

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**Investigating the Antecedents and Coercive Organizational Messages in Iranian Government Organizations: A Qualitative Study with a Grounded Theory Approach****Mehdi Mohammadi¹** 

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT**Introduction**

Organizational silence, defined as the conscious or intentional withholding of work-related ideas, information, or concerns by employees (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), has gained increasing scholarly attention due to its detrimental effects on innovation, decision-making, and overall organizational performance. In public sector organizations, where hierarchical structures and bureaucratic rigidity are prevalent, silence can become a systemic barrier to change and development. Iranian government organizations operate within a unique socio-political context characterized by centralized decision-making, economic pressures such as international sanctions, and emerging challenges including post-pandemic surveillance technologies.

Despite growing research on organizational silence in Western and Asian contexts, there remains a significant gap in context-specific, qualitative studies that explore the lived experiences of employees in Iranian public sector organizations. Most existing studies have adopted quantitative approaches, focusing on predefined variables and testing hypotheses derived from Western literature. Few have employed grounded theory to systematically develop a paradigmatic model from direct narratives of managers and employees. Moreover, emerging factors such as digital monitoring in remote work, post-COVID-19 pressures, and the interaction between psychological contract violation and organizational bullying have rarely been investigated in the Iranian public sector. Understanding these factors is critical because silence not only reduces productivity but also leads to emotional exhaustion and turnover among public servants, ultimately harming citizen-centric services. The absence of a localized model means that many interventions are imported from Western contexts without considering Iran's cultural and structural particularities, such as strong collectivism and power distance.

Furthermore, the dynamic nature of organizational silence – how it evolves, reinforces itself, and becomes embedded in daily routines – remains poorly understood in non-Western settings. In Iran, where administrative reforms have often faced resistance due to deep-rooted hierarchical traditions, silence may function as a covert form of resistance or self-protection. Without a grounded understanding of the specific antecedents and consequences operating in this context, policy makers risk implementing ineffective solutions that fail to address the real drivers of silence. Therefore, the central research question is: What is the paradigmatic model of antecedents and consequences of organizational silence in Iranian government organizations? The aim is to identify and explain causal conditions, contextual factors, intervening conditions, strategies, and outcomes, providing a grounded theory that can inform both theory and practice.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory-applied research design using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This approach is particularly suitable for under-theorized phenomena where deep, context-sensitive understanding is required. The target population consisted of employees and managers working in various Iranian government organizations, including ministries, provincial offices, state-affiliated agencies, and public universities, who had direct, meaningful experience with organizational silence. Purposive sampling was used with the following inclusion criteria: at least five years of work experience in a government organization; personal experience or direct observation of organizational silence (self or colleagues); ability to articulate experiences; and diversity in job level, organization type, and gender. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation – the point at which new data no longer generated new concepts or categories. A total of 19 participants were interviewed (11 men, 8 women; 6 senior/middle managers, 13 frontline employees). All interviews were conducted in Persian and later translated into English for analysis. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were the primary data collection tool. An interview guide was developed based on literature review and refined iteratively after the first three interviews to capture emerging themes more effectively.

Key questions included: Describe a situation where you or your colleagues deliberately withheld work-related ideas or concerns; What factors do you think caused this silence?; What were the consequences for you, your team, or the organization?; Under what conditions was silence reduced or managed? Interviews lasted 45 to 75 minutes, were audio-recorded with written consent, and transcribed verbatim. Additionally, a limited number of internal organizational documents (e.g., performance evaluation reports) were examined for triangulation. Data analysis followed the three-step coding approach of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Open coding involved line-by-line analysis generating over 128 initial concepts, later condensed into 85 codes. Axial coding organized codes into 29 main concepts and 16 sub-categories, and causal, contextual, and intervening relationships were identified. Selective coding determined the core category – organizational silence as a self-reinforcing cycle in centralized government structures – and the paradigmatic model was built. To ensure trustworthiness, codes and categories were reviewed by an external researcher familiar with qualitative methods, and any disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. Analysis was facilitated by MAXQDA software, and inter-coder reliability was 87 percent. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw.

Findings

The grounded theory analysis revealed a paradigmatic model in which organizational silence is not a static phenomenon but a self-reinforcing cycle driven primarily by structural and leadership factors. The causal conditions (direct antecedents) included toxic leadership and lack of genuine managerial support, such as empty promises or indirect punishment of idea-givers; centralized structure and rigid hierarchy where decision-making is concentrated at top levels; and emerging contextual pressures like digital surveillance after the pandemic, economic sanctions, and performance pressure. The contextual conditions were closed organizational culture and lack of psychological safety, cultural and ethnic differences in nationwide organizations, and weak reward and feedback systems. Intervening conditions that moderated the process included job burnout and perceived distributive injustice, organizational bullying and psychological contract violation, and low psychological capital (lack of hope and self-efficacy). Employees adopted different strategies in response: defensive silence (withholding to protect self), acquiescent silence (resigned submission), and prosocial or organizational-oriented silence (silence to protect the organization, which sometimes led to side unethical behaviors). The consequences of organizational silence were reduced organizational innovation and creativity, increased deviant behaviors such as absenteeism, hidden sabotage, and quiet quitting, weakened commitment and collective burnout, and a decline in public service quality and citizen dissatisfaction. Under managed conditions, a temporary focus on routine tasks was observed as a dual outcome. The core category was organizational silence as a self-reinforcing cycle: once silence becomes the norm, it intensifies the original antecedents, leading to worsening outcomes. Illustrative

quotes from participants (translated from Persian) include: Our manager always says share your opinions, but when we do, either ignores us or says there's no budget. Now everyone remains silent (middle manager, ministry); and After COVID, with online monitoring systems, people are afraid even to give negative feedback in group chats (expert, provincial organization).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides a context-grounded model of organizational silence in Iranian government organizations. The findings confirm that organizational silence is far more dependent on structural and leadership factors than on individual personality traits – a key insight that challenges the tendency to individualize the problem. The results align with studies by Mohammadi et al. (2023) showing that a closed organizational environment increases silence, but extend this by identifying toxic leadership and digital surveillance as emerging antecedents. The role of prosocial silence leading to side unethical behaviors echoes Abbaspour et al. (2020). Internationally, the findings are consistent with Morrison (2023) and Hao et al. (2022) regarding burnout and negative leadership; however, the present model gives greater weight to context-specific factors such as centralized structures, sanctions, and post-pandemic surveillance. Unlike early studies (e.g., Morrison & Milliken, 2000) that emphasized organizational-level barriers, this study shows that in Iran's public sector, silence operates as a vicious cycle that actively erodes public service quality.

The theoretical contributions are threefold: providing the first grounded-theory model of organizational silence in Iranian public administration; introducing emerging contextual pressures as distinct antecedents; and demonstrating how prosocial silence can transition into ethically questionable behaviors. Additionally, this study reveals that silence is not merely an absence of voice but a dynamic, learned behavior reinforced by repeated negative experiences with management, which has not been fully captured in previous quantitative research. Practical implications include establishing secure and anonymous voice channels such as digital suggestion systems with identity protection; implementing authentic and empowering leadership training for middle and senior managers; revising reward and feedback systems to encourage constructive criticism; reducing excessive digital monitoring, especially in remote work settings, and attending to post-crisis psychological well-being; and fostering psychological safety through group workshops and top-manager modeling. Furthermore, organizations should conduct regular climate assessments to detect silent norms early and design targeted interventions before the cycle becomes entrenched.

Limitations of this study are that the qualitative findings are not statistically generalizable, though theoretical generalization is intended; the focus on Iranian government organizations limits transferability to similar contexts; there is reliance on participant recall and potential social desirability bias; and there was lack of access to some confidential internal documents. Future research directions include mixed-methods studies to test the model across different types of government organizations, longitudinal studies to examine the evolution of the silence cycle, comparative studies between public and private sectors in Iran, and exploration of the role of emerging technologies such as AI-based monitoring on future silence patterns. In conclusion, organizational silence in Iranian government organizations is a systemic, self-reinforcing phenomenon rooted in centralized structures and ineffective leadership. Breaking this cycle requires simultaneous interventions at structural, leadership, and cultural levels. Without such changes, silence will continue to undermine public service performance and employee well-being.

KEYWORDS

Organizational Sulking, Antecedents, Consequences in Iranian Governmental Organizations, Grounded Theory, Human Resource Management.

