

SILENCE OF THE EMPLOYEE'S IN AN ORGANIZATION AND INTENTION OF THEIR TURNOVER – THE ROLE OF THE EMPLOYEE'S GENDER

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Purpose: The aim of this study is to analyse silence in an organization and turnover intention taking into consideration the different motives of keeping silent in an organization and the role of the employee's gender.

Design/methodology/approach: The empirical material was obtained through a survey by means of a questionnaire. The survey was conducted in 2021 in the West Pomeranian province, Poland. 426 questionnaires were analysed.

Findings: This research confirmed in the conditions of the Polish research sample that including voice mechanisms is an essential factor that contributes to a weaker wish to leave an organization. In the context of the analysed relation, the literature points to the significant role of defensive silence and pro-social silence. In this context, this research highlights the importance of acquiescent silence (in both gender groups) and the relative force of a relation between the analysed variables among women for defensive silence and opportunistic silence.

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

Practical implications: In order to limit staff turnover, we need to take all possible steps to build voice mechanisms into the organization's management system. One needs to adjust the spectrum of activities to the employee's gender, with a particular focus in the women's group on actions to counteract defensive and opportunistic silence.

Originality/value: The research in world literature does not usually take into account, however, the specific motives that determine silence in an organization and gender differences in the scope discussed. Additionally, such research has not been carried out on a Polish sample, thus it is a pioneering investigation in national literature.

Keywords: organizational silence, turnover intention.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Research on voice and silence in an organization has been carried out since the 1970s. Placing voice mechanisms in the organizational system of an organization encourages dialogue between decision-makers and employees. The desire to leave an organization decreases in such an environment. This relation, in its straightforward form, has been examined in the literature in quite in-depth terms. The research does not usually take into account, however, the specific motives that determine silence in an organization and gender differences in the scope discussed. The research presented here fills this research gap. Additionally, such research has not been carried out on a Polish sample, thus it is a pioneering investigation in national literature.

The aim of this study is to analyse silence in an organization and turnover intention taking into consideration the different motives of keeping silent in an organization and the role of the employee's gender.

This study is both theoretical and empirical. The theoretical part presents the problem of personnel turnover, voice and silence in an organization and reviews research on links between silence in an organization and turnover intention. It then discusses results of a survey carried out on a Polish research sample of 426 respondents from the Zachodniopomorskie Province that focuses on the implementation of the goal of this article. The study closes with a discussion of results

2. Voice and silence in an organization

The “exit, voice and loyalty” theory points out that organizations should ensure that their employees have mechanisms for reporting work-related problems (Hirschman, 1970). Including such mechanisms in the organizational system allows employees to express their fears and to solve problems in dialogue with the management rather than respond by leaving (Perlow, Reponing, 2009; Zwiech, 2021). Voice contributes to limiting the frequency of people parting with the organization. Employee silence, in turn, is positively related with the intention to leave. Employee silence may be one manifestation of their dissatisfaction with work and the organization itself. Those employees may, therefore, consider quitting relatively more frequently.

Voice and silence exist in the literature as somehow parallel institutions, though they do permeate (Milliken, Lam, 2009; Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). Historically, employee voice was already the focus in earlier decades (since the 1970s – the quoted Hirschman's theory). Two of the alternatives of responses from dissatisfied employees may be examined in the context of silence (treated as an act of loyalty or resignation).

The subject matter of silence was introduced to the study of organizations only 30 years later by Milliken, Morrison (2000). They treated organizational silence as a collective phenomenon determined by managers' fear of feedback and employees' covert beliefs. The climate of silence in an organization is created in this way, amidst which silence, not voice, dominates. In a classical approach, organizational silence was treated as a uniform construct, though further studies (Van Dyne, Ang, Botero, 2003; Knoll, van Dick, 2013) point to the differentiated spectrum of premises that determine decisions of individual employees (employee silence).

Van Dyne, Ang Botero (2003) identify three basic motives for employee silence: resignation, fear or orientation on others, naming the categories singled out through this as acquiescent, defensive and prosocial, respectively. Knoll, van Dick (2013) expanded the baseline concept to include an additional category of employee silence: opportunistic silence. They propose instruments to measure employee silence that take into account its four category types. These instruments are most frequently applied today in empirical studies. They were also used in the research carried out in this paper. Thus, the measurement instruments will be presented in more detail in the methodology part of this study.

3. Turnover intention

Research on rotation or leaving the company encounters numerous obstacles since such studies could potentially be carried out post factum, that is when an employee is no longer a member of a given organization. A decision to leave a company may mature over months, years and thus may be easy to capture. On the other hand, the period between the decision to leave and the actual leaving the company may be so short that it may be difficult to notice. Thus, it is turnover intention that is being studied. An intention to leave a job reflects the employee's wanting to leave the organization and their reluctance to form a relation with it in the long run. Leaving is a behaviour that an employee first sees as an intention and only later, in a certain time perspective, do they they take specific actions to implement it.

Employee leaving entails a myriad of negative consequences for the organization, from recruitment costs to a diminished morale among the personnel who stay. Wong, Lasinger (2015) estimate that costs of employee turnover account for 15-30% of the total organization costs.

4. A study on the relationships between silence in an organization and turnover intention

The relationship of organizational silence and turnover intention has been addressed in numerous research papers. Organizational silence also acts as a mediator or moderator of relationships that take turnover intention into consideration as one of the variables.

Abou-Shouk, Elbaz, Maher (2021) studied the relationship between employee voice, work satisfaction and intention to leave on a sample of employees of travel offices in Egypt. The research shows that employee voice is a key predictor of the intention to leave. This work also investigates the moderating role of employee gender, though in reference to the relationship between work satisfaction and intention to quit.

Erdem, Tutar (2021) looked into the direct relationship between organizational silence and intention to leave. They examined the role of organizational loneliness as a relationship mediator. Their research showed that unfavourable working conditions that magnify employee silence foster the intention to quit and the feeling of organizational loneliness.

Uslu, Aktas (2017) addressed the mediating role of job satisfaction and the work safety index in the relation between organizational silence and individuals' intention to quit. This research was carried out on a sample of hospital employees in Istanbul. They also addressed the impact of demographic factors. Statistically significant relationships were identified in this field.

The relations between organizational silence and organisational cynicism and the intention to quit were examined on the basis of a group of nurses of a university hospital in Ankara. They researched the reasons for organizational silence and cynicism. It showed that the former in particular influences organizational cynicism. The reasons for organizational silence combined with organizational cynicism increase wanting to quit one's job. However, as the research showed, approximately half of the participants had never considered leaving (Altuntas, Caylak, 2017).

Jiang, Yao (2020) studied the moderating role of voice and silence in the relation between the climate of industrial relations and turnover intention. Their research showed that a harmonious climate of industrial relations lessened a desire to change jobs as an effect of increased employee voice, whereas a hostile climate in industrial relations increased employee silence, which meant increased wish to switch jobs.

Gunsay, Sarrafoglu (2020) investigated the impact of perception of organizational justice and organizational silence on job satisfaction and intention to leave. The research was conducted on people working in the public and private sector at the level of individual dimensions of employee silence. Statistically significant correlations were noted for the prosocial and defensive dimension of silence in relation to job satisfaction and intention to quit. Such correlations were not observed for acquiescent silence.

Chung-Hee, Min-Jeong (2018) researched the impact of organizational culture, organizational silence and work complexity on nurses' turnover intention. The investigation identified a positive correlation of defensive silence and turnover intention.

Kashif et al. (2021), in turn, confirmed the moderating role of defensive silence in relation between organizational stressors (abusive supervision and ethical conflict) and turnover intention in their study of a sample of frontline employees.

5. Methodological aspects of the research

The empirical material analysed comes from research on the subject matter of employee silence (subject of research). It was gathered in September-October 2021 (research period) by means of a paper questionnaire filled out by respondents from the West Pomeranian province (spatial scope). The research sample closed at 426.

Turnover intention was examined among the respondents using a four-item measurement scale.

In the analysis of the typology of employee silence the employee silence scale – a tool offered by Knoll, van Dick (2013) – was used. The questionnaire comprised 20 statements that started with the same core phrase “I remain silent at work...”. It accommodated partial questions for constructs that reflected four types of organizational silence in line with the typology described in the theoretical part. 3 discriminating questions were provided for each type of silence. Not all questions, thus, discriminated between individual types of organizational silence. The authors of this concept picked adequate questions (12) based on indications of the confirmatory factor analysis.

Respondents could express their beliefs for each statement presented to them on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 meant strongly disagreeing with a statement and 5 – strongly agreeing with the statement.

However, a synthetic measure was also created on the basis of responses to all questions (20) in the scale. Such a variable reflected the element of the examined dependency – employee silence in the main relation.

The main relation in groups of respondents in total and in groups singled out according to the gender criterion were analysed using classical regression models. R^2 for each of them was calculated to assess the quality of the fit of the model. In other cases (individual items in the survey and synthetic measures for individual categories of silence), the investigated relations were identified using linear correlation measures. For each dependency so identified statistical significance of the correlation measure for three possible cases of central limit probability of type I error was specified ($p = 0.1$; $p = 0.05$; $p = 0.01$). Synthetic measures were created by calculating the mean from partial measures.

Table 1 presents selected measures of statistical description and a reliability analysis for the investigated constructs.

Table 1.

Selected measures of statistical description and a reliability analysis for the investigated constructs

measures/variables	silence					turnover intention
	defensive	prosocial	opportunistic	acquiescent	all items	
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS						
minimum	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
first quartile	1,33	1,67	1,33	1,00	1,67	2,25
median	2,00	2,33	2,00	2,00	2,17	3,00
quartile three	2,67	3,33	2,67	3,00	2,75	3,75
maximum	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00	4,00	5,00
variance	0,98	1,21	0,87	1,14	0,50	1,01
standard deviation	0,99	1,10	0,93	1,07	0,71	1,01
skewness	0,83	0,47	0,60	0,63	0,07	-0,05
kurtosis	-0,08	-0,45	-0,29	-0,47	-0,71	-0,49
RELIABILITY ANALYSIS						
Cronbach's alfa	0,599	0,699	0,595	0,735	0,833	0,698

Source: author's own compilation based on author's own research.

Probability distributions for constructs that reflect the analysed categories of types of silence are right-skewed. It is evidenced by positive skewness values. The greatest asymmetry in a population is noted for defensive silence, and the least – for prosocial silence. Thus, respondents relatively more often chose the option of disagreeing with the the statement that refers to the state of silence in an organization. Such asymmetry does not manifest itself for a synthetic variable that includes all items of the measurement scale for silence in an organization. Asymmetry for the synthetic measure that reflects the construct of turnover intention (skewness close to zero, non-significant left-skewed asymmetry) cannot be identified either.

All distributions for the analysed constructs are platykurtic, as seen by negative kurtosis values. Thus, variable values in these distributions centre closer to a central measure (compared to a regular distribution) and tail areas are less developed. The lowest kurtosis was observed for defensive silence, the highest – for the construct that reflects silence in an organization on the basis of all questions that form the measurement scale. The lowest variance (least variable variance) was noted for this variable. The highest variance was noted for prosocial silence (variances are comparable thanks to the common range of possible variants of variable development on the 1 to 5 scale).

Cronbach's alpha was calculated for individual constructs. Values of this measure generally fit within the norm framework (>0.6). Cronbach's alpha for defensive silence and opportunistic silence balances at the border of the norm. Thus, it may be assumed that the scales are reliable.

6. Research results

This study analyses the relationship of silence in an organization with turnover intention taking into consideration the different motives of keeping silent in an organization and gender aspects.

The increasing value of the analysed measures (partial and synthetic) that refer to silence in an organization suggested growing intensity of this phenomenon. In turn, statements about turnover intention were directed content-wise towards an analysis of remaining in the current workplace. The declining values of the synthetic measure, therefore, evidenced greater motivation to leave one's current post. A negative correlation with silence in an organization (dependent variable) is identified for the independent variable: turnover intention in the 2 econometric models presented in Table 2. Thus, silence in an organization is a factor that encourages motivation to leave an organization. Therefore, such a correlation is suggested by negative values of an adequate coefficient. Negative values of the coefficient for the independent value were identified in each analysed model (in general and in gender groups). These correlations are statistically significant in each case for each level of the probability analysed. Low R^2 values need to be considered in the context prediction limitations of this research. The models account for 11.6% (for men) to 17.1% of general variability of the phenomenon of silence in an organization. Therefore, other determinants play a decisive role.

Table 2.

Econometric models of correlations between silence in an organization and turnover intention (in general and in gender groups)

Dependent variable (Y): silence in an organization

variable	coefficient	stand. error	t	p-value
TOTAL ($R^2 = 0,146$)				
const	3,03	0,156	19,5	0,000***
rotation	-0,27	0,049	-5,5	0,000***
MEN ($R^2 = 0,116$)				
const	2,91	0,238	12,2	0,000***
rotation	-0,23	0,076	-3,0	0,004***
WOMEN ($R^2 = 0,171$)				
const	3,14	0,208	15,0	0,000***
rotation	-0,30	0,065	-4,7	0,000***

Source: author's own compilation based on author's own research.

In the next stage, correlations between respondents' declarations about turnover intention (synthetic variable) and respondents' partial declarations in response to detailed questions that did or did not discriminate individual types of silence in an organization included in the questionnaire proposed in the analytical concept were examined (Knoll, van Dick, 2013). Detailed data is presented in Table 3. The entire research population was included in the research. In this part of the study, correlations between variables examined in this paper were identified on the basis of an analysis of the correlation measures calculated. The value of the

correlation measure is strongly associated with the sample size, thus with such a large sample, low values of correlation measures may also suggest an existing causal link. Decisions in this regards must be taken on the basis of results of an analysis of statistical significance of the correlation measures (three possible variants of central limit probability were examined: 0.1; 0.05; 0.01).

Table 3.

Correlation analysis for silence in an organization (declarations/partial measures) and turnover intention

I keep silent at work...	Type of silence	r_{xy}
for fear of negative consequences	defensive	-0,170**
because I fear disadvantages from speaking up	defensive	-0,114
to not make me vulnerable in the face of colleagues or superiors	defensive	-0,261***
to avoid conflicts		-0,082
because I don't want to be viewed as a troublemaker		-0,112*
because others say nothing, too		-0,216***
because I do not want to hurt the feelings of my colleagues or superiors	prosocial	-0,088
because I don't want to embarrass others	prosocial	-0,202***
because I don't want others to get into trouble because of me	prosocial	-0,133*
because I don't want to damage relationships to colleagues or superiors		-0,137*
not to give away knowledge advantage	opportunistic	-0,209***
because of concerns that others could take an advantage of my ideas	opportunistic	-0,072
because I want others to experience the effects from their mistakes		-0,182**
because my superiors do not deserve my involvement		-0,325***
because it would mean having to do avoidable additional work	opportunistic	-0,258***
because my opinions will not fall on fertile ground anyway	acquiescent	-0,327***
because my superiors are not open to proposals or solutions	acquiescent	-0,319***
because nothing will change anyway	acquiescent	-0,403***
because it is not expected from me to get involved		-0,143*
because of bad experiences I've had with speaking up on critical issues in the past		-0,153**

Source: author's own compilation based on author's own research.

In all cases of the examined 20 statements on the varied spectrum of motivation for silence in an organization, negative correlations (negative values of correlation coefficients) were also identified between the variables analysed in this study (turnover intention, silence in an organization), and thus, similar to the case of the analysed correlations for synthetic measures for both variables. Correlations that were not statistically significant were noted for four statements (2 – discriminating defensive silence, 4, 7 – discriminating prosocial silence and 12 – discriminating opportunistic silence).

It is worth confronting here the data from Table 3 with this from Table 4. This table presents measures of correlations that analyse relations between turnover intention and synthetic measures for individual types of silence in an organization – according to the typology (Knoll, van Dick, 2013). The data was presented in a general approach (first row of results) and in gender groups (rows 2 and 3).

Table 4.

An analysis of correlation for the relationship between silence in an organization and turnover intention (in general and in gender groups)

total/sex	defensive	prosocial	opportunistic	acquiescent
total	-0,215***	-0,172**	-0,244***	-0,423***
women	-0,243**	-0,145	-0,320***	-0,438***
men	-0,165	-0,204*	-0,177	-0,412***

Source: author's own compilation based on author's own research.

Analysing data in Table 4, one must note a markedly greatest force of the analysed negative relation for acquiescent silence ($r_{xy} = -0.423$). It is confirmed by the data included in Table 3 for relations identified around partial statements that discriminate this type of silence in an organization (measures of correlations in the 0.319-0.403 range, always statistically significant). Correlations measures presented in Table 4 (in the general approach) for relations identified for the remaining types of silence in an organization are markedly lower and relatively close to each other (in the range from -0.172 for prosocial silence – correlation not statistically significant for $p = 0.01$ – to -0.244 for opportunistic silence). This observation is confirmed also by data included in Table 3 for the cited three remaining types of silence in an organization.

Analysing the data in Table 3, it is worth noting two statements that do not discriminate individual types of silence in an organization, pursuant to the Knoll, van Dick (2013) concept. In the context of turnover intention, one may examine a significant importance of silence in an organization due to the fact that superiors do not deserve employee's engagement ($r_{xy} = -0.325$) or due to the fact that other employees in the organization are also silent ($r_{xy} = -0.216$ – in both cases statistically significant dependencies were noted for all adopted levels of probability).

In turn, the analysis of other data presented in Table 4 that includes an analysis of the relations in gender groups brings very interesting observations. For data collected among men and women, a statistically significant and relatively strong negative correlation between the investigated variables with consideration to the construct that reflects respondents' declarations about acquiescent silence was also confirmed. However, marked differences in groups of respondents identified according to the gender criterion are revealed for the remaining types of silence in an organization. A relatively stronger correlation (statistically significant) between silence in a selected motivation and turnover intention in the group of women must be noted for opportunistically-driven silence (r_{xy} in this gender group -0.320) and for defensive silence. Adequate measures of correlations for the identified constructs in the group of men evidence statistically insignificant correlations. A reverse scheme of relations occurs in the analysed relations for the construct of prosocial silence. Here, the statistically significant correlation (though only for $p = 9.1$) is shown by the correlation measure calculated in the group of men (-0.204, though negligently different from the relevant measure in the women's group -0.145, though the correlation here is no longer statistically significant).

7. Discussion

This research confirmed in the conditions of the Polish research sample that including voice mechanisms is an essential factor that contributes to a weaker wish to leave an organization. Similar conclusions flow from the research referred to in the theoretical part – (i.a., Jiang, Yao, 2020; Abou-Shouk, Elbaz, Maher, 2021; Erdem, Tutar, 2021). It confirms the force and statistical significance of the relationship in groups of respondents identified according to the gender criterion.

The literature also offers studies that refer to selected categories of types of silence in an organization (that take into account the varied spectrum of motives that guide employees). Research in the context of the analysed relationship most often underlines defensive silence's crucial importance (Chung-Hee, Min-Jeong, 2018; Kashif, Petrovskaya, Samad, Wijenayake, 2021) and that of prosocial silence (Gunsay, Sarrafoglu, 2020). On the other hand, this research highlights – contrary to conclusions made by Gunsay and Sarrafoglu (2020) – the importance of acquiescent silence (a markedly stronger correlation of this construct with the construct of turnover intention, dependencies identified for defensive and prosocial silence have a relatively lesser force of the relation – lower value of correlation measures though the relations are still statistically significant). No significant differences in gender groups have been noted here. Perhaps the factor that determines the shift of emphasis in relation to existing findings lies in the specific cultural context (Polish sample – e.g. managerial staff not open to change).

On the other hand, the research reveals variation in the force of the relation for remaining categories of silence in gender groups. A relatively stronger relation between the analysed variables among women (compared to men) can be seen for defensive silence (fear, risk of criticism) and opportunistic silence (avoiding additional work).

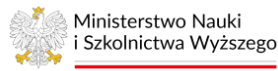
The lowest force of the analysed relation in general term was identified for prosocial silence. In gender groups, the relation between the analysed variables was identified only in the men's group, though adequate measures of correlations are not different significantly for this category of silence in both gender groups.

When examining the utilitarian dimension of this research, a set of recommendations may be presented. In order to limit staff turnover, we need to take all possible steps to build voice mechanisms into the organization's management system (constructing a formal system, programmes that change managers' mentality, actions encouraging employees to express their voice in an organization, verification at the stage of recruitment of managers of how open they are to employee voice and to change). One needs to adjust the spectrum of activities to the employee's gender, with a particular focus in the women's group on actions to counteract defensive and opportunistic silence.

As is the case with all research, this one also has its limitations. It is partial, not comprehensive. The subjectivism of responses to the survey questions must also be noted. The spatial scope of the research limits it to the regional dimension (Zachodniopomorskie Province) even though the research repeatedly refers to the Polish sample. This research presents a static image of reality; longitudinal studies could reflect the dynamics of the changes. Future similar research could cover other variables that differentiate the studied population.

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