

Employee silence in the context of unethical behavior at work: A commentary

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Abstract

This special issue of the German Journal of Human Resource Management reflects and reinforces the growing global interest in organizational studies of employee silence. Attention to this multidimensional concept has been steady since its introduction as the withholding of expressed evaluations of work circumstances to persons able to effect change with two initial dimensions - quiescent silence (fear and anger-based) and acquiescent silence (futility and resignation-based) - following unjust events (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). However, an unprecedented confluence of trends across law, justice, and governance worldwide underlies current strong concern about employee silence of ethical issues in organizations, including how we understand (un)ethical work behavior and protection for employees, organizations, and society. To sustain interest and impact, rigorous and relevant research is needed. This calls for intellectual diversity and open-mindedness to spur studies of employee silence while resisting paradigmatic isolation or privilege, concept proliferation and confusion, level-of-analysis slippage (e.g., equating employee silence with organizational silence), and other challenges. Advancing employee silence-ethics linkages depends on expanding theories using multiperspective, integrative approaches and testing models that span social, cognitive, and emotional elements in processes of silence. Better knowledge of employee silence promises a more healthy and motivated workforce, more successful and sustainable organizations, and more vibrant and engaged societies.

Keywords

Employee silence, ethics, unethical behavior, quiescent silence, acquiescent silence

Introduction

The appearance of this special issue of the *German Journal of Human Resource Management* reflects, and no doubt will reinforce, the growing interest in employee silence among organizational researchers. Over the past 15 years, there has been a surge

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of scholarly attention to the topic since its introduction (also in a Human Resource Management journal) as a behaviour modelled in a complex social process and informed by a wide-ranging review of social science, humanities and organizational literatures (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). We defined employee silence as a person's withholding of genuine expression about behavioural, cognitive and/or affective evaluations of organizational circumstances to persons perceived capable of effecting change or redress. We envisioned it as a multidimensional concept relevant for positive or negative work contexts. We proposed two types – quiescent silence (fear- and anger-based) and acquiescent silence (futility- and resignation-based) – as responses to organizational injustice following our inductive research on voice and silence in this arena (Harlos, 1998; Harlos and Pinder, 1999). We were informed, too, by a national scandal of sexual violence in the Canadian military; dramatic media accounts of soldiers' silence and silencing (e.g. O'Hara, 1998) strongly echoed the patterns and texture of research accounts, including different modes of self-silencing and organizational mishandling of voiced complaints (Harlos, 2001). A disheartening post-script (Mercier and Castonguay, 2014) revealed little improvement – same issues, different targets and perpetrators, and evidence that remedial voice resources introduced 16 years earlier are not working.

The popular press is filled with ongoing reports of misconduct, misappropriation or mistruths in organizations tolerated and, at times, enacted by decision-makers and accompanied by failed or flawed voice systems, such as the Volkswagen emissions and General Motors ignition scandals, the France Telecom suicide saga, and suppressed child abuse infamy in the Catholic Church most recently detailed by the Australian Royal Commission. Such accounts routinely portray conditions that stifle objections and sustain what Hirschman (1970) called 'objectionable states of affairs'. When ethical gaps are endemic in an organization, particularly those with a multinational scope of operations, people (employees, consumers, citizens etc.) as well as organizations themselves are put at considerable risk. Yet with few exceptions (e.g. Wang and Hsieh, 2013) there is little data on how employee silence and ethical climates intersect and even less on intersections within corrupt networks or systemic misconduct. Although employee silence itself may become embedded as an organizational-level phenomenon (e.g. Morrison and Milliken, 2000), our grasp of how to change routinized unethical conditions or cultures of silence amid wrongdoing is still largely limited to insights from the few willing to voice objections (Miceli and Near, 1985) rather than the 'silent observers' who remain understudied despite their presumed prevalence. At the same time, there are few in-depth studies of mishandled complaints and the role of policy gaps (content or implementation) that, if documented and analysed, could yield levers to transform silence for individual remedy and organization renewal, and so address Morrison's (2014) call for greater knowledge of inhibitors and motivators of voice.

The articles presented here indicate the burgeoning global and practical relevance of employee silence under the arc of ethicality consistent with original conceptualizations. The wave of interest continues to reflect broadened perspectives and interpretations, inventive methods to inform its study, and applications to more diverse workforces — features that increasingly characterize contemporary approaches. Such advances in knowledge are compelling and will ensure a lasting source of valuable ideas for practitioners and policy-makers eager to leverage evidence that reduces adverse aspects of employee silence and enhances benefits for individuals, organizations and society. The

thought-provoking articles in this collection invoke, to varying degrees, employee voice as a conceptual counterpoint to silence and deepen our understanding of the nature, experience and meaning of silence when accepted norms of what is right or moral are not met across a range of topics and different motivators for silence.

In this commentary, I draw on theoretical perspectives that underpinned the development of employee silence as a stand-alone organizational concept, its dimensionality within unjust events (often framed as policy-based ethical violations), and reflections from its examination and the potential or actual channel into voice mechanisms. I reflect on aspects for deeper thought toward meaningful models testable across disciplines, methods, work settings and cultures to help sustain this nascent body of knowledge. My reflections are general, drawing on some older work and new developments while recognizing that the editors and authors have summarized these articles' specific points and have their own views about value, limits and future avenues for research. Across subtle or clear points of difference in this assembled work, there is a shared core belief that accessing and exploring employee silence within an unethical relationship, event or climate is important and that further exploration is required of its role and impact on human resource management (HRM). The commentary is organized around three observations to help think about what is known – and still is not – in the search for theoretically grounded and empirically supported HRM practice and policy in the face of immorality, injustice or illegality at work.

The time is now

There is an unprecedented confluence of current trends underlying the growing concern with employee silence of ethical issues in organizations. Of particular relevance, rapid changes are taking place in law, justice and governance worldwide, contributing to shifts in how (un)ethical work behaviour is understood and in individual and collective responsibility for protecting employees, organizations and society. For example, the spate of European protections against psychological harassment sparked legislative and regulatory advances in Canada to prevent mental injury at work, echoed in the United States (US) Healthy Workplace Bill movement, and bolstered the increasing universal regard for dignity and respect at work as a fundamental human right (Miller, 2001). Significant developments in law across labour relations, human rights, workers' compensation, and occupational health and safety and the resulting duty of Canadian employers to provide psychologically safe workplaces (Shain, 2010) present a new level of challenge for many jurisdictions beyond traditional demographic-diversity, geographic-globalization, and economic-social-environmental value concerns. More broadly, the United Nations Convention against Corruption enshrines a global priority for its prevention, criminalization, cooperation and asset recovery ratified by 178 countries as of December 2015 (<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/CAC/signatories.html>). Together, such initiatives put mounting pressure on organizations to adapt quickly in compliance with changing imperatives and expectations by reconfigured internal structures, cultures, strategies and core HRM functions and processes.

In the rush to respond, however, the need to assess the effectiveness of ethics initiatives (including reported violations or complaints) can be overlooked, the chronic problem of under-reporting can be neglected along with non-usage rates of remedial

procedures or the possibility that failed voice (e.g. mishandled complaints) can lead to silence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). Against the backdrop of extraordinary changes in organizational, economic and legal landscapes around the world and evolving obligations to respond, organizations want to prevent harm and reduce costs from ethical violations to people, workplaces, communities and society. Therefore, the need to know who is silent in these circumstances as well as why and how silence transformation into voice occurs are urgent questions, now more than ever.

The challenge is hard

Theory-driven research on employee silence, especially within the context of organizational ethics, is difficult work. Epistemologically and ontologically, how we ‘know’ the nature of individuals’ silence and our assumptions about its reality call for conceptualizations and applications that reflect its complexity in the human experience and its rich disciplinary roots (Brinsfield et al., 2009; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). Whether studied through traditional realism, postmodern constructivism or combinations thereof, employee silence is widely viewed as inherently subjective, deeply personal and influenced by situational, cultural, political and economic factors. The premise we originally offered – that employee silence is a key multidimensional, multideterminate behaviour heretofore unrecognized in the organizational literature – carries research challenges that can plague or delight us in its careful scrutiny, especially in objectionable affairs given its historic eclipse by the concept of loyalty (cf. Hirschman, 1970).

Shaping precise objectives, finding and using methods aligned with researchers’ foundational assumptions, and interpreting results toward validity appropriate to paradigmatic principles is no easy enterprise. It may be among the least understood of proverbial black boxes in organization studies, known more by its inputs or antecedents and outputs or consequences than by its actual contents or nature. Until recently, it has been the ‘dark matter’ of the organizational universe (to stretch a cosmic metaphor), an invisible substance undetectable by direct means, long-hypothesized not only to exist but also to make up most of the matter in the universe. There is rapidly accumulating evidence that dark matter does exist (e.g. Iocco et al., 2015) and these data are allowing its nature to begin to be understood.

Similarly, rapid gains in knowledge of employee silence continue (for reviews see Donaghey et al., 2011; Morrison, 2014). At this juncture in theory and evidence building, however, there is increasing importance placed on theoretical approaches and research objectives that illuminate the existence and fundamental nature of this elusive and ubiquitous phenomenon. If we accept the axiom that we get what we measure, then the field must attend to how employee silence is experienced, conceptualized, operationalized and assessed for a fulsome understanding of its obvious and nuanced expressions, its simple and complex essence, its particular and universal meanings, the conditions under which it plays a determining role in unethical work situations, and how this occurs. In their integrative overview, the editors address some of these issues in greater detail against the backdrop of specific studies in this collection (Knoll et al., 2016). A body of employee silence research in its aggregate that is at once holistic and elemental promises

a sound evidence base for effective HRM practice in key areas of change management, employee relations, legal compliance, health and safety, labour/industrial relations and strategic planning.

From this perspective of knowledge production, approaches to theory development of employee silence that are overly reductionist can limit the capacity to create understanding, while overly complicated ones bring limits and struggles of their own. My experience in theory building is illustrative of these tensions. Fresh from dissertation immersion in different disciplines and traditions to make sense of words withheld and words expressed in response to organizational injustice, and infused by Craig Pinder's fertile intellect and intense curiosity, he and I developed a process model of employee silence from multi-disciplinary literatures that integrated in-depth research and popular press accounts for realism and range, filled with feedback loops across cognitions (e.g. multi-step appraisals of circumstances), emotions (e.g. fear, anger) and behaviours (e.g. quiescent and acquiescent silence, voice, exit) shaped at different points by personal factors (e.g. self-esteem, gender, past injustice, cultural values) and situational factors (e.g. climate of silence, culture of injustice).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the manuscript stalled at the *Academy of Management Review* in the late 1990s. Reviewers wanted a more parsimonious theoretical model of employee silence that would be more easily falsifiable; they thought simplicity would support more testable propositions and stronger evidence of truth. We wanted to explain not only employee silence but also silencing; because this was new theoretical territory we were wary of the trap of triviality when theories are built around methodological limits such that validation trumps usefulness (Weick, 1989). Looking back, was the original theory too complex? Probably. Were assumptions explicit (enough) that meaning rather than truth, itself context-specific, was the goal and that processes associated with employee silence would reveal meanings for theory-driven efforts to address problems associated with it? Probably not. The point is that this entirely appropriate exchange took time, and lengthy timelines to publication of new models and concepts are risky for early-career scholars for a variety of reasons.

Along with challenges of theory development are common logistic and methodological hurdles in field studies of unethical behaviour. For example, gaining access to organizations can be formidable for investigation of sensitive, embarrassing or damaging topics, especially if complaint suppression is occurring (inadvertently or intentionally). Low base rates may limit the available evidence base and there are typically heightened needs among employees for safety and protection that sometimes no amount of assurance about anonymity or confidentiality can address. How employee silence about unethical behaviour is identified is often imperfect; non-usage of voice mechanisms and the disinclination or weak intention to report to organizational authorities for remedy (approaches I have used) tend to be simplistic and indirect proxies for the state of silence and often reveal little about silencing. But they can be a useful bridge to delve deeper into who is silent and why. Intriguing insights are emerging from tests of multilevel models (e.g. Wang and Hsieh, 2013) and person-situation interactions (e.g. Harlos, 2010; Morrison et al., 2015) to tease out roles of gender, self-esteem, hierarchical and personal power, inhibition, ethical climates and context support in employee silence and silence transformation to voice. In addition, the multilevel model introduced by the editors offers new ways of thinking

about influences on employee silence for future empirical research (Knoll et al., 2016). More broadly, mixed-method study, combined inductive–deductive research for theory development (Dubin, 1978), and non-traditional theorizing and approaches hold promise of contributions through propositions and data for counter-intuitive, imaginative ideas and implications that advance employee silence–ethics linkages.

In this nascent stream of research, traditional theory may yield small gains; its value ultimately may rest on the degree to which models built on wider foundations with broader scope successfully address questions and issues faced by organizations in this turbulent time for larger, impactful gains. The big question – What is the fate of employee silence theories in organizational ethics research? – seems to depend on meeting the challenge of developing and applying strong theory, which Sutton and Staw (1995: 378) described as delving

... into underlying processes so as to understand the systematic reasons for a particular occurrence or nonoccurrence. It often burrows deeply into microprocesses, laterally into neighboring concepts, or in an upward direction, tying itself to broader social phenomena. It usually is laced with a set of convincing and logically interconnected arguments. It can have implications that we have not seen with our naked (or theoretically assisted) eye.

These challenges, together, may be daunting but necessary to address so that contributions from past, current and future work endure.

The circle is wide

As indicated, contemporary research approaches call for a range of epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies to apply new ways of modelling how employee silence in unethical conditions arises, continues, changes and recedes. In particular, less traditional and devoutly non-traditional work on employee silence may be useful for probing deeply held assumptions of the researcher and those researched, and for stimulating new possibilities in conceiving of silence–ethics linkages even though relevance to ethical matters varies. More directly relevant applications include social constructionist treatments of silence and silencing in relation to power dynamics (e.g. Cohen, 2002). In this vein, to develop employee silence theory I drew on Scott's (1990) notion of public transcripts (i.e. voice) and hidden transcripts (i.e. silence) among dominant and subordinate groups. He argued that when power is exercised over less powerful individuals both transcripts are produced, but the hidden or private ones - the texts we say in our heads, or to coworkers or family but withheld from authorities - contain rich insights into social, emotional, and cognitive processes, as does the gap or difference between our public and private transcripts. I thus asked research participants who felt they had been unjustly treated, 'If you could speak with impunity to those you believe responsible for the situation, what would you say?', and was curious about differences between voicing to power and silencing from it. These data guided the formulations of employee quiescence and acquiescence as well as distinctions between these silence forms on dimensions of emotionality, stress, propensity to voice and exit, situation acceptance, and how voluntary and conscious was employees' silence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). As

the field of employee silence evolves, opportunities to bridge contributions that describe, explain or predict the phenomenon can be a means of advancing organizational knowledge. Such bridging supports an aim – until now more implicit than explicit – to achieve a holistic, complete understanding of the antecedents and consequences of silence forms, the characteristics and properties accompanying these states of silence, transitions between forms, and transformation to employee voice.

Many methods can illuminate the layered experience of silence and silencing by accessing the world of interior ruminations up to and including the precipice of exterior dialogue with authorities. My view is that we do not yet have enough such data for a comprehensive conceptual map of employee silence and silencing with sound evidence of its full nature. However, new ideas and work are flowing from a variety of approaches, such as mixed-method research to more deeply understand and measure silence motives (Brinsfield, 2013; Knoll and van Dick, 2013) and discursive analysis to probe the role of employee silence in sexual minority experiences (Ward and Winstanley, 2003). This growing collection of research will create even more scholarly space for grounded yet imaginative theory and stronger theory-based evidence for organizational policy and decision support. Emerging insights from perspectives on silence and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered employees (e.g. Bowen and Blackmon, 2003) are already guiding new HRM efforts and practices to promote inclusion (Bell et al., 2011).

In broader terms, there is an evolving view that organizationally induced silence about employee social identity (e.g. ethnicity, sexual minority membership, gender identity, (dis)ability status) is fundamentally an ethical issue. Organizational conditions or practices that promote silence about such human dimensions (Morrison and Milliken, 2000) can engender discrimination, disrespect and a sense of injustice among employees, whether actual or imagined. This suggests that new questions about employment disclosure and accommodation requests in particular may help us to better understand interconnections among employee silence, social identity, vulnerability, safety, justice and ethics, and to better design procedures responsive to a pluralistic workforce's varied needs for moving from silence to voice. On a global level, the refugee crisis in Europe demonstrates the timeliness for research that can help move beyond diverse to inclusive societies and (re)configure social and political supports to sustain the sense of being recognized, understood and accepted. Inclusivity in organizational or societal arenas can benefit from new applications of past work, such as Noelle-Neumann's (1974) notion of the spiral of silence adapted by Bowen and Blackmon (2003) to propose ways in which isolation and exclusion underlie the silence of sexual minority groups. Such insights can yield important avenues for empirical studies of what makes interventions to promote inclusion through employee voice.

At the same time, there is growing attention to the role of gender in employee silence with empirical evidence that some work conditions (e.g. lower hierarchical power) may make women less inclined to voice interpersonal mistreatment by a supervisor for remedy (Harlos, 2010), suggesting that voice mechanisms may not provide equal access to justice as traditionally assumed. Recent work on employee responses to mistreatment (Salin et al., 2014) asks new questions with mixed data about targets' actual responses and ideal (i.e. desired) ones and, interestingly, what gives rise to discrepancies between

what they actually did and what they wished they had done, echoes Scott's (1990) public and private transcripts. That larger discrepancies between actual and ideal responses were associated with larger organizational status differences and gender differences between targets and perpetrators resonates with past work. The 'active response' classification (e.g. confrontation, advocacy-seeking) can be read as voice while 'passive responses' (e.g. do nothing, conflict avoidance) can be read as silence. Open-ended, qualitative data to probe the actual-ideal gap suggest there may be deeper connections to gender and ethnicity for further exploration.

Earlier insights from critical studies and feminist scholarship on gender, power and silence can supplement new work, perhaps spurring new questions to ask, new methods to apply, or new assumptions to examine. The view that gender and power relations are inextricably linked is gaining acceptance in organizational science (e.g. Calas and Smircich, 1992; Ely and Padavic, 2007) consistent with past sociological analyses that reject the assumption that organizations are gender-neutral and asexual settings (e.g. Acker, 1990). Acker's (2006) concept of inequality regimes further proposed that gender, race and class are intersecting processes that result in and maintain inequality in organizations (see also Elliott and Smith, 2004). These views align with recent treatments of silence as invisibility and voice as visibility amid gendered norms and practices at work (Simpson and Lewis, 2005). Critical theorists see a complete interconnection through the unitary concept of 'gender power'; this offers new possibilities for theorizing about silence amid gendered organizational structures and processes (Harlow et al., 1995). These developments can inform more traditional theorists and approaches about individual everyday experiences (i.e. employee silence) and organizational structures, practices and processes (i.e. organizational silence) as well as what lies between in cross-level intersections. The thrust of newer work, including several articles in this special issue noted by the editors (Knoll et al., 2016), is that gender matters. Ethnicity matters. Class matters. Power matters. And, of course, context matters.

In sum, there is compelling support for a commitment to intellectual diversity and open-mindedness to maintain the momentum of contributions from employee silence-ethics linkages and their value. As the breadth of paradigms and methods widens and as collected results accelerate, however, the list of research challenges grows: concept proliferation and confusion, theoretical fragmentation, level-of-analysis slippage, and knowledge silos are but some. Not all difficulties are avoidable when seeing employee silence from different points of view, but watching for tendencies to isolate or privilege paradigmatic approaches, to incorrectly equate terms that are level-specific (e.g. employee silence versus organizational silence), to ignore boundaries of generalizability (e.g. historical, cultural) or to slip into dust-bowl empiricism are prudent cautions now in the evolution of employee silence theory. This is not to gloss over problems that can be associated with particular models or methods or to mute the scholarly critique needed for assurance that ideas or findings are sound and valuable. This is also not to argue for a Grand Theory of Employee Silence to prove that this is a substantive line of inquiry that is here to stay. But a multiperspective approach to understanding employee silence in ethics and a thoughtful 'back-to-basics' research oversight can encourage the disciplined imagination (Weick, 1989) and creativity to advance knowledge by imaging the unseen, knowing its complex nature, and plumbing its depths. For example, there is a need for ongoing attention to

construct clarity as measurable definitions of employee silence are developed and applied (Brinsfield, 2013; Knoll and van Dick, 2013; Whiteside and Barclay, 2013). Support for the precision and validity of measures can draw on direct and indirect evidence from a number of domains. It seems accepted now, for example, that emotionality is a distinguishing characteristic of employee silence forms as originally proposed in 2001. New measures can be compared against emotion data gathered in study design (e.g. open-ended questions) to bolster psychometric evidence or enhance content validity in item construction informed by relevant literature, such as summaries of silence in the face of fear at work (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009).

As much as there are dilemmas to be reconciled in the road ahead, the time is now, the challenge is hard, and the circle is wide. With the growing regard for fair and respectful workplaces as a fundamental right, and for a new research agenda to guide practitioners and policymakers so that those most vulnerable feel able to seek help, researchers will benefit from richer theoretical understandings of the psychology of employee silence and its sociological-organizational connections. Today more than ever, the power of words withheld in times of trouble and recommendations for organizations to handle words expressed for remedy call for theory-driven research that delivers both rigour and relevance. The study of employee silence offers much value, some that lies in the future and some already realized, to researchers and practitioners concerned with ethics in organizations. The intellectual and financial investments in creating and using this knowledge promises strong returns for better management of human resources for a healthy and motivated workforce, successful and sustainable organizations, and vibrant and engaged societies.

Concluding reflections

Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906–1945)

History offers a bleak lesson about silence in an unethical system of unimaginable proportions: the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer, a key figure in the Resistance executed for his deeds, further warned that ‘silence in the face of evil is itself evil’. Genocides have occurred before and since the Holocaust, notably during the 1970s and onwards with unrelenting horror (e.g. Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia). To these dark chapters in history, Bonhoeffer’s claims bring the question of ethics of individual silence to light. We have much to learn about the morality of silence, how it shapes and is shaped by everyday moral dilemmas that people face, and their decisions to stay silent or voice objection.

With our growing knowledge of employee silence set against extraordinary changes in organizational, economic, societal and legal landscapes around the world, research forums such as this special issue are central for expanding theories and testing models that span social, cognitive and emotional elements in processes of silence. In this expansion, the advent of a view of social responsibility as a universal imperative, a call to consider people along with profits, adds a fundamental question of how our evolving research agenda serves the social, public and organizational good.

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