Struggling for Organizational Identity: Employee Voice and Silence

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Abstract

The organizational communication literature has often portrayed voice and silence as a state of being/state of affairs of employees, concluding that those who have voice are able to freely construct their identity, while silenced employees are more constrained in authoring their sense of self. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that voice and silence are not state of being/state of affairs. Voice and silence are so interrelated and intertwined that they presuppose each other; they are strategic communicative resources that employees utilize in their daily activities in order to survive, get by, advance and construct their identities. These arguments will be illustrated by the case of a management consulting team employed in a Romanian fish company with the goal of improving the company’s performance before listing it on the national stock exchange. The 1.5 years of participant observation in this company, complemented by 40 in-depth interviews have demonstrated that people react positively to voice not because they expect specific gains, but because an opportunity for voice signifies valorisation, membership and, most importantly, a chance for self-authorship. The challenge for the identity construction process is for people to maintain a sense of self-continuity and coherence (Whortington, 1996: 13 and McAdams, 1996: 306, in Clarke et al., 2009: 326), while multiple and diverse moments and contexts offer the possibility to tell many different identity stories many of which are paradoxically contradictory and fundamentally unstable (Gergen, 1992, in Clarke et al., 2009: 326).

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1. Introduction

Ever since Hirshman’s (1970) model of exit, voice and loyalty, the literature on voice and silence has deeply influenced organizational studies that deal with issues such as identity, power, justice, culture and discourse. For more than 40 years, the literature on voice and silence has been developed by embracing many paradigms and perspectives, two of which will be briefly discussed in this article.

On the one hand, there is a normative and functionalist perspective that treats voice and silence as complete opposites and as state of being/state of affairs. Managers create codes, climates or cultures of voice or silence and employees have no other option but to conform. Their lack of agency influences the identity building process.

On the other hand, there is a social constructionist perspective that treats voice and silence as opposites only at a first sight. Voice and silence are strategic communicative resources so interrelated and intertwined that they presuppose each other. If we consider voice and silence to be interrelated and intertwined strategic forms of communication, then actors are free to construct, in interaction with relevant others, a complex and multidimensional (crystallized) identity by utilizing, modifying or creating symbolic and discursive resources.

This latter view will be illustrated by the case of a consulting team employed in a family-owned Romanian Fish Company in order to improve operations and create a more attractive image in the eyes of its customers.

2. Voice and silence as state of being/state of affairs

The organizational literature dedicated to a macro level of analysis (groups and organizations) 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. This stream of literature embraces the ontological posture of being realism (Chia, 2003), viewing organizations as a stable phenomenon rather than emergent processes.

Argyris (1977), for example, talked about powerful games and norms that prevent employees from saying what they know about technical and policy issues. On the other hand, Redding (1985), emphasized the fact that many organizations implicitly convey to employees that rocking the boat means challenging corporate policies or managerial prerogatives.

Drawing on organizational theorists like Argyris (1977) or Redding (1985), Morrison and Milliken (2000) 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 and arrives at one effect: 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 behaviours. These, in turn, aid to 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 (1999) talks about cultures of injustice, the shared meanings among mistreated employees of what working within an unjust employment relationship is like (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). 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” (Pinder and Harlos, 2001: 346). 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 and opinions. These codes of silence can be broken by perpetrators, witnesses and victims through public revelations (Pinder and Harlos, 2001).

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 to.
same goes for climates and cultures of voice put into play by different managerial strategies such as: joint consultation, partnership schemes, work councils, suggestion schemes and attitude surveys (Armstrong, 2009). This power-play leaves no room for agency and for individual choice. Voice and silence are the result of constraint, and employees cannot resist it, fight it or choose something else.

This normative view which minimizes agency and maximizes structure is of tremendous importance to the discussion of identity in relation to voice and silence. The lack of agency and individual choice in building a sense of self usually brings into the forefront the case of minority groups, whether they are sexual minorities, racial minorities or gender based minorities. The cases of the Canadian mistreated soldiers (Pinder and Harlos, 2001), the gay and lesbians (Ward and Winstanley, 2003), the women (Simpson and Lewis, 2005), or the gay and lesbian Protestant ministers (Creed, 2003) demonstrate that, for the members of these groups, choosing to speak up implies those parts of the self that not only depart from organizational expectations, but also have been historically marginalized, which imply a tension between claiming and preserving valued aspects of the self (Creed, 2003). Minority representatives may be encouraged to voice their differences, opinions and experiences, but they often encounter difficulties being heard. Silence is a state of absence and neglect, while to speak up and stand out in the crowd (visibility) is to be seen as different and to be isolated and marginalized from the dominant group (Simpson and Lewis, 2005).

3. Voice and silence as strategic communicative resources

Considering voice and silence as social activities, as strategic communicative resources implies the fact that people do not exist outside relationality (Fletcher and Watson, 2007). This perspective rejects the ontological posture of being realism and adopts the posture of becoming realism (Chia, 2003) which treats organizations as emergent processes, rather than a stable phenomenon.

In this perspective, voice and silence are interrelated and intertwined (Creed, 2003) 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 (Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003; Creed, 2003; Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Characterized by being active, conscious, intentional and purposeful, voice and silence become critical components of social interaction (Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003).

Voice and silence are conceptual opposites only at a first sight, since one signifies expressing, while the other one withholding (Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003). 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. Voice and silence represent a dualism, the two facets of the same coin, but the social actor embodies both facets of the coin, thus embracing the whole dualism.

This re-conceptualization brings several implications into the foreground, the most important of which 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.

In the process of self-authorship, voice and silence could be used out of pro-social, defensive or acquiescent motives. Pro-social voice/silence is a positively intended, non-required and other-oriented behaviour that benefits the organization and reinforces cooperation. Self-protective (defensive) voice/silence is usually put into practice when the perceived future consequences are negative. Acquiescent voice/silence is caused by a disengaged behaviour based on resignation and being unable to make a difference (Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003). Fletcher and Watson (2007) urge us to move away from the search of motives because this might promote an “either-or” style of analysis where things are put into boxes, and because actors simultaneously face multiple
factors (pro-social, altruistic, and defensive) in the everyday organizational life. In turn, Fletcher and Watson (2007) recommend us to make relational processes by which both person and culture are produced and reproduced.

Since the presence or absence of language provides actors with the possibility to make sense of and project their self through self-narratives, identity and identification are tightly connected to voice and silence. In the relational view, identity is subjectively and publicly available through self-narratives that actors construct inside themselves or in interactions with others (Clarke et al., 2009).

Identity’s self-narratives could be stable, coherent and unified, or changeable, fractured and diverse. On the one hand, the challenge of identity is to incorporate multiple and diverse elements in order to build a sense of self-continuity and coherence (Whortihington, 1996 and McAdams, 1996, in Clarke et al., 2009). On the other hand, multiple and diverse moments and contexts offer people the possibility to tell many different identity stories which can be contradictory, changing, disparate and fundamentally unstable (Gergen, 1992, in Clarke et al., 2009). This latter view leads to a more postmodern definition of identity which goes hand in hand with voice and silence as interrelated and intertwined strategic forms of communication. Identity becomes a paradoxical collection of forms clustering in moments of time, similar to a garbage can full of meanings where streams of identity, which condense and vary in moments of time, are forming from fragments of meanings, statements, names etc., that are held together, at the same time (Hatch and Schultz, in Whetten and Godfrey, 1998).

Social actors have fragmented, multiple identities where “who we are” is no longer “who we say we are”, but also those parts of the self that are silenced, or are not talked about. As a result we can no longer conceive of identity as that which is central, distinctive and enduring (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998) about one individual, group or organization.

4. Case and methodology

The case focuses on a middle- to large-size Fish Company that employs almost 250 people. Its 30+ years of background in fishing have been complemented by an expansion of its core activities. To its traditional fish division which encompasses 400 ha of water, one processing unit and seven directly owned stores, in time, the company added two more divisions: a) the tourism division which manages one restaurant and two motels with restaurants as well as a natural reserve and many annual fish competitions; b) the construction division which sells different sorts of sand and gravel used in the construction industry.

My point of entry was determined by the company’s decision to be publicly listed. The company is owned by one private majority shareholder and a state owned investment fund who decided in 2010 that it is time to publicly list the company. But in order to be listed, the company needed to „look good” in front of its future investors. Therefore, the owners decided to hire what will end up to be called “a team of mercenaries” who’s solely goal was to improve the operations and image of the company.

Each „mercenary” has occupied a middle management position: cost control manager, fish division manager, production manager, marketing manager, commercial manager etc. They had a deadline of two years to complete the improvement of the company.

The methods used for gathering data were participant observation during a period of 1.5 years and interviews taken with both „mercenaries” and members of the family, because this was a family based company. The interviews were taken both during my participant observation and after I have exited the company.

I have interviewed all the members of the consulting team and most members of the family, depending on their direct contact with and influence on the consulting team. This process resulted in 20 one-hour interviews.

The main focus was on the daily interactions between the consulting team and family members and how these interactions influence the attainment of organizational goals.
5. Struggling for organizational identity: fishing in muddy waters

What “mercenaries” discovered soon after their arrival in the Fish Company was that their work was twofold: on the one hand they had to deal with the company’s daily operations and try to make them more efficient and profitable, and, on the other hand, they had to work with the owner’s family, overcome the family business mentality and the daily interactional conflicts and tensions.

A superficial picture of the company can be portrayed by listing a few positions occupied by the owner’s family members: the owner was the general manager of the company, his sister was the business development manager, his wife was the manager of one restaurant, his mother and brother-in-law were the managers of a motel, his god-daughter was the manager of the other motel and his cousin was the manager of the constructions division. And the list goes on.

One of the main aspects that came into the foreground when analysing the interaction between “mercenaries” and the rest of the organization was the identity formation process. “Mercenaries” were specialists brought in to make the company more efficient and more profitable. Thus their work was more rational. On the contrary, the members of the family were more emotional and their emotions influenced their daily organizational activities.

The interactions between “mercenaries” and the rest of the organization were characterized by the tension between, on the one hand, guarding their specialist identity and thus opposing the current status quo and, on the other hand, integrating in the company’s culture and thus negating their own reasoning, training and knowledge of how things should be done.

This tension brought into the foreground several aspects related to the identity formation process.

5.1. Narrating the self

Constructed inside themselves or in interactions with others (Clarke et al., 2009), self-narratives are the main vehicle through which the inner self is rationalized, simplified, broken apart and communicated. Due to the fact that social actors are simultaneously part of different subcultures (department, gender, age, length of service, etc.), they have the possibility to present a different self-narrative according to the context or the moment in time.

“Being employed only since last year I guess I am part of the „mercenaries” group with which I am on the same wave-length and we try daily to change things around here. But I spend almost all my day with the accounting team and I feel I am closer to them than I am to the „mercenaries”. (FM – cost control)

The way actors manage these multiple and diverse facets of identity depends on personal strategies, context or moment in time. In building their self-narratives in order to create a sense of self, employees can choose among or play with competing discourses (voice) and they can resist (silence) specific discursive regimes. Therefore employees are far from passive in the face of discursive pressures and more agential, creative and generative (Down and Reveley, 2009).

5.2. Contextual identity between agency and structure

The question that arises here is whether the discursive resources chosen, modified, created and re-created in order to construct self-narratives are only organizational, or they also incorporate the surrounding social and cultural environments. While Clarke et al. (2009) limit their model to a single context (the organization as the site for realizing the project of the self), Down and Reveley (2009), Ashcraft (2007) and Kuhn (2006) see identity work as reflective self-narration that draws not only on organizational, but also on socially supplied narratives and discourses, thus widening the array of discourses that come into play in the identity formation process.

The twist is that discourses shaping identity construction vary with local cultures, as the surrounding field provides the cultural meaning system with which both individuals and organizations assert their legitimacy and construct their identities (Bourdieu, 1991, in Kuhn, 2006).
“This is the difference between a village and a city (The Fish Company is located in a village 20 km away from one of the most developed cities A/N.). What can they do in the Village? Can they live only on the beet and potatoes they grow on the fields? No! And so they are happy to be hired at this company and they accept anything...We have other possibilities...I do not accept to be transformed into a slave and I try to impose myself anytime I get the chance. They either do as I know it should be done, or else...I think this is the reason why they do not love us that much!” (SF, commercial manager)

If individuals were to choose only from organizationally based discourses, and discursive practices contribute to the reproduction of existing social and power relations, thus exercising pervasive control over employees, then the agency would be reduced to a minimum. Employees can only choose the position they occupy on a certain continuum comprised of discourse based descriptors, or if they position themselves on that continuum at all.

Not even multiple discourses necessarily create a space of action that enables resistance to managerially defined selves through counter or dis-identification, or through self-consciously fake performances (Kuhn, 2006). The multitude of discourses creates a vision of the organizational self that provides greater or fewer options for self-creation (Kuhn, 2006).

In conclusion, identity as self-narrative becomes a game of continuing dialectic between agency and structure (Clarke et al., 2009). Identities are constructed within discursive contexts (structure), but individuals are able to influence and shape these contexts (Jenkins, 1996, in Down & Reveley, 2009). Organizations and organizational prescriptions do not completely determine and explain identities, as the self is crafted through practice and is thus achieved. In interaction, actors can choose what to voice and what to silence.

5.3. There is no identity without dramaturgy

In addition to local, organizational or social symbolic and discursive resources, self-narratives require also encounters. This form of interaction is used in order to display, confirm or verify identity (Down & Reveley, 2009).

In the identity formation process, voice and silence are strategically used as forms of communication not only to draw upon, select and play with discursive/symbolic resources, but also to adapt to face to face interactions, reactions and to mount credible dramaturgical performances.

Therefore, “the looking glass of others’ reactions” (Burke, 1991: 839, in Down & Reveley, 2009) becomes not only a means to construct, anchor, verify and repair narrative identities, but also a source of anxiety and control. Actors voice only those discursive resources constrained by organization and locale that align not only with their own self narratives, but also with the expectations of relevant others in the workplace (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, in Kuhn, 2006). The power moves away from discourses towards the haunting and continuous confirmation or disapproval of surrounding others.

“...There are good days and bad days...Sometimes I have to shut up and accept what I’m told, sometimes we get along great and they accept me the way I am. Yesterday for example I had to put up a great show only to make them understand that I no longer want to come to work on Saturdays. I’m not their slave. Maybe I want to relax during the weekend and not do any work at all...I’m surprised they have accepted. I’m on guard all the time to see what state they are in, how they woke up this morning so as to know how to behave and what to say” (AN, marketing assistant)

Dramaturgy does not necessarily presuppose the construction and display of an organizationally preferred self that is less real than the private, authentic and inner self. One way of disrupting this dichotomy is to go beyond the language of the real, fake, authentic and core self and move towards the language of the crystallized self, which is far from being flattened or colonized as it is multidimensional, multifaceted and complex (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). For those who occupy both marginalized and preferred organizational positions, the crystallized self allows employees to reflect different facets of their self in various contexts and thus to relate differently to work, home and the spaces in between work and home (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005).
6. Conclusions and limitations

6.1. Conclusions

I would like to conclude this article with the argument that treating voice and silence as interrelated and intertwined strategic forms of communication allows individuals to construct multiple identities depending on the context or moment in time, utilizing both local/organizational and distal/social and cultural discursive and symbolic resources. This opens up the road towards emancipation, while viewing them only in a functionalist paradigm where individuals have a coherent single identity formed only by local/organizational discursive and symbolic resources removes the strategic nature of the identity formation process and leads to a certain determinism which minimizes the possibility of change and transformation.

A crystallized self, characterized by multidimensionality and complexity, implies for the employee a freedom to construct its multiple identity facets in interaction, depending on the context and moment in time, depending on the reactions of relevant others and by embracing, introducing or changing discursive and symbolic resources from both the organization and the social and cultural surroundings.

6.2. Limitations and future possibilities

Combining participant observation with in-depth interviews has opened up the possibility to emphasize and analyze both organizational practices (what goes on) and member sensemaking (what it means). However, we have to take into account the fact that participant observation reveals only limited organizational situations and interview statements are, in many cases, limited in their capacity to reflect the “reality” out there and the subjective world of the interviewee because they are too context/situation bound (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Even the close relationship that I have developed with the interviewees cannot guarantee truthful interview statements that give a realistic picture of the organizational “reality”. “Investigating talk remains difficult as talk varies, due to setting and the variety of discourses available and because of different interviewees’ verbal skills and creativity in producing accounts” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000: 75).

The limited number of interviews taken (20 one-hour interviews) and the overt reliance solely on qualitative methods could pose replicability and generalization problems. However, this ethnographic case study reveals aspects of individual and socially shared subjective reality inside the organization under focus that could be generalized with the help of additional methods and case studies.

Going beyond these limitations, I would like to end by stressing that this paper attempted to put a different spin on the concepts of voice and silence and their relationship to identity, and to show that it could be more productive both conceptually and practically to think of voice and silence as presupposing each other. More studies that employ this model are necessary in order to test its validity and organizational worth.

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