

Silence in the workplace: what do we know from research?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to examine the antecedents and consequences of organizational silence and employee silence to determine whether these two concepts should be distinguished rather than used interchangeably in research.

Design/methodology/approach – This study conducted a systematic literature review of 79 studies on organizational silence and 113 on employee silence, leading to three major findings.

Findings – First, this study shows that organizational silence is a collective phenomenon and employee silence occurs at the individual level; therefore, indicating they should be treated as two distinct concepts. Second, both types of silence are influenced by contextual factors (internal and external) and leadership. Third, organizational silence impacts both individual and organizational outcomes, whereas employee silence mainly affects an individual's psychological health and performance.

Originality/value – This research clarifies the distinction between organizational silence and employee silence, offering guidance for researchers on how to approach these concepts. It also highlights the critical need to address workplace silence and the potential harm it may cause to both organizational and individual well-being if left unaddressed. Furthermore, this research supports organizational leaders and human resource developers in fostering a healthier work culture, improving performance and driving continuous improvement.

Keywords systematic literature review, human resource, organizational silence, employee silence, healthy work culture, silence in the workplace

Paper type Literature review

Employees are key assets of organizations; their knowledge sharing and innovative work behaviors (e.g. new idea generation and application) are essential for developing and sustaining a competitive advantage in today's fast-changing world (Castaneda and Cuellar, 2020; Widmann *et al.*, 2016). Both knowledge sharing and innovative behaviors require social interaction among employees; thus, being proactive and open in sharing information and expressing diverse thoughts is important to advancing organizational innovation (Kim and Song, 2024). However, in reality, many employees withhold their ideas, opinions and information in the workplace, a phenomenon known as employee silence or organizational silence (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Dyne *et al.*, 2003).

Some silence researchers argue for distinguishing these two concepts, as they originate from different levels. For example, Morrison and Milliken (2000) introduced organizational silence as a top-down, organizational-level phenomenon where employees withhold critical



issues (e.g. job-related problems), ideas, information or opinions that could improve the organization. In contrast, [Pinder and Harlos \(2001\)](#) conceptualized employee silence as the:

[...] withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individual's behavioral, cognitive, and/or affective evaluations of his or her organizational circumstances to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change or redress (p. 334).

From a motivational perspective, [Dyne et al. \(2003\)](#) identified three dimensions of employee silence: acquiescent silence (withholding ideas due to resignation), defensive silence (withholding based on fear) and prosocial silence (withholding based on cooperation to benefit the organization).

Over the years, [Dyne et al. \(2003\)](#) conceptualization has triggered further scholarly interest. For example, viewing it as a bottom-up phenomenon, [Knoll and Van Dick \(2013\)](#) identified four forms of employee silence: acquiescent, quiescent, prosocial and opportunistic silence. While the first three are similar to [Dyne et al. \(2003\)](#) categorizations, opportunistic silence is new, referring to withholding information for own's benefits. From the motivation standpoint, [Brinsfield \(2013\)](#) outlined six dimensions of motives for silence: ineffectual, relational, defensive, diffident, disengaged and deviant silence. Except for defensive silence, these dimensions differ from [Dyne et al. \(2003\)](#) three dimensions of employee silence. According to [Brinsfield \(2013\)](#), ineffectual silence stems from the belief that speaking up will not change anything. Relational silence refers to withholding information to maintain relationship with others. Diffident silence is driven by the motivation to avoid embarrassing self, and disengaged silence arises from disengagement. Deviant silence refers to intentionally failing to provide necessary information to a supervisor or coworkers ([Brinsfield, 2013](#)).

Our initial analysis of the silence literature reveals three issues of concerns. First, informed by different ways of thinking, researchers have examined the phenomenon of silence in the workplace at different levels, specifically, organizational silence at the individual, organizational and cultural level ([Akar, 2018](#)) and employee silence at the individual, interpersonal and organizational/societal levels ([Chou and Chang, 2020](#)).

Second, despite the documented differences in current literature, researchers often use the terms "employee silence" and "organizational silence" interchangeably, creating confusion. For example, [Chou and Chang \(2020\)](#) conceptual research on employee silence and [John and Manikandan \(2019\)](#) meta-analysis used both concepts interchangeably. Given the varying consequences of silence at different levels, it is necessary to treat organizational and employee silence as separate constructs. This distinction will help leaders and human resource development (HRD) practitioners to gain a nuanced understanding of silence, hence, be better prepared to develop targeted interventions.

Third, previous research on silence has predominantly been conducted in areas of organizational behavior, human resource (HR) management and organizational communication. For a field such as HRD that cares deeply about the health and development of people and organizations, we are missing a big opportunity to address critical issues and add value to the world of practice.

Prompted by these concerns, this research was conducted to provide an evidence-based, nuanced understanding of silence in the workplace. In this article, we use "silence in the workplace" as an overarching term that includes both organizational silence and employee silence. However, to ensure the thoroughness of our literature search, we treated them as distinct concepts. Specifically, we were interested in answering the following three questions:

- Q1. How is silence in the workplace conceptualized in literature?
- Q2. What are the antecedents of silence in the workplace?
- Q3. What are the consequences of silence in the workplace?

This research is timely and relevant to HRD for several reasons. First, by examining silence from both individual and organizational perspectives, this research clarifies the two similar yet different concepts. Second, by identifying the causes and impact of silence in the workplace, this research raises awareness of a critical workplace phenomenon and its potential harm to both organizations and their members if left unaddressed. This knowledge will help organizational leaders and HR developers foster a healthier work environment, boost individual performance and promote continuous improvement. Finally, this research advances HRD research by highlighting an issue that affects the effectiveness of organization management, yet has been largely overlooked by the HRD scholarly community. Adding new topics to the HRD research agenda will not only help broaden the impact of HRD scholarship, but also provide an opportunity for HRD scholars to engage in research of practical significance.

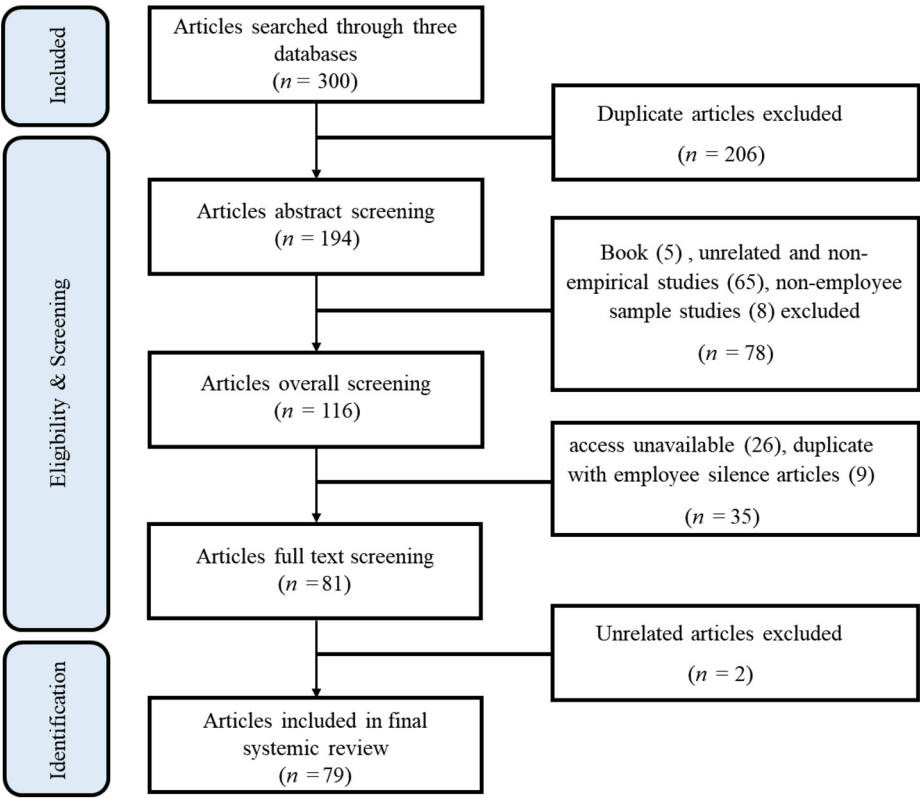
In the remainder of the article, we first describe how the methods we have employed to collect relevant literature. We then present the finding that, highlight the distinction between collective-level organizational silence and individual-level employee silence. Following that, we report the key antecedents and consequences of organizational and employee silence as revealed by the literature. Finally, we discuss the research and practical implications and conclude with limitations and recommendations for future studies.

Research methods

We adopted the systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to address the three research questions. This approach synthesizes existing bodies of knowledge through a structured analysis of relevant research findings, using a specific search strategy (Snyder, 2019). SLR enables researchers to categorize and extract unique themes, identify gaps in the literature and recommend areas for future research (Motyka, 2018). To ensure rigor in the search process, we followed the preferred reporting items for systematic review guidelines. Our search focused on publications since 2013, reflecting our interest in acquiring the holistic understanding of research on silence in the workplace. We conducted separate searches for organizational silence and employee silence, each following the same three-stage process outlined below.

Search for organizational silence literature

In the initial search stage, we identified 300 articles using three databases: ProQuest, Web of Science and Scopus. Our search criteria included only peer-reviewed, full text, English-language publications containing the keywords: *organizational silence* or *organisational silence*. We organized the search results by article titles and the authors' first name, and then removed 206 duplicates found across the databases. In the second stage, we screened the abstracts of the remaining 194 publications by adding an additional inclusion criterion: only empirical studies that focused on employees in organizational contexts. This criterion helped us narrow the results down to 116 articles for further consideration. In the third stage, we excluded 35 inaccessible articles and those that were duplicates of *employee silence* studies. We then read the remaining 81 articles in full. After a careful review, we excluded two unrelated articles, leaving a total of 79 articles for final analysis (see Figure 1). Articles were assigned coded numbers at each stage to prevent missing data.



Source: Authors own work

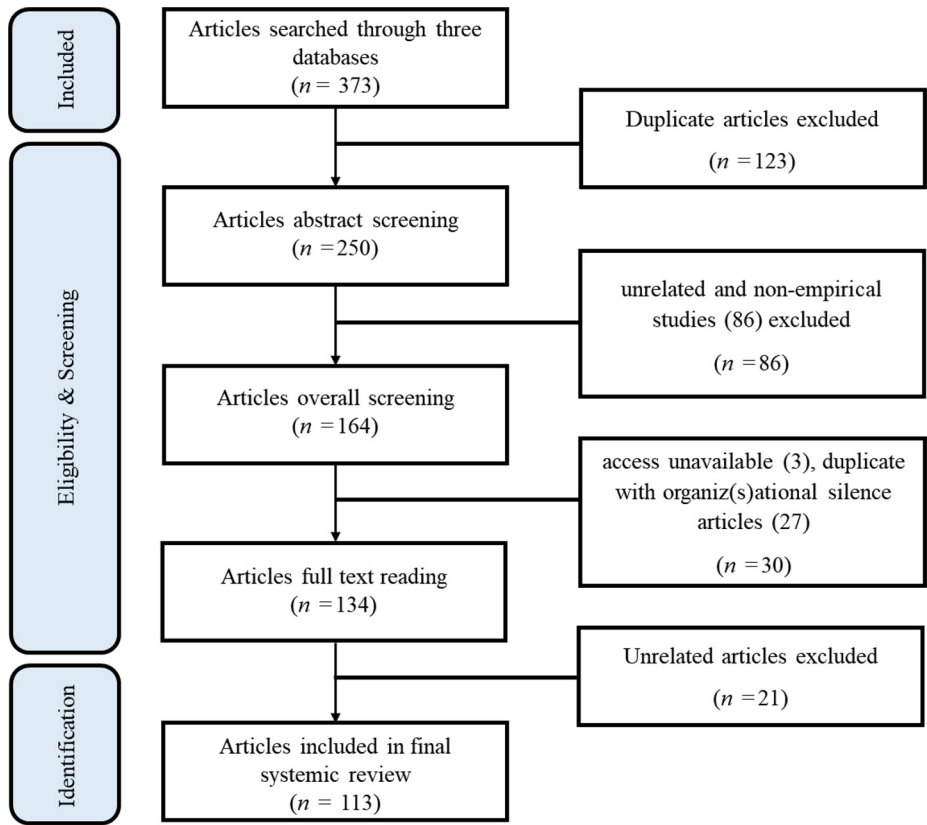
Figure 1. Organizational silence literature search process

Search for employee silence literature

Our search for employee silence literature followed the same process, using the same databases and criteria as described earlier. Using one overarching term, *employee silence*, our initial search yielded 373 results. After removing duplicates, 250 articles remained for abstract screening. At this stage, we excluded 86 unrelated articles and nonempirical research (e.g. measurement development/validation study, conceptual paper, literature review), leaving 164 articles for further review. Subsequently, an additional 30 articles were removed due to inaccessibility or duplicate with *organizational silence* studies, and 21 more unrelated articles were excluded. Our multiple-round of screening led to a total of 113 articles for final analysis (see Figure 2).

Data management and analysis

To facilitate the analysis, we organized the articles on organizational silence and employee silence into two separate files, following Garrard's (2007) matrix method. Each article was coded to extract information in the following areas: author(s), article title, publication year, methodology, methods, measurement, sample, key factors related to either organizational



Source: Authors own work

Figure 2. Employee silence literature search process

silence or employee silence and major findings. We then performed a thematic analysis, identifying major themes in response to the three research questions, which are reported in the following sections.

Conceptualizing “Silence”

This section addresses definitional issues. Our analysis shows that some researchers treated organizational silence and employee silence as two different concepts, while others made no distinction. To avoid further confusion, below we discuss these two concepts separately.

Conceptualizing organizational silence

Definitions. Table 1 presents the definitions cited in the 79 studies we reviewed. In general, the terms – organizational silence and employee silence – were used interchangeably, making it difficult to identify a specific definition. Morrison and Milliken (2000) were the

Table 1. Definitions of organizational silence

Author (year)	Definition
Morrison and Milliken (2000)	“a collective phenomenon where employees withhold their opinions and concerns about potential organizational problems” (p. 707)
Bowen and Blackmon (2003)	spirals of silence within groups that hinder honest discussion that is critical to organizational improvement
Bagheri <i>et al.</i> (2012)	“situations where employees withhold information that might be useful to the organization to which they are a part of whether intentionally or unintentionally” (p. 50)

Source: Authors’ own work

first to define organizational silence, describing it as a barrier to organizational change and development. Building on their work, Bagheri *et al.* (2012) incorporated individual intention into the definition. Bowen and Blackmon (2003), on the other hand, framed silence within a group context. Despite these variations, all three definitions recognize workplace silence as a collective social phenomenon with organizational-level impacts.

Dimensions. While not a primary focus of our research, examining how silence was measured by researchers provided valuable insights into the dimensions of silence that have attracted scholarly attention, helping us understand the reasoning behind different definitions. Our analysis of the quantitative studies led to three findings. First, more than half of the studies used measures that included motivational factors of silence, with Dyne *et al.* (2003) employee-level silence framework being the most widely used. Second, only a few studies used measurements related to organizational culture or climate factors. Finally, some studies used self-developed instruments or revised versions of existing measurements. Interestingly, although organizational silence is commonly recognized as a collective-level phenomenon, most of the studies on organizational silence examined silence behaviors at the individual level, often focusing on different motivations behind silence (see Table 2).

Conceptualizing employee silence

Definitions. Table 3 presents popular definitions of employee silence. Among them, Dyne *et al.* (2003) conceptualization is the most frequently cited, followed by Pinder and Harlos (2001) and Morrison and Milliken (2000). However, Morrison and Milliken (2000) definition, which describes silence as a collective-level phenomenon (i.e. organizational silence), was sometimes used interchangeably when referring to employee silence. Compared to the organizational silence literature, employee silence is more often discussed in relation to voice behavior.

Dimensions. The majority of the studies used Dyne *et al.* (2003) measurement or Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008) adaptation, which was based on Dyne *et al.* (2003) measurement. Similarly, Knoll and Van Dick (2013) and Jain’s (2015) measurements were rooted in Dyne *et al.* (2003) work. Although less frequently used, the measurements, developed by Detert and Edmondson (2011), Zheng *et al.* (2008), Vakola and Bouradas (2005) and Brinsfield (2013), share dimensions similar to those in the more widely used measurements (see Table 4).

Table 2. Dimensions of organizational silence

Level	Author (year)	Dimension
Individual-level	Van Dyne <i>et al.</i> (2003)	acquiescent silence defensive silence prosocial silence
	Kutlay (2012)	accepted silence defensive silence protectionist silence
Contains organizational level	Çakici A. (2007)	fear of isolation fears related to work fear of damaging relationships lack of work experience
	Brinsfield (2009)	administrative and organizational reasons fear of isolation fear of dismissal lack of experience
	Yalçın and Baykal (2019)	organizational climate acquiescent silence silence based on fear silence based on protecting the organization
		silence climate

Source: Authors' own work

Table 3. The definitions of employee silence

Author (year)	Definition
Morrison and Milliken (2000)	“a collective phenomenon where employees withhold their opinions and concerns about potential organizational problems” (p. 707)
Pinder and Harlos (2001)	“the withholding of any form of genuine expression about an individual’s behavioral, cognitive, and/or affective evaluation of his or her organizational circumstances to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change” (p. 334)
Van Dyne <i>et al.</i> (2003)	Intentionally withholding relevant ideas, information and opinions based on resignation, fear and cooperation
Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008)	Employees’ actual communicative choices to withhold information from others
Kish-Gephart <i>et al.</i> (2009)	“the withholding of ideas, suggestions, or concerns about people, products, or processes that might have been communicated verbally to someone inside the organization with the perceived authority to act” (pp. 166-167)
Knoll and Van Dick (2013)	A multidimensional construct that is triggered by four different motivations (e.g. quiescent, acquiescent, prosocial and opportunistic silence)

Source: Authors' own work

Antecedents of silence in the workplace

In this section, we compare the similar and distinct antecedents of employee silence and organizational silence that emerged from the literature review, providing valuable insights into the factors influencing these silence behaviors at different levels within the workplace. As shown in Table 5, the similar antecedents (i.e. organizational support,

Table 4. Dimensions of employee silence

Level	Author (year)	Dimension
Individual-level	Van Dyne <i>et al.</i> (2003)	acquiescent silence defensive silence prosocial silence
	Vakola and Bouradas (2005)	developed based on Morrison and Milliken (2000)
	Zheng <i>et al.</i> (2008)	organizational silence theoretical framework acquiescent silence defensive silence disregardful silence
	Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008)	five items were adapted from Van Dyne <i>et al.</i> (2003) scale and were modified for the hospital context
	Detert and Edmondson (2011) Knoll and Van Dick (2013)	single dimension quiescent silence acquiescent silence prosocial silence opportunistic silence
	Brinsfield (2013)	deviant silence relational silence defensive silence diffident silence ineffectual silence
	Jain (2015)	disengaged silence fear of retaliation internal motivation self-competence self-image

Source: Authors' own work

positive work environment, organizational politics, organizational justice, different types of leadership) are categorized at the organizational level and were identified in both literature on employee silence and organizational silence. Given the extensive number of studies included in our final analysis, we primarily focused on key articles related to each theme.

External

Labor market conditions. Among the 192 studies in our final pool, only one study (Emelifeonwu and Valk, 2019) examined how macro-level contextual factors, such as sub-Saharan African culture and labor market conditions, contributed to employee silence in Nigeria. In this specific context, Nigeria's culture of tribalism sometimes makes it difficult for employees to express their opinions.

Organizational

Organizational culture. Organizational culture affects both employee silence and organizational silence. For instance, the Chinese *Chaxu* atmosphere, where leaders classify members as in-group or out-group based on relationship intimacy, was found to increase employee silence and reduce organizational responsibility behavior (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). In the hostile industrial relations climate, employees who do not align with management values may increase their defensive

Table 5. The antecedents of silence in the workplace

			Subthemes	
Dimensions	Themes	Employee silence	Organizational silence	
External	Labor market conditions		–	
Organizational	Organizational culture	Organizational support	Organizational support	
		Positive practice environment	Positive work environment	
		Organizational politics	Organizational politics	
		Organizational justice	Organizational justice	
		Hostile industrial relations climate	Effective organizational communication	
			Organizational trust	
		Lack of support and participation in decision-making		
		Experience of not being valued	Career barriers	
		Collectivism	–	
		Chaxu atmosphere		
		Customer participation in value cocreation		
		High power distance		
		Punishment		
		Organizational voice climate		
		Ethical organizational climate		
		Psychological contract breach		
		Racial discrimination		
	Structural issue	Positive workplace gossip		
		Centralization	–	
		Strict governance and control in a hierarchical organization	–	
		Structural reform		
	Job status	–	Job insecurity	
	Social relationship	Social undermining	Organizational mobbing	
		Workplace ostracism	Workplace incivility	
		Workplace bullying	–	
	Leadership	Authentic leadership	Authentic leadership	
		Transformational leadership	Transformational leadership	
			Toxic leadership	
		Toxic leadership	Instructional leadership	
		Abusive supervision (coercive power)	School administrators' communication skills	
			Supervisor support	
		Leader bottom-line mentality	Supervisor trust	
			Manager's attitude to silence	
		Supervisor undermining	–	
		Negative emotional expression		
		Leader's aggressive humor		
		Authoritarian leadership		

(continued)

Table 5. Continued

Dimensions	Themes	Subthemes	
		Employee silence	Organizational silence
Team	Team climate	Destructive leadership	–
		Leader's destructive personality	
		Narcissistic leadership	
		Ambidextrous leadership (+/–)	
		Empowering leadership	
		Benevolent leadership	
		Leader's openness for voice	
		Ethical leadership	
		Leader's behavioral integrity	
		Leader's interpersonal emotion regulation	
Individual	Psychological construct	Focus on the future	Organizational commitment Self-confidence Moral distress Moral behavior/judgment Positive psychological capital Organizational citizenship behavior Locus of control (external, internal) Power distance perception Perception of power base games
		Regular contact	
		Team vision	
		Coworker support	
		Team commitment	
	Behavior	Employee authenticity	
		Insecurity	
		Compulsory citizenship behavior	
		Knowledge hiding	
	Power-orientation value		
	Identification	Organizational identification Relational self-identity (+/–)	
	Demographic characteristics	Gender, age, education, marital status, family dependents and level of experience (+/–)	
	Personality trait	Self-narcissism	
	Competence	Emotional intelligence	
	Resource	Family support	

Source: Authors' own work

silence and decide to leave the organization (Jiang and Yao, 2020). Furthermore, organizations that emphasize customer participation in value co-creation may pressure employees to satisfy even unfriendly customers, leading to silence (Boadi *et al.*, 2020). The use of authority and power by supervisors, especially in high-power distance organizations, can lead to communication problems and cause less powerful employees to remain silent (Dedahanov *et al.*, 2016; Şahin *et al.*, 2021). In collectivist organizational cultures, employees may choose to remain silent to avoid interpersonal conflict (Dedahanov *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, punishment can foster fear among employees, making them reluctant to express disagreement on organizational issues or share information (Dedahanov *et al.*, 2015; Rhee *et al.*, 2014).

When employees perceive a lack of organizational justice or a breach of the psychological contract, they may respond with distrust and alleviate pressure by displaying negative work attitudes and behaviors, such as employee silence (Wu *et al.*, 2021). However, Ölçer and Coşkun (2024) noticed that organizational justice positively affected organizational silence. This discrepancy in the results between the studies is due to cultural characteristics as the silence in Turkey is regarded as a respectful act (Ölçer and Coşkun, 2024). Because of strict organizational control, limited decision-making involvement or feeling unappreciated, managers also likely to remain silent (Dellve and Jendeby, 2022). In addition, individuals who perceive racial discrimination at work use silence as a coping behavior in stressful circumstances (Gu *et al.*, 2021). Women facing career barriers, such as gender stereotypes or work environment barriers, may also prefer to remain silent, especially when seeking promotion (İnandi *et al.*, 2017).

On the other hand, recognizing and praising employees' personality, competence or job performance (i.e. through positive workplace gossip) can reduce silence behavior (Liao *et al.*, 2022). An organization's caring ethical climate can not only enhance employees' psychological safety and positive attitude toward organizations but also decrease acquiescent and defensive silence (Zhang and Cao, 2021). In addition, a voice climate in the workplace can help reduce acquiescent silence (Knoll *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, fair treatment of employees fosters psychological safety and organizational trust, which eventually reduces silence behavior (Wu *et al.*, 2021).

Leadership. Because leaders have significant influence on organizational culture and employee behavior, different social environments are created based on how they treat employees (Fahie, 2019). In addition, leaders' traits, personality, behaviors and attitudes impact employee silence (Brinsfield, 2013). For example, narcissistic leadership (Mousa *et al.*, 2021; Hamstra *et al.*, 2021; Khan *et al.*, 2021) and abusive supervision have been shown to increase employees' defensive and acquiescent silence (e.g. Afshan *et al.*, 2022; Al-Hawari *et al.*, 2020; Cheng *et al.*, 2024; Lam and Xu, 2019). Toxic leadership and destructive leadership, along with other negative forms, deplete employees' resources and prompt them to remain silent (Wu *et al.*, 2018). This leadership also impairs individuals' perception of organizational justice, leading to organizational silence (Reyhanoglu and Akin, 2022). Leaders who focus exclusively on achieving bottom-line goals can cause employees' emotional exhaustion in the pursuit of success, ultimately resulting in their silence (Wan *et al.*, 2021). In addition, leaders who degrade subordinates via disrespectful body language, negative words (e.g. negative humors) and emotional expression may trigger subordinates' desire for revenge, reduce their sense of psychological safety and increase employee silence (Afshan *et al.*, 2022; Chen *et al.*, 2022; Wei *et al.*, 2022).

On the contrary, empowering leadership, where authority or power is shared with employees, boosts employees' intrinsic motivation, enhances trust in supervisors and encourages participation in decision-making, thus reducing silence (Hassan *et al.*, 2019; Ju *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, alignment between a leader's words and actions builds trust and stimulates employees' self-efficacy to contribute to their organization (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2019). Leaders who care about followers within and outside the work domain (i.e. benevolent leadership) and give high-quality leader-member exchanges (LMX) can decrease employees' silence (Li and Xing, 2021). In addition, leaders who effectively manage both their own and employee's emotions help break the barrier of subordinates' silence behavior (Khan *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, manager's openness for voice also helps subordinates to reduce both acquiescent silence and quiescent silence (Knoll *et al.*, 2021).

Research further shows that authentic leadership promotes employees' constructive cognition, which eventually decreases acquiescent and quiescent silence, particularly on

moral issues (Frömmer *et al.*, 2021). Interestingly, ambidextrous leadership, which involves encouraging both exploratory and exploitative behaviors, when done properly, can reduce employee silence (Wu *et al.*, 2022). Transformational leaders prevent organizational silence by creating a satisfying and productive work environment that supports the development of employees' self-confidence and ability (Ahmadi *et al.*, 2015; Atalay *et al.*, 2019). Meanwhile, leaders' communication skills (e.g. empathy, social relaxation and support) are important in motivating employees to participate in decision-making and express their opinions freely (DURNALI *et al.*, 2019). In sum, leaders and managers play a critical role in influencing organizational silence (Alqarni, 2020).

Others. Compared to organizational culture and leadership-related variables, less attention has been given to structural issue, job status and social relationship-related variables in studies on silence in the workplace. Under a centralized structure where decision-making power is concentrated by the top management, lower-level employees tend to be less empowered and more disengaged (Dedahanov *et al.*, 2015). Structural reforms, such as mergers or splits of organizational units, can also trigger defensive silence among employees as they seek to avoid conflicts and eventually increases following repeated organizational structural reform (Wynen *et al.*, 2020). In addition, when employees experience job insecurity, they are more likely to engage in acquiescent silence and defensive silence (Son *et al.*, 2023) and this positive relationship was stronger for those who are in highly political work environment. Furthermore, damage to social relationships within the organization such as social undermining, workplace bullying, workplace mobbing, workplace incivility and ostracism, also increases both organizational and employee silence. Simply put, these negative social interactions can exacerbate silence behaviors and harm employees' psychological health, trust and performance (e.g. Ayub *et al.*, 2021; Dingren, 2020; Hüsrevsahi, 2015; Jung and Yoon, 2019; Khan *et al.*, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2020; Sahabuddin *et al.*, 2023; Xu *et al.*, 2022; Yao *et al.*, 2022).

Individual

Psychological construct. When individuals feel a sense of team commitment, they are motivated to work toward the team's goals and consider speaking up as a key part of their responsibilities (Qian *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, employee's attachment to the organization helps reduce organizational silence (Bayramoglu and Cetinkanat, 2020). On the other hand, employee authenticity, a sense of being genuine and true to oneself in thoughts, feelings and actions, has been found to predict more voice behaviors and less employee silence (Knoll and Van Dick, 2013). However, some employees may choose to remain silent due to feelings of insecurity related to their newness on the job, past unsuccessful experiences or negative impacts from supervisors (Robinson and Shuck, 2019; Son *et al.*, 2023; Yu *et al.*, 2023). In addition, organizational silence was found in the nursing field when employees experience moral distress caused by constraints in the work environment (Pejmankhah and Pezhmankhah, 2022).

Behavior. In organizations, employees' involuntary extra-role work activities, known as compulsory citizenship behavior, can create significant pressure and negative emotions, ultimately triggering employee silence (He *et al.*, 2019; Su *et al.*, 2021). Bari *et al.* (2020) identified that when employees observe their coworkers or supervisors concealing knowledge, they become hesitant to speak up and choose to remain silent in response. This reaction is influenced by the perception that they are being mistreated by their colleagues.

Power orientation value. The high acceptance of unequal power distribution within an organization positively affects employees' silence behaviors, often driven by resignation and fear. Research evidence shows that when an individual attempts to align with a popular

figure in the organization or seeks mutual support among peers to increase their organizational power, it primarily influences their prosocial silence rather than defensive silence (Gencer *et al.*, 2018).

Identification. Employees who strongly identify with their organization and feel a sense of belonging tend to be emotionally connected to the organization, leading to reduced silence behavior (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hassan *et al.*, 2019). Conversely, individuals with a strong relational self-identity are more likely to engage in prosocial silence when the colleague in question is part of their social network (Hawass, 2016).

Demographic characteristics. Some studies within the employee silence and organizational silence literature indicate that silence is influenced by demographic characteristics such as gender, age, tenure, education, marital status, total working time and the size of the organization (Labrague and De los Santos, 2020; Sağlam *et al.*, 2019). For instance, Yuan *et al.* (2021) found that migrant workers with dependent children tend to remain silent even when facing violations of their rights and interests in the workplace. Their silence is driven by the need to sustain their livelihood in a foreign country. However, other studies revealed no significant relationship between demographic variables and organizational silence (Girgin and Gümüşeli, 2021; Köse and Köse, 2019). These contradictory results seem to stem from cultural and contextual differences in the context where the studies were conducted.

Others. Employees with narcissistic personality traits tend to remain silent as a self-protection strategy due to their vulnerable self-esteem and excessive care about how others perceive them (Wan *et al.*, 2021). While emotional intelligence is often seen as a positive competence that fosters better interpersonal relationships and effective communication, Saeed *et al.* (2021) pointed out its dark side. Specifically, their study revealed that individuals with high emotional intelligence might be more likely to become morally disengaged, using their emotional skills to manipulate others for personal gain, which can lead to silence in certain situations.

Family support, as a form of social support, plays a pivotal role in mitigating the adverse impacts of the work environment on employees. Understood from the spillover theory, family support extends its influence to employee silence within the workplace by alleviating negative work attitudes, such as work cynicism (Zhang *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, enhancing social capital, which emphasizes relationships, interactions and shared norms among individuals, can reduce organizational silence and enhance organizational voice (Soreshjani *et al.*, 2018).

Team

Team climate. Interestingly, only one study examined team-level variable as an antecedent of employee silence at the individual level. In this study (Pilař *et al.*, 2014), the researchers found that clear team goals and vision, support for innovative ideas from team members, progress toward development and regular contact with the team members encouraged the development of employee initiative and reduced employees' tendency to withhold new ideas due to fear (Pilař *et al.*, 2014).

Consequences of silence in the workplace

In this section, we compare similar and different consequences of employee silence and organizational silence identified in the literature review, offering valuable insights into the effects of silence behavior at different levels in the workplace. Unlike the antecedents of silence in the workplace, the consequences tend to overlap at the individual level. Similar outcomes such as burnout, turnover intention, job satisfaction, organizational commitment,

self-efficacy, counterproductive work behavior, were found in both employee silence and organizational silence literature (see Table 6).

Organizational

Performance. According to Oyerinde (2020), a low degree of organizational silence positively impacts institutional effectiveness – achievement of organizational goals and objectives. In other words, employees’ active engagement in organization management enhances organizational effectiveness. Based on this finding, we can safely assume that a high degree of organizational silence is likely to be associated with low organizational

Table 6. The consequences of silence in the workplace

Level	Themes	Subthemes	
		Organizational silence	Employee silence
Organizational	Performance	Institutional ineffectiveness Academic success of the school Organizational creativity Synergy Patient safety	–
	Knowledge management	Knowledge transfer Knowledge sharing Organizational learning	–
	Culture	Organizational rumor Work alienation	–
Individual	Improvement and development	–	
	Psychological construct	Burnout Turnover intention Job satisfaction Organizational commitment Self-efficacy Organizational cynicism	Job burnout Turnover intentions Job satisfaction Organizational commitment Job self-efficacy Organization-based self-esteem
		Person-environment fit Affective commitment Organizational communication satisfaction Psychological well-being	–
	Work-family conflict	–	–
	Behavior	Counterproductive work behavior Job performance	Counterproductive work behavior Task performance Contextual performance Willingness to report near misses/errors Innovative work behavior Organizational deviant behavior Defensive silence Organizational citizenship behavior

Source: Authors’ own work

effectiveness. In the case of healthcare professionals, organizational silence has been shown to impair performance and reduce synergy (Harmanci Seren *et al.*, 2018; Yurdakul *et al.*, 2016).

Knowledge management. To gain a competitive advantage, organizations must foster creativity and innovation. Employees' ability to generate new knowledge or apply existing knowledge for problem-solving is a key asset. Knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing are crucial as they promote information exchange and collective learning within an organization (Elrehail *et al.*, 2018). Because key knowledge management processes such as knowledge transfer and sharing) rely on social interactions among organizational members, organizational silence can significantly inhibit creativity, knowledge transfer, knowledge sharing and even organizational learning (Atalla *et al.*, 2022; Sadeghi and Razavi, 2020).

Individual

Psychological construct. Similar consequences are found in the employee silence and organizational silence literature, particularly regarding individual's psychological constructs. For example, Knoll *et al.* (2019) noted a positive relationship between resignation and fear-motivated silence with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, a subconstruct of burnout. Regarding self-efficacy, two studies reported conflicting results. Chou and Chang (2020) demonstrated that when individuals withhold information for personal gain while disregarding harm to others (i.e. opportunistic silence), it negatively impacts job self-efficacy, as it undermines their perceived ability to perform effectively in their roles. Conversely, Alheet (2019) found that the participants in his study used silence (by not publicly expressing their opinions) as a strategy to avoid mistakes and harm. In this sense, employees used silence to control and solve problems, which increased their self-efficacy.

Fear and repression in the workplace reduce employee's organizational commitment, which is influenced by perceptions of alignment with the organization's goal, the belief that one can make a difference for the organization and the belief that one's efforts are respected (e.g. Cetin, 2020; Delhomme *et al.*, 2008; Sadeghi and Razavi, 2020). Also, organizational silence negatively affects person-organization fit (Sariboga and Serin, 2020). Employees who are exposed to such a negative environment perceive the organization as less attractive, leading to higher intentions to leave or lower job satisfaction and performance (e.g. Aiman-Smith *et al.*, 2001; Reyhanoglu and Akin, 2022). Furthermore, employees who are dissatisfied with organizational communication experience poor information exchanges within the organization (Doo and Choi, 2021). Lacking support from other members, they feel lonely, isolated and undervalued (Cetinkaya and Karayel, 2019). When employees choose to withhold their expression for self-protection (i.e. quiescent silence), they feel powerless and demotivated to initiate changes that will improve organizational effectiveness, which leads to decreased organization-based self-esteem (Chou and Chang, 2020).

Behavior. Employee silence prevents smooth communication between employees and hinders innovative work behavior, which relies heavily on knowledge sharing (Chen *et al.*, 2022; Islam *et al.*, 2022; Maqbool *et al.*, 2019). Consistent experiences of uncomfortable silence can lead to increased stress, reduced task performance and an uptick in deviant behaviors (Dong and Chung, 2021). Moreover, employee silence can lower contextual performance, which involves voluntary behaviors beyond formal job duties, and lead to job burnout (Shaukat and Khurshid, 2022). When employees remain silent due to disengagement, they become more vulnerable to bullying, with responses ranging from aggressive counterproductive work behavior to defensive silence driven by fear (Kim *et al.*, 2020). On a more positive side, Shahjehan and Yasir (2017) highlighted the importance of

balancing prosocial silence (withholding information to protect each other) with prosocial voice (speaking up to improve the organization) to display citizenship behavior in the workplace. However, defensive silence has been shown to reduce nurses' willingness to report errors in their workplace (Kim *et al.*, 2014).

Improvement and development. Among the existing literature we reviewed, Yurdakul *et al.* (2016) study is the only one that examines the impact of silence on performance quality improvement and employee development. By focusing on nurses and midwives, the researchers revealed that organizational silence limits opportunity for improvement and development.

Moderators of silence in the workplace

As shown in Tables 5 and 6, silence in the workplace is influenced by external, organizational, team and individual factors, and it negatively impacts both organizations and

Table 7. The moderators of silence in the workplace

Dimensions	Themes	Subthemes	
		Employee silence	Organizational silence
External Organization	Union support		–
	Organizational culture	Organizational politics	Organizational politics
		Ethical organizational culture	Organizational support
		Forgiveness climate	–
		Knowledge sharing climate	
		Career growth opportunity	
		Empowerment	
		Customer orientation	
		Procedural justice	
		Cognitive problem-solving demand	–
Individual	Leadership	Leader-member exchange	Transformational leadership
	Psychological construct	Supervisor-subordinate guanxi	–
		Organizational identification	Organizational identification
		Psychological ownership	–
		Perceived time pressure	
		Positive affectivity	
		Subjective social status	
		Organizational commitment	
		Moral identification	
		Intention to leave	–
	Attitude	Zhongyong thinking	
	Competence	Emotional intelligence	–
	Social support	Political skill	
		Workplace friendship	–
	Personality trait	Coworker support	
		Employee conscientiousness	–
	Promotion-focused value	–	–
	Demographic characteristics	Employment status	–

Source: Authors' own work

individuals. Addressing this issue is essential for promoting employee well-being and maintaining a healthy organization. In this section, we compare the moderators of employee silence and organizational silence based on a literature review (see [Table 7](#)). Moderators differ from antecedents because they affect the strength of the relationship between variables. As depicted in [Table 7](#), organizational politics and organizational identification were identified as key factors that can help mitigate silence in the workplace.

External

Union support. Union support serves as an external resource that can mitigate the negative effects of workplace exclusion ([Dingren, 2020](#)). According to the conservation of resource theory, union support plays a key role in alleviating resource loss caused by workplace ostracism, reducing emotional exhaustion and eventually decreasing employee silence ([Dingren, 2020](#)).

Organization

Organizational culture. An organization's ethical culture provides employees with a chance to cope with observed racial discrimination by upholding shared norms and fostering the perception that the organization is a safe place to speak up ([Gu et al., 2021](#)). However, even in a strong ethical culture, employees may remain silent about racial discrimination to protect their social resources, particularly in light of social movements such as Black Lives Matter. In a forgiveness-oriented organizational climate, employees expect to receive rewards and support for demonstrating tolerance and kindness toward offenses. [Liu et al. \(2020\)](#) found that a forgiveness climate weakens the negative impact of workplace bullying on psychological safety, eventually increasing affective commitment and decreasing employee silence. In a hospital setting, a knowledge sharing climate increased nurses' willingness to report near misses, even among those who tend to remain silent due to fear ([Kim et al., 2014](#)). In addition, employees who perceive career growth opportunities within the organization tend to feel confident and optimistic, which reduces job insecurity, resource depletion and silence behavior ([Yu et al., 2023](#)). Employees who perceive fairness in decision-making procedures and interpersonal treatment are also more likely to experience positive effect, further helping to reduce employee silence ([Huang and Huang, 2016](#)).

Job characteristics. [Madrid et al. \(2015\)](#) argued that when employees experience unpleasant feelings, such as high-activated negative core affect, they may engage in withdrawal behavior like silence to protect their well-being. However, in job situations that require diagnosing and solving complex problems, as well as preventing and recovering from errors, the need to confront challenges decreases employee silence.

Leadership. Although a supervisor's narcissism and a follower's negative perception may lead to silence behavior, trust between leaders and their individual followers within a group or organization can mitigate the negative influence of supervisor narcissism ([Wang et al., 2018](#)). In contrast, high-quality LMX relationships can exacerbate the negative effects of social undermining, leading to increased emotional exhaustion and employee silence ([Xu et al., 2022](#)). In the context of Chinese culture, *guanxi*, a strong reciprocal relationship between supervisor and subordinate based on mutual trust, support and understanding, reduces the negative impacts of perceived compulsory citizenship behavior on subordinate's moral disengagement and decreases the probability of engaging in silent behavior ([He et al., 2019](#)).

Individual

Psychological construct. Employees working in an environment characterized by abusive supervision and high-power distance culture tend to exhibit silence behavior and are reluctant to share knowledge. However, employees with a strong sense of psychological ownership and a tight connection to the organization are more inclined to contribute to its success, resulting to a reduction in silence behavior (Islam *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, individuals who prioritize maintaining consistency with their moral self and promote ethical behavior are less likely to be affected by workplace ostracism, which, in turn, reduces their engagement in silence behavior (Sahabuddin *et al.*, 2023). In addition, when individuals experience stress due to time constraints in their daily work-related tasks, it can help mitigate the negative effects of employee silence on innovative work behavior (Maqbool *et al.*, 2019). However, Maqbool *et al.* (2019) called for additional managerial and organizational interventions to effectively address and eliminate silence behavior in the workplace.

Attitude. When employees demonstrate psychological detachment, such as having the intention to leave the organization, the impact of abusive supervision on their tendency to remain silent and withhold information is reduced (Xu *et al.*, 2020).

Competence. Employees with emotional intelligence, characterized by the ability to understand and regulate both their own and others' emotions, are better equipped to cope with workplace ostracism and less likely to use of adopting defensive silence as a response (Ayub *et al.*, 2021). In addition, employees with higher political skill are more adept at navigating dynamics of their workplace relationships, which strengthens their relational identification with an integrity-driven leader and reduces silence behavior (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2019).

Social support. Coworker support acts as a buffer, mitigating the negative effect of leader's aggressive humor on subordinate's psychological security, ultimately reducing employee silence (Wei *et al.*, 2022). In addition, coworker support can help individuals better deal with job insecurity by reducing stress and ego depletion, thus preventing silence behavior in the workplace (Yu *et al.*, 2023). Employees who have established strong friendships at work experience greater social support, decreased silence and are better prepared to cope with the negative effects of workplace bullying (Rai and Agarwal, 2018).

Personality trait. Employees with high conscientiousness are responsible, organized and thorough in their work-related tasks and responsibilities. When the leader prioritizes profit maximization and imposes this focus on their employees, subordinates may experience emotional exhaustion and engage in silence behavior. However, those with high conscientiousness can buffer the negative effects of such detrimental leadership behavior and effectively cope with resource depletion in the workplace (Wan *et al.*, 2021).

Promotion-focused value. Individuals with a promotion-focused regulatory focus tend to seek positive outcomes when facing organizational challenges. Liao *et al.* (2022) showed that in environments where job performance and competence are acknowledged and praised, employees experience increased psychological safety that helps reduce silence in the workplace. In fact, psychological safety is found to be particularly helpful in reducing silence for individuals with a high promotion-focused regulatory focus.

Discussion

This systematic review aimed to provide evidence-based clarity regarding the similarities and differences between the two debated concepts, organizational silence and employee silence. In this section, we discuss our key findings and their implications for research and practice by taking a closer look at the antecedents and consequences of these two concepts.

First, the antecedents of both organizational silence and employee silence exist at two levels: organizational (contextual) level and individual level. At the organizational level, factors such as organizational structure, culture and leadership were key antecedents. Hence, we conclude that silence in the workplace is influenced by internal and external contextual factors, including organizational structure, culture, climate and leadership. Leaders play a crucial role in shaping organizational culture and employees' work behavior. When leaders show respect and care for employees, organizational silence is likely reduced. On the contrary, when leaders dismiss employees' input or act unfairly, both organizational and employee silence would be increased.

Because [Dyne et al. \(2003\)](#) and [Pinder and Harlos \(2001\)](#) proposed the concept of employee silence based on [Morrison and Milliken \(2000\)](#) conceptualization of organizational silence, these two terms share some commonalities. However, the individual level of antecedents showed a clear difference between the two concepts. Most of the organizational silence studies focus on general characteristics of individuals such as demographics and behaviors that cause silence in the workplace. On the contrary, most of the employee silence studies focused on individual psychological aspects, such as motivation, autonomy and identification. This supports [Morrison and Milliken \(2000\)](#) and [Harlos's \(2016\)](#) argument that organizational silence is primarily about collective behavior of employees rather than employees' psychological aspects. Notably, compared to research on employee silence, organizational silence studies paid much less attention to antecedents that might reduce organizational silence.

Our review shows that consequences of organizational silence can be seen at both organizational and individual levels. Organization-level consequences were related to organizational performance and effectiveness, while the individual-level consequences were associated with organizational commitment. In contrast, consequences of employee silence are only identified at the individual level. The reviewed literature suggests that employee silence negatively impacts individuals' psychological health and performance, leading to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, job burnout and lack of innovative work behavior. These findings reaffirm that organizational silence is a collective-level phenomenon, while employee silence pertains to individual-level behavior.

According to our review, the perception of silence in organizations is overwhelming negative, evidenced by only 2 out of 192 studies framed it positively ([Alheet, 2019](#); [Srivastava et al., 2019](#)). Nevertheless, we argued that organizational silence can be considered as an opportunity or strategy to avoid potential conflict, stress, mistakes and harm caused by speaking up in the workplace. By remaining silent, employees can also conserve their resources.

Despite the multidimensional nature of employee silence, most studies included in this review treated it as a one-dimensional construct. This makes it difficult to examine the distinct antecedents or consequences of each form of employee silence. While various motives behind employee silence (e.g. resignation, fear and cooperation) have been identified, more research is needed, given that this area of study is still in its infancy. Further systematic investigations will help reveal the root causes of silence among organizational members and enable organizational leaders and HRD practitioners to address this workplace issue in a timely and effective manner.

With the heightened awareness that silence impact on diverse organizational and individual-related outcomes, HRD practitioners are better positioned to leverage social capital within organizations ([Nakamura and Yorks, 2011](#)) and develop interventions that will promptly prevent the occurrence of silence in the work context and/or effectively address its unintended consequences. As our findings show, both employee silence and organizational

silence are shaped by organizational leaders who set the tone and culture for employees. Thus, to maintain organizational competitiveness, leaders must make a concerted effort to support employees by empowering them to share their opinions and voice concerns. Leaders should also model desirable behavior by actively expressing their authentic opinions and listening to employees with sincerity.

Furthermore, silence can cause serious harm to both individuals and organizations. With this heightened awareness, HRD practitioners must provide diverse opportunities such as training programs and counseling sessions, to equip employees with the skills needed to manage their psychological well-being. Programs focused on self-management, stress management, conflict management and mediation skills can be particularly beneficial. At the same time, HRD professionals should actively promote a friendly work environment that fosters strong positive relationships among employees at all levels. HRD interventions like team building, reverse mentoring and 360° feedback sessions can help create a supportive and transparent organizational culture that benefits all members.

Finally, the literature we reviewed did not address the potential impact of silence in the workplace on mental health in the workplace. Given the growing concern about mental health issues across industries, particularly during and post the COVID-19 pandemic, developing a solid understanding of silence as a potential contributor to the ongoing mental health crisis is vital. Silence behaviors, whether at the organizational or individual level, can be one of the primary factors leading to mental health problems such as stress, anxiety and depression in the workplace. To this end, we call for more research on these sensitive yet important phenomena. Research on organizational and employee silence, particularly their negative health effects, can provide valuable insights into how these behaviors contribute to workplace disengagement and poor mental health outcomes. Findings from research along this line can inform policies and interventions aimed at improving employee well-being and reducing silence-driven mental health problems. To achieve this goal, we encourage multi-disciplinary collaborations among scholars and practitioners, including HRD, healthcare, organization management, to name a few.

Limitations and future research

Although this SLR provided novel findings, it has limitations embedded in our methodological choice. In this section, we discuss four limitations and offer future research recommendations to address each of them.

First, while we were able to provide a broad understanding of the antecedents and consequences of silence in the workplace through an SLR, we did not conduct an in-depth analysis of each variable. We encourage future research to explore each factor in greater detail. For example, researchers could investigate the cause of each dimension of employee silence to suggest appropriate interventions for both employee silence and organizational silence.

Second, as mentioned earlier, we found only two studies that examined silence in organizations from a positive perspective. Therefore, there is a need for more empirical evidence that will help us gain a better understanding of the positive outcomes of silence in the workplace. To this end, we encourage collaboration between researchers and practitioners to identify and study cases of success where organizational silence or employee silence was used as a defensive strategy and yielded positive outcomes. Third, most of the studies we reviewed are quantitative. While qualitative evidence provides broad and generalizable understanding of silence in the workplace, it does not offer, rich individual perceptions and stories. To address this gap, we recommend using qualitative approaches to

generate descriptive narratives that will uncover the root causes of organizational and individual silence in various contexts and provide deep insights into individual experiences.

Finally, previous literature reviews or meta-analysis on silence have primarily focused on identifying antecedents, effects and different forms of employee silence (Chou and Chang, 2020; John and Manikandan, 2019). Given the different backgrounds of these two concepts, in this article, we distinguished the characteristics of employee silence and organizational silence by examining their respective antecedents and consequences. We call for more silence studies in this area that clearly distinguish between these two concepts. Because employee silence concept was originally proposed to explain bottom-up silence in organizations, studies on employee silence have focused more on individuals' psychological aspects than on organization-level factors. In this sense, employee silence may be seen as a precursor to organizational silence. The lack of research on the antecedents of various forms of employee silence may explain why organizational silence research has paid less attention to factors that could reduce silence at the organizational level.

Conclusion

Based on empirical evidence from 192 studies on organizational silence and employee silence, we provided a comprehensive list of the antecedents and consequences of these two interrelated yet distinctly different workplace phenomena. Using the SLR methodology, we discovered that organizational silence operates as a collective-level phenomenon, whereas employee silence is an individual-level behavior. Therefore, while there are commonalities between these two concepts, we conclude that they should be treated as two separate constructs in future silence research. By unpacking the damage caused by organizational and individual silence, we hope to motivate organizational leaders and HRD practitioners to proactively address these detrimental workplace issues.

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