

Determining the Organizational Silence Behavior of Nursing Faculty Members and Affecting Factors

Hemşire Akademisyenlerin Örgütsel Sessizlik Davranışları ve Etkileyen Etmenlerin Belirlenmesi

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Abstract

Aim: The purpose of this study was to determine the organizational silence behaviors of nursing faculty members and the factors that influence them.

Method: This descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted using an online survey of 127 nursing faculty members working in Turkey. The data were gathered using the Organizational Silence Behavior Scale and a 14-item survey for sociodemographic and job-related information and preferences for speaking up.

Results: The participants obtained the highest mean score from “acquiescence silence” (3.33±.89), and the result of the multiple regression analysis revealed that “remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected” had the greatest influence on the subscales of the Organization Silence Behavior Scale.

Conclusion: Nursing faculty play an important role in empowering future nurses. To make valuable contributions to nursing, all faculty members should work in an environment without fear and inhibit organizational silence. To improve the nursing profession, deans/directors and policymakers in nursing should support open communication.

Keywords: Organizational silence, nursing faculty, communication, academic work environment.

Öz

Amaç: Bu araştırma, hemşire akademisyenlerin örgütsel sessizlik davranışlarını ve etkileyen etmenleri belirlemeyi amaçlamıştır.

Yöntem: Tanımlayıcı ve kesitsel tipteki bu çalışma, Türkiye genelinde çalışan 127 hemşire öğretim elamanına çevrimiçi anket uygulanarak gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veriler, Örgütsel Sessizlik Davranışı Ölçeği, tanımlayıcı bilgi formu ve çalışma ortamına ilişkin bilgiler ile konuşma tercihlerini kapsayan 14 soruluk veri toplama formu kullanılarak toplanmıştır.

Bulgular: Katılımcılar en yüksek ortalama kabullenici sessizlik alt boyutundan (3.33±.89) elde etmiş olup çoklu regresyon analizi sonucunda “akademik kariyeri olumsuz etkileyeceği için sessiz kalma” seçeneğinin, örgütsel sessizlik davranış ölçeğinin tüm alt boyutlarında en fazla etkiye sahip olduğu görülmüştür.

Sonuç: Hemşire eğitimciler geleceğin hemşirelerini güçlendirmede önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Hemşireliğe değerli katkılarda bulunabilmek için tüm öğretim elemanlarının korkusuz ve örgütsel sessizliği engelleyen bir ortamda çalışması gerekmektedir. Hemşirelik mesleğini geliştirmek için dekanlar/direktörler ve politika yapıcıların açık iletişimi desteklemesi önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Örgütsel sessizlik, hemşire akademisyenler, iletişim, akademik çalışma ortamı.

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Introduction

An academic environment should support open communication and create an organizational climate where everybody's ideas are valuable (Akan & Oran, 2017). Organizational silence can be a barrier for institutions' development in any sector (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). Especially when we consider academia, it is not only important for scientific creativity and academic freedom but also essential for empowering students (Bağ & Ekinci, 2018; Fapohunda, 2016). There have been studies about organizational silence among faculty members and nurses separately (Bağ & Ekinci, 2018; Çaylak & Altuntaş, 2017; Labrague & De los Santos, 2020; Yalçın & Baykal, 2012), all highlighting that organizational silence has been mainly affected by organizational norms, the work environment, and the fear of being excluded.

Background

Voice and silence concepts have been studied in management literature for over 40 years. Voice was first defined as an act of opposition manifested by employees to protest organizational inequity in order for managers to solve inequity issues (Hirschman, 1970). On the contrary, Tesser and Rosen (1975) argued that people remain silent because they do not feel comfortable being messengers of bad news. They defined this behavior as the "mum effect" (Tesser & Rosen, 1975). Noelle-Neumann (1974) defined the "spiral of silence," arguing that if an individual shares the same idea with the minority, that person could avoid explaining his/her opinions, and eventually those who shared the same idea with the minority would become even quieter and potentially lose their positions. All these investigations about voice and silence concepts in the management literature led to the need to explaining silence on an organizational level. Morrison and Milliken (2000) introduced a new term called "organizational silence" and defined it as a purposeful act of not sharing information or new ideas which can improve the organization. Since the time of its definition, many researchers have gone on to study the reasons for organizational silence to occur. Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin (2003) argued that the reasons are fears and beliefs, while Bowen and Blackmon (2003) stated that organizational norms are the affecting factors. Moreover, Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) suggested that the perception of a supportive work environment can determine whether one stays silent or speaks up.

Since then, there have been numerous studies conducted among different professions in addition to health care and education. Health care organizations have a hierarchical structure, this sometimes causes problems that often result in silence behaviors (Morrow, Gustavson & Jones 2016). A study conducted among nurses reported that if the nurses find their work environment unsafe, they may choose to stay silent out of fear, particularly with senior management (Yalçın & Baykal, 2012). The hierarchical structure in healthcare is similar to an academic environment (Tülübaş & Celep 2014). Studies indicated that nurses stay more silent than other healthcare professionals (Harmanci et al. 2018). Several studies conducted in Turkey, to determine the issues about organizational silence, found that the nurses remained silent in regard to ethical and administrative issues (Çaylak & Altuntaş 2017; Yurdakul, Beşen & Erdoğan, 2016). Furthermore, the studies conducted with faculty members in Turkey suggested that in general, faculty members were acting cautiously about sharing new ideas or their opinions about issues about which they were concerned (Akan & Oran, 2017; Akin & Ulusoy, 2016; Bağ & Ekinci, 2018; Tülübaş & Celep 2014). The study led by Çakıcı (2008) with 327 academic staff and 181 university administrative staff indicated that 70% of the participants remained silent in terms of ethical issues and responsibilities, management problems, employee performance, institution improvement issues, and lack of experience among faculty members, and participants reported remaining more silent due to the fear of isolation. Organizational silence has also affected burnout, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Akin & Ulusoy 2016). The study, conducted with 190 faculty members, showed that organizational silence and burnout levels were highly correlated, indicating that the lack of communication and the university's workplace environment caused faculty to remain silent (Akin & Ulusoy 2016).

Although there are various organizational silence studies with nurses in the literature, these studies were carried out in clinical areas. This topic is an understudied topic among nursing faculty. Because of this reason this study aimed uncover this issue among nursing faculty.

Methods

Aim: This study aimed to determine the organizational silence behavior of nursing faculty members and its affecting factors.

Participants and Settings: Participants were invited to the study via an email written by the primary investigator (PI). All faculty members working at university-level nursing schools in Turkey were invited to participate in the study. The study universe is comprised according to the data provided by Higher Education Council there were 1930 nursing faculty working at universities. The researchers made a list of all nursing schools in the country, looked up their websites, obtained the e-mails of the faculty members, and sent them an email using the Qualtrics system. Completion time took approximately 10-15 minutes, and their survey forms were submitted anonymously to the system. Using G * Power (3.1.9.2), a minimum sample of 81 participants were required to observe a modest effect size ($f^2=.1$) based on assumed power of 80% and a two-tailed α of 0.05. This study conducted with 127 nursing faculty.

Survey Form: The data collection form consisted of three parts. The first part was a personal information form that included seven questions regarding the participants' sociodemographic and work-related characteristics. The second part had seven questions about their preferences for speaking up and expressing their views within their work environment. These questions were created by the researchers with using existing literature (Morrison & Milliken 2000; Bowen & Blackmon 2003; Dyne et al. 2003; Yalçın, Göktepe, Türkmen & Özcan, 2020). The last part was 32-item Organizational Silence Behavior Scale (OSBS). The scale was developed by Yalçın and Baykal (2019) and aims to assess the level of organizational silence behavior. The 32-item scale has four subscales: silence climate, silence based on fear, acquiescent silence, and silence based on protecting the organization. The items are rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never stay silent) to 5 (always stay silent). The scoring is based on the mean score for the overall scale and the mean scores for the subscales. While a high mean score indicates that the level of silence is high, a low mean score indicates that the level of silence is low and The Cronbach's alpha value of the OSBS was 0.93 for the overall scale (Yalçın and Baykal 2019). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.96 for the overall scale and ranged between 0.74 and 0.95 for the subscale.

Data Collection: Data were collected using the Qualtrics system between June -October 2019. The survey link was sent by email to a total of 321 nursing faculty members whose email addresses were available on the university websites. The survey link was accessible for three months, and during this period, a reminder message was sent three times (approximately every three weeks). The survey response rate was 39.6%.

Data Analysis: The SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences 26) program was used to evaluate the data. Descriptive (number, percentage, mean, and standard deviation), independent groups t test/Mann-Whitney U test, multiple regression was used to analyze the quantitative data. The independent variables that affected the participants' OSBS subscale scores in the first analysis were evaluated with multiple linear regression (backward method), with p values less than 0.05 considered statistically significant. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the independent variables' effect on each subscale of OSBS. Nine independent variables were found to affect the silence climate subscale in the primary analysis: the faculty member's title, satisfaction with the institution, geographical region, ability to freely talk to the manager about problems, hesitating to express opinions for fear of being excluded, having an administrative duty, ability to freely express ideas within the institution, remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected, and duration of working in academia. Nine independent variables were determined to affect the silence based on fear subscale during the primary analysis: satisfaction with the institution, title, having an administrative duty, being able to freely express their opinions within the institution, duration of working in academia, hesitating to express opinions for fear of being excluded, ability to freely talk with manager about problems, remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected, and geographical region. For the acquiescence subscale, six independent variables were determined to affect the subscale score in the primary analysis: ability to freely express ideas within the institution, ability to freely talk with manager about problems, geographical region, hesitating to express opinions for fear of being excluded, satisfaction with the institution, and remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate three independent variables together: hesitating to express opinions for fear of being excluded, duration of working in academia, and remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected.

Ethical Considerations: The study was approved by an university social sciences ethical committee (2019.063.IRB3.038). The survey included a clause for stating that participants would voluntarily join the study by clicking the "yes" button. Potential participants were informed by email that their participation was voluntary, their responses were anonymous, they were free not to answer any questions, and they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Results

Table 1. Nursing faculties' demographics and work-related variables (N = 127)

Variables	n	%
Age		
≤ 35	60	47.2
> 35	67	52.8
Min-Max/± SD (24-58/37.41±8.08)		
Gender		
Male	9	7.1
Female	118	92.9
Geographical Region		
Coastal*	95	75.6
Terrestrial/inland region **	58	24.4
University type		
Private	32	25.2
Government	95	74.8
Title		
Research assistants	70	55.1
Tenure track positions	57	44.9
Duration of working in academia (years)		
≤ 10 years	79	63.8
> 10 years	48	36.2
Duration of employment at current university (years)		
≤ 5 years	67	52.8
> 5 years	60	47.2
Holding a managerial position		
Yes	30	23.6
No	97	76.4
Satisfaction with working in current institution		
Satisfied	99	78.0
Not satisfied	28	22.0
Ability to talk freely with manager about problems		
Yes	100	78.7
No	27	21.3
Expressing ideas freely in the university		
Yes	90	70.9
No	37	29.1
Hesitating to express an opinion for fear of being excluded		
Yes	32	25.1
No	95	74.8
Remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected		
Yes	78	64.4
No	49	38.6

* Marmara Region, Mediterranean Region, Black Sea Region, or Aegean Region

** Central Anatolia Region, Eastern Anatolia Region, or Southeastern Anatolia Region

Sample Characteristics and Speaking Up Preferences

The mean age of participants was 37.41±8.08 (ranging between 24 and 58 years of age). The mean employment duration in the current institution 6.48±5.54 (ranging between 1-25 years). As shown in Table 1, 74.8% of faculty members worked in public universities, 92.9% were women, 55.1% worked as research assistants or lecturers, and 76.4% had no administrative duties in the institution.

It was determined that 78.7% of the nurse academics were able to discuss their problems with their senior managers, 70.9% expressed their opinions freely in their university, 74.8% expressed their opinions without being excluded and 64.4% did not share their ideas because they thought that their academic career would be negatively affected (Table 1).

Table 2. Organizational Silence Behavior Scale scores (N=127)

Organizational Silence Behavior Scale	Min-max (1-5)	$\bar{x}\pm SD$
Overall scores (32 items)	1-4.66	2.83±.75
Subscale scores		
Silence climate (5 items)	1-4.80	2.75±.87
Silence based on fear (12 items)	1-4.75	2.48±.94
Acquiesce silence (10 items)	1-5	3.33±.89
Silence based on protecting the organization (5 items)	1-5	2.77±.78

Organizational Silence Behavior Scale

The mean score obtained on the OSBS was 2.83±.75. Of the mean scores on the four subscales, the highest mean score (3.33±.89) belonged to the “acquiesce silence,” while the lowest mean score (2.48±.94) belonged to the “silence based on fear” (Table 2).

Table 3. Factors associated with organizational silence (N=127)

Subscales	Independent variables	B	SE	β	t	p	95% Confidence Interval		
							Lower limit	Upper limit	
Silence climate	Constant	.48	.30	-	1.560	.121	-1.13	1.08	R: .58 Adjusted R²: .32 F: 20.91 p:.000*** Durbin–Watson: 1.94
	Expressing ideas freely in the university	.67	.14	.36	4.717	.000***	.39	.96	
	Remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected	.53	.14	.30	3.867	.000***	.26	.80	
	Duration of working in academia	.34	.13	.19	2.504	.014*	.07	.60	
Silence based on fear	Constant	-.53	.40	-	1.332	.185	-1.33	.26	R: .61 Adjusted R²:.35 F: 18.24 p: .000 *** Durbin–Watson: 1.73
	Hesitating to express an opinion for fear of being excluded	.80	.16	.37	5.038	.000***	.49	1.12	
	Ability to talk freely with manager about problems	.59	.14	.31	4.090	.000***	.31	.88	
	Remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected	.39	.17	.17	2.346	.021*	.06	.73	
	Geographical region	.33	.16	.15	2.064	.041*	.01	.64	
Acquiesce silence	Constant	.70	.42		1.670	.098	-1.13	1.53	R: .50 Adjusted R²:.23 F: 10.34 p: .000 *** Durbin–Watson: 2.00
	Geographical region	.57	.16	.28	3.473	.001**	.24	.89	
	Hesitating to express an opinion for fear of being excluded	.49	.16	.24	2.965	.004**	.16	.81	
	Satisfaction with the institution	.45	.17	.21	2.606	.010*	.11	.78	
	Remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected	.30	.15	.16	1.999	.048*	.00	.59	
Silence based on protecting the organization	Constant	2.16	.23		9.246	.000***	1.70	2.63	R: .24 Adjusted R²:.05 F: 7.37 p: .008 ** Durbin–Watson: 1.90
	Remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected	.38	.14	.24	2.715	.008**	.10	.65	

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

^a Independent variables for multiple regression analysis

Factors Associated with Organizational Silence

Multiple regression (backward method) analysis was performed to assess independent variables determined to have an effect on the subscales of the OSBS score. It was found that three variables (expressing ideas in the university freely, remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected, duration of working in academia) affected the subscale of silence climate (Adjusted R^2 : .32), four variables (hesitating to express opinions for fear of being excluded, ability to talk freely with manager about problems, remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected, geographical region) affected the subscale of silence based on fear (Adjusted R^2 : .35), and four variables (geographical region, hesitating to express opinions for fear of being excluded, satisfaction with the institution, remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected) affected the subscale of acquiescence silence (Adjusted R^2 : .23). The subscale of silence based on protecting the organization was affected by one variable (remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected) (Adjusted R^2 : .05) (Table 3).

Discussion

This study aimed to analyze the organizational silence behavior of nurse academicians and the affecting factors. In the literature there have been numerous studies focused on the level of organizational silence among nurses and academicians separately; however, there are a limited number of studies focused on nurse academicians. The results of this study are significant regarding this topic.

Silence Climate: Remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected, expressing ideas in the university freely, and duration of working in academia were found to have an effect on silence climate subscale. If people think that their opinions will not be supported, they will either choose to remain silent or support the dominant opinion (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Squires & Juárez, 2012). Silence climate affects organizational improvement, instills fear among employees, and hinders them from discussing serious issues, such as the incompetency of their colleagues (Bowen & Blackmon 2003). In this study, nursing faculty who are working for less than ten years or not feeling comfortable expressing ideas freely were found to be exhibit organizational silence behavior due to silence climate. Experience that comes with a deep understanding of both the role and organizational structure may help employees to give their opinions more confidently. On the other hand, the lack of experience can also cause employees to stay silent in order to hide their lack of knowledge or experience (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). When we consider the nature of the academic environment, it should be one open to new ideas and encourage everyone regardless of their title and should contribute to and enhance the academic work environment in order to make meaningful contribution to the profession and to the students. However, academia has a lot of hierarchy and sometimes the academic personnel at lower ranks, such as research assistants, lecturers, or assistant professors, remain silent in front of associate professors and professors because of the climate created in their work environment.

Silence Based on Fear: According to the multiple regression analysis, hesitating to express opinions for fear of being excluded, ability to talk freely with manager about problems, remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected, and geographical region were found to affect the subscale of silence based on fear. Participants who were afraid of being excluded, those not able to talk with their deans/chairs, those fearing that their academic career would be affected, and those living especially on coastal regions of Turkey obtained high scores on the subscale of silence based on fear. People choose to remain silent even when they have an opinion because they fear that their opinion will not be accepted or supported, which would result in them being excluded from the group or labeled as a troublemaker (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Morrison & Milliken 2000; Squires and Juárez 2012). Academic title and the academic hierarchy may cause the same fear. Because of this, faculty members fear that their academic career might be affected negatively if they raise issues (Akin & Ulusoy 2016; Bağ & Ekinçi, 2018; Çavuşoğlu & Köse 2016; Fapohunda 2016). Academic environments should support freedom of expression in order for faculty members not to remain silent and give more productive feedbacks and enhance the academic environment (Akin & Ulusoy 2016). There are more universities located on coastal areas of Turkey, and academic competition is generally higher in those areas and the cost of living is higher. These might be the reasons that nursing faculty members working in these universities stay more silent, in order not to lose their jobs. It may be concluded that strict hierarchy, the work environment, and the deans/chairs' behavior can cause fear among employees.

Acquiescence Silence: Four variables (geographical region, hesitating to express opinions for fear of being excluded, satisfaction with the institution, and remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected) were found to have an effect on acquiescence silence, and this subscale obtained the highest score on the OSBS. According to the results of a study conducted with 499 academic staff examining the role of power distance perceptions of academic staff

working in faculties of education on their organizational silence level indicated that the staff who had lower academic rank showed higher levels of acquiescent silence behavior (Saglam, Yorulmaz, Anasiz, Colak & Dumlu, 2018). Acquiescence silence is defined as a disengagement behavior. If the person feels that they cannot change their situation they tend to remain silent (Dyne et al. 2003; Yalçın & Baykal 2019). The results of the present study aligned with the some of the studies conducted among nurses and faculty members. In a study conducted by Harmancı Seren et al. (2018) with 601 nurses and physicians, among the reasons for nurses to remain silent, the subscale “administrative issues” obtained the highest score. Other studies conducted among faculty in Turkey indicated that faculty members remained silent because they wanted to protect themselves and thought that they could not change their current situations (Akan & Oran 2017; Akin & Ulusoy 2016). When suggestions are not accepted due to organizational structure, employees may begin to show acceptance toward the issues and develop silence behavior over time (Dyne et al. 2003). In this context, nursing faculty may remain silent because they do not hold the belief that change would ever happen, so they avoid speaking up for fear of being alone or harming their academic careers.

Silence Based on Protecting the Organization: The variable of remaining silent because academic career would be negatively affected was found to have an effect on the silence based on protecting the organization subscale. A study conducted among 230 healthcare professionals determined that they remained silent in order to benefit their organization; in addition, organizational citizenship behavior and organizational silence were compared in the same study, and it was found that organizational silence was affected by organizational citizenship behavior (Ürek et al., 2016). In academia, staying at the current position up until retirement is an important decision and a factor; academicians tend to stay silent to keep their status and position and to protect their universities. (Akan & Oran 2017; Çavuşoğlu & Köse 2016). In this context, it may be concluded that faculty members in this study showed organizational silence behavior to protect their organization, which in turn could help them protect their current status and academic careers.

Limitations: The present study was conducted among nursing faculty members in Turkey. Even though there are other studies among nurses and faculty members separately, as far as we know, this study is the first focusing on only nursing faculty members, which has limited the discussion since there are no other studies conducted on this population. Also, the data for this study was collected online after sending e-mails to faculty members around Turkey; therefore, participation was low. Because of this, the study presents the current situation based on a relatively small number of participants. It is suggested to conduct this research with larger population and examine the relationship between academic work environment and organizational silence. In addition, qualitative studies can be conducted to attain better understanding of the fear of speaking up that their academic career could be affected.

Conclusion

This study highlighted that nursing faculty remain silent out of the fear that their academic career could be affected if they spoke up. This is the most important reason found in this study. Organizational silence is a major problem facing organizational development. In academia it is essential to speak up so that academic advancements can be achieved. In the literature there have been numerous studies focused on the level of organizational silence among nurses and faculty separately; however, there are a limited number of studies focused on nursing faculty. If faculty members feel unsafe regarding their career, they remain silent. As a result, they cannot empower their students, create new techniques, and make meaningful contribution to the nursing profession.

Implications for Professional Nursing Development

To enhance the nursing profession and empower nurses, nursing faculties academic environments should provide and maintain open communication and creativity while discouraging a climate of fear and strict hierarchies. This study can guide deans/directors and policy makers to understand the underlying reasons for organizational silence so that they can prevent it. Especially, supporting younger generation in academia to raise their voice without fear and create an environment with less hierarchy can impact nursing education and eventually empower the future generation of nurses speak up.

Ethics Committee Approval: Koç University Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee approval was obtained (Date: 01.03.2019 - Number: 2019.063.IRB3.038).

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