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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Designing and Explaining the Model of Silent Revenge Formation in Public Organizations

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EXTENDED A B S T R A C T

Introduction

Organizations are complex social systems in which formal structures, informal relations, and hidden emotions continuously interact. Within these systems, perceived injustice, breaches of psychological contracts, and leadership failures often give rise to deviant responses from employees. While overt forms of workplace deviance; such as absenteeism, open conflict, or explicit resistance; have been widely studied, covert and subtle retaliatory behaviors remain understudied, despite their significant long-term impact. Among these covert forms, the phenomenon of silent revenge has emerged as a hidden but powerful behavioral response. Silent revenge refers to intentional but covert actions taken by employees to retaliate against perceived organizational mistreatment, unfairness, or neglect, without making these actions directly visible to supervisors or formal systems.

The purpose of this study was to design and explain a grounded theoretical model of silent revenge formation in public organizations. In the specific context of Iranian bureaucratic institutions, where voice channels are limited and hierarchical structures are rigid, employees often perceive that overt protest is risky or ineffective. Consequently, they resort to hidden strategies of retaliation that remain invisible on the surface but gradually erode organizational trust, efficiency, and legitimacy. This research therefore sought to uncover the antecedents, processes, and consequences of silent revenge and to provide a model that both scholars and practitioners can use to better understand and address this concealed threat.

The concept of retaliation in organizations has long been linked to theories of organizational justice, social exchange, and psychological contracts. Equity theory argues that perceived inequities generate pressures to restore balance, while social exchange theory highlights the norm of reciprocity—both positive and negative. When employees perceive breaches in distributive or procedural justice, they may feel compelled to reciprocate in ways that disadvantage the organization. However, existing literature has largely emphasized visible deviance or destructive behaviors such as theft, absenteeism, or overt aggression. Less attention has been paid to subtle, invisible behaviors that employees adopt when formal voice mechanisms are absent or ineffective. Silent revenge fills this gap by explaining how employees retaliate not by openly confronting management but by withdrawing effort, withholding cooperation, manipulating information, or subtly sabotaging organizational processes.

In public organizations, where bureaucratic routines, rigid hierarchies, and opaque procedures prevail, silent revenge can be especially destructive. It erodes the credibility of managerial authority, undermines service quality, and contributes to the erosion of trust between citizens and state institutions. This study thus offers both theoretical and practical significance: it extends organizational deviance literature by theorizing covert retaliation, and it provides public managers with insights into how to detect and mitigate these hidden behaviors.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative design using grounded theory methodology. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with a purposive and theoretically selected sample of 16 participants, including human resource managers, frontline employees, experienced observers, and retired senior managers from public organizations in Kurdistan province, Iran. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved: while saturation was evident after 14 interviews, two additional interviews were conducted to confirm completeness.

The interview protocol included open-ended questions regarding perceptions of unfairness, reactions to managerial behaviors, experiences with conflict or retaliation, and strategies used by employees when they felt powerless to voice concerns. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding procedures. NVivo software was employed to support coding and categorization. Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement in the field, member checking, peer debriefing, and the maintenance of reflexive journals. These measures enhanced the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

Findings

The analysis produced a multi-layered model of silent revenge formation consisting of causal factors, contextual conditions, intervening variables, behavioral manifestations, and consequences.

1. Causal/Antecedent Conditions. Employees described a range of triggers that generated feelings of frustration and injustice, including unfair reward distribution, biased promotions, lack of recognition, prior negative encounters with managers, and the absence of welfare and support systems. These antecedents created emotional tension and a desire for retaliation.

2. Contextual Conditions. The organizational environment was shown to play a crucial role. Rigid bureaucratic structures, toxic organizational cultures, lack of empathy from leadership, and opaque communication channels limited the possibility of open dialogue. In such settings, employees perceived that overt resistance would not only be ineffective but might also endanger their career security.

3. Intervening/Moderating Factors. The transition from dissatisfaction to silent revenge was shaped by individual and cultural moderators. Employees with higher emotional sensitivity, lower resilience, or personal economic pressures were more likely to engage in silent revenge. Moreover, socio-cultural norms valuing silence, patience, or indirect resistance reinforced the adoption of covert strategies.

4. Behavioral Strategies of Silent Revenge. Participants described a variety of tactics, including withholding or distorting information, intentional work slowdowns, reduced quality of output, covert sabotage of resources, spreading rumors to undermine leaders, disengagement from team activities, and undermining managerial authority in subtle ways. Importantly, these behaviors were not random but calculated efforts to retaliate without detection.

5. Consequences. Silent revenge was shown to produce damaging outcomes at multiple levels. At the individual level, employees experienced burnout, emotional exhaustion, and declining organizational commitment. At the organizational level, consequences included reduced productivity, information breakdowns, declining service quality, and reputational harm. At the societal level, the erosion of trust in public institutions undermined citizen confidence and fostered cynicism toward state governance.

Discussion and Interpretation

The findings extend prior theories of organizational justice, psychological contracts, and organizational silence. While previous studies acknowledged that breaches of fairness can lead to deviance, this study shows that when formal complaint channels are absent, retaliation does not disappear; rather, it takes hidden and less detectable forms.

The model suggests that silent revenge functions as a form of “exit without leaving”—a way for employees to symbolically withdraw while remaining within the organization. This aligns with the literature on “quiet quitting,” but with a more retaliatory orientation. Furthermore, the study highlights the cultural context: in societies where direct confrontation with authority is discouraged, covert retaliation becomes an adaptive response.

By integrating individual, organizational, and cultural factors, the model advances the literature on deviant workplace behavior. It also offers a framework for future research to develop measurement scales, test causal dynamics, and compare cross-cultural differences in silent retaliation.

Practical Implications

The study offers several actionable recommendations for public organizations:

- Strengthening organizational justice: ensuring fairness in reward distribution, transparent promotion systems, and clear procedural guidelines.
- Developing safe voice channels: creating anonymous reporting mechanisms, independent grievance systems, and ombudsperson offices to provide employees with constructive outlets.
- Leadership training: equipping managers with skills in empathy, fair decision-making, and conflict resolution to reduce the likelihood of retaliatory perceptions.
- Early detection systems: using HR analytics and monitoring performance indicators (delays, errors, absenteeism) to identify patterns of silent revenge before escalation.
- Employee support: offering wellness programs, workload management, and professional development to reduce stressors that fuel retaliatory impulses.

Limitations and Future Research

As a qualitative study, the findings are context-specific and not intended for statistical generalization. Future research should develop quantitative instruments to measure silent revenge, conduct large-scale surveys, and employ longitudinal designs to trace the temporal evolution of covert retaliation. Comparative research across sectors and cultural contexts would further validate and refine the model.

This study provides one of the first systematic attempts to conceptualize and empirically model the phenomenon of silent revenge in organizations. By identifying its antecedents, processes, and consequences, the research highlights the hidden ways in which employees retaliate when they feel mistreated but lack safe avenues for voice. For public organizations, recognizing and addressing silent revenge is critical not only for preserving productivity and trust but also for maintaining the legitimacy of state institutions. The grounded theory model and recommendations presented here thus contribute to both academic theory and practical organizational reform.

KEYWORDS

Organizational Revenge, Silent Revenge, Public Organizations, Behavioral Modeling.

