



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Does Injudicious Kindness Caused by Power Distance Lead to Organizational Silence Behaviors of Research Assistants?

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Abstract

Employee silence poses a significant challenge for organizations, hindering the use of innovative ideas and the establishment of democratic work environments. While previous research has predominantly focused on the cultural roots of silence within organizational culture, the influences of broader social-cultural factors have often been overlooked. In addition, investigations into the antecedents of silence have mainly relied on quantitative methodologies, leaving gaps in our understanding. To address these limitations, this study employs an exploratory qualitative case study methodology. Conducted through in-depth interviews with 12 research assistants from state universities, this study investigates the impact of power distance perceptions on academicians' silence behavior. The findings reveal that research assistants exhibit a heightened perception of power distance, leading to instances of inappropriate deference and a tendency to remain silent on critical issues, even when such silence is undesirable.

Keywords

Organizational silence, Power distance, Academicians, State universities in Türkiye

Introduction

Organizations are fundamentally aimed at improving their ability sustainability by using resources effectively and efficiently, with human resources being among the most valuable (Hagen et al., 2011). Developing new products, increasing service quality, making effective decisions, solving problems, and implementing creative ideas through human resources is possible. There are many ways to benefit from human resources. The most important of these is to obtain the ideas and opinions of employees about decisions, practices, and problems. Harnessing employees' creativity and insights is crucial for innovation, problem-solving, and

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decision-making within organizations (Castaneda & Cuellar, 2020). However, despite the importance of employee input, many organizations encounter a phenomenon known as organizational silence, in which employees withhold valuable knowledge and opinions that could contribute to organizational goals (Cullinane & Donaghey, 2014). Various factors contribute to organizational silence, including personal, organizational, and sociological dimensions (Dyne et al., 2003). Personality traits play a significant role in shaping employee behavior within organizational contexts (Cohen & Özsoy, 2021), with individuals exhibiting certain traits, such as schizoid or dependent tendencies, often refraining from expressing their views in social environments and business life (Millon et al., 2012; Özsoy & Ardiç, 2020). Moreover, employees may prefer silence for many reasons, such as protecting themselves, not being perceived as a bulge, and conforming to the normative social influence of the group (Morrison & Milliken, 2003; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). Organizational factors also contribute to silence, particularly in environments characterized by repressive or autocratic management philosophies suitable for the age, and employees prefer to remain silent (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). The phenomenon of organizational silence in this context is defined as the conscious withholding of work, ideas, knowledge, and thoughts pertinent to organizational advancement by employees (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Particularly in workplaces characterized by high power distance, employees refrain from expressing their viewpoints to their managers, opting instead to adapt to the organizational culture determined by hierarchy structures (Huang et al., 2005). Power distance denotes the extent to which unequal power distribution is accepted within societies (Hofstede, 1984). In societies exhibiting high power distance, both managers and subordinates perceive each other as unequal (Kiymalıoğlu et al., 2018). Courtesy norms, emanating from cultural heritage within organizations that foster a vertical hierarchical framework, can affect the attitudes and behaviors of employees, fostering one-way communication dynamics between subordinates and superiors (Blackman & Sadler-Smith, 2009). At this point, employees' silence can also occur within the framework of virtue elements such as modesty, respect, and kindness (Nakane, 2006).

Employees, in adhering to customary courtesy rules within the organization, often choose to remain silent out of fear of being misunderstood. Consequently, “national and cultural norms” emerge as primary factors prompting employees to collectively withhold their opinions and concerns within their professional undertakings (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). While this tendency toward silence may not immediately disturb employees in the short term, it gradually calcifies with the working environment over time, fostering a culture of silence within the organization. Such a climate stifles the generation and sharing of fresh, creative ideas, thereby impeding organizational evolution and development across various sectors. When universities and institutions are considered to ideally foster environments of accessible criticism and discourse, the deep-seated issues stemming from organizational silence become apparent (Cohen & Baruch, 2022; Sadeghi & Razavi, 2020). Although universities contribute

significantly to the production of scientific knowledge through research and publications, they also play a vital role in cultivating qualified, innovative, and creative graduates, thereby benefiting both the economy and society at large.

Amidst the fulfillment of these critical tasks, there is undeniably a need for work environments that foster mutual communication, idea sharing, and the cultivation of polyphony (Çaloğlu, 2014). Conversely, despite universities being the highest-level institutions in academic education and training, the entrenched perception of power distance within cultural frameworks can adversely affect employee relations within academic organizations (Cohen & Baruch, 2022). Cultural power distance thus emerges as a determinant of the inclination toward silence within the university environment. Considering this, it can be posited that the social-psychological processes stemming from the interaction of individual, organizational, and cultural factors significantly influence employees' proclivity toward silence. While numerous empirical studies explore the individual and organizational antecedents of silence, research investigating the effect of cultural factors on silence remains scant (Kwantes & Boglarsky, 2007). Although the effect of culture on silence has been explored within the realm of organizational culture (Parcham & Ghasemizad, 2017), from a sociological perspective, social culture also shapes the attitudes and behaviors of employees within organizations (Tutar, 2003). However, there is insufficient empirical evidence regarding whether cultural factors, particularly the perception of power distance, contribute to silence or cause excessive courtesy.

Building upon the above arguments, this study examines the role of power distance perception as a determinant of organizational silence tendencies among university employees. Particularly within universities, which serve as the primary source of free and critical sharing of thought, questioning, and research and foster innovative and entrepreneurial perspectives, understanding the reasons behind the tendency for silence becomes imperative. Thus, this study reveals the insights necessary for designing a more productive working environment within universities.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Definition of Concepts

Organizational silence refers to the deliberate withholding of ideas, opinions, and concerns by employees regarding organizational issues and challenges (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Those who choose silence abstain from addressing workplace problems and fail to provide valuable input and suggestions crucial for organizational growth and development (Henriksen & Dayton, 2006). Silence, generally perceived as an enigmatic attitude within organizations, significantly impacts both employees and organizational performance by impe-

ding progress and undermining organizational cohesion. Generally, the tendency for silence in organizations is attributed to organizational, managerial, and individual factors, with fears such as being labeled as the complainer, losing respect or trust, damaging relationships, facing termination, or encountering barriers to promotion being significant deterrents (Milliken et al., 2003). Fear of negative evaluation is particularly notable as a factor discouraging employees from speaking up or offering input in various situations (Milliken & Morrison, 2003). In addition, different motives prevent employees from sharing their ideas and information, leading to the emergence of different dimensions within the concept of silence (Dyne et al., 2003), such as acquiescence, self-defense, preserving relationships with colleagues, lack of confidence, and adherence to organizational regulations (Brinsfield, 2009).

Power distance involves the acceptance of unequal power distribution among individuals and organizations within society (Hofstede, 1984). This unequal power distribution determines the dynamics of social and interpersonal relations within organizational structures. Hofstede characterizes power distance as a cultural dimension, noting that societies exhibit varying degrees of power distance ranging from narrow to wide intervals. High power distance denotes a society in which inequality in power distribution is pronounced (Hofstede, 1984). In organizations characterized by high power distance, the culture endorses the centralization of power among employees, who often occupy positions within a structure dictated by their superiors and await instructions. An autocratic management style prevails in such organizations, augmenting employees' dependence on their superiors. Conversely, in organizations with low power distance, the inequality between managers and employees is minimal, with centralization and hierarchy at their lowest levels (Turan et al., 2005). Such organizations avoid the centralization of power, with employees asserting their beliefs while participating in decision-making processes (Rodrigues, 1998).

The cultural effect of power distance has been argued to be an effective lens for analyzing the sociocultural origins of organizations' silence (Hofstede, 1980). In societies characterized by high power distance levels, silence is deemed acceptable. A defining trait of such societies is the tendency for workers to obey orders without questioning or criticism. Hierarchical inequalities, differences in status, and power imbalances are commonly accepted norms. Particularly in these high power distance societies, where significant emphasis is placed on formal positions and hierarchies, employees often lack opportunities for participation in decision-making processes, and upward feedback mechanisms are absent within the organization structure (Morrison & Rothman, 2009).

Silence is commonly perceived as a positive politeness strategy aimed at regulating communication behaviors and ensuring harmony (Nakane, 2006). It is associated with various virtuous behaviors, including humility, respect for others, and common sense (Shojaie, et al., 2011). Conversely, tendencies such as polite and respectful behavior, coupled with extreme

humility, arise from the interaction of cultural and individual differences, influencing silence (Nakane, 2006). From a sociocultural perspective, silence can be viewed as a behavior encouraged by certain cultures, symbolizing respect. Hence, in cultures characterized by high power distance, it is often observed that subordinates remain silent in situations and environments where those in positions of power dictate courtesy rules (Aquino & Bommer 2003). Studies investigating the relationship between cultural power distance and silence behavior have shown that cultural power distance significantly influences employees' inclination to withhold their opinions. Employees in societies with lower power distance are typically more inclined to express their opinions (Huang et al., 2005).

Research Setting

Türkiye is recognized as a country characterized by high power distance (Pasa et al., 2001; Hofstede, 1984). The prevailing perception is that the Turkish bureaucratic system exhibits a robust and centralized structure. Consequently, obedience to authority plays a crucial role in shaping individual behavior within Turkish society. From an organizational standpoint, the prevalence of organizational silence can be expected, given institutional arrangements combined with limited and inadequate communication channels (Aytaç, 2007). The degree of respect given to managers by their subordinates is widely regarded as a crucial indicator of managerial performance. This underscores the tendency of many Turkish employees to hesitate in expressing their opinions to their superiors (Wasti, 1998). This reluctance stems primarily from cultural factors that emphasize humility, respect, and kindness (Nakane, 2006). The implicit restrictive tendency arising from cultural factors between individuals in the position of authority and their subordinates within organizations may hinder individuals with lesser power from criticizing authority or expressing their opinions in decision-making processes. Consequently, high power distance may impede the creation of a participatory organizational culture and organizational development (Ghosh, 2011). Within the context of Turkish universities, previous research has suggested that power distance could be a potential factor contributing to employee silence (Çavuşoğlu & Köse, 2016; Sağlam et al., 2018; Solmaz & Serinkan, 2020). However, these findings remain predominantly descriptive, lacking in-depth exploration.

While universities in Türkiye may exhibit a more relaxed bureaucratic structure than other public institutions, they are not entirely free from communicative limitations imposed by bureaucratic frameworks. For example, Özgan and Külekçi (2012) found that the prevailing culture and norms within Turkish universities compel lecturers into silence, with the hierarchical structure inhibiting open sharing of ideas and opinions. Similarly, Alparslan's (2010) study supported this view, emphasizing the influence of organizational structuring and managerial attitudes as primary drivers of the climate of organizational silence, with institutional regulations cited as a significant factor contributing to academician reluctance. In this context, this study investigates the impact of extreme humility and courtesy on organizational silence within

Turkish universities. Being exploratory, this study refrains from developing specific hypotheses. However, several general expectations are presented: First, due to the deep traces of cultural norms, it is expected that Turkish academicians will generally exhibit a high power distance, notwithstanding their high level of education. Second, it is expected that this high power distance will engender an excess of unwarranted courtesy. Finally, it is expected that this unwarranted courtesy due to power distance will also hinder institutional progress within universities, despite their scholarly pursuits.

Methodology

Procedure and Data Collection

A qualitative case study research methodology grounded within the interpretivism paradigm was employed. The adoption of a multiple-case study design was deemed suitable for inductively exploring the silent behavior exhibited by the research assistants employed at the university. A semi-structured interview questionnaire was designed to facilitate the interviews. The initial iteration of the questionnaire was developed based on the pertinent literature. In addition to questions derived from the literature, new inquiries were incorporated into the questionnaire through focused group interviews. The formulation of the interview questions was guided by this collaborative process. Subsequently, to input from the co-authors and two pilot studies, question revisions were made to enhance their efficacy. This iterative process ensured the refinement of the interview questions. The final version of the open-ended questions presented to the participants is detailed in Table 1. These questions aimed to elucidate the role of power distance perception in influencing the tendency for silence among research assistants employed in universities.

Table 1
Interview questions

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- 1- How can you define your relations with your colleagues whose academic title is higher than yours? Do you believe there is a power distance felt in your work environment?
 - 2- Can you easily share all your ideas and thoughts in your working environment? Can you, for example, express your thoughts or ideas for improving solutions to organizational problems?
 - 3- Do you believe that to continue to work in this institution, you ignore the negative situations related to work and remain silent from time to time?
 - 4- Do you believe you will not be taken seriously because of a lack of experience or your position when you report a work-related issue or problem?
 - 5- Do you believe that your manager or colleagues may have a critical attitude towards you when you speak openly?
 - 6- Does "the best-I-know attitude" of your high-level colleagues make your statements meaningless? In other words, do you believe that he doesn't listen to your ideas?
 - 7- Do you believe that people who report problems in the work environment are not welcome? Do your colleagues support you when you speak openly?
 - 8- In your opinion, do the courtesy rules in the working environment affect the sharing of healthy information?
-

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with the participants. Each interview session with an average participant lasted approximately 45 minutes. Two researchers conducted the interviews, whereas other team members were responsible for the subsequent data analysis. Interviews were conducted with the participant's permission, adhering to ethical principles, and recorded using a voice recorder. Participants were assured that these recordings would only be used for the intended research purpose and would not be disclosed elsewhere. All participants consented to the voice recordings. In addition, important points were documented in writing by the researcher during the interviews. To ensure the reliability and accuracy of the interview results, questions were posed to the participants in a comfortable and conducted atmosphere.

Participants

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Sakarya University Ethics Committee (dated 02/09/2020, numbered 61923333/050.99/). Before the interview, informed consent was obtained from all participants who confirmed their voluntary participation in this study. The participant pool comprises 12 research assistants, comprising 4 females and 8 males, employed across two public universities.

Validity and Reliability Findings

To ensure the validity of this study, methods such as long-term interaction, participant confirmation, and expert review were employed (Holloway & Wheeler, 1996). Researchers dedicated significant time to the interviews and conducted them in person, fostering an intimate understanding of the participants and enabling observation of consistency between verbal responses and body language. This approach contributed to mitigating researchers' biases and enhancing the study's objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, to prevent misinterpreting of participants' responses, clarification questions were posed during the interview, the researchers asked them questions like "... do you mean like that?" The confirmation mechanism was thought to ensure that responses accurately reflected participants' intended meanings (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). Expert opinions were obtained during the data coding process and theme development. Moreover, the inclusion of numerous direct quotations from participants enhanced internal reliability (Shenton, 2004; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). Two pilot studies were conducted with two participants each during data collection to ensure clarity of expressions in the interview format. Reliability enhancement strategies included data source triangulation (interview data and secondary data), method triangulation (observation, focus group, and interview), and researcher triangulation during analysis (Denzin, 1978). The coding consistency among researchers was found to be 90%, with the remaining 10% reflecting minor discrepancies, which were resolved through discussions among the researchers.

Data Analysis

To facilitate data analysis, sound recordings were transcribed into written texts, with each participant's data documented in separate text files. Participants were anonymized as "Participants 1,2,3...." Content analysis was employed to unveil themes and sub-themes from the interviews, aiming to elucidate participants' attitudes, thoughts, and values (Büyükoztürk et al., 2018). MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2018 was utilized for data analysis. Specialist input was sought in theme development, with consensus reached among experts and researchers regarding the three main themes and corresponding sub-themes. The study's framework delineating the relationship between reasons for silence and power distance perception was constructed based on these themes and the researchers' inputs. Furthermore, participants' perspectives were adhered to throughout the study to ensure its reliability and validity, with all stages meticulously detailed.

Findings

Themes and Sub-Themes

Data analysis conducted through content analysis revealed three main themes: (1) Communication, (2) Power Distance, and (3) Silence. Under the Communication theme, sub-themes recurrently highlighted by all participants ($f = 12$) and perceived to contribute to communication challenges were identified as insufficient idea sharing and abstention. Additionally, most participants ($f = 8$) emphasized "improper courtesy" as a significant barrier to effective communication. Regarding Power Distance, all participants ($f = 12$) cited high levels of distance, an "I-know" attitude, and heavy workload as contributing factors, with the majority ($f = 10$) noting perceptions of injustice. Furthermore, a significant number of participants ($f = 11$) emphasized the necessity of maintaining a low power distance to uphold the institutional order.

Regarding the Silence theme, all participants ($f = 12$) attributed their reluctance to speak out to insufficient support from colleagues and a lack of acknowledgment. Additionally, most participants expressed job insecurity anxiety ($f = 10$), skepticism about reaching a solution ($f = 8$), apprehension about being perceived as a complainant ($f = 7$), and fear of facing criticism ($f = 9$). Half of the participants ($f = 6$) also expressed feelings of humiliation and distrust toward the management. The themes and sub-themes identified through content analysis are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2
Results of content analysis

Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency ^a
Communication	Lack of sharing ideas	12
	The difficulty of expressing	5
	Abstention	12
	Injudicious Kindness	8
	Prejudice	2
	Gossip	2
	Make suggestions	3
	Authoritarian power structure	2
	Title	12
	High distance	12
Power Distance	Self-righteousness attitude	12
	Injustice	10
	Favouritism	4
	Work load	12
	Maintain order	11
	Humiliation	6
	Insult	1
	Threat	5
	Distrust of management	6
	Lack of colleague support	12
Silence	Lack of organizational support	2
	Anxiety of being complainant	7
	Get short shrift	12
	The belief that a solution will not be reached.	8
	Target display	1
	Critical attitude	9
	Damage to relationships	4
	Job insecurity anxiety	10
	Mobbing	4

Note. The number of sub-themes repeated by the participants.

Based on the excerpts from the participants provided in Table 2, it is evident that research assistants perceive a prevalent presence of high power distance within their working environments. Participants assert that as one ascends the hierarchical ladder, the power distance intensifies, impacting the level of centralization. Conversely, participants argued that a lower power distance is imperative for maintaining order in the working environment.

For instance, Participant 1, a male, states “*I believe that there is absolutely a great power distance, and there is certainly a hierarchical structure in the working environment. I mean, there is a case where the one who has got a little bit of title speaks.*”

Participant 6, a female, expresses, “*I’m an advocate against an excessively high power range, yet a degree of power distance is essential. Otherwise, perceptions of duty vary among individuals, leading to potential injustice and favoritism. Such behaviors are evident at various levels. Even the Dean may not be taken seriously if there is no power distance. Therefore, a balanced power distance is crucial for upholding fair-*

ness, preventing misunderstandings, and reducing prejudice. There is also favoritism at certain levels.”

Participant 8, a male, shares, *“I Feel the power distance too much. This is clearly felt, especially with a research assistant. Even my friends in the faculty who were ahead of me and have recently become doctors, try to remind me of my profession and what I am required to do. I consider them malevolent. When we move down from seniority, the perception of power distance intensifies, suggesting an inverse correlation. It is intriguing, but precisely the case. The only explanation for this is the lack of experience and self-awareness among individuals. I believe that our senior managers have already solidified their positions and no longer require external validation. However, newer or mid-level managers may lean toward utilizing power distance as a way to express something or prove themselves, showcase their capabilities, and establish authority.”*

Participant 11, a female, reflects, *“I perceive male domination, evident in the effectiveness of their words and their tendency to employ harsh treatment. This gender-originated power distance is tangible.”*

According to the findings, research assistants tended to remain silent primarily because they believed their opinions would not be valued or taken seriously, and that any potential solutions would not be implemented due to the prevailing organizational culture and their perceived lower status within the hierarchy. These findings indicate that research assistants withhold their input due to their concerns about how it will be received in the workplace and their perception of lacking experience.

Participant 2, a female, shares, *“To maintain my position within this institution, I often find myself silently enduring unfavorable work conditions. Despite grievances to middle-level managers about unfair workload distribution or negative situations affecting my performance due to management oversight or indifference, I have sometimes been disregarded. In such instances, I prefer to remain silent and continue my work. The power distance I perceive in the environment means that I am not taken seriously until probably when I complete my doctorate.”*

Participant 6, a female, recounts, *“Our managers have used a disturbing phrase. A rector from another university ranked individuals, placing one professor first, followed by two associate professors, three doctoral lecturers, four lecturers, five students, six dogs, and seven research assistants. This ranking implies that we as research assistants, are deemed to be lower in status than dogs. Such a sentiment discourages open communication. When our managers echo this sentiment or similar ideas from other institutions, they indirectly remind us to ‘know our place’ and recognize our limit’.”*

Participant 7, a male, voice, *“Communication poses a significant challenge for us. Personally, I do not believe our opinions are truly heard by the higher-ups. Effective communication seems unattainable. It is evident that we are not taken seriously. In this environment, it feels as though being a research assistant is synonymous with being invisible unless you hold a doctorate. Furthermore, I perceive favoritism among the research assistants, which contributes to a pervasive sense of bias.”*

As evident from the findings, one solution to reduce organizational silence is to maintain open upward communication channels. Research indicates that when research assistants perceive that their higher-level colleagues can openly communicate with managers, their perceptions of organizational culture improve. This positive relationship underscores the importance of employees feeling psychologically safe to express themselves within the organization, with management being receptive to communication (Botero & Dyne, 2009). Morrison and Milliken (2000) state that sharing ideas and knowledge can lead to workplace improvement opportunities. Conversely, employees may become despondent and remain silent if they believe that their input will not make a difference. Additionally, Vakola and Bouradas (2005) discovered a significant relationship between top management attitudes toward silence and communication opportunities and employees’ tendency to remain silent. Research further indicates that healthy communication between managers and employees reduces perceived role uncertainty, leading to increased job performance and satisfaction (Johlke & Duhan, 2000).

Once again, due to their job title, research assistants abstain from sharing information and ideas out of anxiety about exhibiting a courtesy-based attitude. Any objection is considered disrespectful, especially in the academic environment, where increased power distance according to the title is perceived as normal. According to these results, employees in the research assistant position believe that they might encounter judgmental or critical attitudes when expressing their opinions clearly. In addition, they fear the negative reactions they may receive from their managers due to increased workloads. Participants in the study argued that various factors contribute to employee silence, including work-related fears, authoritarian executive characteristics, the prevalence of fear cultures within organizational structures, and the uneasiness of being socially isolated. These factors collectively reinforce the behavior of remaining silent among research assistants.

Participant 7, a male, remarks, *“A research assistant who knows how to behave, sit, and talk in the working environment typically adheres to courtesy rules. Personally, I have always respected these rules with all my managers, or at least I believe I have. However, adhering strictly to courtesy norms can sometimes hinder effective communication. I refrain from highlighting mistakes made by higher-level managers, particularly in collaborative projects, opting instead to correct them myself out of courtesy.”*

Participant 8, a male, suggests, *“The prevalence of courtesy rules may contribute to this silence, hindering healthy information sharing. While our profession may appear respectable from the outside, excessive adherence to improper courtesy norms exists within. Since childhood, we have been taught to respect our superiors, including managers. This mentality persists, creating barriers to open communication. I often feel that this improper courtesy culture is sufficient to prevent the sharing of business-related information. Furthermore, the significance placed on titles outweighs factors such as age or job role, intensifying the issue.”*

Participant 8, a female, expresses, *“At times, I refrain from sharing information due to courtesy rules. I choose silence to avoid reactions like ‘Do you know more than I do?’ I believe that some higher-level colleagues may react critically to open discussions on certain topics, which could hinder constructive outcomes.”*

Participant 11, a female, explains, *“When issues are raised, there is a fear of being targeted publicly, which silences me. Targets are indirectly identified rather than directly addressed. Additionally, hierarchical structures in meetings lead to one-sided information sharing. Due to infrequent meetings, we are not accustomed to expressing our thoughts freely.”*

As evident from the findings, there are notable challenges in downward communication within the chain of command. In this context, the quality of communication between department managers and employees outweighs the importance of communication tools or messages (Glaser, 1984). To address this, it is necessary to review attitudes toward role distribution. Regardless of one’s role, rank, or reputation, workplace norms should prioritize mutual respect. Managers must refrain from adopting a management style that fosters a culture of fear, leading employees to remain silent for self-protection, a key contribution to organizational silence. Such management approaches detrimentally impact organizational behavior, academic pursuits, career progression, organizational socialization, workplace well-being, self-confidence, and individuality (Yaman, et al., 2010).

Finally, it is apparent that research assistants exhibit a tendency toward silence due to job insecurity. Despite harboring thoughts and opinions, they hesitate to voice them, fearing insufficient support from colleagues and managers.

Participant 1, a male, remarks, *“Job insecurity is our primary concern, perhaps intensified by the political climate in the country. We refrain from discussing certain topics, fearing potential repercussions that could jeopardize our employment security.”*

Participant 8, a male, reflects, *“The power distance sometimes appears to be a vindictive sanction in our workplace. For example, one becomes more often controlled*

by investigations, threats, and overtime obligations prevalent in our faculty. Naturally, job insecurity is a significant concern. Our profession ties us closely to the university, making it challenging to transition elsewhere without uprooting our lives. Private sector opportunities are not always readily available, especially considering my specialization in research over the past seven or eight years. This lack of practical knowledge outside academia intensifies anxieties about employability. Consequently, I have developed a defense mechanism, I withdraw and remain silent.”

Participant 9, a female, laments, “*Regrettably, support is lacking when issues are reported. Despite receiving validation among ourselves after the meeting, those who agree during the meeting often fail to support each other afterward. This reluctance stems from a sense of unease, driven by anxieties about job insecurity.*”

In this section, participants share their personal experiences, highlighting employees’ sensitivity to organizational challenges. Despite their awareness and ability to evaluate the situation, they often feel a lack of support and trust from colleagues. Job insecurity and anxiety compel them to remain silent. It is believed that unity among employees at the same hierarchical level in expressing organizational issues and supporting each other will empower top management to take more constructive steps in addressing these issues.



Figure 1. Word cloud

It is evident from the interviews with research assistants that their tendency toward silence primarily stems from the organizational culture and their position within it (Cohen & Baruch,

2022). This behavior reflects a broader perception of how their institutions are managed. The prevalence of expressions such as power distance, the significance of the title, and being disregarded due to lack of experience suggests that organizational management styles align with their perception of silence and organizational culture. It is evident that employees with this title tend to remain silent due to anxiety about being targeted or facing criticism. This aligns with the concepts of *acquiescent silence* and *defensive silence* found in the literature, where silence serves as a form of self-protection and withdrawal (Vakola & Bouradas 2005). Mutual distrust within the organization further intensifies this reluctance to speak up, as employees fear repercussions for expressing their opinions on related issues (Detert & Edmondson, 2005). Defensive silence, rooted in the literature's notion of a fear culture, underscores fear as a primary motivator for organizational silence (Akan & Oran, 2017).

Once again, social factors emerge as a significant determinant of the constitute of silence, as revealed by participants' responses. The social factors cover the harmony among employees, the distribution of obligations, and the overall atmosphere of insecurity within the organization. Participants' responses indicate a reluctance to be perceived as troublemakers in the work, leading them to avoid conflicts and doubt their ability to garner sufficient support even when expressing their ideas. This finding aligns with *the prosocial silence dimension* highlighted in the literature. Moreover, the lack of communication in the workplace prevents employees from accessing maximum information about organizational issues and participating effectively in organizational processes (Ulker & Kanten, 2009). Consequently, the organization becomes enveloped in a "spiral of silence," wherein individuals refrain from expressing their views due to perceived social pressure and fear of negative consequences (Noelle-Neumann, 1991).

The responses indicating a keen sense of power distance also suggest the presence of a climate of silence stemming from *the institutional arrangements*, which is consistent with findings in the literature. Park and Keil (2009) assert that the climate of silence often arises from managerial practices. Rhee et al. (2017) examined the relationship between power distance and silence among workers in a heavy industry company in South Korea and found that power distance significantly influenced organizational silence. Similarly, Ayan (2015) discovered in their study on banking sector employees that transformative leadership style negatively affects organizational silence, whereas authoritarian leadership styles have a positive effect on organizational silence (see also Cohen & Baruch, 2022). In academic studies, Sağlam et al. (2018) identified a significant relationship between power distance and organizational silence. Likewise, Aydin et al. (2016) observed that research assistants tend to remain silent in cases characterized by power distance. In a qualitative study by Bayram (2010) on the organizational silence of academicians, significant variations in organizational silence scale scores were noted among academicians with different titles, depending on their duration of work, age, and administrative duties.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore institutional factors as the primary driving force behind the silent attitude observed among research assistants. Many participants expressed beliefs that the hierarchical structures within their institutions hinder the free sharing of ideas, opinions, and suggestions, fostering a culture of submission and increasing the tendency to remain silent. However, organizations benefit from employees who are willing to share their knowledge and ideas without reservation (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997). By removing some organizational and administrative barriers, creating a positive organizational culture, and providing the necessary support, organizations can empower employees to comfortably and freely use these skills (Cohen & Baruch, 2022; Dimitris & Vakola, 2007; Boyukaslan & Aşıkoğlu, 2022).

Furthermore, the research revealed that research assistants often refrain from speaking up due to their perception that their ideas will not be valued. Consequently, they may abandon efforts to address organizational issues and withdraw from active participation. This behavior is characteristic of employees who feel that their contributions are disregarded and believe that their suggestions will not affect changes, leading to a sense of learned helplessness (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). Drawing on Hofstede's cultural framework (1980), Turkish culture exhibits characteristics of high power distance, where authority is highly valued and respect is expected. In such cultures, adherence to courtesy rules often takes precedence, leading research assistants to opt for silence as a means of self-preservation, fearing the negative consequences of expressing dissenting opinions.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The present study contributes to the literature on employee silence by examining power distance as a key factor influencing silence within university settings. Through qualitative analysis, this study unveils specific patterns linking academics' silence behavior to power distance, particularly highlighting the impact of excessive courtesy stemming from power distance on organizational silence. These findings are particularly significant considering the crucial role that universities play in various developmental areas. It is crucial for universities, as centers of innovation and knowledge dissemination, to foster an environment where all employees, including research assistants, feel empowered to voice their ideas and opinions. Silence exhibited by research assistants can have negative effects on both individual well-being and organizational effectiveness. Over time, employees who adopt a silent attitude may become disengaged from their work, leading to difficulty in meeting performance expectations. Based on the research data, it is crucial for universities to implement reforms aimed at facilitating open communication and idea-sharing among all employees. This may entail revisiting central and hierarchical management structures and considering

alternative management approaches, such as lean and participative management. In addition, developing robust feedback mechanisms and establishing effective communication networks across different organizational units and hierarchies are crucial steps in fostering an inclusive organizational culture.

The perception among research assistants that their ideas and opinions are disregarded due to their titles, or that their expectations will not be fulfilled even if they openly express themselves, serves as a significant factor driving their silence. To alleviate this sense of learned helplessness, it is recommended that academicians with higher titles should reconsider their interactions with research assistants and actively encourage their participation in decision-making processes. This can be achieved through the implementation of practices that foster constructive conflict resolution, as suggested by Kirchmeyer and Cohen (1992).

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

One important limitation of this study is its focus on a small group of research subjects. Although the sample size does not allow for generalization to other professional groups, our findings provide theoretical insights into how power distance could shape organizational silence. Future studies further explore the role of personal-psychological variables in the development of a culture of silence (see, for example, Cohen & Baruch, 2022). Consequently, the study findings may not be readily generalizable to other cultures. Considering this limitation, researchers are encouraged to conduct studies in other countries to comprehensively analyze the relationships between the behavior of silence, academicians, and power distance.

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