

Smell of silence - Psychological contract breach as a mediator between workplace bullying and employee silence

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the association between workplace bullying and employee silence along with the mediating effect of psychological contract breach (PCB). Three types of silence – acquiescent, defensive and pro-social have been taken into consideration. The data for this research was collected from 430 respondents from various services sector of India. The result shows that workplace bullying significantly impacts employee silence while psychological contract breach partially mediates the association between bullying and silence at workplace. This research is one of the few studies especially in Asian countries where the three factors, bullying, PCB and silence have been taken for study. This study also becomes crucial as different dimensions of silence have been considered rather than taking employee silence as a whole. This research work could be an alarm bell for organizations where mistreatments like bullying is rampant and silence among employees is observed.

Subject Classification: 90C99.

Keywords: *Silence, Employee silence, Psychological contract breach, Workplace bullying, Acquiescent, Defensive, Pro-social.*

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1. Introduction

Organizations strive to integrate the knowledge of all its employees and put it to good use for the benefit of the organization (Grant, 1996). This goal can be achieved only when employees freely communicate without holding back any information but this doesn't always happen. Researchers like Morrison and Milliken (2000) and later on, Pinder and Harlos (2001) have shown that employees intentionally conceal information due to various reasons and that's when silence prevails. Not sharing information, ideas or concerns can result in detrimental effects on organizations hampering their overall growth and development. Bullying is one important reason behind employee silence. Bullying is a kind of interpersonal mistreatment where an employee repeatedly faces negative behaviors at workplace (Einarsen et. al., 2011). Bullying if left untreated can have devastating outcomes both for the employee and the organization. Apart from researching bullying's various impacts on employees, researches have also started focusing on some passive coping mechanism like employee silence (Rai and Agarwal, 2018), feedback avoidance (Whitman et. al., 2014) etc. adopted by the bullied employees. But employee silence remains a prominent coping strategy towards bullying.

Studies over the last few years have shown that apart from direct impact of bullying on its employee outcomes, there are certain underlying machineries working to affect this direct linkage (e.g. Glasø et. al., 2010). Psychological contract breach (PCB) is one such prominent mediating mechanism which still needs to be explored, especially in Asian context. PCB can be explained as "when employees perceive that their organizations have failed to fulfill their obligations" (Wang and Hsieh, 2014). To sum up, this study has two-fold objectives: (1) to investigate the relationship between workplace bullying and three major forms of employees' silence (acquiescent, defensive and pro-social); (2) to test PCB as a mediating factor between bullying and employee silence.

Literature Review and hypotheses

Workplace Bullying

"Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's tasks at work. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly and over a

period of time (e.g. about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal 'strength' are in conflict" (Einarsen et al., 2011). Bullying has severe outcomes both for employees and the organizations (Bjorkqvist, 1994). Since bullying can leave devastating effects on any organization, it becomes important to dig deeper into workplace bullying and understand its after-effects (Jayasri Puli & Srilalitha Sagi 2022).

Employee silence

Intentionally holding back ideas, opinions, knowledge, concerns and complaints by employees about unpleasant happenings and issues at workplace can be referred as employee silence (Rai and Agarwal, 2018). A research conducted few years ago says that silence is a common response by employees who have been bullied at workplace. Bullying creates stressful situations for employees who in turn become reluctant to speak or raise voices. Three prominent dimensions of silence (acquiescent, defensive and pro-social) given by Dyne et al., (2003) has been considered in this research work. First form, acquiescent silence occurs when employees try to conceal information, ideas and knowledge due to resignation (Pinder & Harlos, 2001) or disengagement (Van Dyne, et al., 2003). Another silence is defensive silence. This type of silence prevails when employees don't speak because of the fear of negative consequences that could occur because of raising voice (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Adding up to the work of previous researchers, Dyne et al., (2003) proposed three silences – acquiescent, defensive and pro-social based on the motives that employee nurture. Pro-social silence is acquired by employees when they value their social-relationship and they keep silent thinking of the benefit of organization and its people (Dyne, 2003). All these types of silence find significant relevance in workplace bullying, bullying being a strong antecedent.

To understand how workplace bullying further leads to employee silence, we need to look into conservation of resource (COR) theory given by Hobfoll (1989). According to COR theory, people strive to protect, preserve and procure what they have i.e resources. These resources (objects, conditions, personal characteristics and energies) are important to people and any loss of these resources or even not reaping the benefits of investing in any new resource can put the employees to

stress. Going by the logics of COR theory, bullying too induces stress in employees. Employees try their best to conserve their valuable intrinsic resource and for this, they may adopt some coping strategies like silence. Employees may practice acquiescent silence when they are reduced to a state of hopelessness and lack of interest in anything. Considered to be a “serious occupational stressor”, bullying can indeed leave employees in a hopeless and hapless situation, not knowing what to do than keeping mum. Defensive silence is induced out of fear of negative consequences at workplace. Using COR theory here, raising voice doesn’t come easy rather at a cost which involves time, energy, efforts, emotional bearings and there is always a risk of loss of the intrinsic resources (Bolino & Turnley, 2005). In case of pro-social silence, employees aiming not to spread negative vibes about a person or organization, intend to maintain their social-capital and avoid speaking up (Milliken et. al., 2003). Going by this logic, we go by the below hypotheses (Figure 1).

H1: Workplace bullying has a significant impact on acquiescent silence.

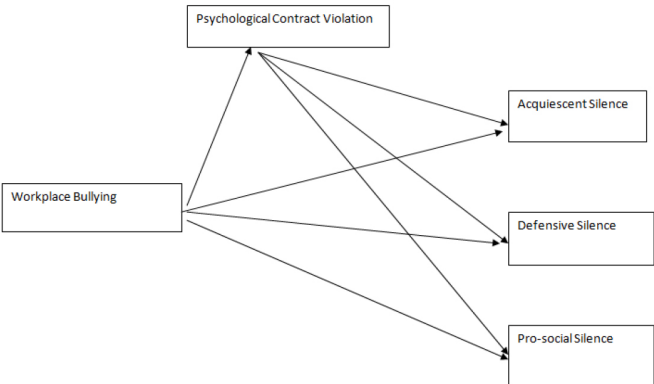


Figure 1

H2: Workplace bullying has a significant impact on defensive silence.

H3: Workplace bullying has a significant impact on pro-social silence.

Psychological Contract Breach as a mediator

PCB is the perception of disparity between “what was promised to the employees” and “what was received” (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). When bullying at workplace happens, employees feel their psychological resources are getting depleted (as per the COR theory) and hence

making employees more vulnerable. These vulnerable employees seek some defense system and silence comes in easy. Depending on the circumstances, employees resort to different dimensions of silence. In this study, it is argued that PCB mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and employee silence (acquiescent silence, defensive silence and pro-social silence).

H4: PCB mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and acquiescent silence

H5: PCB mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and defensive silence

H6: PCB mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and pro-social silence

Research Methodology

Research Objective and data collection

The objective of this research work is to test the relation between workplace bullying and employee silence. It also assesses the effect of psychological contract breach as a mediating factor. For this empirical study, field research is conducted on professionals from services sector of India. Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire and Convenient Sampling technique has been used. 470 people were reached out with the questionnaire. After removing questionnaires with missing or erroneous responses, total valid responses received were 430. Data analysis was carried out on these 430.

For workplace bullying five items adopted from Rayner's (1999) were used to assess workplace bullying. Cronbach alpha for this scale was 0.899. Employee Silence was measured through twelve items adopted from Van Dyne et.al. (2003). Cronbach alpha for this was- acquiescent silence: 0.889; defensive silence - 0.913; pro-social silence: 0.849. Five items adopted from Robinson & Morrison's (2000) scale for psychological contract breach were used to assess PCB. Cronbach alpha for this scale was 0.925.

Analysis and results

For all the 430 valid responses, data analysis was done using SPSS and AMOS. Table 1 gives descriptive statistics for dependent, independent and mediating variables where all the values are significant.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and Correlation analysis

	Mean	Std. Dev	Skewness	Kurtosis	PSYCNTB	WRKBUL	DEFSIL	ACQSIL	PRSCSIL
PSYCNTB	3.38	1.15	-0.413	-1.258	0.844				
WRKBUL	3.5	1.052	-0.746	-0.583	0.284***	0.8			
DEFSIL	3.31	1.148	-0.443	-1.136	0.587***	0.409***	0.851		
ACQSIL	3.17	1.163	-0.304	-1.234	0.487***	0.448***	0.648***	0.817	
PRSCSIL	3.5	0.985	-0.679	-0.428	0.450***	0.370***	0.512***	0.519***	0.765

Measurement Model

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was done using AMOS to obtain the measurement models. Table 2 shows 22 items from five constructs. For Convergent Validity, the values of AVE and CR are checked. They are above 0.5 and 0.7 respectively and meet the acceptability criteria. Even the factor loadings of all items are greater than 0.7.

Table 2
Factor loadings, CR, AVE, MSV

Predictor	Outcome	Std Beta	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)
PSYCNTB	PSYCNTB1	.837 ***	0.925	0.712	0.344	0.926
	PSYCNTB2	.860 ***				
	PSYCNTB3	.836***				
	PSYCNTB4	.843 ***				
	PSYCNTB5	.843 ***				
WRKBUL	WRKBUL1	.801 ***	0.899	0.64	0.2	0.899
	WRKBUL2	.803***				
	WRKBUL3	.778 ***				
	WRKBUL4	.821 ***				
	WRKBUL5	.796 ***				

Contd...

ACQSIL	ACQSIL1	.818 ***	0.889	0.668	0.42	0.89
	ACQSIL2	.838 ***				
	ACQSIL3	.818***				
	ACQSIL4	.796 ***				
DEFSIL	DEFSIL1	0.857***	0.913	0.724	0.42	0.913
	DEFSIL2	.862 ***				
	DEFSIL3	.847 ***				
	DEFSIL4	.838 ***				
PRSCSIL	PRSCSIL1	.778***	0.85	0.585	0.269	0.851
	PRSCSIL2	.788 ***				
	PRSCSIL3	.751 ***				
	PRSCSIL4	.742 ***				

Assessment of discriminant validity has been done by Heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratios. All constructs have HTMT < 0.85. Hence, discriminant validity is established. Model fit measures were used to assess the goodness of fit for the overall model. The values were CMIN/DF = 1.56, CFI = 0.983, SRMR = 0.038, RMSEA = 0.024, $p = 0.851$ (insignificant), NFI = 0.928, TLI = 0.967 which are all as per the threshold levels.

Testing of Hypotheses

For hypothesis testing, SEM was ran using bootstrapping approach in AMOS. The complete structural model was run including the mediator. Figure 2 shows the structural model. Now, we look at the direct effect of workplace bullying on three silences. Table 3 shows that the value of p in each of the case is less than 0.05. It means workplace bullying has a significant association with acquiescent silence, defensive silence and pro-social silence. Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 are supported. Table 4 gives the indirect effect (estimate values) and shows the mediated relationships. Values of $p < 0.05$ in all the three cases. It means the mediated relationships are all significant. Hence, hypotheses 4, 5 and 6 are supported. Now, since both direct and indirect effects are significant, we can say that the relationship between workplace bullying and the three types of employee silence is partially mediated by PCB.

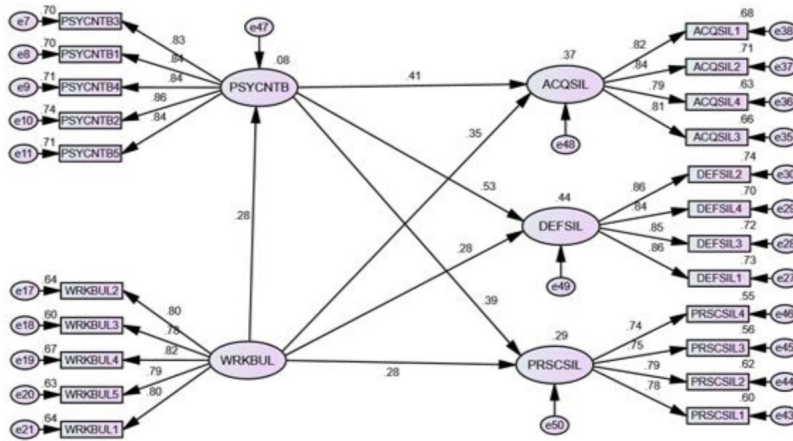


Figure 2
Structural model

Table 3
Direct relationship (in presence of mediator)

	Estimate (β values)	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result
WRKBUL-->ACQSIL	0.351	0.053	7.002	***	Hypothesis 1 accepted
WRKBUL--> DEFSIL	0.28	0.05	6.067	***	Hypothesis 2 accepted
WRKBUL--> PRSCSIL	0.278	0.048	5.239	***	Hypothesis 3 accepted

Table 4
Indirect relationship

Parameter	Estimate	Lower	Upper	P	Interpretation	Result
WRKBUL • PSYCNTB • ACQSIL	0.124	0.074	0.186	0.001	Partially mediated	Hypothesis 4 accepted
WRKBUL • PSYCNTB • DEFSIL	0.16	0.1	0.231	0.001	Partially mediated	Hypothesis 5 accepted
WRKBUL • PSYCNTB • PRSCSIL	0.099	0.056	0.15	0.001	Partially mediated	Hypothesis 6 accepted

Discussion

This study strengthens the literature on employee silence behavior by examining a crucial antecedent, workplace bullying and how it impacts the different dimensions of silence (acquiescent, defensive & pro-social). Along with this, the mediating effect of PCB is also considered. The results are in sync with the proposed hypotheses. Firstly, this study examined the direct relationship of workplace bullying with three different types of employee silences. Data analysis revealed that workplace bullying has significant relationship with acquiescent, defensive and pro-social silences. Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 were supported. Our results support previous studies in this area. In a previous study by Khan, K., et. al (2021), it has been found that workplace bullying (that includes physically intimidating bullying) has a direct and positive association with employee silence. Hypothesis 4, 5 and 6 examined the mediating effect of PCB on workplace bullying and the three types of employee silence in consideration. For all the three cases it was found that presence of PCB as a mediating variable significantly impacted the association of the independent and dependent variables. A previous study by Rai & Agarwal (2018) has proved psychological contract violation plays a significant mediating role between workplace bullying and employee silence. But since violation is preceded by breach (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), our study has taken psychological contract breach as the mediating mechanism. The mediation analysis in this study concludes that relationships between bullying and the three types of employee silence are partially mediated by PCB.

Implications

Since there hasn't been much empirical research that considers workplace bullying as the reason to employee silence, this study does value addition in this area. As far as our knowledge goes, this is the first research in India examining the association of bullying and employee silence (with its different forms) via PCB. Organizations should promptly curb any kind of bullying behavior if they are impacting employees' voice or leading to silence. Apart from this, organizations should always support their employees which ultimately lead to better contribution from them. Leaders should be fault-tolerant as this helps keep up the spirit of employees and encourages their voice behavior.

Limitations and directions for future research

Future studies may widen their horizon by taking into consideration different areas of bullying and analyze their individual impact on employee silence. Also, in future more robust scales for all the constructs could be considered with diverse items for each construct. The study takes into account three types of silences as given by Van Dyne (2003) but future research can explore the new areas/dimensions of employee silence. In our study, we have taken PCB as a mediator but have ignored any moderators to avoid complexity in data analyses. But researchers can certainly explore mediated moderation model to get more depth of the antecedents of ES.

Conclusion

We conclude by saying that psychological contract breach partially mediates the association between workplace bullying and the three silences (acquiescent, defensive and pro-social). Prevalence of bullying and PCB both bolsters employee silence which may not augur well for the organizations. Managers and top executive should strive to identify bullying behaviors and also the signs of PCB that follow bullying. Since bullying, the feeling of breach and silence among employees, all can harm organizations' long-term goals, sincere moves should be taken to curb them.

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