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ASSESSING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORKPLACE CONFLICT AND EMPLOYEE SILENCE

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Abstract: This study explores the relationship between workplace conflict and employee silence, focusing on various conflict-handling styles and the levels of silence exhibited by employees in a state university setting. Utilizing a quantitative analysis of employee silence indicators, the findings reveal that collaborating is the most preferred conflict-handling style, followed closely by accommodating, while avoiding is the least favored approach. Employee silence is characterized by high levels of prosocial and quiescent silence, indicating that employees often refrain from voicing concerns for the benefit of the organization. In contrast, opportunistic and acquiescent silence are viewed neutrally, suggesting a need for further investigation into the underlying causes of these behaviors. Correlation analysis demonstrates significant relationships between various forms of silence and workplace conflict, particularly highlighting the impact of conflict on quiescent and acquiescent silence. The results are discussed in relation to Social Exchange Theory, Conservation Resource Theory, Fear of Retaliation Theory, and Organizational Justice Theory, emphasizing the importance of fostering a culture of open communication and collaborative conflict resolution. Recommendations for organizational practices are provided, aimed at enhancing employee engagement and reducing the detrimental effects of silence in the workplace.

Keywords: workplace conflict, employee silence, Northeastern Mindanao State University, Lianga, Surigao del Sur

1. Introduction

Employee silence is often brought by administrative issues, treatment of employees, personal character of managers, lack of trust, bad experiences from the past, conflicts, and many more (Lee et al., 2022). The consequences of employee silence can be damaging to decision-making and change processes. If this happens, employees may feel undervalued, possess lack of control, and display discrepancy between beliefs and behavior (Alkhlaifat, 2021). Silence from employees may be extremely harmful to a company. Employee silence may lead to a lack of concern among employees. Employees that are unconcerned may disregard the ideals of their company, which might result in subpar performance (John, & Manikandan, 2019). Employers and workers constantly pay a high price for this point of view.

In the study of Penaloza (2020), it appeared that there was a correlation between conflict and silence in a variety of settings, including social settings, workplaces, and even the national discourse. In order to provide previously repressed voices a platform to emerge, this study was carried out at a time when the United States was exploring the hidden (and visible) racial conflict existing throughout its norms and structures. A notable new behavior in the national political system existed where political employees, after being fired, authored books detailing the conflicts and

difficulties they had as a result of their voices being consistently stifled across many organizations. Furthermore, in the private sector, businesses that were thought to be worth hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars were collapsing and failing as the public learned the truth about the actions of their leaders and the problems with their enterprises (Wingard, 2019).

Moreover, employee silence not only affects interpersonal relations but also undermines organizational learning and innovation. When employees withhold information, concerns, or suggestions, critical insights that could prevent errors or foster improvement remain untapped. This absence of open communication creates an environment where mistakes are repeated, and opportunities for growth are missed. Research indicates that psychological safety—a climate where employees feel safe to speak up—is strongly linked to organizational adaptability and performance (Edmondson & Lei, 2022). Without this safety, silence becomes self-perpetuating, as employees interpret prior inaction as a signal that their input is neither welcomed nor valued.

In addition, silence can exacerbate workplace stress and disengagement, further hampering productivity. Workers who feel unheard often experience reduced job satisfaction and increased burnout, as their emotional and professional needs go unmet (Nguyen, 2021). This disengagement has downstream effects on team cohesion, as silent employees may withdraw from collaborative efforts and avoid contributing to problem-solving processes. Over time, this dynamic leads to a fragmented workforce, where trust erodes and informal communication channels weaken—deteriorating both morale and operational effectiveness.

Finally, addressing employee silence requires deliberate organizational strategies that prioritize voice and trust. Leadership behaviors—such as demonstrating empathy, inviting feedback, and responding constructively—can mitigate silence by signaling that employee input matters (Zhou & George, 2023). Implementing structured voice mechanisms (e.g., suggestion systems, regular check-ins, anonymous reporting) also helps bridge communication gaps and encourages contributions without fear of reprisal. When organizations invest in these strategies, they not only reduce the harmful effects of silence but also create a culture of shared responsibility and continual improvement.

This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the relationship between workplace conflict and multiple dimensions of employee silence within a higher education context, where such relationships remain under-explored. By focusing on a state university setting, the study provides context-specific insights into how conflict dynamics show association with silence behaviors among academic and non-academic personnel. Through an examination of employee silence through the lens of workplace conflict, this research study aims to analyze the relationship between these two factors. Specifically, it aims to:

1. To determine the most-preferred workplace conflict-handling style of the employees at Northeastern Mindanao State University-Lianga Campus;
2. To measure the level of employee silence at Northeastern Mindanao State University-Lianga Campus;
3. To test the relationship between workplace conflict and employee silence; and

2. Literature Review

The literature review examines key concepts and existing studies related to workplace conflict and employee silence. It is organized into three main sections:

Workplace Conflict, Employee Silence, and Relationship Between Workplace Conflict and Employee Silence. This structure provides a clear synthesis of how conflict dynamics influence employees' decisions to withhold or express their thoughts, forming the foundation for the present study.

2.1 Workplace Conflict

Workplace conflict has been identified as a significant driver of employee silence. Penaloza (2020) highlighted that conflicts in social and professional settings are closely associated with the suppression of employee voice. Employees who experience unresolved conflicts often choose silence as a coping mechanism, especially in hierarchical structures where expressing dissent may be perceived as risky. The consequences extend beyond the individual, as organizations may fail to detect operational inefficiencies or systemic problems. Wingard (2019) illustrated that even high-profile organizations experienced failures when employees' voices were consistently stifled, demonstrating the broader implications of silence on organizational transparency and sustainability.

Workplace conflict is a common organizational phenomenon that arises due to differences in values, work goals, and interpersonal relationships among employees (Omisore, 2021). It often occurs when individuals perceive incompatibility in interests, beliefs, or approaches to accomplishing tasks within the organization (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2022). Scholars emphasize that workplace conflict may take several forms, including task conflict, relationship conflict, and process conflict, each affecting employees differently (Rahim, 2021). When conflict is not managed effectively, it can result in decreased cooperation, emotional strain, and reduced productivity among employees (Tabassi, Abdullah, & Bryde, 2022).

Also, workplace conflict has been found to significantly influence communication patterns and employee participation in organizations (Zhang, Cao, & Tjosvold, 2022). Employees who experience high levels of interpersonal conflict may choose silence as a strategy to avoid confrontation or further tension in the workplace (Xu, Loi, & Chow, 2021). Studies indicate that employees often remain silent when conflict with supervisors or colleagues creates fear of negative evaluation or punishment (Liang & Farh, 2022). As a result, unresolved workplace conflict can suppress open communication and discourage employees from expressing their ideas or concerns (Detert & Edmondson, 2023).

2.2 Employee Silence

Employee silence is a complex organizational behavior influenced by various factors, including administrative issues, treatment of employees, personal characteristics of managers, lack of trust, previous negative experiences, and workplace conflicts (Lee et al., 2022). When employees withhold opinions, ideas, or concerns, the organization may face severe consequences. Silence can undermine decision-making processes and hinder organizational change, as employees may feel undervalued, lack a sense of control, and experience a discrepancy between their beliefs and behaviors (Alkhlaifat, 2021). Prolonged employee silence may result in a lack of engagement, decreased concern for organizational goals, and sub-optimal performance, ultimately costing both employers and employees in terms of productivity and organizational effectiveness (John & Manikandan, 2019).

Furthermore, employee silence refers to the intentional withholding of ideas, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues that could improve organizational performance (Morrison, 2023). Employees may remain silent when they believe

that speaking up may lead to negative consequences such as criticism, retaliation, or conflict escalation (Brinsfield, 2021). Organizational climate, leadership behavior, and perceived psychological safety are important factors that influence whether employees choose to speak up or remain silent (Knoll & van Dick, 2021). When employees frequently engage in silence behavior, organizations may lose valuable feedback that could enhance innovation, decision-making, and problem-solving processes (Wang & Jiang, 2023).

Recent studies highlight that different types of employee silence, such as acquiescent silence, defensive silence, and prosocial silence, which may emerge in response to workplace conflict (Knoll, Wegge, Unterrainer, Silva, & Jönsson, 2021). Acquiescent silence occurs when employees feel that speaking up will not lead to meaningful change within the organization (Morrison, 2023). Defensive silence is motivated by fear of negative consequences, particularly when employees anticipate conflict or retaliation (Brinsfield, 2021). Meanwhile, prosocial silence may occur when employees withhold information to protect colleagues or maintain harmony in the workplace despite existing conflicts (Wang & Jiang, 2023).

2.3 Relationship between Workplace Conflict and Employee Silence

Workplace conflict has been widely recognized as a critical antecedent of employee silence, as it influences how employees evaluate the risks associated with speaking up in organizational settings (Zhang et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2021). Employees who experience interpersonal or task-related conflict are more likely to withhold their opinions to avoid further tension and preserve working relationships (Liang & Farh, 2022; Knoll & van Dick, 2021). In high-conflict environments, speaking up may be perceived as risky, particularly in hierarchical organizations where power distance is evident (Detert & Edmondson, 2023; Wang & Jiang, 2023). Consequently, employees may adopt silence as a coping mechanism to protect themselves from potential negative consequences such as criticism or retaliation (Brinsfield, 2021; Harlos & Knoll, 2021). This behavior supports the assumptions of Social Exchange Theory, where employees weigh the potential costs and benefits of voicing concerns and may choose silence when perceived risks outweigh expected gains (Yao et al., 2022; Mazzone et al., 2024).

Moreover, workplace conflict influences different forms of employee silence, particularly quiescent and acquiescent silence, which are often associated with fear and resignation (Knoll et al., 2021; Morrison, 2023). Employees exposed to ongoing or poorly managed conflict may develop a sense of psychological insecurity, leading them to remain silent to avoid worsening the situation (Edmondson & Lei, 2022; Liang & Farh, 2022). Research indicates that quiescent silence emerges when employees fear negative consequences, while acquiescent silence reflects a belief that speaking up will not lead to meaningful change (Brinsfield, 2021; Wang & Jiang, 2023). In addition, conflict may reduce psychological safety, thereby discouraging open communication and limiting employee participation in decision-making processes (Detert & Edmondson, 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). These findings suggest that unresolved workplace conflict not only suppresses employee voice but also reinforces a culture of silence that can negatively affect organizational learning and performance (Xu et al., 2021; Morrison, 2023).

In summary, employee silence, often triggered by workplace conflict and managerial practices, has profound negative effects on organizational performance and employee well-being. Addressing this issue requires deliberate organizational strategies, including fostering psychological safety, encouraging open communication,

and implementing structured mechanisms to ensure employees' voices are heard. These interventions not only mitigate the harmful effects of silence but also promote engagement, innovation, and organizational sustainability.

3. Theoretical Framework

While multiple theories provide valuable insights, this study primarily anchors its explanation on Social Exchange Theory and Fear of Retaliation Theory to provide a more focused theoretical interpretation of the findings.

Workplace conflict can be related to employee silence through the lens of Social Exchange Theory, which posits that individuals make decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis of their actions. In environments characterized by conflict, employees may perceive that speaking up carries significant risks, such as damaged relationships, retaliation, or unfavorable evaluations. As a result, employees may choose to remain silent, believing that the personal and professional costs of voicing concerns outweigh the potential benefits of open communication. This decision to stay silent becomes a form of self-preservation within a contentious workplace environment (Yao et al., 2022).

Additionally, the Fear of Retaliation Theory also plays a role in understanding the relationship between workplace conflict and employee silence. This theory highlights how fear of negative consequences, such as job loss, demotion, or ostracism, can discourage employees from speaking out. In a conflict-ridden environment, the fear of being targeted or further isolated by those involved in the conflict may push employees to choose silence as a safer alternative. The perceived risk of retaliation thus contributes significantly to why employees may withhold their thoughts or concerns (Harlos & Knoll, 2021).

Based on the reviewed literature and theoretical grounding, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Workplace conflict is positively related to employee silence.
- H2: Workplace conflict is positively related to quiescent silence.
- H3: Workplace conflict is positively related to prosocial silence.
- H4: Workplace conflict is positively related to opportunistic silence.
- H5: Workplace conflict is positively related to acquiescent silence.

4. Methods

The study was conducted among the employees of Northeastern Mindanao State University (NEMSU)-Liang campus, focusing on the influence of workplace conflict on employee silence. A total of 117 employees out of the 166 population were selected as respondents, with the sample size determined through the Raosoft sample size calculator, ensuring a representative and statistically significant sample. The sample size of 117 respondents is considered adequate for correlation analysis and meets the minimum requirements for social science research, ensuring sufficient statistical power for detecting relationships among variables.

This method was chosen to account for a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, providing a reliable basis for the study's findings. The sampling technique employed was simple random sampling, allowing each employee an equal opportunity to be included in the study, thus minimizing bias. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to capture the experiences and perceptions of employees regarding workplace conflict and its impact on their decision to remain silent. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and voluntary participation,

were strictly observed throughout the research process to ensure the integrity of the data and the protection of respondents' rights.

The study utilized the Thomas–Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) to assess the conflict-handling styles of the participants. The instrument categorizes conflict responses into five modes: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. Scores for each mode were aggregated to determine the most and least preferred workplace conflict-handling styles among the respondents.

The statistical tool used to analyze the level of employee silence was Mean and Standard Deviation. The mean was used to determine the average level of responses for each indicator of employee silence, while the standard deviation measured the variability or dispersion of the responses. These statistical measures helped describe the respondents' level of quiescent, prosocial, opportunistic, and acquiescent silence in the workplace.

The relationship between workplace conflict and employee silence was analyzed using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient. This statistical tool was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between workplace conflict and the different dimensions of employee silence, namely quiescent silence, prosocial silence, opportunistic silence, and acquiescent silence.

The internal consistency of the research instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The results revealed that the overall scale demonstrated excellent reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.91, indicating a high level of internal consistency among the items.

5. Results

This section presents the findings of the study on workplace conflict and employee silence among employees of Northeastern Mindanao State University–Liang Campus. The results are organized according to the study objectives, including the preferred conflict-handling styles, the level of employee silence, and the relationship between workplace conflict and the different dimensions of employee silence.

5.1 Workplace Conflict Handling Styles

Based on the Table 1 results, for each pair of conflict-handling modes, it summarizes the total scores for each style across all participants. This will help identify the most and least preferred conflict-handling styles.

Table 1. Workplace Conflict Handling Styles

Workplace Conflict-Handling Style	Total Score
Accommodating	655
Collaborating	707
Compromising	586
Competing	650
Avoiding	488

The results presented in **Table 1** indicate that *collaborating* is the most preferred workplace conflict-handling style among employees, with the highest total score of 707. This suggests that employees tend to adopt a cooperative approach in managing conflict, emphasizing open communication, mutual problem-solving, and the pursuit

of win–win outcomes.

The *accommodating* (655) and *competing* (650) styles also received relatively high scores, indicating that employees may adjust their conflict strategies depending on the situation. The preference for accommodating suggests a willingness to yield to others to preserve harmony, while the presence of competing behavior implies that some employees assert their positions when necessary.

Notably, *avoiding* recorded the lowest score (488), indicating that employees are less likely to withdraw from conflict situations. This finding suggests that employees generally prefer to address conflicts rather than ignore them, which is a positive indicator of engagement in workplace interactions. However, when interpreted alongside the study's findings on employee silence, it may imply that while employees do not completely avoid conflict situations, they may still withhold their thoughts or concerns during such interactions.

It may be considered that the preference for the collaborating conflict-handling style has a significant relationship with the collectivist cultural orientation commonly observed in Filipino workplaces, where maintaining harmony, respect, and interpersonal relationships is highly valued. This cultural tendency may also explain why employees exhibit higher levels of prosocial silence, as withholding opinions may be perceived as a way to preserve group cohesion and avoid interpersonal conflict.

5.2 The Level of Employee Silence

The data indicates a nuanced view of employee silence, where constructive silence is acknowledged, but there are also areas of concern regarding the neutrality of opportunistic and acquiescent silence. This suggests a potential need for interventions or discussions to encourage a more open communication culture, addressing the reasons behind the neutral responses.

Table 2. Level of Employee Silence

Indicator	SD	Mean	Descriptive Level
Quiescent Silence	.92	3.58	Agree
Prosocial Silence	.82	3.88	Agree
Opportunistic Silence	1.1	3.08	Neutral
Acquiescent Silence	1.1	3.05	Neutral
Total	.78	3.40	Agree

Quiescent silence received a mean score of 3.58 (SD = 0.92), indicating agreement that employees often refrain from voicing concerns. Prosocial silence showed an even higher mean score of 3.88 (SD = 0.82), suggesting a strong belief that silence can benefit the team or organization. In contrast, opportunistic silence had a neutral mean of 3.08 (SD = 1.1), reflecting divided opinions about the advantages of withholding input for personal gain. Similarly, acquiescent silence also scored neutrally at 3.05 (SD = 1.1), indicating a lack of strong feelings among employees about remaining silent due to resignation or indifference. Overall, the total silence score stood at 3.40 (SD = 0.78), signifying an overall agreement that silence is a prevalent behavior in the workplace, warranting further exploration of its implications on team dynamics and communication culture.

5.3 The Relationship of Workplace Conflict on Employee Silence

The findings from the study on the relationship between workplace conflict

and employee silence reveal significant insights into how conflict associates various dimensions of silence among employees. The correlation coefficients indicate that quiescent silence (QS) is associated with workplace conflict at 0.25, suggesting a moderate tendency for employees to withhold their thoughts and opinions in response to conflict. Similarly, opportunistic silence (OS) shows a correlation of 0.24, indicating that employees might choose to remain silent for self-serving reasons when conflicts arise. Acquiescent silence (AS) has the highest correlation at 0.26, which suggests that employees may agree to avoid conflict rather than voice their concerns. In contrast, prosocial silence (PS) has a negligible correlation of 0.01, indicating that employees are less likely to remain silent for the benefit of others in a conflicted environment. Overall, the results, with a mean correlation of 0.25, underscore the importance of addressing workplace conflict to mitigate its impact on employee silence, particularly in fostering an environment where open communication is encouraged.

Table 3. The Relationship of Workplace Conflict on Employee Silence

Workplace Conflict	Employee Silence				
	QS	PS	OS	AS	Overall
	.25(0.00)	.01(0.00)	.24(0.00)	.26(0.00)	.25(0.00)

The correlation values ($r = 0.24 - 0.26$) suggest a weak to moderate positive relationship between workplace conflict and specific forms of employee silence, indicating that while conflict contributes to silence behavior, other organizational factors may also play significant roles.

It is also important to note that the findings indicate associations rather than causal relationships, as the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for causal inference.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study on the relationship between workplace conflict and employee silence are closely aligned with theoretical frameworks, notably Social Exchange Theory and Fear of Retaliation Theory. Social Exchange Theory emphasizes that employees weigh the costs and benefits of their interactions within the workplace. The preference for collaborating and accommodating conflict-handling styles, evidenced by high scores in these areas, suggests that employees prioritize mutual benefit and positive relationships over individual gain, reflecting a cooperative spirit essential for effective conflict resolution.

Fear of Retaliation Theory is also relevant; the high correlation with acquiescent silence (0.26) suggests that employees may choose silence as a defensive mechanism to avoid negative repercussions from expressing their opinions during conflicts. This theory posits that concerns about backlash can deter employees from voicing dissent, thereby promoting a culture of silence in the face of workplace conflict.

Overall, the results highlight the critical need for organizations to foster an environment that encourages open communication and addresses the underlying issues contributing to employee silence. By promoting constructive conflict resolution and supporting collaborative approaches, organizations can enhance team dynamics and ensure that silence does not become a barrier to effective communication and teamwork.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance communication and conflict resolution within the workplace:

1. NEMSU shall implement training programs that promote collaborative conflict-handling strategies among employees. This will foster teamwork and improve interpersonal relationships, making it easier to address conflicts constructively.

2. NEMSU may establish anonymous reporting systems or regular feedback sessions that allow employees to express their concerns without fear of retaliation. This can help mitigate the effects of fear of retaliation and promote open dialogue.

3. Training sessions focusing on conflict resolution skills shall be integrated into professional development programs. Employees may benefit from learning techniques to manage conflicts effectively, which may reduce instances of silence and improve overall workplace dynamics.

4. NEMSU shall ensure that policies and practices reflect fairness and equity. Regular assessments of workplace practices may help identify and address any perceived injustices, fostering an environment conducive to open communication.

5. While silence can be detrimental, the organization may encourage prosocial silence by recognizing and valuing situations where withholding input is beneficial for team cohesion. This shall help employees understand when silence can contribute positively to the organization.

6. NEMSU may conduct regular surveys to gauge employee perceptions of workplace conflict and silence. This feedback shall provide valuable insights into areas for improvement and the effectiveness of implemented strategies.

7. In addition to correlation analysis, future studies may employ regression analysis to control for demographic variables such as age, tenure, and position to further examine the predictive strength of workplace conflict on employee silence.

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