

What Does Employee Silence Mean? The Role of Organizational Climate and Burnout

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Abstract: The avoidance of employees to express and share their ideas and opinions about organizational issues leads to the multidimensional concept of employee silence. From an organizational perspective, it is necessary to take in consideration that individuals tend to remain silent about situations that are less positive in the organization. But silence is not just the absence of voice or communication. Silence prevents individuals from carrying out their work in the most appropriate way, can act as a barrier to organizational change and can influence the employee well-being. Acquiescent silence is the retention of information considered relevant, based on resignation and submission (passive retention) and quiescent silence comes from fear of the negative consequences from sharing information, being used as a form of self-protection. Prosocial silence is related to altruistic motives and opportunistic silence is used to obtain personal advantages. It becomes relevant to determine the factors associated with this silence and what are the implications of employee silence on employee well-being. Thus, the objectives of this study are i) to study the of employee silence motives, ii) to understand whether two of the dimensions of the authentic organizational climate (leader's trust and credibility and opportunities for learning and personal development) are antecedents of employee silence and iii) to study the consequences of employee silence motives on burnout. A quantitative study is conducted, using a questionnaire survey applied to a sample of 222 individuals, working in different portuguese organizations. The confirmatory factor analysis identifies four employee silence motives. The regression analyses highlighted that authentic psychological climate dimensions, namely learning and personal development opportunities, were predictors of the three dimensions of employee silence: quiescent silence, acquiescent silence and opportunistic silence. Regarding the impact of employees' silence on burnout, acquiescent silence stood out as the main predictor of different burnout dimensions: emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishment and depersonalization. Finally, it can be concluded that acquiescent silence seems to stand out as the silence variable most explained by authentic organizational climate and the one that most explains the appearance of burnout. The findings can be used by human resources managers.

Keywords: Authentic Psychological Climates, Burnout, Employee Silence

1. Introduction

In workplaces, effective communication is often seen as central for organizational success. However, employee silence, an often-overlooked concept, can challenge this premise. Suggestions, opinions, ideas and concerns are part of the daily lives of individuals within organizations. Sharing different points of view is likely to bring improvements and to contribute to the team and the organization efficacy (Knoll, Hall and Weigelt, 2019).

Silence prevents individuals from carrying out their work in the most appropriate way (Knoll and Van Dick, 2013) and can act as a barrier to organizational change which, consequently, compromises organizational development (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

The lack of recognition of the multidimensionality of silence construct occurs because, often, silence is seen simply as an absence of voice and the causes for its appearance become difficult to determine (Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003). It is correct to say that silence is an "extreme manifestation" of indirect expression, that is, nothing is said, but this silence can have a lot of meaning (Tannen, 1985). Silence can be considered a form of employee response, in this case passive, in the face of less pleasant situations that occur in the organization (Pinder and Harlos, 2001).

It is important that an assessment is carried out, not only of the surrounding environment, to identify flaws in the conditions that facilitate the sharing of information, but also to identify existing problems in the organization that give rise to silence (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

The retention of information by employees, that is, the adoption of silence, is not just an absence of voice (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin, 2003; Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003). Therefore, voice and silence must be analyzed separately as individual and multidimensional concepts (Knoll et al, 2016). In short, the main distinguishing characteristic between silence and voice is the employee's willingness to retain or expose information and suggestions for organizational improvement (Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003).

The main objective of this study is to investigate the concept of employees' silence, understand its multidimensionality and explore the motivations that lead individuals to adopt it. It aims to study the relationship between silence and two of the dimensions of the authentic psychological climate (leader's trust and credibility and opportunities for learning and personal development), presented as antecedents of employee' silence, and to examine the relationship between employee silence and burnout, with the latter as a consequent variable.

2. Background

2.1 Employee Silence and its Underlying Motives

Different motives lead to different forms of silence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Hao et al, 2022; Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin, 2003; Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003). There are four motives for silence based on studies carried out by Pinder and Harlos (2001); Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, (2003) and Knoll and Van Dick (2013).

Pinder and Harlos (2001) distinguish two motives of silence, acquiescent, which involves the retention of information considered relevant, based on resignation and submission (passive retention). It can be said that employees lose hope for improvement and are not focused or committed to sharing ideas and information. Quiescent silence comes from the fear of negative consequences that may arise from sharing information, being adopted as a form of self-protection (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Pinder and Harlos, 2001).

Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) state that the three motives that lead employees to adopt silence are behaviors of disinterest based on resignation, behaviors of self-protection based on fear and behaviors of concern for others based on altruism. The latter, prosocial silence, is therefore more oriented towards concern for others, based on feelings of generosity, the objective is not to harm anyone. Knoll and Van Dick (2013) introduce a fourth motive of silence, opportunistic silence, which is characterized as a practice of silence that involves a strategy to obtain personal advantages, regardless the damage caused to others and to the organization. As such, it was hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1: Employee silence has four dimensions: quiescent silence, acquiescent silence, prosocial silence and opportunistic silence.

2.2 Psychological Organizational Climate as an Antecedent of Employee Silence

To establish authentic work environments, supporting employee well-being, it is essential that feelings of purpose, determination, impact, competence, belonging, pleasure and satisfaction and meaning are provided (Kets de Vries, 2001). The creation of the neologism authentic is based on two words of Greek origin: *authentikos* and *zotikos* and translates into a reliable and vital organization for life. The first reflects the authenticity of the organization, its ability to convey trust and quality. In an authentic company, leadership has the ability to convey not only the how, but also the why, reflecting the impact of each individual on the organization's development, making them feel motivated and active. *Zotikos* means "vital for life" and is associated with the need for individuals to explore and expand knowledge (Kets de Vries, 2001, p.110).

Rego (2004) and Rego and Souto (2004) extracted a set of six climates based on employees' perspectives on workplace conditions. The focus is on the psychological climate rather than the organizational climate, that is, the behaviors adopted by individuals in response to the organizational conditions that surround them (Rego and Cunha, 2008).

One of the psychological climates is the trust and credibility of the leader. A leader who promotes trust and credibility provides a safer environment, in which workers feel able to express themselves (Bharanitharan et al, 2019). It promotes authentic relationships, contributing to feelings of impact and happiness (Rego and Cunha, 2008). However, what is expected from a relationship in which there is no trust that the employee hides their real feelings and expose emotions that are different from the true ones (emotional dissonance), which leads to a lower psychological well-being (Rego and Cunha, 2008).

Opportunities for learning and personal development provides individuals with a feeling of personal fulfillment and competence. It is important that employees feel that they have all the working conditions so that they feel motivated to expand their knowledge and objectives (Kets de Vries, 2001). In addition to monetary compensation or career advancement opportunities, individuals are able to feel motivated at work through personal fulfillment when they experience positive emotions. This type of emotions allows to a behaviors of resilience, competence and greater willingness to strengthen social relationships. Employees are willing to overcome certain adverse work conditions and to feel less stress (Rego and Cunha, 2008). As such, it is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 2: Employee silence is influenced by authentizotic organizational climate.

Hypothesis 2.1: Employee silence is negatively influenced by leader's trust and credibility.

Hypothesis 2.2: Employee silence is negatively influenced by learning and personal development opportunities.

2.3 Burnout as a Consequence of Employee Silence

According to Maslach and Jackson (1981), burnout can be defined as the response to a set of stress factors associated with work. It can manifest itself through exhaustion, depersonalization and low levels of personal accomplishment. An essential condition of burnout is a growing sense of emotional exhaustion. Employees do not feel able to make further psychological efforts because their resources are depleted (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). This dimension of burnout portrays the basic dimension of stress and is related to feelings of overload and scarcity of emotional and physical resources. Exhaustion promotes behaviors in individuals that make it possible to distance themselves emotionally and cognitively from their work in order to overcome their overload (Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter, 2001). The second dimension of burnout concerns depersonalization and is associated with characteristics of disinterest and insensitivity that begin to develop in the employee, which lead them to distance themselves from what they are committed to at work, whether in carrying out the tasks or in relationships with colleagues or supervisors (Cropanzano, Rupp and Byrne, 2003; Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004). The third dimension of burnout is reduced personal accomplishment, which occurs when the employee stops believing in their work and their good performance. It is related to issues of trust and self-efficacy in the organizational context (Knoll, Hall and Weigelt, 2019). The concepts mentioned regarding self-regulation, control of behaviors and emotions, and feelings of exhaustion and tiredness, consume employee resources that could be applied and used in their work. This situation causes employees to feel that they are not capable of carrying out their tasks, leading to a reduction in feelings related to personal accomplishment (Knoll, Hall and Weigelt, 2019).

Hobfoll's theory of conservation of resources (1998) states that if employees experience feelings of exhaustion they tend to reduce investment in new resources for sharing information. Exhaustion prevents employees from having their voice in situations where it is necessary, making any change within the organization impossible (Knoll, Hall and Weigelt, 2019). An employee's connection with their work is high when they realize that they are valued as an individual and that their ideas, opinions or suggestions make a difference within the organization. When they feel that they are not valued, they lose the ability to express their thoughts, leading to psychological withdrawal, that is, they work in a state of depersonalization (Knoll, Hall and Weigelt, 2019). As such, it is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3: Employee silence influence burnout.

Hypothesis 3.1: Quiescent silence and acquiescent silence influence burnout associated with emotional exhaustion.

Hypothesis 3.2: The four motives of employee silence do not influence burnout associated with reduced personal accomplishment.

Hypothesis 3.3: Prosocial silence and opportunistic silence do not influence burnout.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

The convenience sample is composed by 222 individuals (n=222). Respondents are portuguese employees over the age of eighteen, who have at least one professional experience and a hierarchical superior and no specific organization or industry was targeted. Regarding gender, 68,9% are female, 30,6% are male and ,05% are other. Regarding age, 46,4% are between 20 and 29 years old, 21,6% are between 30 and 39 years old and 18% are between 40 and 49 years old. In relation to academic qualifications, 40,5% have a bachelor's degree and 23,9% a master's degree.

3.2 Measures

In this study is used questionnaire surveys. To measure employee silence, Knoll and Van Dick (2013) scale is used: 3 items for quiescent silence, 3 items for acquiescent silence, 3 items for opportunistic silence and 3 items for prosocial silence. To assess the authentizotic climate, Rego's scale (2004) is used: 3 items for leader's trust and credibility and 4 items items for learning opportunities and personal development. To measure burnout, the Maslach and Jackson (1986) scale is used: 9 items for emotional exhaustion, 6 items for personal accomplishment and 4 items for depersonalization.

After data collection, IBM SPSS Statistics were used to examine the data.

4. Results

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A Confirmatory Factor Analysis, extraction method Principal Component Analysis, with varimax rotation was carried out for all the measures.

Using the principal components method with varimax rotation and applying a fixed number of factors equal to 4, according to the study by Knoll and Van Dick (2013), the four silence motives were extracted. All coefficients lower than ,5 were removed. In relation to the employee silence scale, the KMO value presented a value of 8,46, which represents a very good adequacy of the sample. The Cronbach's alpha was ,887.

Regarding the authentizotic organizational climate scale, the KMO value was ,9, which indicates good internal consistency and excellent sample adequacy. The internal consistency value of the total scale ($\alpha = ,923$) represents an excellent measure of item reliability. The Cronbach's alpha was ,923.

Regarding burnout, after extracting the factors, items with loadings lower than ,5 were removed. The KMO value presented a value of ,880, which indicates good internal consistency and sample adequacy. The Cronbach's alpha was ,798.

4.2 Correlations and Regression Analysis

4.2.1 Correlations and Regression Analysis Between Employee Silence and Organizational Authentizotic Climate

As a first step, zero-order (Pearson) correlations were calculated to examine the bivariate associations amongst the variables. The results are shown on table 1.

Table 1: Pearson Correlations among dimensions of authentizotic organizational climate and employee silence motives

	Prosocial Silence	Quiescent Silence	Aquiescent Silence	Oportunistic Silence
Learning and personal development opportunities	-,119	-,226**	-,470**	-,177**
Leader's trust and credibility	-,073	-,178**	-,366**	-,053

** $p < ,01$

A regression analysis (method stepwise) of authentic climate and prosocial silence was carried out. No statistically significant values were detected in the model; authentic climate dimensions are not predictors of the prosocial silence motive.

Regarding the regression analysis of the authentic climate and quiescent silence, the independent variable was excluded: leader’s trust and credibility presented significance values higher than recommended and, therefore, was not considered for the construction of the model. Learning and personal development opportunities (table 2) have a negative and statistically significant impact on quiescent silence ($B = -.226$)

Table 2: Regression Analysis between authentic organizational climate and quiescent silence

Model	Non Padronized Coefficients		Padronized Coefficients	t	p
	B	standard error	Beta		
Quiescent silence	4,587	,329		13,931	,000
Learning and personal development opportunities	-,243	,070	-,226	-3,449	,001

Dependent variable: quiescent silence

Regarding the regression analysis of the authentic climate and opportunistic silence, the independent variable was also excluded: leader’s trust and credibility because it presented significance values higher than recommended. Learning and personal development opportunities (table 3) have a negative and statistically significant impact on opportunistic silence ($B = -.177$).

Table 3: Regression Analysis between authentic organizational climate and opportunistic silence

Model	Non Padronized Coefficients		Padronized Coefficients	t	p
	B	Standard error	Beta		
Opportunistic silence	3,358	,269		12,487	,000
Learning and personal development opportunities	-,154	,058	-,177	-2,673	,008

Dependent variable: opportunistic silence

Finally, in the regression analysis of the authentic climate and acquiescent silence, the exclusion of the independent variable: leader’s trust and credibility was once again verified, as it presented significance values higher than recommended. Learning and personal development opportunities (table 4) have a negative and statistically significant impact on acquiescent silence ($B = -.470$).

Table 4: Regression Analysis between authentic organizational climate and acquiescent silence

Model	Non Padronized Coefficients		Padronized Coefficients	t	p
	B	Erro padrão	Beta		
Acquiescent silence	6,237	,341		18,315	,000
Learning and personal development opportunities	-,575	,073	-,470	-7,896	,000

Dependent variable: acquiescent silence

4.2.2 Correlations and Regression Analysis Between Employee Silence and Burnout

As a first step, zero-order (Pearson) correlations were calculated to examine the bivariate associations amongst the variables. The results are shown on table 5.

Table 5: Pearson Correlations between employee silence motives and *burnout*

	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal Accomplishment
Prosocial silence	,227**	,086	,026
Quiescent silence	,437**	,263**	-,178**
Aquiescent silence	,587**	,433**	-,261**
Opportunistic silence	,218**	,211**	-,161*

** $p < ,01$

* $p < ,05$

In the regression analysis of employee silence and emotional exhaustion, prosocial silence and opportunistic silence (independent variables) were excluded. These variables had significance values higher than recommended and, therefore, were not considered for the construction of the model.

Aquiescent and quiescent silences have a positive and statistically significant impact on emotional exhaustion (respectively $B = ,506$ and $B = ,137$) (table 6).

Table 6: Regression Analysis between employee silence motives and emotional exhaustion

Model	Non Padronized Coefficients		Padronized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	B	Standard error	Beta		
Emotional exhaustion	1,482	,225		6,596	,000
Aquiescent silence	,439	,058	,506	7,506	,000
Quiescent silence	,136	,067	,137	2,032	,043

Dependent variable: emotional exhaustion

Regarding the regression analysis of employee silence and personal accomplishment, prosocial silence, quiescent silence and opportunistic silence (independent variables) were excluded. These variables had significance values higher than recommended and, therefore, were not considered for the construction of the model. Acquiescent silence has a negative and statistically significant impact on personal accomplishment ($B = -,261$) (table 7).

Table 7: Regression Analysis between employee silence motives and personal accomplishment

Model	Non Padronized Coefficients		Padronized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	B	Standard error	Beta		
Personal accomplishment	5,687	,166		34,271	,000
Aquiescent silence	-,158	,039	-,261	-4,006	,000

Dependent Variable: Personal accomplishment

With regard to the regression analysis of employee silence and depersonalization, prosocial silence, quiescent silence and opportunistic silence (independent variables) were excluded. Acquiescent silence has a positive and statistically significant impact on depersonalization ($B = ,433$) (table 8).

Table 8: Regression Analysis between employee silence motives and depersonalization

Model	Non Padronized Coefficients		Padronized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	B	Standard error	Beta		
Depersonalization	1,320	,161		8,223	,000
Aquiescent silence	0,272	,038	,433	7,129	,000

Dependent variable: Depersonalization

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The confirmatory factor analysis identifies four motives on employee silence. The reason why individuals retain opinions is variable, hence the importance of studying employee silence motives (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin, 2003; Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003), namely quiescent silence, acquiescent silence, opportunistic silence and prosocial silence Hypothesis 1 is confirmed.

The regression analyses highlighted that authentic psychological climate dimensions, namely learning and personal development opportunities, were predictors of the three dimensions of employee silence: quiescent silence, acquiescent silence and opportunistic silence. Hypothesis 2 is confirmed.

It was found that the dimension of leader's trust and credibility did not present adequate significance values for the construction of the models. Therefore, it can be said that this dimension of the authentic climate, in particular, does not explain the adoption of silence by employees in this study. The research focused exclusively on the leader's ability to transmit trust and credibility to individuals. However, trust and credibility can be influenced by the presence of other dimensions. Limiting the analysis to this dimension may not have captured the complexity of the superior's trust and credibility climate.

Learning and personal development opportunities are crucial for individuals to feel motivated and capable of developing their skills at work. The lack of opportunities can mean a series of situations such as the lack of career progression, which give rise to feelings of lack of support and motivation in the individual (Rego and Cunha, 2008). Without access to these resources, individuals may not have the necessary response capacity to the demands of work (Rego and Cunha, 2008). Without the presence of a leader who promotes a safe environment, which motivates continuous learning, there is no place for communication (Edmondson, 2003). It is probable that individuals will not express their opinions and ideas if the work environment does not provide conditions for continuous development (Knoll et al, 2016). Thus, opportunities not only provide sensations associated with continuous development, but also avoid the presence of silence. Hypothesis 2.1 is refuted.

Regarding the impact of employees' silence on burnout, acquiescent silence stood out as the main predictor of different burnout dimensions: emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishment and depersonalization. Finally, it can be concluded that acquiescent silence seems to stand out as the silence variable most explained by authentic climates and the one that most explains the appearance of burnout.

According to Aboramadan et al (2020), the adoption of silence by employees tends to lead to a drain on individuals' resources, which, consequently, causes stress. The relationship between silence and burnout is clear in the literature, showing a positive association between employee silence and burnout (Hao et al, 2022). This study corroborates this conclusion (hypothesis 3).

It was found that quiescent and acquiescent silences are predictors of emotional exhaustion, as stated by Knoll, Hall and Weigelt (2019), in line with what was described in hypothesis 3.1. Depersonalization presented only acquiescent silence as a predictor, and quiescent silence was not found to be a predictor of this dimension of burnout. Thus, hypothesis 3.1 is partially confirmed, since all aspects included in it are verified with the exception of quiescent silence, which did not explain the presence of depersonalization.

Depersonalization is related to traits of apathy that are manifested in the employee's behavior. Employee is no longer committed to work, prevents carrying out tasks or the interactions with colleagues and superiors (Cropanzano, Rupp and Byrne, 2003; Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004) and ignore their own qualities that distinguish them from the colleagues. (Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter, 2001). The involvement in work interactions decreases, giving way to disinterest, a reduction in the quality of relationships, reinforcing depersonalization (Knoll, Hall and Weigelt, 2019). However, when the employee realizes that their work is valued and that their contributions have a significant impact, the connection with the organization is higher (Knoll, Hall and Weigelt, 2019). Thus, an environment favorable to the expression of opinions encourages employees to identify with the company, promoting greater sharing of ideas (Kassing, 2000).

It can be considered that quiescent silence did not explain the presence of feelings of depersonalization, since, as it is a self-protection strategy, quiescent silence may not completely include apathy and disinterest associated with depersonalization. This silence is associated with the retention of information as a form of self-protection. In other words, employees believe that sharing their opinion can be risky and choose to remain silent for fear of the repercussions that sharing may cause. Employees are fully aware that they are retaining information because they are protecting themselves from threats (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003). Thus, as depersonalization is described as being linked to the perception that sharing information is not valued by

superiors, it goes far beyond the fear of repercussions of speech, being related to scepticism in sharing information.

In the case of acquiescence, employees lose hope that sharing information will lead to improvements, since their opinions are not valued by superiors, promoting disinterest (Pinder and Harlos, 2001).

The analyzes carried out showed acquiescent silence as a predictor of reduced personal fulfillment, contrary to what was described in hypothesis 3.2. However, the remaining dimensions of silence do not prove to be predictors of this dimension of burnout. Hypothesis 3.2 is only partially confirmed.

Regarding prosocial silence and opportunistic silence, it was effectively confirmed that they do not explain the presence of any of the dimensions of burnout, therefore validating hypothesis 3.3. Both prosocial silence and opportunistic silence are adopted by individuals because they are beneficial to themselves or their relationships (Knoll and Van Dick, 2013). Opportunistic silence is characterized by withholding information for one's own benefit, that is, the employee has the advantage that only him knows the information. This silence is, therefore, adopted in a strategic way, harming both co-workers and the organization (Knoll and Van Dick, 2013).

It can be concluded that acquiescent silence seems to stand out as the silence variable most explained by autenticizotoc climates and the one that most explains the appearance of feelings of burnout. Based on the study by Pinder and Harlos (2001), it appears that individuals who feel more quiescent seem to be more aware of the circumstances in which they find themselves and are therefore more capable of finding alternatives to their situation. In acquiescent silence, the employee remains silent almost without noticing, with less awareness of the circumstances, showing a greater tendency to remain silent. The fact that acquiescent silence is associated with a tendency to adopt silence for a longer period may explain the reason why it has a greater influence on the dimensions of burnout.

Given the fact that leader's trust and credibility has shown an association with the employee silence, but did not explain the adoption of employee silence, it is advisable to include others dimensions of authenticizotoc psychological climates in future studies.

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