EMPLOYEE SILENCE: INVESTIGATION OF DIMENSIONALITY IN SELECT IT COMPANIES OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Silence is a fence around wisdom. - German Proverb.

It is observed that employees prefer to be silent at work place, as they don't want to catch eyes and perceived as troublemakers. Many organizations feel that the climate of silence is safe for them, so they do encourage it; but such organizations do not realize that it can be a form of stagnation or can be an uprising gale. Work pressure, on the job demands, stress, anxiety, burnout and depression is also mounting in employee's lives. Indian Information Technology (IT) sector's turbulent and dynamic nature is illustrious in this context. This is an exploratory study to investigate the dimensionality of employee silence in select IT companies of India. The study is conducted on data obtained from 300 employees of IT sector in India. The study explored five dimensions of employee silence namely defensive silence, acquiescent silence, self-image silence, diffident silence (internal motivation) and inefficient silence (self-competence) using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis.

KEYWORDS: Acquiescent Silence, Defensive Silence, Employee Silence, Indian IT Sector,

Self-image Silence.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Silence is a source of great strength"

- *Lao Tzu*

Silence not always signifies absence of speech. Sometimes it also underlies the emotions of a person like anger, revenge, depression, nervousness, guilt and shame. An organization is responsible for identifying problems before hand and employees' feedback plays an important role in highlighting the issues of concern. The practice of employees' reporting the immediate manager is of worthy in many respects. Employees not only come up with the problems, but they also can also prove to be a source of valuable suggestions and creative ideas. But in reality this practice is hardly followed. Sometimes management does not take the employees' voice in a positive sense and due to number of reasons; employees also do resist reporting problems to their managers and preferring silence over raising voice **(Jain, 2015).**

Form the past few decades Indian organizations are facing challenging business environment due to change in technology, political changes, amended business policies, workforce diversity and global competition. In such an environment, employees play a crucial role as they prove their intellect can act as a competitive advantage for an organization. Thus, organizations need committed and motivated employees coming up with new ideas and suggestions. Therefore employee silence inhibits the learning and knowledge sharing environment.

It is evident from the previous research that management encourages non-union representative schemes and discourages contradictions and criticism in reality. The number of unions has decreased significantly over the period of time. It is highlighted that the practices like collective bargaining and worker's participation in management discourage employee union formation in the companies. So the companies view employee silence as a profitable strategy as employees do not gather and raise voice for their rights. This brings about climate of silence. **(Argyrys, 1977).**

If organizations want to be effective they need to challenge the employee silence and fix it, both the employee and the employer side need to deal with the situation because silence climate affect both the parties equally. Being that the effects of employee silence can be severe and harmful to

the working of an organization, management should try to minimize its occurrence. One way to combat silence climate is to establish a fair organizational climate and make employees committed to the organization. So when the management is committed to the employees the employees in return will be engaged to the organization, which in turn restricts silence climate.

1.1 Genesis of the Term Employee Silence

Employee silence denotes to a state, where employees refuse to share information that might be valuable to the company either intentionally or unintentionally. This situation arises when employees hesitate to speak up to their supervisor or manager. Employee silence is pervasive and can arise in any organization. Specifically though, it arises in the companies having poor communication channels. In a computer-generated workplace it is common phenomenon. In a virtual organization like IT industry, face to face communication occurs in small conference rooms. Such kind of work-place is very inclined to silence climate as there is little one-to-one communication, and it is very common to overlook or misunderstand things like email or telephonic conversation.

According to me, Employee Silence *refers to planned, proactive, premeditated behavior with regard to an essential reason based on cost/benefit analysis, of speaking up or not about organizational related matters; typically in view of any kind of fear, futility, inefficiency, belief or hesitation.*

1.2 Dimensions of Employee Silence

Researchers have listed various dimensions of employee silence according to the context of study. **Morrison and Milliken (2003), Pinder and Harlos (2001), Van Dyne et al. (2003), Knoll and Van Dick (2012)** have studied following three dimensions of employee silence:

Acquiescent Silence (Disengaged Behavior):	It is the consequence of employees' perception of futility and uselessness of raising the voice. **(Pinder and Harlos, 2001).** For example, if an employee withholds information about a dangerous work environment because he or she does not believe that the organization will address the problem, then the employee is engaging in acquiescent silence. Thus, acquiescent silence is a passive behavior that occurs when employees withhold information, ideas, or opinions because they believe that expressing their concerns or ideas are

	futile and unlikely to result in meaningful change **(Van Dyne et al., 2003).**
Quiescent silence (self-protective or defensive behavior)	It occurs when an employee purposely withholds information to avoid negative repercussions **(Pinder and Harlos, 2001).** Unlike acquiescent, quiescent silence is proactive by nature; it involves a consideration of viable alternatives and the decision to remain silent is motivated by the desire to protect the self from external threats **(Van Dyne et al., 2003).** For example, if an employee has knowledge of a supervisor who has been engaging in fraudulent trading practices and purposely withholds this information for fear of retaliation (e.g., job loss, denial of promotion), then the employee is engaging in quiescent silence. Communication is the key to an organization's success. If employee silence does occur, communication suffers and as a result harms the overall functioning of the organization.
Prosocial Silence (concern for others, withholding ideas, information or opinion with goal of benefiting other people or the organization)	It is defined as withholding of information to benefit others. It is motivated by the concern for others rather by the fear of negative personal consequences. Prosocial silence is a proactive behavior which is not mandated by the organization. It also involves withholding information from others in order to protect a colleague, boss or the organization from embarrassment and unexpected troubles **(Knoll and Van Dick, 2013). Milliken et al. (2003)** suggest that the need to build and maintain one's social capital deeply motivates employees to avoid speaking up. Some employees choose to remain silent about colleagues' mistakes in order to avoid breaking up their social network. The fear of losing the social network is further amplified when job interdependence among co-workers is a core feature in the organizational design. The social capital refers to "the sum of resources, actual and virtual, that accrues to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" **(see, Hawass (2016).**

Furthermore, **Brinsfield (2009)** in his extensive dissertation work, noted following six dimensions of employee silence:
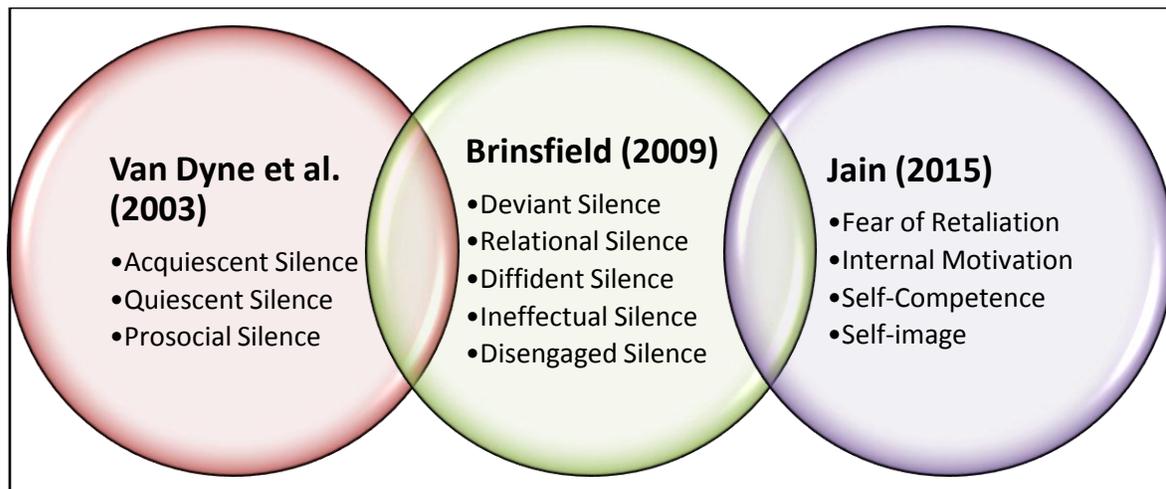
Deviant Silence (not giving necessary information)	Silence becomes employee deviance when "an employee intentionally or unintentionally withholds any kind of information that might be useful to the organization" **Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008).** The problem occurs if an employee fails to disclose important information, which detrimentally affects the effectiveness of the organization due to poor communication.
Defensive Silence (like Quiescent Silence)	This dimension consists of variables related to fear of negative consequences and fear of organizational authorities.
Diffident Silence (self-doubt or lack of confidence in expressing ideas)	This kind of silence is the result of employees' lack of confidence and low self-esteem which hinder their voice raising capacity against any concern or issue.
Ineffectual Silence (like acquiescence silence)	Such silence results when employees do not feel worth speaking, they have easy going behavior and "let it happen" attitude.
Disengaged Silence (Lack of concerns):	Sometimes employees lack interest in organizational affairs and does not actively participate in important discussions, events etc. For example when an employee is serving notice period in company s/he show such kind of silence behavior.
Relational Silence (not want to harm a relationship):	The employees seek to satisfy their desire for inclusion at work through being cheerful and open to social interactions. They would also give pieces of advices to show their sympathy and assure their status as honest workplace friends. In this context, the desire to achieve social acceptance is expected to motivate them to engage in prosocial silence **(see, Hawass (2016).**

In Indian context, **Jain (2015)** explored four underlying motives of employee silence namely Fear of Retaliation, Internal motivation, Self-competence and Self-image as explained below:

Fear of Retaliation (fear of negative consequences**):**	As explained by **Pinder and Harlos, 2001;Van Dyne, Ang&Botero, 2003; Brinsfield, 2009;** defensive silence explains fear of retaliation evidently. To avoid future negative consequences of speaking up, employees prefer to remain silent. This dimension also supports the high power distance context, like India, where managers are relatively authoritarian in their relationship with subordinates which creates a sense of fear and insecurity among employees.
Internal Motivation (lack of knowledge)	Internal motivation leads to silence when employees lack knowledge, skills, abilities and interest of subordinates, therefore silence may provide a safe avenue to maintain high self-esteem or protect ego of such employees in front of their superiors. This dimension explains a lack of confidence in knowledge, skills and abilities of subordinates as the cause of silence behavior. This dimension is different from the earlier studies which posited that employees prefer to remain silent to protect their knowledge. However, this dimension explains that employees believe that they are lacking in knowledge, ideas and opinions to be shared with their supervisors which is close to the construct of diffident or disengaged forms of silence **(Brinsfield, 2013).** Thus silence facilitates in protecting one's self-esteem in front of bosses.
Self-Competence (Due to inefficiency):	This dimension consists of variables related to the negative evaluation of one's self-concept. Employees may believe that they are lacking inadequate interpersonal and social skills (self-affirmation beliefs) in arguing with their bosses. This can be the result of fear of organizational authorities and inability to develop an open relationship with bosses. This dimension is different from earlier studies as it explains that employees do not believe in their superiors in terms of openness and the ability to listen carefully. However employees follow silence as they lack interpersonal and social skills to contradict a dominating and assertive boss.
Self-Image (Being	Employees prefer to see themselves in a positive light and want to

Neutral and play-safe):	maintain a positive impression on others. Thus employees want to maintain an image of being a nice and simple person by not arguing with their boss, and may develop a self-belief that "I am here to work rather than to argue or fight with my boss." Thus it supports the personality traits of introversion and non-assertion in response to the superiors.

Figure 1: Dimensions of Employee Silence

Van Dyne et al. (2003)
•Acquiescent Silence
•Quiescent Silence
•Prosocial Silence

Brinsfield (2009)
•Deviant Silence
•Relational Silence
•Diffident Silence
•Ineffectual Silence
•Disengaged Silence

Jain (2015)
•Fear of Retaliation
•Internal Motivation
•Self-Competence
•Self-image

Source: Author's own

*For the present study, all the aforementioned dimensions (given by **Van Dyne, Ang&Botero, 2003; Brinsfield, 2009 and Jain, 2015**) of employee silence are considered to construct the instrument for employee silence.*

1. Defensive Silence: It occurs when an employee purposely withholds information to avoid negative repercussions.

2. Diffident Silence: It explains a lack of confidence in knowledge, skills and abilities of subordinates as the cause of silence behavior.

3. Self-Competence/ Inefficient Silence: Employees follow silence as they lack interpersonal and social skills to contradict a dominating and assertive boss.

4. Self- Image Silence: It supports the personality traits of introversion and non-assertion in response to the superiors.

5. **Acquiescent Silence:** It is a passive behavior that occurs when employees withhold information, ideas, or opinions because they believe that expressing their concerns or ideas are futile and unlikely to result in meaningful change

Information Technology is considered as the most dynamic sector and doing job in such an environment is very insecure. It is unpredictable for an employee that how much time he is working for the company. Layoff and being on bench is an integral part of this industry; there are companies with a bench size up to 40%. Change is the order of IT sector and "Re-skill or Perish", is the option available for employees. Employees don't get much time and platform to raise their concerning issues, exploitation or discrimination because of the absence of employee unions. The policies of companies are configured so that there is zero possibility of outside involvement and unionism. At few places employees are looking out for making Union for IT. Unlike US & Europe where they have flat Organization structure, here in India companies follow hierarchical model.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Although substantial work has been done on Employee Silence, so far very little relevant study is available which has studied Employee Silence in Indian IT industry.

The current study is an investigation which tries to explore the antecedents of employee silence. The study discovers antecedents of employee silence through micro perspective. The study is exploratory in nature and makes use of both primary and secondary type of data sources.

2.1 Sampling Technique

Top ten IT companies (based on the parameter of profitability by NASSCOM for the year 2016) have been selected. In order to select the individual respondent a mix of judgemental and snowball sampling method has been adopted. It has been preferred to select the respondents from the line function of the organizations consisting programmers, software developers, software engineers, software testers, team leaders and project leaders. An employee has been considered as a sample unit.

2.2 Dimension of Employee Silence in select Indian IT companies

The scale developed for the study consists of twenty four statements and it has been prepared by reviewing the existing literature on employee silence. In addition, employee silence scales developed by **Jain (2014), Vakola & Bouradas (2005), Brinsfield (2009)** and **Van Dyne, Ang, &Botero, 2003** are considered for developing the dimensions of employee silence.

The data collected from thirty respondents through personal interviews were analyzed using content analysis, to generate a sufficient number of items from the conceptual domain of silence in the Indian workplace context. It is evident from the past research that content analysis is useful for studying and analyzing any construct in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner **(Kerlinger, 1973)**. Based on review of literature; the individual factors like low self-esteem, less communication apprehension, external locus of control, low self-efficacy, introversion, low conscientiousness, emotional instability, fear of retaliation, low internal motivation, low self-competence, poor self-image, fear of damaging valued relationships, status quo, self- monitoring, distrust, pessimism toward manager, anticipatory fear, guilt, shame, and anticipated regret results to following seven dimensions of employee silence - Deviant Silence, Relational Silence, Defensive Silence/ Quiescent Silence, Diffident Silence/Internal Motivation, Ineffectual Silence/Acquiescent Silence, Self-Image/Disposition Silence And Disengaged Silence **(Brinsfield, 2009; Jain, 2014;Van Dyne et al., 2003; Milliken & Morrison, 2003; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Vakola & Bourdas, 2005)**. Further, by using the content analysis approach, twenty four statements were drawn out related to aforementioned dimensions viz. defensive silence (six items), diffident silence (five items), self-competence (four items), self-image (five items) and acquiescent silence (four items). The dimensions pro-social silence, deviant silence, opportunistic silence and disengaged silence were eliminated initially as no importance was assigned to these dimensions in the interview results.

The frequency count approach was used to analyze the content of the interview data in order to reduce the reasons down to twenty four meaningful categories.

Most respondents agreed that they had, to a large extent, experienced silence in their organizations. Results of the content analysis are presented in Table 1, which depicts the various reasons identified for silence along with the frequencies of that particular reason.

2.3 Sample Size

In order to investigate the dimensions of employee silence, data was collected from a list of ten IT companies with number of employees working, located in different parts of India; the questionnaire was sent to 300 employees (taking a sample of 30 from each organization) and a total of 264 correct responses were received in due course of time.

Data from 264 employees of IT sector of Chandigarh region was analysed to cross-validate the exploratory reasons mentioned in the Table 1.

Table 1: Reasons of employee silence with respect to concerning issues, problems and ideas in select IT companies

S. No.	Statements
1	I fear of getting victimized later (DS) – Factor 1
2	I fear of boss´s authority and power (DS) - Factor 1
3	I want to protect my relationship with another individual (DS) Factor 1
4	My performance appraisal could get affected (DS) Factor 1
5	I do not want to be viewed as causing problems (SI) Factor 5
6	I do not think it will do any good to speak up (AS) Factor 2
7	I do not think it is worth the effort to speak up (AS) Factor 2
8*	I lack preparation of the subject (IM) Factor 3
9	I am unsure what to say (IM) Factor 3
10	I lack interest in the subject (IM) Factor 3
11	My attitude of acceptance to differences (IM) Factor 3
12*	I fear of being supposed as a bad employee (DS) Factor 1
13	I lack involvement in organizational affairs (IM) Factor 3
14	I do not want to appear incompetent (SC) Factor 4
15	I want to protect my image or reputation (SC) Factor 4
16	I am unable to argue with boss successfully (SC) Factor 4
17	I do not want to get embarrassed (SC) Factor 4
18	I expect someone else to speak up (SI) Factor 5
19	I am not able to make assertions (SI) Factor 5

20	I am introvert in nature (SI) Factor 5
21*	I have poor interpersonal skills (SI) Factor 5
22	I have simple and easy going behaviour (SI) Factor 5
23	I do not care enough(AS) Factor 2
24*	I do not have authority to speak up (AS) Factor 2

*Items deleted after EFA/CFA.

This list was then discussed and validated in a focus group interview. Majority of participants showed conformity over the reasons for silence from their personal experiences. Then, a principal axis factoring with oblique rotation was conducted to explore the underlying dimensions. Perusal of the Eigen values and factor loadings reveals the importance of only five significant underlying dimensions toward employee silence behaviour in organizations. The criteria to determine whether an item loaded on its underlying dimension is as follows: the item with minimum factor loading of 0.50 or better on one factor and greater than 0.20 for the cross-loading differential across the two factors **(Jain, 2015).**

Further, reliability analysis to identify internal consistency among the items of each dimension is shown in Table 3.3. The criterion of 0.70 and above is adopted to select or drop the factors (Nunnally, 1978). Based on the EFA and reliability testing, twenty items were found to be significant to explore the underlying dimensions of employee silence behaviour in Indian organizations whereas four items were dropped owing to the selection of criteria for items. From the above results, four dimensions of silence in this study are found to be similar to the dimensions proposed by **Jain (2015)** viz. fear of retaliation, internal motivation, self-competence and self-image. One more dimension acquiescent silence is found significant similar to the earlier research proposed in various studies of western context. **(Brinsfield, 2009; Van Dyne et al., 2003).**

2.4 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA):

In multivariate statistics, EFA is applied before proceeding to the confirmatory factor analysis for the purpose of construct validity **Norris, Lecavalier (2009)**. First of all, appropriateness of factor analysis has been assessed. This has been done by examining sampling adequacy through Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistics. KMO statistics for the construct employee silence comes

out to be **0.836,** which is adequate (KMO values between 0.8 and 1 indicate the sampling is adequate).

Using AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures) 20 version software, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) technique is applied to check the construct validity and goodness of fit for the sub-constructs and constructs of the study. In the EFA factor structure (how the variables relate and group based on inter-variable correlations) is explored; in the CFA the factor structure extracted in the EFA is confirmed.

Since in the model of the study, there exists no exogenous variable which has correlation value more than 0.8. So it fulfills the assumption that there should be no multicollinearity and if it exists i.e. correlation between any two variables exceeds 0.8, it should be deleted before proceeding further.

The indices related to construct validity of all the five dimensions of employee silence namely defensive silence, diffident silence (also called internal motivation), inefficient silence (also referred as self-competence), self-image silence and acquiescent silence exceeds the recommended composite reliability of 0.7 and AVEs (Average variance extracted) for all the five constructs are above 0.5. Furthermore, Discriminant validity is also supported as the AVEs for each construct is greater than MSV (Square of maximum shared variance) and ASV (Square of average variance) of each construct.

3. CONCLUSION

Through rigorous refinement of the employee silence construct, a final instrument containing twenty-four statements was developed. Further applying exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis on the instrument, twenty statements were framed out to measure five dimensions of employee silence namely defensive silence, acquiescent silence, self-image silence, diffident silence (internal motivation) and inefficient silence (self-competence). Each of these dimensions was analyzed statistically in order to find the significant underlying motives of employee silence in select IT companies.

4. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As stated, a major purpose of this study was to investigate the dimensions of employee silence from individual perspective. This research, in part, confirmed individual perspective antecedents through previously proposed literature, in addition, development of silence items related to emotions of an individual can be proposed in future research. The dimensions of employee silence are confined to the IT industry, other dimensions of silence can be explored for industries like Government Institutions, Banking, Hospitals, Educational institutes etc. In the present study only dimensions of employee silence are studied and explored. Future research can expand the relationship of employee silence with organizational factors like organizational climate, culture, organizational learning, innovation and flexibility opportunities etc.

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