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Research Paper

Employee Silence: A Meta-Analytic Review

Sharu P John[1]*, Manikandan K.[2]

ABSTRACT

Employees often have ideas, information, and opinion for constructive ways to improve work and organizations. The extent to which employees communicate upward with suggestions, ideas, information about problems, or issues of concern can have tremendous implications for an organization's performance and even its survival. Employee silence refers to the conscious withholding of potentially important information, suggestions, or concerns, from those who might be able to act on that information. The silence climate has an impact on the ability of the organisation to detect errors and organizational functioning. Here the investigator planned to go through the studies conducted in India as well as outside to have a deep understanding on the concept of employee silence, its dimensions, method of study, related concepts, implications etc. The investigators used meta-analysis as the method for approaching the problem. Twenty studies which met the inclusion criteria were selected for this study. Findings of the study shows that there are organisational, individual and socio-demographic factors that contributes to employee silence. It was also found that employee silence has an impact on both employees and on organisation. So, it was suggested to identify and minimise employee silence at the earliest.

Keywords: *Employee Silence, Meta-analysis, Organisational Silence, Organisation, Performance, Socio-demographic*

Employees are the important asset of an organisation**.** Employees often have ideas, information, and opinions for constructive ways to improve work and work organizations**.** Classical theory of organization considered human being as an economic man but it is not applicable to the current work setting. People are expressing their emotions, experience, thoughts, perception, and attitudes about the work and organisation through communicating using multimedia and other gadgets. At the same time, many employees in an organisation, due to its management policies or other reasons, may be incapable of expressing their feelings or emotions in any manner. They withdraw themselves from commenting about the function or drawbacks of the organisation in which they are working. The extent to which the employees communicate upward with suggestions, ideas, information about problems, or issues of concern can have tremendous implications for an organization's performance and even its survival. Sometimes these employees exercise voice and express their ideas,

[1] Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, University of Calicut, Kerala, India
[2] Professor in Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Calicut, Kerala, India
*Responding Author

information, and opinions; and other times they engage in silence and withhold their ideas, information, and opinions. In many cases, they choose the safe response of silence, withholding input that could be valuable to others or thoughts that they wish they could express. Researchers have referred to this as *employee silence* (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001).

Shortly after publication of Morrison and Milliken's (2000) work on organizational silence, the related concept of *employee silence* began to appear in the organizational science literature. Pinder and Harlos (2001) defined *employee silence* as "the withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individual's behavioural, cognitive and/or affective evaluations of his or her organizational circumstances to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change or redress. "Whereas organizational silence was viewed primarily as organizational level phenomenon, the focus on most of the work on *employee silence* was the individual level of analysis. Although silence may begin with one individual electing to withhold his/her opinion, silence may become "contagious" among team members when many individuals are unwilling to speak up. It is also noteworthy that the terms "*employee silence*" and "organizational silence" have been used interchangeably in the literature by authors who seem to be referring to the same phenomena.

Morrison and Milliken (2000, p. 708) first introduced this definition of a "climate of silence". According to this definition, a "climate of silence" is: "…*widely shared perceptions among employees that speaking up about problems or issues is futile and/or dangerous. When such a climate exists, the dominant response within an organization will be silence, rather than voice. However, the likelihood of such a climate emerging and the strength and pervasiveness of that climate will depend on employees' collective sense making activities*."

"…*there are powerful forces in many organizations that cause widespread withholding of information about potential problems or issues by employees. We refer to this collective-level phenomenon as "organizational silence"* (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Pinder and Harlos (2001) defined "…*the withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individual's behavioral, cognitive and/or affective evaluations of his or her organizational circumstances to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change or redress*".

Tangirala and Ramanujam (2005) defined *employee silence* as the intentional withholding of concerns, information, or opinions by employees concerning important situations, issues, or events relating to their job or organization.

According to Van Dyne, *et al*. (2003), it is the employee's motivation to withhold or express opinions, information, and ideas about work related improvements.
By analyzing these definitions, it can be inferred that *employee silence* means "intentionally not expressing the existing problems, not giving feedback on setbacks, not making useful suggestions, not providing constructive criticisms about employee's evaluations of his or her organizational circumstances to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change".

Silence is a form of communication that in itself involves a range of cognitions, emotions and intentions. It is assumed that *employee silence* only hurts the organization, but realistically it

hurts both the organization and the employees. There are many different types of issues that people in organizations are silent about and many reasons why people may elect to be silent.

Employee silence is still a comparatively novel topic of investigation. Only a few studies are conducted in India on employee silence. Although the phenomenon of employee silence is quite dominant in organizations, may be because of its frequency and intensity, there is little empirical evidence in the literature aiming at defining it, analysing it and coping with it.

Objective
1. To analyze research studies on *employee silence* and to have a deep understanding on the concept of *employee silence* and its related concepts.

METHODOLOGY

Literature search
A computer based information search was conducted on the InfoNet- a computer database, which provides abstracts and full paper of articles. Studies from January 2000 up to October 2018 were covered in the search. Google scholar, Science Direct, PubMed, Jstor, Springer, Wiley, Taylor and Francis were searched using "*employee silence*" and "organizational silence" as keywords to search for papers published from January 2000 to October 2018. Many studies were identified by the above keywords. Study abstracts obtained were read to eliminate studies that were not concerned with *employee silence* or organizational silence. These steps produced a pool of 20 studies that met inclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria
The study aimed at understanding the concept of *employee silence*. Some studies with title organisational silence were also included if it focus on employee silence. Because the terms "*employee silence*" and "organizational silence" have been used interchangeably in the literature by authors, who seems to be referred the same phenomena. Only full text studies were included. Qualitative studies, reviews, articles which focus mainly on *employee silence* were also included. Another inclusion criterion was that study must be written in English language and finally the study must have been conducted between January 2000 and October 2018.

Procedure
First of all the selected studies were arranged according to the year of publishing (from 2000 to 2018), then extracted major findings of the studies and then each study was analyzed qualitatively**.** These selected studies were arranged according to the publishing year. Then they are consolidated and analyzed using content analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The collected studies were arranged in the order of publication and analyzed using already identified factors and some factors were also emerged during the analysis process. The arrangement of selected studies and their classification were presented in table 1.

Table 1Author, title and major findings of employees silence research papers published during the year 2000 to 2018

SN	Author(s) and year	Name of the study	Major findings
1.	Morrison and Milliken	Organizational Silence: A Barrier to Change	The hidden dynamics that create silence can create many problems for

SN	Author(s) and year	Name of the study	Major findings
	(2000)	and Development in a Pluralistic World.	the organization, the reasons for these outcomes are unlikely to be understood.
2.	Pinder and Harlos (2001)	Employee silence: Quiescence and acquiescence as responses to perceived injustice.	Developed the concept of employee silence and introduce two attendant forms (i.e. quiescence and acquiescence). Silence is a form of communication that in itself involves a range of cognitions, emotions and intentions.
3.	Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003)	An exploratory study of employee silence: Issues that employees don't communicate upward and why.	Reason for silence: Fear of being viewed or labelled negatively, and as a consequence, damaging valued relationships.
4.	Dyne, Ang and Botero, (2003)	Conceptualizing employee silence and employee voice as multidimensional constructs.	Based on employee motives, it can differentiate three types of silence (Acquiescent Silence, Defensive Silence, and ProSocial Silence) and three parallel types of voice (Acquiescent Voice, Defensive Voice, and ProSocial Voice). Both silence and voice are complex and multidimensional constructs. Observers will be more likely to misunderstand and misattribute employee motives for silence (than for voice).
5.	Morrison and Milliken (2003)	Shades of Silence: Emerging themes and future directions in organisation.	Issues: Concern about competence /performance of a co-worker, Suggestions /improvements. Motives: fear, labelled as troublemaker, not to hurt someone, to manage self-image. Social/cultural context also motivates silence.
6.	Vakola and Bouradas (2005)	Antecedents and consequences of organisational silence: An empirical investigation.	Results indicates that supervisors' attitudes to silence, top management attitudes to silence and communication opportunities are associated and predict employees' silence behaviour.
7.	Brinsfield (2009)	Employee Silence: Investigation of dimensionality, development of measures, and examination of related factors	Employee silence is pervasive, multi-dimensional, can reliably be measured, and is significantly related to other important organizational behaviour phenomena.

SN	Author(s) and year	Name of the study	Major findings
8	Shojaie, Matin, and Barani (2011)	Analyzing the infrastructures of organizational silence and ways to get rid of it	Top managers and supervisors have to create workplace where employees will feel safe to express their views and will be encouraged to offer their ideas and suggestions. By creating procedural justice climate and by encouraging speaking up behaviour is to ensure communication opportunities and by creating formal systems for the transfer or exchange of information, concerns or ideas, organisational silence can be reduced.
9.	Knoll, and Van-Dick (2013)	Do I Hear the Whistle…?: A first attempt to measure four forms of employee silence and their correlates	Four forms of employee silence are quiescent, acquiescent, prosocial, and opportunistic silence. Providing an organizational climate that supports voice, as proposed in psychological safety literature may inhibit acquiescent and quiescent silence but will be less successful in preventing prosocial silence.
10	Beheshtifar, Borhani, and Moghadam (2012)	Destructive role of *employee silence* in organizational success	*Employee silence* has many effects on the employees themselves. Indifferent employees, often products of ignored employee silence, tend to feel like cogs at machinery factories, developing the attitude "to get along, go along". Indifferent employees cause the organization to lose money and function poorly. If employee silence does occur, communication suffers and as a result harms the overall functioning of the organization
11	Umar, and Hassan (2013)	Antecedents and outcomes of voice and silence behaviours of employees of tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria	Cultural values of absolute loyalty and respect for the superior is the chief reason followed by fear of negative label, being marked rebellious or antagonist as well as inability to rise to top positions. Employees believe this will continue for a reasonably long time, because culture more than any other thing influence employee voice on work related issues
12	Eriguc, Ozer, Turac, and Songur (2014)	Organisational silence among nurses: A study of structural equation	With regard to responsibility, the analyses revealed that the nurses, who are younger than 25 and who have less than four years of experience, remain

SN	Author(s) and year	Name of the study	Major findings
		modelling	more silent than the others. Concerning employees' performance and administrative issues, female nurses remain more silent than the others. Female nurses remain more silent due to administrative reasons and, fears of isolation and damaging the relationships.
13	Akbarian, Esmail, Shaemi, and Keshtiaray (2015)	Organizational Silence: Why and how can overcome?	The most common factors causing organizational silence are organizational culture, fear and negative feedback by management, lack of trust, bad experiences in the past, fear and characteristic differences that are discussed. Top managers and supervisors have to create workplace where employees will feel safe to express their views and will be encouraged to offer their ideas and suggestions.
14	Jain (2015)	An interpersonal perspective to study silence in Indian organizations	Four major dimensions of silence in India namely fear of retaliation, internal motivation, self-competence and self-image as the possible causes of silence. This study showed the positive impact of silence on satisfaction which is contrary to the western studies.
15	Prouska and Psychogios (2016)	Do not say a word! Conceptualizing employee silence in a long-term crisis context	Three main categories of silence present in times of economic crisis. Firstly Silence as a fear of consequences, Secondly silence as a response to the perceived duration of the crisis relates to the decision an employee makes to either tolerate difficulties (hence not speak up) or not depending on the perceived duration of the crisis period. Silence as the norm relates to the decision employees make not to speak up, because everyone else is not speaking up. Fear is a key motivator for employee silence.
16	Fapohunda, and Tinuke (2016)	Organizational Silence: Predictors and consequences among university academic staff	Different organizational issues and the most repeatedly cited motivations were administrative beliefs, organizational practices and the fear of being labelled negatively, and subsequently damaging

SN	Author(s) and year	Name of the study	Major findings
			esteemed relationships. There was a significant relationship between organizational silence and emotional exhaustion; employee job dissatisfaction and apathy.
17	Magotra (2016)	Why employees remain silent: A study on service sector	The study depicted that the attitudes of top management and supervisors to silence create milieu that either encourage or discourage the endorsement of silence behaviour by employees.
18	Kirrane, O'Shea, Buckley, Grazi, and Prout (2017)	Investigating the role of discrete emotions in silence versus speaking up	Fear as the main emotion associated with silence behaviour. Anger is an antecedent to speaking up about an observed transgression, whereas less intense anger was associated with staying silent. This pattern was not evident for fear
19	Sonika and Kaushik (2017)	Employee Silence: Investigation of dimensionality in select it companies of India	Five dimensions of employee silence namely defensive silence, acquiescent silence, self-image silence, diffident silence (internal motivation) and inefficient silence (self-competence).
20	Jafary, Yazdanpanah, and Masoomi (2018)	Identification of factors affecting organizational silence from the viewpoint of middle managers of shiraz university of medical sciences: A qualitative study	Factors affecting organizational silence among middle managers of the university were categorized to: (1) organizational factors (including three main themes: (a) organizational structure and process, (b) organizational communication, (c) organizational culture); and (2) and individual factors (including three main themes: (a) psychological factors, (b) communication skills, and (c) demographic factors).

The analysis of studies revealed that most of the studies were conducted among employees from academic sector, banking sector, health care professionals and IT professionals. When analyzing the type of study, it can be seen that majority of the studies were exploratory or qualitative in nature and some used both quantitative and qualitative approach. A very few studies were of experimental type. Most of the studies were aimed at studying the dimensions, causal factors, effects and management of *employee silence.*

Accordingly the investigators have grouped these elements under three clusters of factors. They were: Causal factors of *employee silence*, Dimensions of *employee silence*, Effects and management of *employee silence.*

Causal factors of employee silence

Findings from these studies indicate that employees prefer to remain silent in front of their supervisors about any issues or concerns (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). From analyzing the literature review on *employee silence*, the researcher identified three factors that contribute to *employee silence*. It includes: organizational factors, individual (psychological factors) and socio demographic factors. Organizational factors include two dimensions: Organizational culture and climate, and Superior-subordinate relationship. Majority of the studies shows that organizational climate which is characterized by strict hierarchical structure, defensive routines, unclear reporting systems, organizational injustice, workplace ostracism (perception of being ignored and isolated by individual or group), lack of organizational support, high power distance, organizational politics are the main factors that contribute to employee silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005; Brinsfield, 2013; Whiteside & Barclay, 2013). In addition to this, poor superior-subordinate relationship also plays an important role in determining *employee silence*. Evidences shows that *employee silence* occurs as a result of supervisor incivility (such as public criticism, sarcasm), lack of superior openness, abusive supervision, perceived trustworthiness of superior, superior's attitude to silence, implicit management beliefs, and manager's fear of negative feedback. Top management's characteristics are another crucial factor in *employee silence* (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). Management beliefs and actions are also a major cause of silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Detert & Burris, 2007).

Just like any other kind of behavior, the motivation to remain silent can come from the employees' perception, needs and goals. These could include what the employees have learnt out of experience, their motives, and their personality. Individual factors (Psychological factors) that contribute to *employee silence* includes: personality, emotion, cognition, learning, and motivation.

Personality characteristics that influence *employee silence* include high introversion, self-monitoring, self-esteem, external locus of control, low assertiveness, high communication apprehension (Pinder & Harlos, 2001;Premeaux & Bedeia, 2003).

Studies shows that employees learned to remain silent, at least in part, from talking with and observing their peers (vicarious conditioning). Silence climate originates from a process of collective sense making; whereby employees together try to derive meaning about their workplace. It develops through social interactions that allow employees share their perceptions and experiences and derive a common understanding of the meaning of various aspects of their work context.

When analyzing the role of emotions in silence behavior it can be found that fear and shame are the main emotions that come to play in employee silence (Ashkanasy & Gardner, 2009). Kish-Gephart, *et al*. (2009) suggest that fear of challenging authorities and higher-status group members is evolutionary based and reinforced from a very young age. An employee displays silence when he or she possesses input that could be valuable to share but does not do so, typically because of fear, concerns about negative repercussions, or feelings of futility (Milliken, *et al*., 2003; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; Van Dyne, *et al*., 2003). Employees remain silent due to the fear of getting a negative image or label like "troublemaker", fear of harming relationship etc. Research on the mum effect shows that individuals have a general reluctance to convey negative information because of the discomfort associated with being the conveyer of bad news (Rosen & Tesser, 1970).

The main motives behind *employee silence* includes: need for social approval and need for affiliation. Due to fear of isolation, people scrutinize their social environments for opinion trends; when there is a perception that their opinions are in tune with the majority they are more likely to express them, while when there is a perception that their opinions are unpopular or against the majority they are less likely to express them (Lee, Detenber, Willnat, Aday, & Graf, 2004). Cognitive factors that were identified from the studies shows that socially acquired belief system (Detert & Edmondson, 2011), psychological safety (Detert& Burris, 2007; Brinsfield, 2013; Edmondson, 1999) and individual's cultural values were silent behaviour.A climate of silence is one characterized by two shared beliefs: speaking up about problems in the organization is not worth the effort, and voicing one's opinions and concerns is dangerous (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Brinsfield, 2013; Van Dyne, *et al*., 2003). Sometimes employees may not speak up, because everyone else is not speaking up. As a result, employees see silence as a norm.

Socio-demographic factors contributing to *employee silence* includes: age, sex, type of job (part time vs. full time), experience, position and status in the organization.

Related concepts in the study of *employee silence* includes: pluralistic ignorance, diffusion of responsibility, loyalty and neglect, group think, MUM effect, Deaf ear syndrome**.** Research on the mum effect shows that individuals have a general reluctance to convey negative information because of the discomfort associated with being the conveyer of bad news (Rosen & Tesser, 1970)

Dimensions of Employee Silence
While going through the literatures, it can be observed that there were several authors claimed *employee silence* was a multifactor construct. The authors and the predominant factors were given in table 2 under each researchers.

Table 2 The major dimensions of employee silence proposed by prominent authors

Pinder and Harlos (2001)	Van Dyne, *et al.* (2003)	Brinsfield (2013)	Knoll and Dick (2013)
Acquiescent silence	Acquiescent silence	Deviant silence	Acquiescent silence
Quiescent silence	Quiescent silence	Relational silence	Quiescent silence
	Pro-social silence	Diffident silence	Pro-social silence
		Ineffectual silence	Opportunistic silence
		Disengaged silence	
		Defensive silence	

Acquiescent silence refers to intentional withholding of ideas / opinions / suggestions due to resignation. Defensive silence refers to withholding of information and problems based on fear. Prosocial /relational silence refers to withholding of confidential information, based on cooperation. Deviant silence refers to withholding of information and problems to purposefully harm the organization or to purposefully harm another individual. Diffident silence is composed by insecurities, self-doubt and uncertainty in respect of a situation and to what to say. Opportunistic silence is the strategically withholding work-related ideas, information, or opinions with the goal of achieving an advantage for oneself while accepting harm of others. Ineffectual silence is the intentional withholding of ideas / opinions /

suggestions based on the belief that speaking up would not be useful in effecting change relative to the focal issue, situation, or concern. Disengaged silence means silence due to lack of concern.

Effects and Management of Employee silence
Effect of employee silence on employees

Employee silence also has many effects on the employees themselves. Indifferent employees, often products of ignored employee silence, tend to feel like cogs at machinery factories, developing the attitude "to get along, go along". As a result of this attitude, employees sometimes develop depression and related health issues. Sometimes these employees use pills and alcohol as a "cure" for the problems they are experiencing at work, which actually make their problems worse. According to Morrison and Milliken (2000) organizational silence leads to a feeling of not being valued, perceived lack of control and cognitive dissonance, which results in low satisfaction, commitment and motivation. The above determinants affect outcomes such as turnover, stress level and job effort towards the organization (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). *Employee silence* can also create stress, dissatisfaction and disengagement amongst employees. These outcomes can have serious long-term consequences for the employees and for their relationships with the organization. Researches shows that *employee silence* affects the personal/psychological well-being of employees, increases stress," and causes them to "feel guilty, where they often experience psychological problems, and have trouble seeing the possibility of change" (*cf* Bagheri, et al. 2012).

Effect of employee silence on the organization

Employee silence has the potential to undermine organisational decision making and error-correction. It can bring several consequences such as blocking change and innovation, preventing positive or negative feedback to the management, lacking of variance in informational input. As a result of employee silence, organizations would not benefit from the intellectual contributions of employees, problems would not be identified, feedback not provided, information not obtained directly, and solutions to problems would be inadequate. All these will hinder effective decision-making, constrain development and change, and hinder performance enhancement (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Premeaux, 2001). Bowen and Blackmon (2003) claimed that remaining silent in an organization limits knowledge sharing, collective brainstorming, problem identification, as well as possible solutions to workplace-related issues. It can also generate new problems depending on how widespread and repetitive it becomes.

Managing employee silence

There are various strategies that organizations can use to break the silence. Developing both organizational attachment and professional attachment is very important for reducing employee silence (Tangirala, 2008). Managers should create a safe climate where employees feel more comfortable in speaking up without being victimized. They should not only permit, but reward, employees who come forward with sensitive or risky information, and should create formal mechanisms through which employees can speak up anonymously if they wish to do so. It is suggested to present a suitable rewarding system for creative ideas, to train the relational skills to the managers and the supervisors. Ensure communication opportunities and create formal systems for the transfer or exchange of information, concerns or ideas.

CONCLUSION

Reviewing the literature has brought a deep understanding on the concept of *employee silence*, its causal factors, dimensions, effects and its management. From majority of studies

it can be learned that all authors approached the problem and viewed from different angles. However, *employee silence* can be studied through prevailing organisational, individual (psychological) and socio-demographic factors. Organizational factors include two dimensions: Organizational culture and climate, and Superior-subordinate relationship. Individual factors (Psychological factors) that contribute to employee silence includes: personality, emotion, cognition, learning, motivation. Outcome or effects of *employee silence* can affect both employees as well as organisation. Main effects of *employee silence* highlighted in all studies were increased stress, low commitment and motivation (on employees) and its effects on organisation include poor error detection and correction, slows down organisational development.

Recent works (eg., Morrison, *et al.*, 2011; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008) has shown that individual and organisational level factors interact with one another, and that a focus on just one or the other is likely to provide an incomplete, or even inaccurate, understanding of the conditions leading to and inhibiting voice. When analysing how *employees silence* can be prevent or managed, all studies focused on creating a climate where employees feel more comfortable in speaking up.

Implications and suggestions

Employee silence keeps management from receiving critical information that would allow their organizations to improve or address problems before they have adverse effects. It is assumed that employee silence hurts both the organization and the employees. The silence climate has an impact on the ability of the organisation to detect errors and learn. If the climate of silence is not addressed properly, it will affect the overall organizational effectiveness. Hence, managers should identify *employee silence* at the earliest and should take necessary steps for overcoming it**.** The organization should put greater measures to ensure that a culture of silence does not take root and also adopt practices that would make employees feel safe to speak up.

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