



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**The Antecedents, Correlates, and Consequences of Employee Silence**

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**ABSTRACT**

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Employee Silence (ES) is a pervasive phenomenon. It has serious effects on an individual, team, and organizational level. However, given its pervasiveness little, there is still a lot to be known about its antecedents and consequences. The objectives of the study were to explore the antecedents, correlates and consequences of ES at individual level. It is imperative to find these factors since the researchers argue that ES has far more negative effects than positive. Using the survey method, the data was collected by administering the adapted questionnaire (n=229) from the banking sector. The analyses confirmed the hypotheses in line with the extant employee silence literature. The instrumental climate had been found to significantly affect ES. Similarly, the ES was found to be negatively related with job satisfaction and have significant positive effect employee wellbeing. The theoretical framework of the research has extended the current themes of research in the employee silence literature which has opened up avenues for the practitioners. It is recommended that the organizational climate should be fostered as conducive, so ES is reduced leading to better employee wellbeing. Further, as part of future research, it has been recommended that the dispositional factors and laboratory settings may be utilized to better understand the underlying phenomena driving employee silence.

**Introduction**

Employee silence (ES) is a behavior that is characterized by remaining intentionally silent in an organization before those who are perceived to be capable of bringing the improvement (Brinsfield, 2009; Morris et al., 2014). However, since the ES is not observable, it cannot be determined if an employee has exhibited it. Further, if an employee is silent it is not possible to determine if the employee is exhibiting ES or is just silent because he/she has nothing to say.

Therefore, it is almost always not possible to determine if ES has been exhibited by an employee. However, the ES silence literature has not only defined it but has also found ways self-reporting ways to determine if an employee is exhibiting

ES. Further, the ES literature has characterized different dimensions of ES based on the underlying motives for each. Each dimension of ES is differentiated from the other based on underlying motives (Prouska & Psychogios, 2016). The underlying motives of ES include factors at the individual, team, and organizational level which fosters ES (Knoll & van Dick, 2013).

At the same time is worth noting here that the silence behavior is different from voice behavior (Brinsfield, 2013; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005), thus silence is not the exact proxy of voice. Consequently, the findings of voice behavior research are different from the findings of employee silence behavior research (Knoll & van Dick, 2013). However, according to Morrison (2014), the silence and voice literature have run in parallel as well as have intersected and can be integrated.

## Literature Review

### Dimensions of Employee Silence

The dimensions of ES are based on different underlying motives, that is to say, each dimension of employee silence is differentiated from the other dimension based on the underlying motives (Abd El-Fattah Mohamed Aly et al., 2021; Qureshi & Naqvi, 2021). A brief account of the dimension of employee silence based on underlying motives is presented in Table 1. In the Table, the dimensions of ES are presented in chronological order with the underlying motives and the title of the respective dimension.

**Table 1**  
**A brief account of the dimensions of ES**

Underlying Motive	Chronological Order
Motive of resignation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quiescence Silence (Pinder&amp;Harlos, 2001)</li> <li>• Acquiescence Silence (Pinder&amp;Harlos, 2001)</li> <li>• Acquiescent Silence (van Dyne et al., (2003)</li> <li>• Ineffectual Silence, Disengaged Silence (Brinsfield, 2013)</li> </ul>
Motive of self-protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defensive Silence (van Dyne et al., (2003)</li> <li>• Defensive Silence (Brinsfield, 2013)</li> <li>• Fear of Retaliation (Jain, 2015)</li> </ul>
The motive of altruism and/or cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ProSocial silence (van Dyne et al., (2003)</li> <li>• Relational Silence (Brinsfield, 2013)</li> </ul>
Motives of accepting harm to others and accepting the benefits for themselves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunistic Silence (Knoll &amp; van Dick, 2013)</li> </ul>
The motive of harming others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deviant Silence (Brinsfield, 2013)</li> </ul>
The motive of saving oneself from embarrassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diffident Silence (Brinsfield, 2013)</li> <li>• Internal Motivation, Self-competence, Self-Image (Jain, 2015)</li> </ul>

Even though there are multiple dimensions of employee silence, there are very few studies that have explored the ES based on its antecedents and outcomes together. In the current research, the authors have demonstrated that instrumental

climate affects ES, while job satisfaction and organization citizenship behavior are affected by ES.

### **Antecedent of ES**

The contextual factors such as instrumental climate have a great role to play in how employees behave in an organization (Mao & Hsieh, 2017). For instance, the silence climate is likely to emerge in an organization that is characterized by staunch organizational policies and managers with unaccounted-for power and a larger span of control (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). On similar grounds, Mao and Hsieh (2017) assert that the organizational climate fosters silence behavior. For instance, the egocentric behavior of an employee will not be found unethical in the organizational climate which is mainly characterized by an instrumental climate.

### **Instrumental Climate and Employee Silence**

According to Wang and Hsieh (2013), the instrumental climate fosters self-interest and egoistic concern in employees at the personal, team, and organizational levels. According to them, in this climate, the decision-maker makes the decision that is in the best interest of it or its team, and the interest of other employees or departments is ignored (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015). Such behaviors naturally then promote the ES. The employees thus are more concerned with their concerns than the concerns of the other employees. They are likely to remain silent in a situation that may endanger their concerns, interests, or wellbeing. They are likely to remain silent to serve their ego over matters which are more important for the survival of their organization (Martin & Cullen, 2006). Thus, an employee does not exhibit ES only when his or her concerns are not addressed. He or she would exhibit ES whenever the concerns of others are shared or addressed. Even they are likely to remain silent when the organizational interests are compromised. In all such instances, when the employees choose to exhibit ES and they do not highlight issues, problems or the avenues of improvement since their own interests are compromised they are exhibiting ES. Therefore, based on the above reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed.

**Hypothesis 1:** Organizational instrumental climate is positively related to employee silence.

### **Correlate: Job Satisfaction and Employee Silence**

Silence behavior is different from voice behavior (Brinsfield, 2013; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005), thus silence is not the exact proxy of voice. Consequently, the findings of voice behavior research are different from the findings of employee silence behavior research (Knoll & van Dick, 2013). However, according to Morrison (2014), the silence and voice literature have run in parallel as well as have intersected and can be integrated. Accordingly, the research on employee voice behavior has provided ample platform for the research on employee silence behavior. For example, the lead on the relationship between job satisfaction and employee silence behavior can be taken from employee voice literature. In which it was found that employee voice behavior in organizations is positively related to job satisfaction. It can be inferred that employee silence is negatively related to job satisfaction. Empirically, the negative relationship between job satisfaction and acquiescent

silence and quiescent silence was found by Knoll and van Dick (2013). In the case of ES, the employees intentionally remain silent. According to Knoll and van Dick (2013), employees feel uncomfortable only when they know they should speak but remain silent as remaining silent bears personal benefits. Thus, the employees engaged in employee silence are also likely to be uncomfortable in the workplace and their job satisfaction will likely be low. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed.

**Hypothesis 2:** Employee silence is negatively related to job satisfaction.

### Consequences: Employee Well-Being and Employee Silence

People have uncomfortable feelings when they feel that something should be said to improve things but they choose to remain silent (Knoll & van Dick, 2013; Perlow & Williams, 2003) likely because of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). In the psychology literature, it has been found that emotional suppression which includes self-silencing can lead to serious health issues and poor psychological functioning (Soto et al., 2011). Negative consequences of speaking up are better than the physical and psychological harms caused by self-silencing (Cortina & Magley, 2003). Silence has repercussions that span from performance deterioration to cynicism, stress, dissatisfaction (Morrison, 2014; Morrison & Milliken, 2003; Perlow & Williams, 2003), strain, turnover intentions, and well-being (Knoll & van Dick, 2013).

Knoll and van Dick found that well-being was found to be negatively related to opportunistic silence. Both the opportunistic silence and employee silence are exhibited to gain personal advantage. In employee silence, employees do not put up the suggestion for improvement as they learn vicariously (Bandura & McClelland, 1977). Consequently, the employees orient themselves to remain silent which is likely to have a positive effect on their wellbeing. Thus, it can be hypothesized that the employees exhibiting ES are likely to have well-being. Accordingly, the hypothesis is proposed

**Hypothesis 3:** Employee silence is positively related to employee well-being.

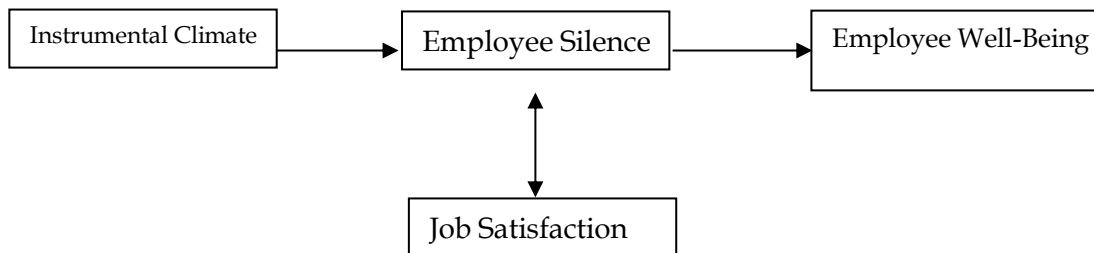


Figure 1: Research Framework

### Material and Methods

#### Population and Sample

The population of the research comprised employees from the service sector. It includes employees of the private banks who had remained in their branches for at

least one year. The sample size was taken from the banking sector of Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

### Sampling and Data Collection Technique

The sampling technique utilized was the step purposive sampling. A bank employee was asked if he or she had remained the part of the particular branch for at least one year. In case of a positive response, the employee was chosen to be part of the sample.

Since all the variables of the research were self-reported, there were high chances of common method bias. To manage this problem the data was collected in a time lag manner in line with the recommendation of Podsakoff et al., (2003). Thus, the data was collected in 3-time lags in a cross-sectional manner as per the following details

**Table 2**  
**Details of Time Lag and the Variables**

Time-Lag	Variables
1 <sup>st</sup>	Instrumental Climate
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Employee Silence, Job Satisfaction
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Well Being

A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed among the employees giving their services in the banking sector. A total of 229 valid questionnaires were received (RR 57%). The sample size (n=229) was found to be adequate as per the findings of G\*Power software (Faul et al., 2007). The demographic analysis revealed that 71% of the respondents were male. 94% of the respondents were having bachelor's degrees and the rest were having master's degrees (18 years of education). 77% of the respondents were having 2-7 years of experience in the current organization, while 14%, 7%, and 2% of the respondents were having 7-11, 12-16, and 17-21 years of experience with the current organization respectively.

### Measures

The questionnaire of ES was adapted from the work of Vakola and Bouradas(2005). The reliability measure (Cronbach alpha) was found to be .87. The questionnaire for the instrumental climate was adapted from the work of Victor and Cullen (1988). The Cronbach alpha value was found to be .86. Job satisfaction was measured with three items developed by Rich (1997). The Cronbach alpha value was found to be .83. The well-being scale was adapted from the scale of Life Scale by Ryff(1989). The Cronbach alpha value was found to be .89. All respondents evaluated each item with the five-point Liker scale with 5 being strongly agree and 1 being strongly disagree.

**Table 3**  
**Reliabilities, descriptive statistics, and intercorrelations among the study variables**

	Variables	Items	Alpha	M	SD	1	2	3
1	Instrumental Climate	7	0.87	2.67	1.03	-		

2	Employee Silence	9	0.86	2.87	1.09	.157**	-	
3	Job Satisfaction	3	0.83	3.28	1.21	-.124**	-.189**	-
4	Well Being	7	0.89	2.88	0.68	.441**	.386**	.226**

\*\* . Correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

### Results and Discussion

The descriptive along with the correlational results are shown in Table 3. Based on the literature review the positive correlation between the instrumental climate and ES in was predicted in Hypothesis 1. Our data confirmed the hypothesis as depicted in Table 3. As expected ES is positively related to instrumental organizational climate ( $r = .31$ ;  $p = .00$ ). it is similar to the finding of the climate of silence by Vakola and Bouradas(2005). In Hypothesis 2, it was predicted that ES is related to job satisfaction. These hypotheses are supported by the data as shown in Table 3. It seems that holding the information and opinions is not satisfying irrespective of the motives supporting them. For Hypothesis 3 it was predicted that the ES is positively related to employee wellbeing. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was confirmed as shown in Table 3.

According to Morrison (2014), ES has serious consequences on individuals, teams, and organizations. The current study has confirmed that ES has a significant effect on employee silence. However, it has also been confirmed that the organizational climate has a significant effect on fostering ES among employees. These findings will have a great effect to develop and implement strategies that are focused on the underrated and unobserved phenomenon of silence. Though comprehensive the research is not without limitations. For example, the current research requires attention in the validation process. Further, the self-reported nature of the variables involved in this study makes it more affinitive toward common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

In this research, the disposition factors such as the characteristics of an employee were taken into consideration. It is believed that these characteristics have a significant effect on the ES behavior of employees. At the same time, these factors commonly known as the dispositional factors must be examined empirically to delineate further ES, its antecedents, correlates, and the consequences. It is also recommended for future researchers to test ES in laboratory settings. It will enable the researcher and practitioners alike to develop strategies to manage and mitigate ES.

### Conclusion

Employee Silence is an insidious phenomenon which encompasses all organizations. Multiple accidents such Enron (Opperl & Kahn, 2002) have taken place due to employees exhibiting ES. Therefore, it was imperative to conduct this research with the objectives of finding the antecedents, correlates and consequences of ES at individual level. It was found that organizational instrumental climate effects ES leading to employee wellbeing. We are positive that this research will pave way for future researchers and practionars to better the understand ES and its antecedents, correlates and consequences. The organizations from service, manufacturing and

hybrid sectors shall find this research very beneficial from better understanding these factor. The research has also paved the way for future researchers which can use the outcomes of this research to use it in work from scenarios, where ES is likely to be exhibited even more.

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