

MOTIVES FOR EMPLOYEE SILENCE IN AN ORGANIZATION – A CORRELATION ANALYSIS OF A POLISH SAMPLE

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Purpose: The aim of this paper is to analyse the differentiated spectrum of types of employee silence that reflect selected motives (including an analysis of interdependence between selected forms of employee silence).

Design/methodology/approach: The empirical material was obtained through a survey - a questionnaire with 47 questions was used (including questions about discriminatory behaviour, forms of organizational silence and respondents' personality traits). The survey was conducted in 2021 in the West Pomeranian province, Poland. 426 questionnaires were analysed.

Findings: Employees often keep silent in an organization for social reasons, while fear is the least important factor here. This research shows marked specific characteristics of prosocial silence which was introduced to research programmes by Knoll and van Dick (2013) (relatively high intensity, weak correlation with other forms). It also points out that a further analysis must take into consideration the widest possible spectrum of motives underlying employee silent attitudes.

Research limitations/implications: The analysis is based on respondents' subjective declarations.

Practical implications: Organizations' management staff should be aware of the diverse spectrum of motives for employee silence and thus measures to counteract negative effects of this phenomenon. This paper provides useful knowledge on this issue.

Originality/value: An analysis of a broad spectrum of motives for employee silence investigated in a Polish sample, along with a multidimensional analysis of the correlation between individual forms of employee silence.

Keywords: organizational silence.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the subject matter of motives that determine silence of employees in the organization. The literature points to two opposing interpretation routes of the analysis of the discussed category which is treated as a homogeneous construct in consideration of the context of factors that make up the climate of organizational silence, or as a category that must be viewed in consideration of many non-homogeneous motives of employee silence. This paper follows the second interpretation path. Commonly accepted measurement instruments have been designed in the second category. The questionnaire refers to four basic forms of employee silence, but it also provides possibilities of a more extensive analysis of motives of employee silence - this part of the questionnaire is often treated as secondary. This paper tries to fill this gap by a comprehensive approach to the analysis of data obtained using this instrument in the Polish sample and also by investigating areas of secondary employee silence. The survey was carried out in 2021 on a sample of 426 respondents who filled out the forms. The aim of this paper is to analyse the differentiated spectrum of types of employee silence that reflect selected motives (including an analysis of interdependence between selected forms of employee silence).

2. Literature review

The subject matter of employee voice/silence was introduced to organisational science by Hirschman (1970). His model offers four alternatives of responses for discontent organizations' employees and clients in the face of a crisis: exit (quitting the organization), voice (adopting an active attitude to initiate changes, voice may also be communicated outwards - whistleblowing), neglect (inactivity, passive observance) and loyalty (support even in a difficult situation). The last two alternatives may be examined in the context of silence (as an act of loyalty or resignation).

Hirschman's model and the concept of the spiral of silence (Noele-Neuman, 1974) that emerged more or less in the same time are examined outside the organizational context, also in the political science perspective. The subject matter of voice/silence has been functioning at the interface of disciplines. It is represented in the psychological, sociological and anthropological literature. It is addressed in discussions on bottom-up communication in an organization (Roberts, O'Reilly, 1974), the MUM effect (Rosen, Tesser, 1970), whistleblowing (Miceli, Near, 1992), procedural justice (Thibaut, Walker, 1975), self-censorship, social organizational behaviours (Brief, Motowidlo, 1986), issue selling (Dutton,

Ashford, 1993), social ostracism (Williams, Sommer, 1997) or deaf-ear syndrome (Peirce, Smolinski, Rosen, 1998).

The subject matter of employee voice has much more pronounced achievements than the subject matter of silence because it has been functioning in literature since the 1970s. Management literature includes two main conceptualizations of voice. In the first approach the term “voice” is used to describe behaviours associated with employees speaking up (employees promote changes pro-actively) (Farrell, Rusbult, 1992; Le Pine, van Dyne, 1998; Withey, Cooper, 1989). In the second meaning the literature uses the terms “voice” to describe the presence of procedures which facilitate employees’ participation in decision-making (Folger, 1977; Bies, Shapiro, 1988; van Dyne, Ang, Botero, 2003).

The issue of voice was introduced to organisational science only at the turn of the centuries (Milliken, Morrison, 2000). Contrary to the discussion on employees’ speaking up held so far, they treat organizational silence as a collective phenomenon driven by managers’ fear of feedback and their covert beliefs. This is how a climate of silence may be built. This is why it is silence, not voice, that prevails in an organization.

In contrast to this approach, there are works that focus on the individual character of decisions about not speaking up. In this angle, silence should be treated as a uniform construct because decisions of individual employees may be based on various premises. The term organizational silence should be replaced by the category of employee silence. Van Dyne, Ang, Botero (2003) identify three basic motives for voice and silence: resignation, fear or orientation on others, and identify the following types of silence: acquiescent silence, defensive and prosocial silence, and thus acquiescent, defensive and prosocial voice, respectively. Therefore, these authors did not oppose earlier approaches to employee voice in their discussion, but successfully attempted at an integration of these approaches. This concept of categorisation of employee silence has become a standard in literature that many writers adhere to.

Knoll and van Dick (2013), sharing this typology of employee silence, introduce an additional category - opportunistic silence. This type of silence is motivated by fear that speaking up may be disadvantageous to an individual, thus they calculate whether it is worth speaking up in such a situation. Authors of the publication cited above also propose measurement instruments for said four categories of employee silence, which are now widely used in empirical applications.

So far it has not been decided whether voice or silence must be seen as opposite ends of a continuum (voice or silence) (Milliken, Lam, 2009) or as separate constructs (Kish-Gephart, 2009). In the second approach, it is argued that voice is a conscious choice of an individual, whereas silence may be an automatic withdrawing response. Additionally, an employee, with a high voice engagement, may at the same time conceal certain information. Scholars put forward postulates of integration of literature on voice and silence in an organization (Morrison, 2011).

3. Methodological aspects of the research

The analysed empirical material comes from investigations of silence in an organization. Analyses that take into consideration the employee silence typology commonly use instruments proposed by Knoll and van Dick (2013). These authors, in turn, root their analytical concept in the works of Milliken, Morrison, Hewlin (2003); van Dyne, Ang, Botero (2003); and Brinsfield (2009). These instruments were used, for example, by Adamska (2015) and Knoll, Neves, Schyns, and Meyer (2021). Adaptation of this measurement instrument in the national literature was done by Adamska and Jurek (2017) who also used it in other studies.

The questionnaire comprises the total of 20 statements that start with the same phrase "I remain silent at work....". On the basis of the confirmatory factor analysis the author of the concept identified questions that may be used in the context of the research for the four individual types of employee silence. 3 statements were provided for each such area. This is why the analysis usually uses 12 questions, while we may assume that the remaining 8 are control questions, though they refer to many other motives of silence in an organization (e.g. aspects of building relations, dislike of conflicts or previous negative experience associated with criticism) not taken into account in the four-element set-up. These questions are usually avoided in investigations or even not taken into account in measurement questionnaires. This study fills this research lacuna. This analysis takes into account the total of information communicated.

This investigation also employs a previously described measurement tool translated into Polish. Statements given to respondents had a common core. The participants could choose their answers on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 meant disagreeing with a statement completely and 5 - agreeing with the statement completely. In individual areas the synthetic value of responses taken into account in further analyses was the total of partial responses recorded on the Likert scale. Apart from questions about employee silence and the bio section, the questionnaire also featured questions on the basis of which it was possible to build other potentially related constructs (e.g. job satisfaction, engagement, turnover intentions). The questionnaire had 47 questions in 3 blocks in total.

The empirical material was gathered in September - October 2021 (research period) from respondents from the West Pomeranian province (spatial scope). 426 respondents filled out the questionnaire to provide the data for the investigation.

An average value of responses weighted with percentage of choosing individual options was calculated to present the degree to which a respondent agreed with a given statement in a synthetic and comparable formula. Such a measure allows us to compare, relatively quickly, a lot of data in the ranking set-up as it is easy to interpret - the higher the value of the mean measure, the more the statement is agreed with. Naturally, we need to take into account the varied distribution of the variable (despite comparable values of weighted means),

thus questions of the emerging asymmetry (right- or left-biased) arise. These questions were controlled by means of the coefficient of skewness presented in selected tables.

The magnitude of interrelations between variables created on the basis of responses was investigated by means of the Pearson’s linear correlation coefficient. The statistical significance of this coefficient was also established at $p = 0.05$.

4. Research results

Table 1 presents the structure of respondents’ declarations with regard to 20 statements included in the survey that concerned employee silence. Statements that discriminate four basic kinds of silence in an organisation were marked with an adequate category (column 1). The table also presents an average weighted degree to which a given statement is agreed with. The data for the ranking was sorted according to the degree of this average measure (from the highest to the lowest value). The coefficient of skewness was also calculated for each of the statements.

Table 1.
The structure of respondents’ declarations about statements concerning organizational silence (together with coefficient of skewness)

Type of silence	I keep silent at work...	% of responses					weighted mean	skewness
		1	2	3	4	5		
prosocial	...because I don't want others to get into trouble because of me	23.1	20.9	20.5	18.7	16.8	2.85	-0.12
	...to avoid conflicts	22.0	23.1	22.0	19.4	13.4	2.79	-1.64
	...because I don't want to damage relationships to colleagues or superiors	23.1	19.4	28.4	16.0	13.1	2.76	0.42
	...because I don't want to be viewed as a troublemaker	31.3	20.1	24.3	11.6	12.7	2.54	0.41
prosocial	...because I do not want to hurt the feelings of my colleagues or superiors	34.0	23.1	19.4	11.6	11.9	2.44	0.86
acquiescent	...because my superiors are not open to proposals or solutions	36.9	21.6	19.4	11.9	10.1	2.37	1.16
	...because others say nothing, too	41.4	18.3	16.4	12.3	11.6	2.34	1.95
acquiescent	...because nothing will change anyway	40.7	18.3	20.5	10.8	9.7	2.31	1.50
opportunistic	...because of concerns that others could take an advantage of my ideas	39.2	21.3	22.8	9.3	7.5	2.25	0.79
defensive	...for fear of negative consequences	38.3	22.6	23.3	9.0	6.8	2.23	0.52
opportunistic	...not to give away knowledge advantage	40.3	22.0	19.4	11.9	6.3	2.22	1.02
acquiescent	...because my opinions will not fall on fertile ground anyway	38.1	22.8	25.7	6.0	7.5	2.22	0.24
prosocial	...because I don't want to embarrass others	39.9	23.9	18.7	9.7	7.8	2.22	0.98
	...because I want others to experience the effects from their mistakes	43.3	22.8	15.3	11.2	7.5	2.17	1.44

Cont. table 1.

defensive	...to not make me vulnerable in the face of colleagues or superiors	39.6	26.1	17.2	12.7	4.5	2.16	0.61
opportunistic	...because it would mean having to do avoidable additional work	43.3	23.5	17.9	7.8	7.5	2.13	1.17
defensive	...because I fear disadvantages from speaking up	43.8	24.7	18.4	7.5	5.6	2.06	0.98
	...because of bad experiences I've had with speaking up on critical issues in the past	50.9	16.1	16.5	9.7	6.7	2.05	1.93
	...because it is not expected from me to get involved	47.8	23.9	17.2	6.0	5.2	1.97	1.22
	...because my superiors do not deserve my involvement	56.0	19.4	13.1	7.5	4.1	1.84	1.83

Source: author's own compilation on the basis of author's own research.

The weighted degree of agreement for the 20 presented statements that refer to motives for silence in an organization was between 1.84 and 2.85. In the group of statements that discriminated four basic types/motives of employee silence, respondents most often agreed with statements that discriminated prosocial silence (point 1, 5 and 13 in the ranking). Defensive silence may be placed on the opposite pole (points 17, 15 and 10, respectively). Statements that discriminated acquiescent and opportunistic silence sat mid-way in the ranking. The said trends reflect information included in Table 2 that presents an average level (arithmetic mean) of measures that demonstrate agreement with statements presented in the questionnaire.

Table 2.

The average degree of agreement and the average value of coefficient of skewness for individual types of employee silence

Type of silence	Mean	skewness
prosocial	2.50	0.57
acquiescent	2.30	0.97
opportunistic	2.20	0.99
defensive	2.15	0.70

Source: author's own compilation on the basis of author's own research.

The mean values analysed sit between 2.15 and 2.50. Respondents clearly (most often) agree with statements concerning prosocial silence, that is they remain silent in the organizational reality for this very reason. For other categories of employee silence, the differences between mean values are not significant, though respondents remain silent due to fear the least frequently (or are not willing to admit that).

If we revisit the data presented in Table 1, we must note an interesting correlation. Statements that do not discriminate types of employee silence due to four basic reasons are located on extreme positions in this ranking (relatively strong or weak agreement with these statements). Respondents remain silent in an organization to avoid conflict, because they care about building and maintaining good relationships with colleagues and superiors or because they do not want to be seen as troublemakers. The bottom end of the ranking accommodates statements that refer to motives of silence in an organization that are less frequently named - the question of previous bad experience with speaking up on critical issues and questions of

building employee engagement in an organization. The middle part of the ranking accommodates two statements that refer to motivation of silence: observation of other employees who do not speak up or wanting to bring about a situation where the person who makes a mistake experiences effects of their actions (position 7 and 14, respectively).

Statements from the analysed form, not examined as verifiers of individual types of employee silence, were correlated with synthetic values for four basic types of silence. Thus I establish convergence of the motivator analysed with a basic motivator. The data is presented in Table 3, in an arrangement proposed by Knoll and van Dick (2013). It presents one or two synthetic variables that most strongly correlate with the investigated variable; a pre-determined level of the measure of correlation did not have to be exceeded, e.g. one that evidences statistical significance of the relation.

Table 3.

Correlation of non-discriminant variables with synthetic measures for four basic types of employee silence

I keep silent at work...	discriminant	correlation
...for fear of negative consequences	defensive	
...because I fear disadvantages from speaking up	defensive	
...to not make me vulnerable in the face of colleagues or superiors	defensive	
...to avoid conflicts		defensive, prosocial
...because I don't want to be viewed as a troublemaker		defensive, prosocial
...because others say nothing, too		defensive
...because I do not want to hurt the feelings of my colleagues or superiors	prosocial	
...because I don't want to embarrass others	prosocial	
...because I don't want others to get into trouble because of me	prosocial	
...because I don't want to damage relationships to colleagues or superiors		prosocial
...not to give away knowledge advantage	opportunistic	
...for fear that others may use my ideas	opportunistic	
...because I want others to experience the effects from their mistakes		opportunistic
...because my superiors do not deserve my involvement		opportunistic, acquiescent
...because it would mean having to do avoidable additional work	opportunistic	
...because my opinions will not fall on fertile ground anyway	acquiescent	
...because my superiors are not open to proposals or solutions	acquiescent	
...because nothing will change anyway	acquiescent	
...because it is not expected from me to get involved		opportunistic, acquiescent
...because of bad experiences I've had with speaking up on critical issues in the past		acquiescent, defensive

Source: author's own compilation on the basis of author's own research.

One cannot resist a visual impression that the third column (correlations) fills spaces in the second column (discriminant) very logically and the filling categories (third column) may be described as lying "at the border". The Polish sample may reflect/confirm empirically the intention of the questionnaire authors to group a greater number of statements for the motivators adopted (in search of statements that correlate in a given group most strongly). Only the last statement escapes this model and it is close to the synthetic measure for acquiescent silence but also to the extremely opposing, defensive indicator (the statement pertaining to previous bad

experience with presenting critical opinions, which may trigger fear but also a sense of lack of agency).

The analysis also covers correlation coefficients between synthetic measures for four types of employee silence. This information is presented in Table 4.

Table 4.

Correlations between synthetic measures for four forms of employee silence (along with a mean for each type of silence)

	defensive	acquiescent	prosocial	opportunistic	mean
defensive	x	0.366	0.166	0.99	0.244
acquiescent	0.366	x	0.223	0.401	0.330
prosocial	0.166	0.223	x	0.196	0.195
opportunistic	1.119	0.401	0.196	x	0,266

Source: author's own compilation on the basis of author's own research.

Correlation coefficients stayed between 0.401 (the strongest correlation between opportunistic and acquiescent silence) and 0.166 (the weakest correlation between defensive and prosocial silence). It is worth comparing this with information included in Table 1, where real discriminant statements for both types of silence are on opposing ends of the ranking.

When analysing average measures of correlation coefficients, we must note that it is acquiescent silence correlates the strongest with another type of silence (next to strong ties will opportunistic silence, we may see a relatively strong correlation with responses naming defensive silence). Prosocial silence correlates the weakest - correlation measures hover around 0.2.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The category of prosocial silence was introduced to a classic arrangement of three forms of employee silence (van Dyne, Ang, Botero, 2003) by Knoll and van Dick (2013). This research shows clear specific characteristics of this form. Prosocial silence shows a markedly weakest correlation with basic forms of employee silence. At the same time, silence so motivated was declared most frequently. We can see here a clear disproportion in the intensity of silence so motivated and in silence motivated by other reasons (acquiescent silence, opportunistic silence and defensive silence).

It is worth pointing out that there is strong convergence of acquiescent silence (which in general correlates the strongest with other investigated forms of employee silence) with opportunistic silence. Fear as a reason for silence was declared the least frequently.

The information acquired from the Polish sample confirms that silence in an organization should not be treated as a uniform construct, as done so by Milliken and Morrison (2000). It seems reasonable to analyse its individual components. It appears to be important that such analysis should also include other factors that motivate employees to remain silent in an organization, usually in limiting analyses due to the specific characteristics of the construct of the measurement instrument. This study intended to fill this lacuna partially. Interestingly, “secondary” factors took extreme positions in the ranking presented herein (which point to high or low intensity of silence for these very reasons).

Limitations of this study include defectiveness of the questionnaire as a tool, which materialises in the subjectivity of respondents’ declarations.

When we turn to directions for further research, we must point to the already mentioned postulate of extensive consideration of motives of employee silence, which is offered by the measurement questionnaire now commonly accepted in the literature (Knoll, van Dick, 2013). Certainly it would be recommended that regular longitudinal studies be conducted to reflect potential trends in changes of factors that motivate employees to remain silent in an organizational reality (for example, following the rhythm of cyclical changes in the economy).

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