Employee Silence as a Determinant of Organizational Commitment: Evidence from the Higher Education Sector of Pakistan

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Abstract

The constructs of employee silence and organizational commitment have been researched very well individually, however very few studies examine how they both are related with each other. The purpose of this research is to empirically determine how the silence of an employee impacts his/her commitment to the organization. To achieve this purpose, data is collected from one-twenty-four people working in the higher education institutions of the capital region of Pakistan. Data is then subjected to various kinds of statistical tests to ensure the achievement of reliable results. The results revealed that employee silence is negatively associated with and a statistically significant predictor of organizational commitment.

Keywords: Employee silence, organizational commitment, acquiescent silence, quiescent silence, pro-social silence

1. Introduction

At various occasions, employees prefer not to voice their opinions and to remain silent regarding many key matters at the workplace. Their silence is usually regarding issues like disagreements with colleagues or management's decisions, personal complaints, worries about illegal behavior at the workplace, and individual knowledge about weaknesses in the organizational systems (Morrison & Milliken, 2003). Employee silence is often regarded as a valuable source for reducing organizational conflicts and managerial information overload, and creating harmony in the workplace (Dyne et al., 2003). However, in reality, this phenomenon has various destructive consequences for the employees and the organization as a whole (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

In accordance with the recent research, employee silence shares a psychological link with the affective commitment of an employee with his/her organization (Vakola&Bouradas, 2005). Employees manifesting high organizational commitment possess positive feelings regarding their organization and identify themselves with it (Mowday et al., 1979). Such employees develop an internal locus of control and an elevated level of job engagement and productivity. Hence, they are likely to make every effort for being industrious, upright, and straightforward in their jobs and prefer not stay quiet about task-related issues in the workplace (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

However, the association between employee silence and organizational commitment is an under researched area (Panahi et al., 2012). Though, a lot a research has been carried out on these two construct individually, very few studies explore how they both are related to each other (Pinder&Harlos, 2001). Hence, the principal purpose of this study is to determine how employee silence impacts organizational commitment, particularly in the context of higher education sector of Pakistan.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Employee Silence

The phenomenon of employee silence is characterized as "the intentional withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individuals behavioral, cognitive and/or affective evaluations of his/her organizational circumstance to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change or redress" (Pinder and Harlos, 2001, p. 334). There are many examples of situations where employees do not communicate important issues to their colleagues and supervisors. However, all of such cases do not necessarily count for employee silence (Johannesen, 1974). Employee silence arises when an employee deliberately chooses not to share potentially important information, such as recommendations, apprehensions, or queries, with the others in the organization (Dyne et al., 2003). Hence, all those situations in which employees fail to communicate due to their absent-mindedness or lack of opinion do not signify employee silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Various researchers consider the construct of employee silence to be multidimensional in nature (e.g., Dyne et al., 2003). This is because it can encompass many diverse issues (like, matters related to team's efficacy, complaints about the organizational treatment an employee receives, or worries about delinquencies at workplace), it can involve different organizational members, and can be targeted on different individuals or entities (like, organizational subunits, external authorities, colleagues, and administration) (Scott, 1993). Hence, it is believed that employee silence can vary from employee to employee depending on the issue, involved people and target audience (Henriksen& Dayton, 2006). For example, it is possible that an employee may prefer to be silent regarding a certain issue but not for others. Similarly, he/she may communicate some information with some people but not with others (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Employee silence is divided into three types depending upon the rationale behind it. The first type is referred as acquiescent silence which is demonstrated by employees when they are not aware about the existence of alternative options to remaining silent (Vakola&Dimitrias, 2005). Acquiescent silence is a disengaged and passive behavior of employees. They hold their tongues not because of any fear or high cognitive dissonance, but due to their attitude of apathy and hopelessness (Pinder&Harlos, 2001).

The second type of silence isdefensive or quiescent silence, which describes an employee's preference of remaining quiet due to some fear of negative aftereffects of speaking up (Pinder&Harlos, 2001). Defensive silence is an employee's well-planned and pre-emptive behavior that attempts to shelter him/her from unfavorable consequences (Dyne et al., 2003). Defensive silence, as opposed to acquiescent one, is more tactical. It involves full knowledge and contemplation about the choices, through which an employee makes a cognizant decision of refusing to communicate his/her viewpoints, knowledge, or information with others (Milliken & Morrison, 2003).

The last type of silence is pro-social silence which is exhibited by an employee when he/she purposely holds back job-related information, feelings, or thoughts for the sake of benefiting the organizational members or the organization as a whole (Pinder&Harlos, 2001). Akin to defensive silence, the employee showing pro-social silence is also fully aware about the existence of alternatives to being mute and willfully chooses to stay quiet. However, unlike defensive silence, the driving force behind pro-social silence is thoughtfulness about others, instead of the apprehension of unconstructive outcomes on the professional wellbeing that might result from raising one's voice (Zheng et al., 2008).

2.2 Organizational Commitment

In the academic literature, there is a plethora of diverse definitions about organizational commitment. The common theme of all those definitions is that organizational commitment is some sort of a bond shared between the employee and his/her organization (Ponnu&Chuah, 2010). Employees committed with the organization have a serious urge to make a significant contribution to the workplace and go beyond the standard job obligations (Eroglu et al., 2011). Organizational commitment is a binding force that attracts employees towards their organization (Meyer & Maltin, 2010). It determines the extent of an employee's inclination of being a part of the organization in the future (Reichers, 1985). It is usually reflected in an employee's confidence in the organizational goals and intentions, readiness to exert an extra effort for their achievement, and keenness to maintain their employment (Steers, 1977). Those employees who have stayed in an organization for a longer period of time, have achieves professional accomplishments, and work with a group of committed employees, are more likely to develop stronger organizational commitment as compared to others (Mowday et al., 1979).

It has been widely accepted that the construct of organizational commitment is multifaceted and is composed of three elements (Meyer & Allen, 1991). The first is affective commitment which determines how well an employee emotionally attaches to, identifies with, and engages in the organization (Salim et al., 2008). Employees strongly exhibiting this type of commitment stay with their firm just because they desire to (Murray et al., 1991). The second is continuance commitment which signifies an employee's assessment of the supposed costs of departing the firm and the perceived opportunities for employment elsewhere (Meyer & Allen, 1998). Employees strongly exhibiting this type of commitment stay with their firm just because they don't have any other choice (Murray et al., 1991). The last is normative commitment which is referred as an employee's compulsion to stay with the firm due to household or cultural pressures (Shahnawaz&Juyal, 2006). Such employees feel that it is their moral responsibility to serve the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1998). Employees strongly exhibiting this type of commitment stay with their firm just because are compelled to do so (Murray et al., 1991).

2.3 Hypothesis Development

The constructs of organizational commitment and employee silence are a double-edged sword. On one hand they can bring about numerous favorable outcomes for the employee and the organization, such as, an increase the organizational and employee productivity, and creation of peace and agreement at the workplace. On the other hand, they are also capable of making the employees susceptible to psychosomatic stress (Tangirala&Ramanujam, 2008).

For the relationship between these two constructs, the research is divided into two schools of thought. The

followers of the first school of thought posit that organizational commitment, depending upon its level, can both, positively and negatively influence employee silence (Meyer & Maltin, 2010). Organizational commitment is a determinant of employee silence and the association between these two variables can vary significantly within an organization (Nikaram et al., 2012).

The researchers belonging to the second school of thought believe that it is the employee silence that determines the organizational commitment level of an employee (Ponnu&Chuah, 2010). They opine that if the factors leading to employee silence can be reduced (such as, by fostering an open culture with flexible hierarchical arrangement, or modifications in the communication channels and leadership style), the employee silence behavior can be eliminated from the workplace (Detert& Burris, 2007). This will in turn enhance the employees' dignity and sense of security in the organization and will thus improve their commitment to the organization (Panahi et al., 2012). Hence based on the second school of thought, the following hypotheses are derived:

H_1: Employee silence is negatively related to organizational commitment

H_{1a}: Acquiescent silence is negatively related to organizational commitment

H_{1b}: Defensive silence is negatively related to organizational commitment

H_{1c}: Pro-social silence is negatively related to organizational commitment

2.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the present study is demonstrated in figure 1. Employee silence along with its three dimensions are the independent variable of the research, while, organizational commitment is the dependent variable of the study.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model(insert here)

3. Methodology

The study's population is composed of all those people who are working in the higher education sector of Pakistan. Whereas, the sample is restricted to only two hundred people employed in the higher education institutions in capital region of Pakistan. Out of the two hundred circulated questionnaires, one-twenty-four fully filled questionnaires were received which signifies a response rate of sixty-two percent. The amassed data is analyzed by means of a statistical software SPSS.

To examine the impact of employee silence on organizational commitment, an ordinal scale-based, structured questionnaire consisting of thirty-one items is developed. The first eight questions are regarding affective commitment and are adopted from Wasti's (2000) scale that was based on the study of Meyer and Allen (1991). The other twenty-nine questions that measure employee silence are taken up from Briensfield's (2009) doctoral dissertation. Nine questions of this scale are regarding acquiescent silence, nine are regarding defensive silence, and five are regarding pro-social silence.

4. Results and Discussion

The people that are survyed in this study are mostly males, are married, belong to the age-group of 30 to 39 years old, have a Master's degree, and are working in their current institution for around five to ten years. The complete details of the characteristics of the sample are given in table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of Respondents (insert here)

The values of the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients and Guttman Split-Half coefficient for the scales and sub-scales used in the study are mentioned in the table 2. All the scales that the current study employs are highly reliable and rich in internal consistency as their Alpha and split-half coefficients are more than 0.7.

Table 2: Scale Reliability Analysis(insert here)

The results achieved through Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis are mentioned in table 3 and 4 respectively.

Table 3: Correlation Analysis(insert here)

Table 4: Regression Analysis(insert here)

Results of Main Hypothesis: The multiple correlation coefficient (R=-0.724) in table 4 indicates that there is an overall negative association between the combined dimensions of employee silence and organizational commitment. This implies that when the silence of an employee regarding any kind of work-related matter increases, his/her commitment to the organization reduces. The 0.535 value of R^2 in table 4 indicates that 53.5% of the variance in the organizational commitment level of an employee can be explained by the three dimensions of employee silence included in the model. The remaining 46.5% of the variation is uncharted and it can be due to several other employee or organization related issues. The 97.005 value of F ratio is significant (p<0.01) which infers that the overall quality and statistical significance of the model is high. Hence, the main hypothesis of the study (H_1) i.e. employee silence is negatively related to organizational commitment is accepted.

Results of Sub-Hypotheses: The values of Pearson correlation coefficients in table 3 indicate that organizational commitment is moderately negatively associated with acquiescent silence (r=-0.636), defensive silence (r=-0.581), and pro-social silence (r=-0.704). This postulates that as the acquiescent, defensive, or pro-social silence

of an employee increases, his/her level of organizational commitment reduces. The table 4 of regression analysis demonstrates that the unstandardized beta coefficients (β) for acquiescent, defensive, and pro-social are -0.136, -0.392, and -0.311 respectively. All these beta coefficients are statistically significant as there t-values are greater than 2 and the level of significance (p) are less than 0.01. Hence, all the three sub hypothesis of the present study (H_{1a}, H_{1b}, & H_{1c}) are also confidently accepted.

5. Conclusion

The principal objective of the present paper is to delve into the constructs of organizational commitment and employee silence in detail and to determine whether a cause-and-effective association between the two constructs exists or not. The researcher, through the review of prior studies, observed that employee silence and organizational commitment have individually been researched a lot; however, not much research has been carried out to examine how they both are related with each other.

Out of the three types of organizational commitment, the present paper particularly focuses on the affective commitment since it favorably influences the performance of employees and the organization. Employees, due to affective commitment, feel that they are an important member of their organization, agree with the organization's aims, strategies and standards, and perform contentedly and effectively. Hence, affective commitment is undoubtedly the most critical kind of commitment that is valued greatly by both, firms and the employees.

The data collected for the present study is subjected to various kinds of statistical tests. The results of these tests demonstrate that each of the three types of employee silence have a significant negative impact on the organizational commitment and are also its statistically significant predictors. This leads to the acceptance of the main and sub-hypotheses of the study. The results of this paper are also in line with those of the past studies (Lambert et al., 2008; Daigle, 2007).

5.1 Implication and Limitations

As the theme of this study is an under researched area, it can significantly contribute in raising the consciousness of scholars and practitioners about employee silence and organizational commitment. The study can be used as a guideline for carrying out future studies on this theme. Moreover, this paper can assist the managements in taking necessary steps so as to encourage employees to voice their concerns and share their knowledge, ideas and opinions.

When evaluating the results, a major limitation of this study should be kept in mind. The sample size is relatively small and comprises of only the people employed in the higher education institutions of a particular city of Pakistan. Therefore, the findings of this study are pertinent only to the institutions in the higher education sector since they share somewhat same kinds of organizational structures and workforce compositions. This limitation can serve as an implication for researchers interested in conducting studies on this area in future. It is recommended that the future studies should increase the sample size and include people in the sample that belonging to different sectors of the economy.

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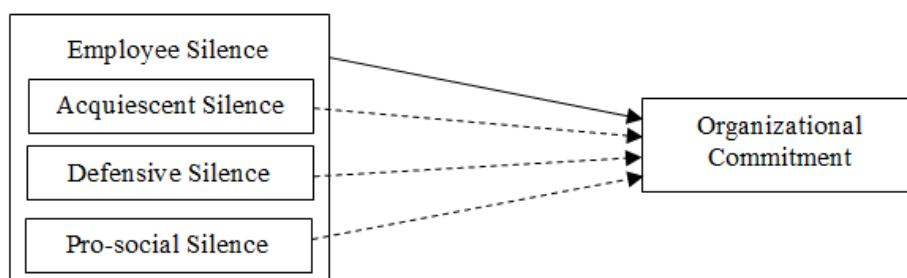
Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Table 1: Characteristics of Respondents

	Items	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	79	63.7%
	Female	45	36.3%
Age	20-29 years	27	21.8%
	30-39 years	49	39.5%
	40-49 years	35	28.2%
	50-59 years	11	8.9%
	Above 60 years	2	1.6%
Marital Status	Single	41	62.1%
	Married	77	33.1%
	Others	6	4.8%
Qualification	Bachelor's	36	29.0%
	Master's	82	66.1%
	Doctorate	6	4.83%
Tenure	0-4 years	47	37.9%
	5-10 years	52	41.9%
	11-15 years	23	18.5%
	More than 15 years	2	1.6%

Table 2: Scale Reliability Analysis

Sub-scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Guttman Split-Half Coefficient
Acquiescent silence	0.862	0.842
Defensive silence	0.789	0.763
Pro-social silence	0.832	0.822
Organizational Commitment	0.914	0.891

Table 3: Correlation Analysis

	1	2	3	4
1. Acquiescent silence	-			
2. Defensive silence	0.269	-		
3. Pro-social silence	0.045*	0.311	-	
4. Organizational Commitment	-0.636**	-0.581**	-0.704**	-

Note: ** Significant at 0.01 level

Table 4: Regression Analysis

Variable	β	t	Sig.
Organizational Commitment	0.059	0.335	0.047
Acquiescent silence	-0.136	-2.035	0.032
Defensive silence	-0.392	-10.515	0.000
Pro-social silence	-0.311	-4.536	0.000

Note: R=-0.724, R^2=0.535, F=97.005, p<0.01

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