

co·wonders



**spiral of silence**

# spiral of silence

Written by: **Agata Stajer (Co.Wonders)**

## What is it about:

- reflection over why it is difficult to state our opinions publicly
- food for thoughts on how we function in group dynamics

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**source:** Spiral of silence by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann

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**domains:** group processes, communication in a group, public speaking, mass communication

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## approach description:

Spiral of silence was described by political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974). She wrote that a person's willingness to express their opinion was a function of how they perceived public opinion. In other words, we voice our opinions less likely in situations where we believe that the opinion of a majority is different than ours. M. Krogerus & R. Tschäppeler explained the phenomenon of "Spiral of silence" in 6 points:

- **Fear of isolation:** many individuals have a fear of isolation and they observe the behaviors of others to assess which opinions will be accepted or rejected.
- **Social pressure:** we put social pressure on each other. Expressions such as grimaces, eye rolls, or turning away occur when someone voices a dissenting opinion.
- **Unconscious level:** the fear of isolation and the urge to conform often operate beneath our conscious awareness. We seldom reflect on how profoundly public sentiment shapes our views.
- **Group reaction:** we may choose to mask our true beliefs if we sense it may lead to group pressure. Conversely, when we feel we may get support in a group, we are more inclined to express our opinions.
- **Consensus:** when a consensus exists within a group, the likelihood of a spiral of silence emerging diminishes.
- **Number of people:** the number of people who share an opinion is not necessarily significant. A minority viewpoint can be perceived as a majority stance if its advocates demonstrate sufficient confidence and assertively represent their beliefs in public



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## aim of use:

The activity can serve as food for thoughts to reflect over the mechanisms of stating opinions in public, what could influence it, and what could be the meaning behind someone's silence.

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## educational method:

- **Step 1: Spiral of silence introduction**

Present the theory behind the spiral of silence and its 6 main points.

- **Step 2: Reflection in groups**

Ask participants to group themselves in pairs and discuss how the spiral of silence is meaningful to them and what they heard was shared. Invite for sharing in a format of listening (not a discussion), thus to make sure:

- everyone has equal space to share their thoughts
- everyone is invited to share not only mental reflection, but also the emotional/body reactions
- everyone is invited to stay away from judgements when listening.

- **Step 3: Reflection in plenary**

Invite a few voices to share (for themselves, not their interlocutors) their thoughts from small groups. Ensure the space for questions and answers.

- **Step 4: Debriefing**

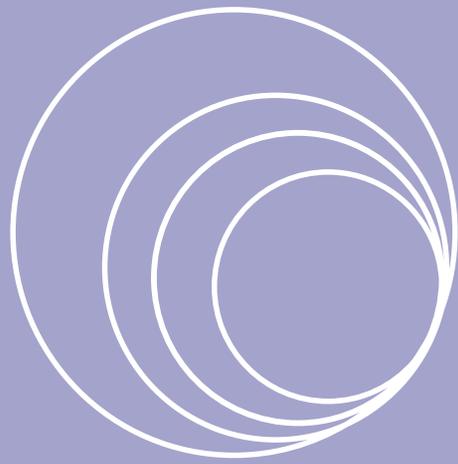
Ask learners to reflect in the plenary over the following questions:

- How are you feeling?
  - How was the process of reflection over the mechanism of spiral of silence?
  - How stating (or not) our opinion influences discussions, activism, educational spaces?
  - What are the learnings you would like to take with you from this activity?
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## read more:

- **Book:** Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann "The Spiral of Silence. Public Opinion--Our Social Skin"
- **Book:** Mikael Krogerus, Roman Tschäppeler, The communication book. 44 ideas for better conversations every day. (2019)





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