VOICE AND SILENCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract: *Unlike previous research on voice and silence, this article breaks the distance between the two and declines to treat them as opposites. Voice and silence are interrelated and intertwined strategic forms of communication which presuppose each other in such a way that the absence of one would minimize completely the other's presence. Social actors are not voice, or silence. Social actors can have voice or silence, they can do both because they operate at multiple levels and deal with multiple issues at different moments in time.*

Key words: *voice, silence, minorities, organizational culture.*

1. Introduction

Voice and silence are interrelated and intertwined [3] strategic forms of communication (Scott, 1993; Grice, 1989) which denote expressing or revealing ideas, opinions and aspects of identity, respectively withholding or non-disclosing them [13], [3], [8]. Characterized by being active, conscious, intentional and purposeful, voice and silence become critical components of social interaction [13]. Voice and silence presuppose each other and social actors have both voice and silence because they operate at multiple levels and deal with multiple issues at different moments in time.

This definition builds upon and re-conceptualizes recent research studies that employ the concepts of voice and silence to address issues of political representation and communicative influence within organizations.

Similar to previous research on voice and silence, this definition employs the terms in a metaphorical sense: voice and silence have moved beyond the simple definitions that relate them to the presence or absence of sound and speech, towards definitions that tightly connect them to political representation, influence and equal-consideration [3], [14].

Unlike such research, however, this definition breaks the distance between voice and silence, and declines to treat them as opposites. For example, the 2003 JMS special issue on voice and silence though making an important step of shifting the analysis from structure to agency still maintains silence separate from voice since the issue is 'devoted to papers that, in one way or another, focus on the question of when and how people in organizational settings will choose voice and how and when they will choose silence' [9].

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The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that voice and silence are conceptual opposites only at a first sight, since one signifies expression while the other one restraint [13]. In fact, voice and silence presuppose each other. Voice cannot exist without silence and silence cannot exist without voice. One gives meaning and significance to the other in such a way that the absence of one would minimize completely the importance of the other one's presence.

This re-conceptualization brings several implications into the foreground which will be discussed in detail. But the most important implication is that voice and silence should be considered as social activities, rather than a state of being/state of affairs, since they are strategic and communicative forms of interaction. Social actors are not voice or silence. Social actors can have voice and silence; they can do both. This places more emphasis on agency, dynamicity, change and opens up the road to emancipation, while viewing them as a state of being/state of affairs removes their strategic nature and leads to a certain determinism which minimizes the possibility of change and transformation.

The emphasis on the relationship between voice and silence brings elements of agency into the foreground. Since voice and silence presuppose each other, and social actors operate at multiple levels, silenced groups, if they so choose, can seek out these interconnections between silence and voice and strategize how to achieve voice out of silence. In other words, silenced groups or individuals, can strategize how to use the voice they have on one level or about one issue and transfer it to another level or issue. This becomes possible because the boundaries between levels are conceptualized as permeable, fluid, flexible and continuously changing.

2. Definitions of voice and silence

Since voice and silence are the main concepts of this article, below I introduce a working definition, which will be broader but not holistic as it tries to incorporate the many sides, the many shades that these complex concepts present:

Silence/voice can be defined as the withholding/expression of:

• What? – ideas, opinions, aspects of the identity (e.g. sexual orientations) [13], [3], [8].

• By who? – social actors, be they individuals, groups, or organizations [3], [8].

• Why? – for defensive, pro-social or acquiescent reasons [13].

Silence/voice can be the result of:

• An individual choice (agency) – either rational calculation (strategic behavior) or emotional response [8].

• An element of constraint (power, structure) [8].

Silence can have multiple consequences at:

• The individual level: emotional, cognitive and behavioral consequences (e.g. contagion [1]);

• The group and the organizational level: endorsement or resistance of the status quo [5], [2].

Recently, in discussing voice and silence in connection to diversity, voice became representation, political influence and equal-consideration, while silence became exclusion, inequality and segregation.

This definition outlines several features and implications. First of all, voice and silence are characteristic of all social actors be they individuals, groups or organizations. It is important to recognize that not only individuals, but also groups and organizations, can have voice and silence, in which case, they can be

conceptualized as collective, rather than individual phenomena [8].

Second, since voice and silence are forms of communication and critical components of social interaction, they should be considered social activities rather than a state of being/state of affairs. Social actors <u>are not</u> voice or silence, they <u>have</u> voice and silence; they can <u>do</u> both. Re-conceptualizing voice and silence as social activities, places more emphasis on agency, dynamicity, change, and opens up the road to emancipation, while viewing them as a state of being/ state of affairs removes their strategic nature and leads to a certain determinism which minimizes the possibility of change and transformation.

Another important implication of this definition, which constitutes the essence of this article, is that voice and silence are interrelated and intertwined. Voice and silence are not mutually exclusive, they are so interconnected that they presuppose each other. Consequently, if voice and silence are social activities that presuppose each other, then social actors simultaneously have both voice and silence.

Moreover, voice and silence are contextual and situational phenomena that change according to the issue in focus, the level considered or the specific moment in time. Furthermore, voice and silence are not only restricted to circumstances that are perceived/ considered as negative [10], [14], [8], they manifest themselves also in circumstances that are positive, although their level/ intensity/ degree might vary/ fluctuate.

Finally, a 'both and' conceptualization of voice and silence implies a multi-level and multi-issue analysis. This is very similar to the open systems theory (Cummings and Worley, 2005), where researchers have to take into consideration several issues and several levels - even though this will include non-organizational settings – and

goes hand in hand with Sackmann's (1997) [11] notion of 'cultural complexity' and Martin's [6], [7] notion of 'nexus'.

3. Dimensions of silence and voice

Pinder and Harlos [10] mention two dimensions of silence/ voice: **acoustic** (the absence/ presence of sound waves - the physical domain) and **pragmatic** (absence/ presence of speech for instrumental or strategic purposes – the human domain).

Acoustic silence posits that silence is linked to sound and that understanding the meaning of silence implies an understanding of the context. Pinder and Harlos [10] present this as 'the integrationist view', which always links silence to sound to the extent that silence needs sound for its own definition.

In contrast, pragmatic silence links silence to speech. The human mind can accommodate both silence and speech, and as there is a continuous interior monologue, silence appears as a state in which we commune with ourselves. Pragmatic silence presents three forms: psycholinguistic (pauses and unintentional junctures in speech), interactive (longer held pauses in conversations that facilitate inferences, judgments and affect) and socio-cultural (group and organizational level pauses that are often highly formalized).

4. Cultural manifestations of silence and voice

Silence and voice can be viewed as rhetorical masks or as political strategies [3]. This shifts the analysis from structure to agency: silence becomes an individual strategic choice.

As a rhetorical mask, silence signifies active accomplishment where employees hide more radical voice and action behind a veneer of passivity. As a political

strategy, silence signifies complicity and cooptation. Voice may be complicity when it appears in the form of lip service or politically correct speech and hollow gestures where non-action speaks louder than words [3].

It matters whose voice and silence we consider because different groups have different historical legacies of oppression and avenues of resistance [3]. Therefore we can distinguish between voice/ silence of resistance and voice/ silence of complicity and cooptation.

Finally, I would like to add another, more complex, view that considers silence and voice as **co-constructed**. Simpson and Lewis [12] re-examine gender in relation to silence and voice and they mention the case of women who speak up in meetings but their ideas are ignored, only to find out that the same ideas get credit later on in the meeting, when voiced by male colleagues. Or that women present solutions which everybody agrees upon, but nobody enacts. The conclusion is that voice without listening and acting is in fact silence.

This last view is more close to the approach of this article because it takes into consideration not only both actors of the communication process, but also the unintended consequences of silence and voice.

First of all, as in any communication process there is a sender and a receiver and the action of each is vital for voice and silence. The sender in our example is women who present solutions to organizational problems and the receiver is represented by colleagues who ignore them. The argument is that voice without listening and acting is actually silence, and this represents the unintended consequence: sometimes having voice leads to silence, and sometimes, silence speaks louder than voice.

5. Levels of analysis

Two levels of analysis dominate the research on silence in organizations. At the individual level, silence is treated as a question of employee decision and behavior, while at the group and organizational level silence is conceptualized as a collective phenomenon.

The micro level of analysis brings individual agency into the foreground. Three types of silence/voice have made the object of recent research and conceptualization [13]. The distinction between the three is based on the degree to which the individual is seen to be active as opposed to passive, or, to put it differently, the distinction is based on the answer given to the following question: 'do people feel something that can and should be said?' [10]. Therefore, when the individual is passive we have acquiescent silence/voice and when the individual is (pro)active we have either defensive or pro-social silence/voice.

The macro level of analysis focuses on groups and organizations. Groups and organizations are usually treated together, as a macro level of analysis, even though, if treated separately, they could add more richness to the analysis. I believe groups should represent a separate and intermediate level of analysis which is placed in between individuals and organization and which filtrates issues bi-directionally: individual issues have to pass through the group filter before reaching the organizational level, and organizational issues reach individuals only after being filtrated by the group. This applies also to the issue of voice and silence.

The literature dedicated to this macro level of analysis accentuates the influence of structure on voice and silence, and conceptualizes silence as a collective phenomenon where employees withhold

their opinions and concerns about potential group or organizational problems. Drawing on organizational theorists like Argyris or Redding, Morrison and Milliken [8] contend that organizational silence is a product of forces within the organization and forces stemming from top management that systemically reinforce silence. In brief, their model departs from organizational antecedents/causes/origins and arrives at one effect/result: organizational silence. They believe that managers' fear of negative feedback and the set of implicit beliefs that they hold about their employees give rise to certain structures, policies and managerial behaviors. These, in turn, help the development of a 'climate of silence' which is enacted and reinforced by employees' collective sense making.

In addition to climates of silence, the literature dealing with a macro level of analysis presents several other concepts. For example Harlos [4] talks about cultures of injustice, the shared meanings among mistreated employees of what working within an unjust employment relationship is like [10]. They argue that 'some organizational contexts systemically and routinely (perhaps even predictably) generate injustice while fostering an atmosphere that discourages unjustly-treated individuals from breaking their silence to improve their situations' [10]. This means that cultures of injustice automatically become cultures of silence.

The same authors also mention codes of silence, group and organizational norms and practices that block disclosure of information/ ideas/ opinions. These codes of silence can be broken by perpetrators, witnesses and victims through public revelations [10].

The concepts presented above are consistent with a managerial, functionalist and normative view on organizations. Managers create codes, climates or

cultures of silence to which employees have to conform. This power-play leaves no room for agency and for individual choice. Silence is the result of constraint and employees cannot resist it, fight it or choose something else. Moreover, there is no discussion about the possible consequences of this organizational behavior. Therefore, the models presented above limit the concepts of voice and silence by presenting only one of their many facets.

An important observation is that the two levels of analysis are not mutually exclusive; in fact one needs the presence of the other. Hence, the analysis is always assuming a dyadic relation individual-system with some of the authors placing the individual in the foreground, while others place the system in the foreground. Thus a vicious circle is born, where group and organizational contexts (codes of silence, climates of silence or cultures of silence) are enacted at the individual level giving rise to individual silence (acquiescent, defensive or pro-social), which in turn maintains and reinforces group or organizational silence.

6. Targets of silence

Usually, authors argue that the target of silence is constituted by everyday information about organizational life, ideas and opinions about improving work or overcoming problems.

However, recently, the literature on organizational silence started to incorporate issues of identity. Creed [3] argues that choosing to speak up implies those parts of self that not only depart from organizational expectations, but also have been historically marginalized. He identifies a tension between claiming and preserving valued aspects of the self. Therefore silence and voice appear to be

aspects of not only agency but also self-authorship.

The discussion of identity in relation to voice and silence usually contains references to groups of minorities, whether they are sexual minorities, racial minorities or gender based minorities. However Pinder and Harlos [10] take a different example, that of Canadian sexually mistreated soldiers. This sexually mistreatment became part of their identity which made it even more difficult to speak up when the first allegations reached the Canadian media. Silence here acted as a self-protecting/defensive mechanism.

7. Consequences of silence and voice

Organizational theorists have long been interested in the consequences that silence and voice could have on the organizational life. Both classical theories and more contemporary perspectives present two main consequences of voice and silence: *endorsement or resistance of the status quo*.

Moreover, silence can entail ambiguous interpretations and it can have organizational, group, individual and unintended consequences, even though the group consequences have not received enough attention in the voice and silence literature.

One of the earliest theorists of voice and silence was Hirshman [5] who created a tripartite model: exit-voice-loyalty. Later on, another dimension was added – neglect - resulting in a complex schema that considered voice as 'any attempt at all to change rather than escape from an objectionable state of affairs' [5]. Voice and exit are shown to be responses to dissatisfaction and perceived mistreatment. But exit is too costly, while voice is too risky. Therefore silence, as a matter of abstract economic calculation, is conceptualized as a passive but

constructive response, synonymous to loyalty (suffering in silence while waiting for better times). Silence equals inaction, but it is perceived as loyalty and endorsement of the status quo.

In contrast to Hirschman, other authors consider silence to be a sign of resistance. For example, Cohen [2] rejects silence as endorsement and considers silence to be a sign of objection and dissent that derives from a lack of information and voice opportunities, or from a belief that voicing would be futile or dangerous. Ward and Winstanley [14] add another interesting consequence when they talk about silence as a tool of hostility. When the organization they have researched started to officially accept sexual minorities, the dominant majority resisted this official policy by reducing considerably the amount of informal communication with the GLTs (gay-lesbian-transsexual).

Silence is also seen as providing more ambiguous cues, which implies that observers will misattribute employees' motives for silence and that employees will have outcomes that are incongruent with their motives [13].

Morrison and Milliken [8] discuss consequences in terms of both individual and organization. At the organizational level silence can have an impact on decision making, change and learning because there is a lack of a double loop feedback. Moreover, organizational adaptability to the environment might be affected as silence makes it impossible to create the needed requisite variety. These problems may accumulate up to the point that they are visible to stakeholders. On the other hand, at the employee level, one can encounter feelings of not being valued, a perceived lack of control, and cognitive dissonance (a gap between one's beliefs and one's behaviors).

Finally, voice and silence can have unintended consequences. For example,

Simpson and Lewis [12] argue that employees who use defensive or self-protective silence which target aspects of their identity (sexual minorities) will end up maintaining silence about everyday aspects of their job as well, a process that Bowen and Blackmon [1] have described as contagion.

8. Conclusion: silence and voice as interrelated and intertwined

Silence is tightly connected to voice, although researchers still struggle with defining this relationship. Some argue that the two concepts are interrelated and some argue that they are two separate and multidimensional constructs; some consider that they are complete opposites and some see them as opposites only on some levels, while on other levels they are presented to be quite similar.

Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) argue that silence and voice are two separate, multidimensional constructs that have different consequences for employees. Although behaviorally they appear to be polar opposites, the key difference behind silence and voice is not the presence/absence of speaking up, but the motivation behind it [13]. This assumption leads to the conceptualization of three types of voice/silence that are based on three types of behavior: *prosocial, self-protective/defensive and acquiescent voice/silence.*

In opposition, Simpson and Lewis [12] develop a framework that posits silence and voice as being interconnected. They use the twin concepts of voice and visibility to analyze silence, exclusion and inequality. Sometimes voice is just a surface act of speaking and being heard, because from a post-structuralist point of view, discursive practices eliminate certain issues from arenas of speech and sound [12]. One example for this

normative view on silence could be that by foregrounding issues such as productivity, efficiency and growth, the organization is conceived as primarily an arena for masculine endeavor, while issues of gender are silenced. Women may be encouraged to voice their differences, experiences and opinions, but they often encounter difficulties being heard.

The perspective of this article moved beyond these views. If one argued that voice and silence are separate concepts, and the other that voice and silence are interconnected concepts, I will argue that voice and silence presuppose each other. Voice and silence represent a unity in duality, the two facets of the same coin. Therefore, voice cannot exist without silence and silence cannot exist without voice. Voice alone has no meaning and no importance. Silence alone has no meaning and no importance. Voice gives significance to silence and silence gives significance to voice. This is the reason why in this work, the two concepts are treated together, as one.

This 'both and' conceptualization, where multiple levels, moments in time and issues are taken into consideration, is much more suited not only for a more complete understanding of voice and silence, but also for gaining a deeper insight into organizational dynamics.

Acknowledgement

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