**DISCERNING AFRICAN VOICES IN THE BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper appraises the concept of silence and voice from individual and organizational perspectives. The concept of voice and silence from the African context was also addressed. The paper also discusses the differences between voices and silence within an organization. The reasons why some people prefer being silent on issues, and the impact of such acts on both individuals and organizations. The paper also mentioned some philosophers in Africa that has voiced out on issues and have contributed to development of Behavioral Science, and the struggle for liberation and emancipation in Africa.*

*Keywords: Discerning, Voice, Silence, Africa,*

**Introduction**

There has been a heightened interest in silence and voice in organizational theory. In every organization, employees often have ideas, information and opinions on how to improve work and organizational processes. As a results of this, these employees are compelled at times to practice voice and express their ideas, information and opinions; and on the other hand they could decided to remain silent and hold on to their ideas, information and opinions. Voice and silence are related concepts. They are both strategic forms of communication which entails expressing or showcasing ideas, opinions, and aspects of identity respectively without restricting them. (Creed, 2003; Dyne *et al.,* 2003). Characterized by being active , conscious, intentional and purposeful, voice and silence are thus important ingredients of social interaction in any organization (Dyne *et al.,* 2003).

It should be noted that voice and silence presuppose each other and social actors can either be silent or voice out their opinions, because they operate at multiple levels and deal with multiple issues at different moments in time (Moasa, 2011). Considering this fact, silenced groups or individuals can strategize on how to achieve voice out of silence. In other words, silenced groups or individuals., can strategize on how to use the voice they have on one level or about one issue and transfer it to another level or issue.

**Silence and voice: An overview.**

Silence and voice can be defined as the withholding/expression of ideas, opinions, aspects of the identity, e.g religious or political inclinations (Creed, 2003), by social actors, which could be individuals, groups, or organizations (Morrison and Milliken, 2000) for defensive or acquiescent reasons (Dyne *et al.,* 2003). Silence and voice can emanate as a result of; an individual choice (agency)-either rational calculation (strategic behavior) or as a result of emotional response (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Moreover, silence can have multiple consequences at the individual level: emotional, cognitive and behavioral consequences (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003); and also the group and the organizational level endorsement or resistance of an established order (Hirschman, 1970; Cohen, 1990). Debates that bothers on the relationship between voice and silence, sees voices to be representation, political influence and equal-consideration, whilst silences is seen as exclusion, inequality and segregation. (Moasa, 2011).

In order to draw a clarity and to define each concepts in simple terms, silence is taken at times to imply ‘loyalty’ and the assumption that nothing was wrong if concerns were not being voiced. However, researches have revealed that an incidence of silence can work against desired organizational results (Aylsworth, 2008). This paper highlights different definitions of organizational silence, in relation to voice below:

Pinder and Harlos (2001) defined silence as the absence of voice as it has its own form of communication, involving a range of cognitions, emotions or intentions such as objection or endorsement. Additionally, they recognized that the phenomenon of employee silence might take on different meanings depending on its underlying motives. Dyne*, et al., (*2003) conceptualized organizational silence as a multi-dimensional construct. He presented three types of silence: acquiescent silence, defensive silence and pro-social silence to buttress his definition . Acquiescent silence is described as an intentionally passive silent behavior. Defensive silence is described as deliberate omission of work related information based on fear of reprisal. Pro-social silence is withholding of work related information for the benefit of others including the organization (Dyne, 2003; Bogosian, 2012). Dan *et al.,* (2009) states that when most members of organizations choose to keep silent about organizational matters, silence becomes a collective behavior, this is referred to as organizational silence (Dan *et al.,* 2009: 1647).

In the actual sense, organizational silence is an inefficient organizational process that wastes cost and efforts and can take various forms, such as collection silence in meetings, low levels of participation in suggestion schemes, low levels of collective voice and so forth (Shojaie *et al.,* 2011). Drawing insights from the above definition of organizational silence, this paper in simple terms define employee silence as a situation where employees withhold information that might be useful to the organization to which they are a part of whether intentionally or unintentionally. This can happen if employees do not speak up to a supervisor or manager (Tangirala, 200\8).

**Dimensions of silence and voice**

Pinder and Harlos (2001) states **acoustic** (i.e. the absence/presence of sound waves-the physical domain) and **pragmatic** (absence/presence of speech for instrumental or strategic purposes-the human domain**). Acoustic** silence implies that silence is linked to sound and that understanding the meaning of silence implies an understanding of the context. Pinder and Harlos noted acoustic silence as ‘the integrationist view’ which always links silence to sound to the extent that silence needs sound for its own definition. On the other hand, **pragmatic** silence links silence to speech. (Moasa, 2011). Of note is the fact that the human mind can accommodate both silence and speech.

**Consequences of Silence on Organization and Employees**

**Organizational Effects**

As stated earlier employee silence in some cases could pose a major threat to organizations, which in turn could lead to a high level of dissatisfaction among employee. This could impact on absenteeism and turnover, and even abnormal behaviors (Greenberg and Baron, 1990) There is no doubt about the fact that effective communication is crucial to organization’s success. For instance, effective communication will be hindered if employee decides to be silent, and this will in turn impact negatively on the organization. Pentilla (2003) argues that, ‘employee silence is killing innovation and perpetuating poorly planned project that lead to defective products, low morale and a damaged bottom line’

The foregoing argument provides the extent to which an organization can experience set back as a result of lack of proper communication. It should be noted that instances like this could also trigger negative effect such as economic losses to the organization, indifference of employees towards their jobs, employers, and quality of work (Joinson, 1996). As mentioned earlier, the silence of employee could make the organization to suffer economic losses and malfunction. Joinson (1996) states that when major monetary losses are discovered in organizations, manager seem to take a reactive measure by trying to recover the loss, without considering the fact that employees have become indifferent as a result of the refusal of management to address employee silence. More often than not employees who are not doing their share of the work are also not speaking up with the problems they see, leading to a protracted cycle of employee silence(Joinson, 1996).

**Effects of silence on employees**

The decision to be silent also has many effects on employees. Joinson, (1998: 1048) states that ‘indifferent employees, often products of ignored employee silence, tend to feel like cogs at machinery factories, developing the attitude “to get along, go along” .The above characteristic according to Clemmer (2008) could lead to depression and other health issues, which can in turn make employees to resort to taking pills and alcohol as a cure for the unpleasant situations they are experiencing at work. These in the real sense have tendencies to aggravate their problems. Another instance of such effects on employees is expounded by Tangirala, who argues that ‘employee silence affects personal well-being of employees, aggravates stess’, and makes them to ‘feel guilty, where they often experience psychological problems, and have trouble seeing the possibility of change’.

Conclusively, there is this misconception that employee silence only impacts on the organization, but in the real sense, it impacts on both the organization and the employees

**Why do people keep silent?**

Employee might decide to be silent over a matter as a result of fear. For instance, he or she could exercise fear of being punished by a superior for expressing his/her feelings about an issue that does not go down well with the boss. On the other hand, an individual may try to avoid an instance of being labeled, a’ complainer’ or a ‘troublemaker’ and the result of such social isolation (Creed, 2003). Silence can also emanate from the desire not to hurt another person (Dyne, *et al.,* 2003) or from a desire to act strategically and manage one’s image with those above the person in a hierarchy (Aylsworth, 2008).

Aylsworth, 2008, further discovered that people who are high in self-monitoring seems to act strategically in their decisions about whether to speak up and what to say. Moreover, people can also be silent because they do not believe that their opinion would make any significant impression and voicing out might not necessarily proffer a solution. Since silence is a behavior with multiple causes, it is a behavior that is hard to interpret. People who observe silence have to try to make sense of a manifestation that looks the same but actually signals potentially quite different states of mind in the actor.

The fact that, there are so many motives for silence means that it is hard to diagnose the meaning of silence (Dyne *et al*., 2003). While attributions as to the meaning of silence on the part of the observer are likely to be critical to how the interaction unfolds, these attributions are also highly likely to be inaccurate (Dyne *et al.,* 2003). Thus, the behavior of silence and efforts to interpret it may often begin a cycle of miscommunication.

Morrison and Milliken (2000) advanced other organizational elements that can trigger silence. The summary is given below:

* When Managers are from different financial or economic backgrounds
* When Management team is uniform in backgrounds
* When Managers value hierarchies and harmony
* When there are High level of difference (e.g. gender, age) between management and employees
* When ever Management emphasis on control and efficiency
* Where Organization operates in low-munificence environment
* Where Top managers are hired from outside the organization
* Where Organization relies heavily on contract labor
* Where Organizational structure has centralized decision making
* Management devolves decision making.
* Where Organizational structure less likely to have formal upward feedback mechanisms where Management fosters formal feedback from below.
* Where Management reacts negatively to feedback and less likely to solicit it.
* Where there are mid to lower level employees able to directly interrelate.

**Voice in Africa.**

Africans have exhibited an attitude of silence in the pre-colonization era, during colonization and in the post-colonization era. This could be traced to the fact that the experience of colonial policies and practices, which resulted in poverty, corruption, strife, lack of freedom of information, amongst others, have impacted negatively on African mentality from one generation to another. Of note is the fact that colonialists disintegrated family units by destroying cooperative structures, which led to total silencing of individuals and groups in Africa (Boyer, 2006). In a similar vein, unparallel power relations also triggered oppressive interactions which in turn silenced the voices of Africans, which lowered Africans’ self-esteem, ability to exercise authority, and restriction on choice. Colonization also silenced African voices through the suppression of their languages and disintegration of their cultures and social structures resulting in ongoing oppression and disempowerment (Boyer, 2006).

As time passed by, African countries were granted independence. Among those African personalities that broke the silent stance of Africans and voiced out to make contributions to liberation and emancipation are Wole Soyinka, Anthony Enahoro, Nelson Mandela amongst others. Although several attempts were made to silence these personalities, but they did not relent on their efforts. Other Africans like Abdul Raham Badavvi, an Egyptian existentialist professor of philosophy and poet, his unrelenting voice made Mammah Gadafi to arrest him and publicly burn his personal library. Other Africans are Zaki Naguib Mohammed of Egypt, Chinua Achebe etc. (Boyer, 2006)

Today, many African countries are moving in a democratic direction, even though the degree of commitment and speed of change vary considerably. The problems of instituting democratic government in Africa include overcoming the resistance of entrenched governments to the pressures of local activists, consolidating political changes, and legitimating democratic concepts in Africa. Nevertheless, over the last few years, there have been successful revolts through expression of voices against authoritarian leaders in Ethiopia, Somalia, Mali, and Lesotho.

Akerele (2012) in his book ‘Thoughts on Leadership’ contends that it is important for Africans to develop conscious awareness of their responsibilities and obligations towards the promotion of the welfare of the black people. He also challenged Nigerian to take the lead in the restoration of black people in light of the fact that black had severely been marginalized, trampled upon and disrespected. He also emphasized repeated discrimination against the black on the basis of their skin pigmentations. In his views, only the black skinned people have not achieved major technological breakthrough. Akerele holds that even amongst the black people, negative image is been driven in form of self-rejection. For instance some black people bleach their skins to look like white, or straighten its hairs for them to look like the hairs of other races and the imitative of white people in their dressing. The work of Akerele has been referenced by other writers in behavioral sciences and has also changed the perception of black readers, thus, his significant contribution to African voices.

It is also noteworthy to state the contributions of A.M. Babu Zanzibar, whilst he was detained in prison for false charges he wrote his classic book “African socialism or socialist African which he used to outline a comprehensive strategy for Africa’s economic and political development his enthusiasm, warmth, openness and clarity made him an immensely popular teacher. He contributed to the development of behavioral science by involving in the resurgence of Pan Africanism which led to the establishment of Pan African movement.

**Concluding Remarks**

The protection of freedom of information (i.e. voice) and human rights is a means of bringing about improved governance in Africa. for example, the media play a critical role in the maintenance of democracy by providing a bridge between all of the different elements in the African society. The media is "often overlooked in Africa, yet it could provide a strong voice and links amongst African countries, which at present are too isolated from one another .Of note is the fact that the African Union seems not to have lived up to expectations in unity constituents countries and in airing the voice of the African people globally) .

This paper is of the opinion that there are nonetheless severe obstacles to the performance of this role by the media. For example, it has been observed that almost everywhere in Africa, radio and television are under direct government control. Radio is often particularly important in rural areas, and among people not literate in English language, whereas newspapers are expensive to run, expensive as a medium to express the voice of the people, and can be subject to government censorship or indirect pressures over matters such as the supply of newsprint. In countries like Mozambique, the media were assigned a political role as agents of mobilization. In South Africa, although restrictions have been eased, newspapers still retain a high degree of self-censorship. (Kpundeh, 1992). Consequently,the media (i.e media mediums like the Nigerian Television Authority, Radio Corporation of Nigeria, amongst others) should be free from state control and entrusted to professional journalists who, in areas such as Nigeria and southern Africa, have maintained a courageous commitment to the freedom of voice. Professional training is needed for journalists, especially in countries whose press has been totally under state control. Most specifically, African journalists to train younger colleagues, organize themselves into associations and trade unions, and to sponsor conferences around the issue of the press and democratic voicing . These steps, could contribute to the emergence of a free and independent press in Africa, with persistent reporting in turn contributing expression of voices and improved governance."

It is also important for the African press to move away from lavishly reporting the activities in the cities alone. Voices of the rural dwellers should be aired. Lastly, the use of alternative media, such as drama, news murals, and posters to educate people about rights was also recommended.

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