

Measuring Organizational Silence and Its Impact on Organizational Loyalty in Algerian Public Institutions

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Abstract

This study aims to provide a comprehensive theoretical and analytical framework for measuring organizational silence and its impact on organizational loyalty in Algerian public institutions, as organizational silence is a behavioral phenomenon that develops in organizations lacking a climate of trust and fairness, and it takes various forms, most notably acquiescent silence, defensive silence, and social silence. Conversely, organizational loyalty is one of the most important positive behavioral outcomes that organizations strive to foster among their employees, as it comprises three main dimensions: affective loyalty, continuity loyalty, and normative loyalty.

This paper offers a critical analysis of the measurement tools used for both variables and reviews the results of previous studies that demonstrated an inverse relationship between them, as high levels of organizational silence lead to a decline in employee organizational loyalty, particularly in the affective and normative dimensions, where the study concludes by proposing an analytical model for examining this relationship and offering recommendations for future research and administrative applications.

Keywords: Organizational Silence, Organizational Loyalty, Algerian Public Institutions.

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Introduction

Modern organizations face ever-growing challenges concerning how to manage employee behavior, motivate active participation in decision-making, and encourage the free expression of opinions and suggestions regarding work-related issues; yet the practical reality often tells a different story, revealing that many employees tend to conceal their thoughts, observations, and concerns, refraining from voicing them for reasons frequently tied to a fear of negative managerial reactions or a deep-seated sense that speaking up would prove utterly futile. This phenomenon is known in organizational behavior literature as "organizational silence," and as Morrison and Milliken once observed, a considerable number of employees prefer remaining silent about significant work-related problems rather than raising their voices. Broadly defined, organizational silence refers to employees' deliberate withholding of information, ideas, feelings, perceptions, and suggestions in any form whatsoever; from this definition arises a central question: to what extent does organizational silence affect employees' organizational loyalty? Answering this question properly requires a grounded and thorough understanding of the concept, dimensions, and measurement of organizational silence on one hand, and of organizational loyalty on the other—precisely what this paper seeks to accomplish by tracing the most

important theoretical and applied approaches while reinforcing them with findings from recent field studies. The paper focuses on four main objectives: first, presenting a theoretical framework for the concept of organizational silence, its various dimensions, and its measurement tools; second, reviewing the concept of organizational loyalty, its most common dimensions, and the instruments used to measure it; third, analyzing the nature of the relationship between organizational silence and organizational loyalty based on the accumulated findings of previous studies; and fourth, proposing an analytical model for studying this relationship while grounding it within the context of different types of organizations.

1. Defining the Study's Concepts

Before diving into the measurement of organizational silence and loyalty or examining how they relate to one another, it makes sense to first lay out what exactly we mean by these two terms. The literature offers quite a few definitions, some broad and others more fine-tuned, and getting a handle on these definitions—along with their underlying dimensions and typologies—is essential for any meaningful empirical investigation. This section walks through the conceptual terrain for both variables, starting with organizational silence.

1.1 The Concept of Organizational Silence

Organizational silence is a collective phenomenon denoting employees' deliberate reluctance to express important information, concerns, ideas, or criticisms related to their work and organization—usually due to anticipated negative consequences that might follow from speaking up, or because of a pervasive belief that expression would lead to no meaningful change whatsoever. Morrison and Milliken (2000) are widely regarded as the primary reference point on this topic, having defined organizational silence in their model as a collective withholding by employees of their opinions or concerns about potential organizational problems. Interest in this phenomenon has evolved considerably over time, to the point where organizational silence is now viewed as a negative organizational attribute, standing in sharp contrast to traditional perspectives that regarded silence as evidence of harmony, a desire for stability, and complete compliance with supervisors' instructions. Through the lens of contemporary theories, organizational silence can be seen as a form of withdrawal behavior that prevents organizations from benefiting from the very opinions, experiences, and ideas that could contribute to performance improvement and entrepreneurial initiative; in this context, Güler and Ocak (2023) have argued that silence behavior—once viewed from a traditional management perspective as an indicator of harmony—is now seen in the modern management world as an employee withdrawal reaction from the organization, meaning that silence is no positive trait but rather a warning sign for organizational health.

1.1.1 Dimensions and Types of Organizational Silence

Organizational silence can be divided into three main dimensions, each with its own distinct characteristics and underlying motivations. The first is acquiescent silence, which is rooted in resignation and non-resistance; here, the employee feels that any attempt to voice an opinion or disclose problems would lead to no result or change whatsoever, so they resort to silence as a passive solution stemming from a sense of perceived inefficacy.

Recent studies suggest that acquiescent silence produces more severe and varied negative effects than defensive silence, making it the most dangerous type of organizational silence and the most damaging to the organization as a whole. The second type is defensive silence, which arises from fear; the employee dreads the consequences of speaking up, believing that disclosing information or criticisms might expose them to punishment, marginalization, or even job loss, so they prefer maintaining silence as a self-protective mechanism. Findings from a study by El-Jazzar and Zaki (2021) help explain that the causes of such silence trace back to employees' fear of losing their jobs when speaking about school-related problems, as well as fear of negative outcomes when expressing opinions about what happens at school; this type of silence is most common in rigidly hierarchical environments. The third type is prosocial silence, which springs from altruism or goodwill toward others; here, the employee refrains from disclosing information that might harm colleagues or the organization as a whole—not out of self-protection but rather from a genuine sense of social responsibility that makes them avoid raising problems. Al-Shanifi and Al-Turki (2021) noted that prosocial silence is the only type that can exist at a high degree while maintaining a positive direct relationship with job performance, suggesting that some forms of silence may not necessarily be harmful to the organization.

1.1.2 Causes of Organizational Silence

Several interrelated factors contribute to the spread of organizational silence in universities and other institutional settings, including leadership roles adopted by top management regarding formality in authority; negative managerial reactions, personal bias, and leaders' personal characteristics; organizational culture and prevailing climate; lack of organizational trust, fear of isolation and damaged workplace relationships, lack of relevant experience, and differences in individual traits. Furthermore, a deteriorating relationship climate among organization members leads to misunderstanding and loss of meaningful connection among university staff, causing them to interact with extreme caution and fear while exchanging information and opinions only minimally. Some employees feel genuinely helpless and incapable of changing reality, adjusting the existing situation, or improving conditions, which leads them to prefer silence over speech; others tend toward passivity, apathy, and withdrawal, showing weak concern for their universities' problems and challenges, again pushing them toward silence. Still others believe that university leadership monopolizes truth, sees itself as always right, rejects questioning, resists criticism, and fears accountability—all of which drives them to prefer silence and avoid discussing their universities' conditions. When we examine the reasons behind employee silence in Algerian public institutions, we find that some causes are organizational while others are personal; however, organizational causes predominate and exert greater influence on employees in these institutions, and these can be addressed and eliminated through appropriate measures designed to break the silence cycle. Identifying and understanding these causes contributes to proper problem-solving and helps decision-makers establish mechanisms that reduce organizational silence levels, increase employees' reassurance about their professional futures and stability, enhance their freedom of expression, and make them more willing to positively critique their universities, offer development suggestions, and reveal flaws and negatives in preparation for eliminating them while moving away from negative organizational silence.

1.1.3 Sources of Organizational Silence

The sources of organizational silence have been classified into several categories, beginning with occupational pressure sources. These include lack of social support—whether from management, colleagues, or family—as a significant source of silence development and diminished psychological security, especially when employees face difficulties and problems during job performance. Role ambiguity also contributes significantly; this is a state of doubt when employees are uncertain about their goals and the means to achieve them, stemming from discrepancies between what others expect and what employees should actually do. Many factors cause role ambiguity, including job tenure, transitioning between positions, and having a new manager. Workload overload represents another negative manifestation of workplace conditions. Moving to personal and psychological sources, gender appears to have no direct effect on silence exposure, though some researchers suggest that females are more prone to silence than males while males are more susceptible to weak interest in dealing with others. Education level matters considerably: higher-educated individuals are more vulnerable to silence than those with lower education levels. Age also plays a role, as younger individuals are more exposed to silence while age advancement brings increased job experience and, presumably, greater confidence in speaking up.

1.2 Organizational Loyalty

If organizational silence represents the problem side of the equation, organizational loyalty is very much the desirable outcome—the thing managers hope to build and sustain even when conditions get tough. But loyalty isn't a simple, one-dimensional attitude; researchers have spent decades unpacking its components and figuring out what makes employees stick around, put in extra effort, and identify with their organization's mission. This part of the paper lays out what organizational loyalty means, how it's been defined over the years, and what its core characteristics look like according to the mainstream literature.

1.2.1 Defining Organizational Loyalty

Definitions of organizational loyalty abound, with numerous concepts and formulations clarifying what is meant by the term. Stewart defined organizational loyalty as individuals' willingness or desire to contribute to the organization beyond what formal contractual commitment requires—linking individual performance and engagement or involvement with work to key conceptual dimensions of job behavior such as motivation and work orientation, while also connecting behavioral manifestations to organizational experience. Greenberg and Baron defined it as the process through which individual goals and values align with organizational goals and values, with the individual exerting effort to achieve those goals and seeking continued membership. Steers described organizational loyalty as the strength of an individual's identification with and attachment to their organization. Aaron Cohen was content to define organizational loyalty simply as a type of employee attitude toward the organization they work for. Becker and Billings distinguished between two dimensions: loyalty focus and loyalty basis—where focus refers to the individuals or groups to which the employee becomes attached, while basis refers to the motivation underlying this attachment. Salancik described the processes through which an individual develops a loyalty relationship with their organization by stating that

the individual becomes bound to the organization as a result of accumulated actions they perform that express their beliefs toward the organization, such that this behavior subsequently becomes binding for the individual.

1.2.2 Characteristics of Organizational Loyalty

Organizational loyalty possesses several distinguishing characteristics that set it apart from other organizational phenomena. It represents a psychological feeling of the degree and level of connection between employee and organization; it is influenced by multiple personal and organizational factors in complex, intertwined ways; it is relative in nature, potentially rising or falling according to various reasons, yet it maintains relative stability compared to many other administrative phenomena. High organizational loyalty likely contributes to accepting and adopting organizational goals, exerting great effort to achieve them, and attempting to maintain employee membership within the organization. Measuring organizational loyalty levels directly proves quite difficult; it is better measured through its apparent effects on employee feelings toward the organization. Furthermore, organizational loyalty consists of several distinct and differentiated dimensions or components. To explain this multidimensional characteristic, Al-Otaibi cites Reichers' observation that any organization comprises multiple constituencies, including rank-and-file employees, clients or customers, top managers or owners, and the public at large. Each constituency has its own goals, and constituencies do not necessarily share a single goal; within each organization, coalitions typically exist—that is, groups of individuals forming a bloc with shared interests, each coalition attempting to secure special benefits for itself over others. Given the multiplicity of constituencies and coalitions within any organization, each has goals and values it attempts to achieve, and these goals and values differ across constituencies and coalitions; consequently, individual and coalition loyalty to these goals and values varies, thus clarifying that different dimensions of organizational loyalty exist rather than merely one single dimension.

2. Measuring Organizational Silence and Organizational Loyalty

Having sorted out what organizational silence and loyalty mean in theory, the next logical question is: how do we actually measure them? You cannot manage what you cannot measure, as the old saying goes, and in organizational research, having reliable and valid scales is half the battle. This section introduces the two most widely used measurement instruments in the field—Morrison and Milliken's scale for silence and Meyer and Allen's scale for loyalty—and briefly discusses how they have been adapted in Arab contexts.

2.1 Measuring Organizational Silence

Measurement literature indicates that Morrison and Milliken's scale (2003) represents the most widely used instrument for measuring organizational silence at the organizational level. Many researchers have adopted this scale in their various studies after making appropriate modifications suited to each study's particular nature. The scale comprises three main dimensions: acquiescent silence (resulting from the feeling that speaking up is futile, captured by statements such as "I feel it's useless to express my opinions because management won't listen to them"), defensive silence (resulting from fear of negative consequences, captured by statements such as "I fear that speaking about problems will harm my career"), and prosocial silence (resulting from a desire to protect others, captured

by statements such as "I prefer not to speak if it would cause problems for my colleagues"). Most Arab studies measuring organizational silence rely on these three dimensions after translation and adaptation to fit the Arab cultural context. For example, a study conducted at the College of Technical Sciences in Derna used a developed questionnaire whose validity and reliability coefficients were confirmed, measured on a five-point Likert scale; its findings indicated that the overall level of organizational silence was high, reflecting the phenomenon's prevalence in Libyan higher education institutions. Another study at King Saud University used the same three dimensions and reached varying results according to how each dimension functioned in that particular context.

2.2 Measuring Organizational Loyalty

In the field of measuring organizational loyalty, Meyer and Allen's scale (1990, 1991) stands as the most common and widely used instrument. One contemporary study noted the use of this scale comprising twenty questions distributed across three dimensions: the affective dimension (measured through statements that gauge the employee's sense of belonging to the organization and happiness working there), the continuance dimension (measured through statements that gauge the employee's perception of the costs of leaving compared to the benefits of staying), and the normative or moral dimension (measured through statements that gauge the employee's sense of duty or gratitude toward the organization). As with organizational silence, this scale has been adapted for use in Arab research after verifying its psychometric properties, and field studies have shown varying levels of organizational loyalty depending on the nature of the organization and the cultural context in question. For instance, a survey study at West Kordofan University found that average organizational loyalty exceeded the hypothetical average in most dimensions, reflecting acceptable loyalty levels within that particular academic context.

3. The Relationship Between Organizational Silence and Organizational Loyalty

Now we get to the heart of the matter: do these two variables actually hang together in any systematic way? And if they do, what does that relationship look like? Drawing on both theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence, this section unpacks the nature of the connection between silence and loyalty, paying close attention to how specific dimensions of silence affect specific dimensions of loyalty.

3.1 Nature of the Relationship: The Inverse Direction

Most field and empirical studies indicate that the relationship between organizational silence and organizational loyalty is inverse or negative in nature; in other words, the higher the level of organizational silence within an organization, the lower the level of organizational loyalty among its employees. This finding aligns consistently with theoretical logic, for silence represents psychological and social withdrawal by employees who feel that their voices are neither heard nor effective—a condition that inevitably leads to frustration, low morale, and weakened desire to remain connected to organizational goals. To put it differently, silence stands as the very antithesis of voice, and loyalty is fundamentally a form of commitment; commitment cannot possibly grow and thrive in a climate permeated by fear and frustration.

3.2 Detailed Impact of Organizational Silence Dimensions on Organizational Loyalty Dimensions

Understanding the precise relationship between organizational silence and organizational loyalty requires analyzing how each silence dimension affects each loyalty dimension separately. A study conducted in Algeria revealed several noteworthy findings. First, acquiescent silence affects continuance loyalty in a statistically significant way; the interpretation here is that the employee who practices acquiescent silence—the one who genuinely feels that speaking up is futile—remains with the organization based on need considerations rather than genuine desire, meaning they perceive the costs of leaving but feel no genuine emotional attachment to the organization whatsoever. Second, prosocial silence affects affective loyalty; the same study revealed that prosocial silence has a significant effect on employees' affective loyalty in the organization. The interpretation relates to how prosocial silence, practiced out of altruistic motives, may create internal conflict and psychological pressure for the employee, gradually weakening their emotional attachment—for if an employee continuously withholds their thoughts to protect others, over time they may experience burnout and lose passion for the organization as a whole. Third, regarding defensive silence and normative loyalty, the same study found no statistically significant effect of defensive silence on normative loyalty. This can be explained by noting that normative loyalty—the type based on moral duty—may persist even under fear of punishment, as the employee might feel a deep duty toward the organization despite fearing management; alternatively, the fear in this case may center on direct management rather than on the organizational entity as a whole. This detailed distribution of effects reflects that organizational silence does not affect all loyalty dimensions equally, a finding that should caution researchers to exercise precision when formulating hypotheses and interpreting their results.

3.3 Empirical Evidence from Field Studies

Numerous empirical studies conducted across different cultural and organizational contexts have supported the inverse relationship between organizational silence and loyalty. For example, a research team in Iran (2021) demonstrated a statistically significant negative relationship between organizational silence and organizational loyalty, showing that increased organizational silence leads to corresponding decreases in both organizational loyalty and creativity levels among university managers. The implication is clear: when voices are suppressed within an organization, the costs extend well beyond low morale to encompass creativity and innovation as well. In the Arab context, a Kuwait study (2024) revealed a statistically significant correlation between organizational silence—covering both defensive and acquiescent types—and weakened organizational loyalty. The findings were quite decisive: legitimizing organizational silence directly undermines employee loyalty. Taken together, these results provide compelling evidence that organizational silence is not merely a communication or expression problem but rather a fundamental issue that threatens the sustainability of human resources within organizations and leads to weakened commitment toward strategic goals and objectives.

4. Conclusion

This paper has presented a reasonably comprehensive examination of organizational silence and its inverse relationship with organizational loyalty. The conceptual and theoretical framework for both variables was reviewed in some detail; the essential measurement tools were highlighted—namely, Morrison and Milliken's scale for organizational silence and Meyer and Allen's scale for organizational loyalty; and the empirical evidence confirming the correlational relationship between various dimensions of the two constructs was analyzed. The analysis leads to the conclusion that organizational silence is by no means a harmless phenomenon; on the contrary, it functions as a suppressor of employee loyalty and positive engagement with their organizations. This finding calls upon both researchers and managers to work seriously toward breaking silence cycles and fostering a genuine culture of voice and participation.

5. Recommendations for Future Research

Where should researchers go from here? No single study can answer all questions, and the present one is no exception. Based on what we have found—and perhaps more importantly, based on what we still do not know—several directions seem particularly promising for future investigation. These range from methodological refinements to entirely new lines of inquiry that could enrich our understanding of how silence and loyalty interact across different settings and cultures.

Given the findings and limitations of the present study, several directions for future research suggest themselves as particularly worthwhile. First, researchers should consider conducting longitudinal studies that track how changes in organizational silence levels affect organizational loyalty over extended periods of time, as this would help establish more precise causal relationships between the variables rather than relying solely on correlational links. Second, there is a clear need to examine mediating and moderating variables in the relationship between organizational silence and organizational loyalty—variables such as organizational trust, organizational justice, different leadership styles, and the prevailing psychological climate—for these likely play a pivotal role in explaining why and under what conditions silence leads to diminished loyalty. Third, future studies would benefit from expanding their scope to include diverse sectors such as industrial enterprises, service organizations, private companies, and public institutions, then comparing findings across these contexts to discover contextual differences in the relationship's nature and intensity; the private sector, for instance, may differ considerably from the public sector regarding how organizational silence affects specific types of loyalty. Fourth, cross-cultural studies investigating the role of national culture dimensions—particularly power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance—in shaping the silence-loyalty relationship would be especially valuable, as defensive silence might affect affective loyalty more strongly in high power-distance cultures than in low power-distance ones. Fifth and finally, researchers should consider integrating qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews and focus groups alongside quantitative approaches, as this would allow for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of employees' lived experiences with organizational silence and how those experiences shape their feelings of loyalty over time; stories and narratives may prove more illuminating than numbers alone in this domain, though numbers certainly remain a useful structural framework. Paying serious attention to organizational silence

and working systematically to reduce it—while simultaneously strengthening organizational loyalty through positive workplace climates—benefits not only individual organizations but also represents a strategic long-term investment in human capital, one that constitutes a sustainable competitive advantage in the turbulent and ever-changing business environment of the twenty-first century.

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