around impression management run high. Lack of success may be anticipated most in the task domain, where individuals judge that alternative methods might be viewed as invalid by others, or where they do not yet have the evidence to convince others that a new approach would work just as well or better than current approaches. In this way, active avoidance allows individuals to make changes without provoking interpersonal confrontation, or to test out new approaches and gather evidence of their success before exposing them to the collective opinion of others in the organization. Furthermore, active avoidance is most likely to be used when the situational incongruence being experienced is moderate, but not too great – when preferences, roles, or processes are at odds with a desired or expected outcome – but the actor sees a way to reconcile the conflicting demands of the situation.

Proposition 1: Moderate levels of situational incongruence will result in a greater likelihood of active avoidance behavior.

In the next section of the paper, we outline the situational constraints that influence the manifestation of active avoidance. In particular, we examine the role of constraints and expectations in organizations and the ways in which they interact with actors’ experience of aversion to influence the shape of active avoidance behavior. We then delineate the ways in which process versus outcome expectations interact with aversion to shape the active avoidance strategies actors adopt -- namely, pretending and bypassing.
MODERATORS OF ACTIVE AVOIDANCE: CONSTRAINTS AND EXPECTATIONS

(OR "RULES ARE MEANT TO BE BROKEN")

Some argue that the main function of organizational designers is to constrain behavior and focus attention so that workers might be more "boundedly rational" (March, Simon, & Guetzkow, 1958; Ocasio, 1997). Constraints direct attention and shape behavior, and we argue that the form active avoidance will take will be influenced by the kinds of constraints that exist in the aversive context that the actors are attempting to implicitly change. Constraints can take the form of specific goals or end states of activity, or may specify the boundaries outside of which behavior is not permitted. Constraints in organizations can be communicated in a variety of ways. They can be formal, as official rules or policies, or informal, as social norms. They can be communicated somewhat negatively in terms of rules against prohibited behavior or more positively in the form of expectations. They can also be more general, i.e. in order to maintain a job an employee needs to show up for work, to a much more fine-grained level, i.e. in order to maintain one's position as a waitress it is necessary to always smile, be friendly, and introduce oneself by name. Even more informal and tacit are the normative social expectations around working hours, clothing, eating with co-workers at lunch, or attending company social functions. Implicitly, organizational actors can become focused on their own performance outcomes through competition and interpersonal comparisons with peers or relevant others (Menon, Thompson, & Choi, 2006). Likewise, implicit expectations about the processes characterizing work behavior (work hours, interpersonal conduct, habits and routines) can be communicated through norms and subtle environmental cues (Barker, 1993; Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1985; Feldman, 1984) without any explicit process mandates or enforcement. Thus, constraints shape the formal or informal expectations about the ways in which people are expected to behave, express themselves and perform their jobs in many different situations in organizations.
Constraints in organizational settings can also be characterized as residing within the outcome or process domains of organizational work. The process domain refers to the way in which work gets done whereas the outcome domain refers to the final product or intended end results of work (Woolley, 2009a, 2009b). The role of outcome and process constraints in focusing individuals on lower-level activities versus overarching goals is consistent with work on construal and action identification (Trope & Liberman, 2003; R. R. Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987). Individuals can identify actions as low-level, specific activities (e.g. “I am typing a report”) or in higher-level terms that encompass multiple specific alternative activities for enactment (e.g. “I am consolidating and communicating my knowledge”). Low-level action identifications are associated with identifying what tasks need to be accomplished and what processes to follow, whereas high-level action identifications are associated with identifying larger goals and outcomes of the work itself. Furthermore, the level at which people identify their actions is highly influenced by cues provided by the task context (R. Vallacher, Wegner, & Somoza, 1989). In this way, action identification unfolds as an emergent process in both individuals and teams, as members reconceptualize what they are doing based on their experience and information in the environment (R. R. Vallacher & Wegner, 1985).

Managerial actions regularly focus attention on the outcome versus process spheres of activity in organizations, and the distinction between how processes and outcomes operate in reasoning and collective functioning has been examined in prior research on the individual, group and organizational levels (e.g. (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trotschel, 2001; Benner & Tushman, 2003; Locke & Latham, 1990; Woolley, 2009a, 2009b). For example, the outcome-process distinction has been applied to research on accountability, an issue which is critical in many organizational settings. Accountability can have a variety of effects that are in part explained by the distinction between process accountability and outcome accountability (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Both can have positive and negative effects. Though outcome accountability can motivate effort
toward a highly desirable goal, it can have dysfunctional consequences such as escalation of commitment to a prior course of action (Simonson & Staw, 1992) or the encouragement of unethical behavior (Siegel-Jacobs & Yates, 1996). Process accountability can mitigate the incidence of both escalation of commitment (Simonson & Staw, 1992) and process dysfunctions observed in the context of exclusive outcome accountability, as well as improve accuracy and confidence calibration in decision-making (Siegel-Jacobs & Yates, 1996). However, process accountability and the constraints it entails may also harm creativity through producing negative affect (Isen & Baron, 1991) and narrow focus (Amabile, 1983; Sutton & Galunic, 1996).

(Insert figure 1 here)

Similarly, we contend that the form an active avoidance strategy takes is influenced by the constraints that are salient in the situation. Active avoiders subject to outcome constraints will understand their work process in terms of higher level action identities and should exhibit greater flexibility in conceiving of alternative processes for accomplishing it. In contrast, active avoiders subject to process constraints will think about their work process in terms of lower level action identities and, in the face of incongruence, should exhibit a greater focus on maintaining an appearance of complying with a relatively narrowly circumscribed set of activities. In terms of the former, outcome constraints focus actors and observers on the form of the final product or end results of work, with less focus on or consensus around the specific steps used to attain those outcomes. Consequently, actions aimed at reducing aversion in such situations will focus on "bypassing" undesirable activities in order to conform to outcome expectations. By contrast, the focus on specific behaviors engendered by process constraints leads the perceived deviation from expected activities to have greater negative consequences for the actor, and thus obscuring observation of the discrepancy allows the actor to implicitly change the situation without experiencing negative consequences. This obscuring behavior takes the form of "pretending," in which the actor distracts or misleads the observer regarding the departure from expected behavior.
Pretending is most likely to occur when the desired results of a process are poorly specified or not easily observable, and thus maintaining the appearance of compliance with expected processes leads to a positive assessment of the actor's behavior overall.

By way of illustration, take for example the mandate to have clean hands in a food preparation or healthcare environment to avoid the spread of illness. This type of mandate is often challenging due to incongruence between employees’ preferences and the situational demands and/or incongruence between expected work processes and desired outcomes. The incongruence between preferences and work demands stems from workers disliking washing their hands because of the resulting skin irritation from the soap or concern about damaging jewelry. Incongruence between this process demand and desired outcomes stems from the time pressure employees may experience, especially in the case of healthcare, and may feel that the desired outcome – seeing a certain number of patients per day – is simply incompatible with the expected process – washing hands for a protracted period before and after seeing every patient (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Based on our model, when process constraints are more salient, then attention is focused on more specific, proximal behaviors of hand washing, and non-compliance requires obscuring one's actions. As a result, pretending behavior is more likely to occur, in which actors maintain the appearance of compliance even when what they are purportedly doing is not the same as what they are actually doing. In the case of the hand washing mandate, this will result in workers walking in the vicinity of the hand washing area, making motions of washing hands, to convey the impression of compliance. If the outcome expectations are more salient, such as a focus on clean hands coming in contact with food or patients, then attention would be less on specific hand-washing steps and more on attainment of the expected outcomes. As a result, actors may bypass certain other steps (such as touching anything that would make their hands dirty) or invent alternative processes. In the case of the clean hands mandate, workers may wear gloves, accomplish activities without using
their hands (e.g. foot- and voice-activated instruments), or invent things like hand gel, which more quickly accomplishes the same state of cleanliness.

Active avoidance behavior in environments like this can be instructive; rather than simply issuing additional directives about the importance of hand washing, organizations could harness the diagnostic information inherent in the pretending and bypassing behaviors in order to create less aversive processes that will lead to better accomplishment of important objectives. We will return to this point in a later section of the paper concerning positive consequences of active avoidance. For now, the example illustrates the difference between pretending and bypassing, and the way in which the type of constraint that is salient--process versus outcome--influences the type of active avoidance that occurs--pretending and bypassing.

Throughout this section we have discussed process and outcome constraints independently. However, organizational life is complex, and certain occupations and tasks may involve both forms of constraints simultaneously. In highly regulated occupations, for example, strong process and outcome constraints may co-occur. Furthermore, in some professions, such as academia, different aspects of the job may entail different types of constraints. For example, an academic may be under strict outcome constraints when it comes to research, but when it comes to teaching the same person may be held to both process (managing the syllabus, the classroom, interactions with students) and outcome constraints (what students learned, their evaluation of course quality). Nonetheless, even when multiple constraints are present, individuals think about constraints in a manner that leads outcomes or processes to be more salient (Woolley, 2009a). Thus, we maintain that, even in the presence of multiple constraints, the active avoidance strategy employed—pretending versus bypassing—will be driven by the constraints that are most salient in a given context.

In the next section, we will describe these active avoidance strategies in greater detail. Furthermore, within the categories of pretending and bypassing, we provide examples of both
behavioral and communicative tactics, since tasks can contain either a behavioral and/or communicative components, which may be employed separately or in tandem. We describe each in detail below.

**Process Constraints and Pretending**

Process constraints and the focus they engender on specific activities result in the sense that individual employees or actors are being "watched." We know from the literature in social psychology that in some circumstances, the sense of being watched creates evaluation apprehension (Markus, 1978) whereas in other circumstances it can fend off the tendencies of social loafing and lead individuals or groups to work harder (Karau & Williams, 1993). "Pretending" involves the creation of a dichotomy between one’s private reality and the one represented to observers. In other words, an actor creates the impression of doing one thing, such as complying with a regulation or engaging in a certain activity, but he or she is really doing something else. Pretending is largely motivated by the desire to find alternatives that will avoid provoking a confrontation or negative interpersonal judgment by overtly defying process expectations. Active avoidance in the presence of strong process expectations will lead to partial or "loose" compliance as a behavioral tactic and expressive ambiguity as a communicative tactic, because both of these tactics render ambiguous the degree of compliance with process expectations. Loose compliance involves maintaining the behavioral appearance of complying whereas expressive ambiguity involves appearing to agree or comply in terms of communication. Both are examples of tactics employed to facilitate the appearance of complying with process expectations.

For example, pretending in the form of loose compliance refers to the execution of a process in such a way that meets the "letter of the law" but avoids undesirable outcomes or experiences without evoking a confrontation concerning non-compliance. One example is found in the grading process used in many educational settings. Instructors institute a grading system as a
means of giving feedback to students on their performance and to differentiate students from one another. However, the increasing incidence of grade inflation (Eiszler, 2002) suggests that, though there is the appearance of a grading system, more and more instructors implement it in such a way that results in little to no differentiation in the grades assigned, since dealing with unhappy students who have received a bad grade is a highly aversive experience. Likewise, loose compliance in terms of industrial safety has been shown to be related to the safety climate (or lack thereof) in an organization, which is characterized by managers’ attitudes concerning safety (Griffin & Neal, 2000; Zohar, 1980). At the same time, loose compliance can also be credited with the invention of flex-time work policies that have enabled women to remain active in more areas of the work force. Current day flex-time policies were preceded by individuals who gradually and covertly shifted their work hours, sometimes with the help of co-workers who would turn on lights or computer workstations or punch timecards to create the impression of their presence, until management had a chance to become comfortable with the idea that work could be accomplished with some degree of non-overlap in work hours (Avery & Zabel, 2001; Milliken, Martins, & Morgan, 1998; Swart, 1978).

Pretending by engaging in expressive ambiguity is a tactic within the communication domain that actors employ, sometimes in conjunction with loose compliance, to facilitate the post-hoc portrayal or interpretation of communication acts as having been in accordance with mandates or expectations, while avoiding confrontation or discomfort in real-time. Specific forms of this tactic come in the form of "couching" negative comments in the midst of positive or ambiguous speech, or "skirting" an issue by talking about related topics while not addressing the contentious topic directly. The presence of observers demands that an answer be given, but answers are constructed so as to be interpretable in a multitude of directions, allowing for the re-construal of meaning after the fact (Weaver, 1986).
Expressive ambiguity is related to the larger domain of strategic ambiguity, which refers to the strategic application of ambiguity in terms of both creating and communicating about an organization’s mission (Eisenberg, 1984). Though the ethics and potential outcomes of strategic ambiguity have been debated (Markham, 1996; Ulmer & Sellnow, 1997), as well as the circumstances under which it should be used (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987), one of the touted benefits is that in certain situations it behooves managers to express an organization’s goals in an ambiguous manner such that various options remain open and a diversity of viewpoints are fostered. Likewise, expressive ambiguity enables actors to actively avoid the aversiveness of confronting and potentially angering important stakeholders while still engaging in communication as required by the process expectations of the situation. Expressive ambiguity may also facilitate new inventions when it allows actors to "buy time" in situations that require a long-term, interpersonally sensitive process. Thus, pretending, and specifically tactics such as expressive ambiguity and loose compliance, may facilitate accommodation among various parties and interests. We consider the positive consequences of pretending in more detail later in the paper.

**Outcome Constraints and Bypassing**

Outcome constraints are generally instituted to hold employees responsible for their results, often in the form of "pay for performance" systems and goal setting, which can lead to many positive consequences (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Locke et al., 1990). Bypassing by engaging in shortcuts involves the use of an unconventional process for accomplishing a desired end state while reducing the aversion experienced in the process. Though negative examples of short cuts abound, such as dishonesty in accounting practices in settings that emphasize outcomes while lacking oversight of processes (Mazar & Ariely, 2006), shortcuts can also result in the development of tools and processes that handle required steps more efficiently. Indeed, from Plato’s famous exhortation about necessity being the mother of invention (Jowett & Campbell, 1941) to early work by economists about the ways in which inventions are often the byproducts of attempts at process
improvement (Nelson, 1959), short cuts are known to lead to time-saving and efficient inventions. Many computer-based tools were motivated by the desire to avoid arduous computational or data processing tasks and attain desired performance outcomes. Similarly, a whole host of physical tools (think "electric hammer" or "riding lawn mower") have been innovated with the desire to facilitate the accomplishment of physically demanding tasks. What these and many other shortcuts have in common is that they are the result of search processes initiated by actors in the face of an aversive situation, that subsequently enable the attainment of desired outcomes while reducing the aversion associated with the process.

Indirect communication in lieu of more direct communication methods is an example of bypassing in the realm of interpersonal communication in which organizational actors transmit information in a more unidirectional and indirect manner in order to enhance speed (by reducing the need to synchronize schedules with recipients) and reduce the opportunities for feedback and interaction. Indirect communication occurs through the use of messages that are primarily not delivered face-to-face and that actors assume will be received and attended to by the intended recipients. The rise in the use of technologies allowing indirect communication (i.e. email, voicemail, texting, etc.) is an example of bypassing methods that stem from these avoidance impulses (Kurtzberg, Naquin, & Belkin, 2005; O’Leary & Cummings, 2007). Such technologies have become particularly popular in contexts lacking norms or process expectations regarding face-to-face communication (Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005; Kraut, Rice, Cool, & Fish, 1998), which tend to be more results-oriented, outcome-focused environments such as manufacturing production and finance (Mazmanian, Yates, & Orlikowski, 2006). Though certainly not all email or voicemail communication is the result of avoidance behavior—and people previously avoided quite successfully using simpler technologies like letters—some have noted the trend that these new technologies have encouraged the younger generations to forego interpersonal encounters in favor of these more indirect approaches (Richtel, 2008). More generally speaking, indirect
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communication parallels bypassing in the realm of communication, since it is a way of working around an aversive interpersonal encounter while accomplishing desired outcomes.

Proposition 2: Aversion interacts with constraint type to influence active avoidance strategy:
The salience of process constraints moderates the degree to which pretending occurs, whereas the salience of outcome constraints moderates the degree to which bypassing occurs.

OUTCOMES OF ACTIVE AVOIDANCE: EFFICIENCY AND ACCOMMODATION

We maintain that pretending and bypassing can lead to positive outcomes in organizations by facilitating process inventions that enhance helpful accommodations and efficiency, respectively. Of course, active avoidance can have negative consequences, and thus there are important boundary conditions that circumscribe the situations under which positive outcomes may occur.

The most obvious negative consequence of pretending is dishonesty in organizations. Indeed, both expressive ambiguity and loose compliance involve an element of dishonesty in that the truth of the situation is somehow simulated to be unknown, skirted around, or only loosely undertaken. The most obvious negative consequence of bypassing is poor quality, both tangibly in terms of products and more intangibly in terms of management. For example, incentivizing employees on production output when processes for production have been correctly specified (but are not monitored) can easily lead to the finding of "short cuts" and consequently undesired variance in the product (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985) or safety incidents (Zohar, 1980). Thus, the negative results of these active avoidance strategies are real and certainly need to be acknowledged.
Therefore, the positive outcomes of active avoidance can only accrue when at least two conditions are present: first, the short- and long-term goals of the organization and the actor are aligned and, second, the active avoidance strategies pass basic tests of ethics. Regarding goal alignment, the importance of goal alignment has been examined in a wide range of contexts, with respect to compensation (Hollensbe & Guthrie, 2000; Jensen & Meckling, 1976), organizational citizenship behavior (Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983), and job satisfaction and tenure (Guth & MacMillan, 1986) to name a few examples. With respect to active avoidance, when the goals of an individual and the organization are aligned, then the cost/benefit analyses driving active avoidance at the individual level are likely to be aligned with the organization’s interests (Kaplan & Norton, 1996). In this way, the active avoidance behavior facilitates aversion-reduction for the individual actor but does not detract from organizational goals. Regarding ethicality, our discussion of positive outcomes of active avoidance is limited to the sphere of ethical behavior, in which selected actions conform to the commonly accepted ethical tests of generalization and utilitarianism (Hooker, 2008). Though standards of ethicality might vary somewhat from culture to culture (E. Kennedy & Lawton, 1996) we maintain that strategies that fail these important ethical tests cannot yield outcomes that could be broadly construed as beneficial.

Despite the potential for negative implications from bypassing and pretending, we also maintain that, within the boundary conditions mentioned above, active avoidance can facilitate efficiency, due to bypassing, and accommodation, due to pretending, which may benefit both individual employees and organizations. More specifically, bypassing can lead to process inventions that more efficiently accomplish desired outcomes, and pretending can lead to inventive ways of accommodating sources of situational incongruence. In this section, we develop propositions concerning the ways in which bypassing and pretending can lead to efficiency and accommodation inventions, respectively, on an individual level. In the section that follows, we develop a proposition about the ways in which organizations can harness the positive results of
active avoidance and, by doing so, foster a diverse environment in terms of both task solutions and management processes.

**Bypassing and Efficiency**

Organizational innovation depends upon invention, which is an original solution resulting from the synthesis of information about a need or want and information about the means by which the need or want may be met (Marquis, 1969; Schmookler, 1966; Utterback, 1971; Utterback & Abernathy, 1975). Innovation is thus an invention that has been implemented in a product or a process (Utterback, 1971). The search for alternatives that underlies active avoidance can raise the probability that new solutions will be invented, and generating a larger pool of solutions can increase the chances that organizational innovation will occur.

The notion that employees can and should invent novel and efficient means of performing tasks is not new; indeed, setting challenging goals while leaving open the means for achieving them has been argued to be an effective way to draw out employees' knowledge and skills (Hackman, 2002). Similarly, task revision, or deviating from the prescribed task, will lead to innovation and improved performance when the work role is inadequately specified (Staw & Boettger, 1990). We argue that bypassing can lead to inventions that improve the efficiency or effectiveness of a work process while holding the outcome of the activity constant. For example, in 1970, unbeknownst to their instructors initially, two business school students developed an alternative method producing correct answers for their accounting homework more quickly and accurately using a computer-based tool. These students invented Visicalc, the precursor to our modern spreadsheets. Rather than completing the process by hand, they invented a more efficient way to get the right answers in much less time. This invention exemplifies the potential for positive benefits from bypassing, which leads to greater efficiency by modifying an aversive task to make it less aversive and more efficient. Bypassing can lead to invention when individuals experience
aversion while working within an outcome constraint, using processes that are only loosely specified or not observable.

To be sure, it is possible that in some cases bypassing could result in less efficient processes when the typical approach is the most efficient but aversive. However, work in individual cognitive psychology and group performance both point to the dominant tendency of individuals and groups to drift toward alternatives that are less effortful (Ebenbach & Keltner, 1998; Johnson et al., 2006; Orbell & Dawes, 1991). Furthermore, the major commodity for trade within organizations is time, where employers and employees barter for individual effort and attention (Ocasio, 1997; Schriber & Gutek, 1987). Any technique that allows the actor to spend less time on a particular task gives him/her additional autonomy for an activity of his or her own choosing and/or to incorporate additional and more desirable organizational activities into his or her role. Thus we argue that in most situations, the incentives are present for individuals to bypass in ways that enhance the efficiency of their work.

Proposition 3: Bypassing will lead to process inventions that facilitate more efficient accomplishment of specified outcomes.

**Pretending and Accommodation**

Accommodation refers to the adaptation or reconciliation of two or more points of difference (Merriam-Webster, 1991). As situations demand different approaches or as workers with diverse needs or perspectives approach the same situation, it will frequently be the case that the same process will not fit them equally. Though organizations often create process constraints in an attempt to ensure fairness across employees or to ensure a certain level of coordination and consistency of performance, these process constraints may exist at odds with individual or situation-specific needs. Similarly, despite all of the praise heaped on to "straight talk," some
interpersonal differences cannot be resolved. Thus, actors in organizations frequently find themselves in a bind -- if they proceed as they explicitly "ought" to, it will leave situational incongruence unresolved, but if they make explicit that they will not proceed, it will bring trouble in a different form. So what is one to do? Pretending enables actors to accommodate local needs without creating system-wide upheaval.

For example, employees may pretend about their whereabouts when certain personal issues take precedence, such as medical appointments or attending an event at a child’s school, particularly in situations in which there are no official policies about flex-time or personal time. These same individuals may also make up for lost work time through working at home after hours, again technically in violation of policy in many organizations. This pretending behavior, especially when organizational and individual goals are aligned, can enable employees to accommodate the various demands in their lives in a manner that avoids confrontation for themselves or their manager over policy violations. Likewise, people in organizations do not always get along with their co-workers on a personal level, but the requirements of their work are inherently interactive. Pretending helps employees to manage these relationships such that they remain workable without aggravating underlying tensions, which may involve issues that are not under anyone's control or may not be appropriate to address in the work context. For example, process expectations often exist in the workplace concerning employee socializing, and employees may often feel implicitly (if not explicitly) required to attend such events even when they do not enjoy doing so. Pretending may help employees deal with these situations, either through the use of expressive ambiguity so as to avoid any confrontations or uncomfortable conversations, or through the use of loose compliance, i.e. by arriving late and leaving early and thus only loosely complying with the expectation to be present in the social situation. We will return to this issue in the next section concerning the ways in which active avoidance can be diagnostic for organizations and lead to positive systemic changes.
Proposition 4: Pretending will facilitate the accommodation of competing demands and/or tensions in the work environment.

Harnessing the Positive Consequences of Active Avoidance: Systems Observation

At the organizational level, harnessing the positive consequences of active avoidance ultimately leads to a greater diversity of invented solutions and management processes. Such diversity is welcome given that most workplaces have become more demographically diverse, and the needs and demands of organizational work are likewise diverse and sometimes incompatible. In the task domain, active avoidance can foster innovation through the proliferation of multiple local inventions that increase efficiency. These inventions are stimulated by the search for alternatives to adapt to constraints and are optimized to be useful to the user. Moreover, these inventions may prove to be useful to others in the organization as well and lead to organization-wide innovations, and be better than those that would have arisen if more explicit change-oriented processes had been engaged to collectively search for alternatives in the absence of such individual inventions. In the interpersonal domain, active avoidance can result in local variations in work processes that accommodate the idiosyncratic needs of a situation. For instance, pretending may be beneficial in organizations in the interpersonal realm, particularly when it comes to overlooking minor differences that may otherwise provoke unproductive or relationship-harming conflict. In the arena of interpersonal communication, research on cultural differences in conflict management styles has shown that managers from the U.S. tend to employ a competing, direct style whereas managers from Asia tend to employ an avoiding conflict style (Morris et al., 1998). These cultural differences have been shown to hinder positive working relationships and outcomes (Graham & Sano, 1991; Hofstede, 1980). In such circumstances, the encouragement of pretending with an eye toward cultural sensitivity, i.e. employing tactics such as expressive ambiguity in order to allow the other party to save face rather than engaging in direct confrontation, may lead to positive outcomes in an organization, especially when long-term relationships are crucial. Similar strategies of pretending in
the face of otherwise conflict-provoking circumstances have been shown to have beneficial effects in preserving relationships even in the absence of cultural differences (Pike & Sillars, 1985).

The degree to which an organization has developed the ability to observe and diagnose active avoidance behavior at a system level will moderate the extent to which they can capitalize on the information value that active avoidance behavior provides. Others have pointed out that avoidance can have positive signaling effects in organizations (Piderit, 2000) as individuals with more local knowledge and a different vantage point can draw attention to those organizational processes that are maladaptive for their particular context. Organizations can harness the value of these local level inventions through the development of system-level observational tools. Since individuals have elected to engage in active avoidance rather than direct confrontation of a situation that requires change, direct reporting or questioning of any individual about his or her behavior is unlikely to yield useful solutions. Furthermore, confronting a single individual about his or her active avoidance behavior is unlikely to provide good, diagnostic information about how widespread vs. idiosyncratic an issue really is. However, system-level observation may suggest areas in which active avoidance is occurring and the manner in which existing processes could be modified. Though system-level observation could be easily interpreted as a "Big Brother" mechanism for employee monitoring, the goal of this type of mechanism is exactly the opposite—rather than monitoring individuals, managers can make more general observations about systemic issues. Doing so equates to a form of “swarm intelligence” – evaluating the quality of a new nesting location not because one individual thinks it is great, but because a series of individuals are beginning to move in a particular direction (Bonabeau, Dorigo, & Theraulaz, 1999).

Returning to the example of hand washing described earlier in the paper, monitoring of individual employees may be difficult and may ultimately not solve a problem (e.g. lack of proper hand washing) that is chronic throughout an organization. Instead, managers could monitor soap levels in different locations, or paper towel usage (a system indicator) as well as outcome indicators.
in different locations (i.e. infection rates associated with different rooms in the hospital).

Furthermore, rather than interpreting active avoidance in this domain as deviant behavior by individuals, managers could use the information about active avoidance to decide whether it is a local problem or a system-wide problem that needs to be addressed. Atul Gawande, in his book *Better: A Surgeon’s Notes on Performance*, recounts a fascinating success story of a Veterans Administration hospital in Pennsylvania in which the rate of bacterial infection was reduced almost to zero as a result of significantly improved hand washing rates. The process of improving this behavior can be interpreted as resulting from observation of active avoidance and the use of that information to make systemic changes to processes in the hospital in order to make hand washing less aversive – in that case, by cutting down the amount of time needed to accomplish the necessary level of hand hygiene.

Pretending behavior can also provide organizations with diagnostic information and enable organizations to make process changes that will ultimately foster a more diverse workforce. An organization in which people are able to accommodate their various needs and demands on could operate more effectively as a diverse organization. Returning to the example of loose compliance with work hours in order to accommodate work and family needs discussed above, the observation of this behavior could lead organizations to make systemic changes, *i.e.* introducing flex-time policies, which ultimately facilitate the hiring and retention of a more diverse workforce. These policies have been shown to have predominantly positive effects on work outcomes (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright, & Neuman, 1999). Furthermore, employees are more likely to be successful in getting flex-time schedules following active avoidance behavior versus making a direct request (Hochschild, 2001). Current employees who gradually (but implicitly) shift their work hours while demonstrating that they can still be effective are generally more successful in negotiating these arrangements than new employees who attempt to directly ask for them.
Thus, cultivating system-level observation of the behaviors and inventions of employees who are resolving situational incongruence will provide an organization with better information about where change is needed as well as potential alternative solutions. For example, if an individual complains loudly to management that the work hours are unreasonable, it is difficult for management to determine how widespread the problem is or what is a workable solution. By contrast, if management observes how full the parking lot is at different hours, how busy the meeting rooms are, and the amount of computer network and telephone usage over the course of the day, then they can determine when the need for worker overlap is greatest and where flexibility might be appreciated. They may also observe some alternative techniques that workers innovate to handle demands from outside of the office which are beneficial for everyone (Morgan 1977). If instead they chastise individual workers who are not at their desk or attempt in other ways to observe or enforce requirements locally, they might force workers to engage in some of the other behaviors described above (withdrawal, deviance, etc.), which are not as beneficial for the organization, thereby ostracizing some workers and not discovering more effective ways of operating that would facilitate greater diversity. Thus, we argue that observation of patterns of behavior across people and over time provides better insight into difficulties and potential solutions than does the interrogation or correction of a single avoider and/or the open invitation to individuals to voice complaints without evidence of solutions. Consequently, we propose that system-level observation will moderate the degree to which organizations obtain diagnostic information about which problems require addressing and which solutions might be more appropriate.

Proposition 5: The adoption of system-level observation and diagnostic capability will moderate the degree to which organizations recognize and capitalize on the positive outcomes of efficiency and accommodation resulting from individual-level active avoidance.
Conclusion

We have introduced a new construct—active avoidance—that involves the implicit search for and use of alternatives by individuals motivated to reduce the negative experience of aversion due to situational incongruence in organizations. Unlike traditional conceptualizations of avoidance, active avoidance does not entail passivity or inhibition, but rather active strategies to pursue alternatives in light of aversive circumstances. Furthermore, we have argued that process-versus outcome-focused constraints will interact with aversion and determine whether active avoidance will entail pretending versus bypassing. We also have proposed two ways in which active avoidance can have positive ramifications for organizations in the forms of process inventions that facilitate efficiency and accommodation on the individual level, which ultimately translate into a greater diversity of solutions and the possibility of better diagnostic processes on the organizational level.

Some may read our discussion here as overly pessimistic about organizational voice and learning, and as such, we would like to emphasize the point that we see it not as either/or, but rather when to use one approach versus another. In situations in which problems and potential solutions are unfamiliar and possibly idiosyncratic, active avoidance will allow individuals and their organizations to pursue temporary local fixes. As situations evolve and it becomes clear that a problem is relatively widespread and persistent, then raising those issues as well as pointing to the kinds of solutions individuals have invented can facilitate a more productive discussion. Thus we see active avoidance as a potential precursor to and facilitator of more productive, solution-focused and change-oriented discussions in organizations. Active avoidance can also help employees cope with aversive situations and prevent more irreparable actions, such as withdrawal and neglect.

A broader understanding of active avoidance will lead to research about active forms of avoidance in organizations that have not been captured previously in organizational research. One
of the reasons that this area has been understudied is that action is much easier to identify and measure than inaction, and previous conceptualizations of avoidance involved inaction and withdrawal. Not only was this a narrow conceptualization of avoidance in organizations, but it is also difficult to study this conceptualization of avoidance empirically using traditional methods such as self-report measures, since social desirability biases impede reporting of outright avoidance and presumably leads to floor effects. However, measurement of the active avoidance strategies described in this paper will enable researchers to obtain a deeper understanding of avoidance behaviors in organizations. Better recognition of the existence of active avoidance and measuring its prevalence will help advance the precision of organizational research.

Finally, a better understanding of active avoidance and its potential benefits may create a more effective bridge between theory and practice (Pfeffer, 1993). Studying active avoidance is an example of the ways in which organizational research can make a significant contribution by building on existing psychological principles such as avoidance, but also considering the ways in which organizational contexts create unique spaces for these psychological phenomena to be manifested in different ways. The demands of the work domain, both in terms of characteristics of organizations as well as fulfillment of the basic need for employment, lead to behaviors that are particular to that context. Avoiding pain—especially when "pain" manifests itself in the form of demanding organizational constraints —may entail pretending and/or bypassing, particularly when traditionally passive avoidance techniques, such as withdrawal and delay, are not possible or desirable. In this way, future research on active avoidance has the potential to better inform a realistic portrait of people's experiences in organizations. Finally, a better understanding of active avoidance can aid managers to harness the potential benefits of resulting process inventions, leading to a more diverse organization that fosters more effective processes and solutions.
References


FIGURE 1

Model of proposed antecedents, moderators and outcomes of active avoidance