

“Silence Belongs To the Young, Speech Belongs To the Old”: The Reason Why Research Assistants Remain Silent¹

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Abstract

The behavior of silence in universities is one of the issues which need to be put importance on. Because sharing different ideas, views and suggestions at universities provide a basis for the development of universities and in turn societies and make it easy for them to adapt to new conditions. Within this scope, the purpose of the study is to identify the situations in which research assistants who work in universities remain silent and analyze the reasons why they display the behavior of silence and its consequences. The study has been modeled through the phenomenological model. Data which has been collected through a semi-structured interview form has been analyzed with content analysis. According to the findings of the study, the most striking situations and issues in which research assistants remain silent have been determined as situations which involve power distance and situations which lack knowledge and experience. The themes which most come to the fore in relation to research assistants' views on the reasons for remaining silent have been determined as the fear of receiving negative feedback, the belief that speaking will not provide any solution and organizational culture.

Key Words: Employee silence, voice, power distance, university, research assistants

Introduction

It is a known fact that behaviors of employees in organizational life have vital importance. What is more, the reactions given by employees to organizational conditions or events, their suggestions and ideas can be taken as one of the factors which determine the future of organizations. The reasons for this is that, the feedback of employees have an important share in carrying organizations forward and their survival in the face of change. However, some employees refrain from expressing ideas which can contribute to the development of their organization and prefer to remain silent in certain situations. This can slow down the development of organizations and make it difficult for them to adapt to new conditions. In this respect, the behavior of silence can be stated to have a key role in the functioning of organizations.

Employees' remaining silent in organizations is defined in different ways by many researchers. Employee silence in management literature has first been dealt with Hirschman in 1970. Silence has been framed as passive but constructive reaction as synonymous to commitment in that period and ever since then, management scientists have continued to regard silence and commitment as the same. For instance, employees who are subject to maltreatment but do not make official complaints have generally been accepted as silent (Yildiz, 2013).

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Morrison and Milliken (2000) have evaluated silence as a collective phenomenon and have dealt with the concept of organizational silence. According to these writers, silence is employees' purposely sparing their knowledge and ideas about their organizations. Pinder and Harlos (2001, 334) have defined silence as "the withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individual's behavioral, cognitive and-or affective evaluations of his or her organizational circumstances to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change or redress". Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) have stated that employee silence is not necessarily absence of voice, whereas they have defined silence as employees' hiding their ideas, knowledge and views about the development of their work instead of expressing these.

In literature, silence has been classified in different manners. Pinder and Harlos (2001) have separated silence into two as quiescence and acquiescence. In quiescence silence, the employee is uncomfortable with the functioning of the organization, but is unwilling to change this situation to protect him. In acquiescence silence, the employee accepts the functioning of the organization deeply and does not even think that there can be an alternative to this functioning of the organization. Breaking down this kind of silence is more difficult than quiescence silence. Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) accept the Pinder and Harlos grouping and add the dimension of pro-social silence to this classification. In pro-social silence, the employee's preference to remain silent for the good of the organization is in question.

According to a classification done by Blackman and Sadler-Smith (2009), silence is separated into two as remaining silent and silenced. In remaining silent, the employee is willing to remain silent without any pressure. As this willingness can result from the individual's personality, it can result from the difficulty of disclosing the knowledge the individual has in a latent and intuitional manner. Silenced as the other type of silence is being forced to remain silent as a consequence of external pressure or the individual's inner pressure to protect himself.

The behavior of silence is one of the issues which need to be put importance on in organizations, because it is a widely observed behavior in organizations. In the study carried out by Ryan and Oestreich (1991; quoted by Morrison and Milliken, 2000) on 260 employees in 22 organizations in the United States of America (USA), it has been stated that 70% of employees do not have the courage to openly speak about work related problems or issues. In this study, it has been seen that issues such as the process of decision making, inefficiency of the management, unjust sharing, organizational ineffectiveness and poor organizational performance were among issues emphasized as "indisputable areas". They have concluded that the most two common reasons for the silence of employees are the belief that talking about these issues openly will not create a change and the fear of receiving a negative answer. Milliken and Morrison (2003) have stated that employees remain silent with the fear of being punished by their superiors or being stamped as a person who is a complainer and a problem maker by their co-workers as well. In addition, employees also prefer to remain silent with the fear of losing their jobs (Penttila, 2003).

Morrison, Milliken and Hewlin (2003) in their study have stated employees most frequently (30%) expressed the worry of being seen as a complaining, gossiping and tell tailing person as the reasons of remaining silent. In the same study, the other reasons have been listed as the fear of harming relationships (%27.5), the belief that speaking will not make a change and will be futile (%25), the fear of losing jobs or getting punished by being deprived of prizes or the fear of others taking revenge (%22.5) and the belief of leaving a negative impression (%20). Among the reasons of the behavior of silence, there are socio-cultural norms and values as well. In other words, the cultural values employees have are effective in their display of the behavior of silence (Panteli and Fineman, 2005). For instance, silence is not a valuable concept in the American culture and thus, it does not receive acceptance by society. Contrary to Americans, the Japanese culture generally attributes a positive meaning to silence and it is accepted as a desired condition by society (Ishii and Bruneau, 1984; quoted by Fujio, 2004). In Turkish culture as well, remaining silent is perceived as being content with the existing conditions and is expressed as "Silence gives consent." Besides these, the employees fear of losing their jobs, the worry of being perceived as trouble-makers, gossipers and complainers make them remain silent by saying "Speech is silver, but silence is gold" (Bildik, 2009).

When we take a look at studies carried on employee silence, we see that this behavior has both organizational and individual outcomes. According to Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008), employee silence reduces the reach of critical information to the management and directly influences the work.

In other words, employee silence blocks the path of accurate information, negative feedback and different views and harms the decision making processes (Beheshtifar, Borhani and Nekoie.Moghadam, 2012) and causes financial loss (Joinson, 1996).

According to Whiteside and Barclay (2013), besides influencing the output of organizations, employee silence has a negative effect on employees' morale and performance as well. In fact, it has been determined in a study that there is a significant negative relationship between employee silence and organizational commitment (Laeque and Zafar Bakhtawari, 2014). In another study, a significant negative relationship has been determined between quiescence silence and acquiescence silence and employee performance (Sehitoglu, 2010). Penttila (2003) argues that this behavior kills the creativity of employees. According to Robbins and Judge (2012), employees who remain silent about important issues experience psychological stress as well.

Besides these effects silence creates on individuals and organizations, there is an expansion effect which can turn into remaining silent about many events within the process, rather than being limited to a single event. In addition, this situation affects the organization structure in a vertical manner (Milliken and Morrison, 2003). For that reason, employee silence should be taken under control to be able to prevent negative effects. The removal of factors which cause organizational employee behavior in terms of providing a peaceful and healthy work environment for individuals as much as in terms of the future, success and productivity of organizations and establishing a refined and open system of communication within organizations carries great importance (Demir and Demir, 2012).

The behavior of silence in universities as organizations is one of the issues which need to be given importance to. In fact, it is extremely important that the channels of communication in universities are more open and employees establish communication with their superiors in an easier manner, besides a participatory, transparent and pluralist organization structure which depends on sharing trust and information to exist (Durak, 2014). In addition, silence of research assistants can be a barrier against sharing their knowledge and accumulation and their development (Tulubas and Celep, 2014). For this reason, it is considered necessary that these behaviors do not become common in universities and to analyze their causes. Within this scope, the purpose of the study is to identify the situations in which research assistants who work in universities remain silent and analyze the reasons why they display the behavior of silence and its consequences.

Method

Research Model

The study has been modeled through the phenomenological model which is one of the qualitative research methods. Phenomenological studies aim at understanding and clarifying the meaning, structure and essence of an experience about an event lived by an individual or a group of people (Patton, 2014). Accordingly, it has been attempted to analyze the reasons and consequences of the research assistants' behaviors of silence to understand these better by taking their experiences as the starting point.

Study Group

In the identification of the study group of the study, purposive sampling method has been used. Within this scope, the study group consists of 15 research assistants who work in four state universities in Ankara-Turkey (Ankara University, Gazi University, Hacettepe University, and Middle East Technical University). The personal information of the participants has been given in Table 1.

As it can be seen from Table 1, the participants' names have been hidden and they have been coded as Research Assistant (RA). The research assistants work in different faculties such as Faculty of Education/Educational Sciences, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Pharmacy, Faculty of Political Sciences and Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences. 10 of the participants are female (67%) and five of them are male (33%). 3 of the participants (20%) are in the process of master's degree, 10 of them (67%) in the process of doctorate degree and 2 of them (13%) work as research assistant doctors. When the seniority of the participants is analyzed, it is seen that their seniority ranges between 1 and 9 years.

Table 1: Personal information of the research assistants who participated in the study

Code Name	Age	Educational Status	Seniority (years)	Faculty they work in
RA1	29	Doctorate degree course period	5	Faculty of Law
RA2	-	Doctorate degree thesis period	7	Faculty of Education
RA3	-	Doctorate degree thesis period	5	Faculty of Education
RA4	32	Research Assistant Dr.	7	Faculty of Educational Sciences
RA5	32	Doctorate degree thesis period	8	Faculty of Education
RA6	29	Doctorate degree thesis period	7	Faculty of Education
RA7	28	Doctorate degree thesis period	3	Faculty of Education
RA8	32	Research Assistant Dr.	9	Faculty of Pharmacy
RA9	29	Doctorate degree thesis period	6	Faculty of Pharmacy
RA10	26	Doctorate degree thesis period	2	Faculty of Pharmacy
RA11	25	Master's degree thesis period	1	Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences
RA12	25	Master's degree course period	2	Faculty of Law
RA13	25	Master's degree course period	1	Faculty of Political Sciences
RA14	34	Doctorate degree thesis period	7	Faculty of Educational Sciences
RA15	27	Doctorate degree course period	4	Faculty of Education

Collection and Analysis of Data

In phenomenological studies, data is generally collected through semi-structured interviews (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008). Within this scope, interviews have been conducted with the research assistant who volunteered to participate in the study. Data has been collected through the semi-structured interview form which has been developed by the researchers. Within this scope, face to face interviews have been done with 10 research assistants. The interviews have been conducted in March, April and May 2015. All of the interviews have been carried out on dates determined by getting an appointment from the participants. The researchers have explained the purpose and the conduct of the study to the participants at the beginning of the interviews and have taken permission to do voice recording in order to attain data in a reliable manner. The views of research assistants who did not accept their voices to be recorded have been taken down in writing. In addition, five research assistants who did not accept being interviewed face to face have stated their views in writing by answering the open-ended questions on the interviews form. The analysis of the collected data has been done through content analysis. Accordingly, it has been attempted to make inferences by systematically matizing the views of the research assistants in line with certain characteristics. In addition, in order to make the data analysis process easier and more systematic, vivo 10 package program has been made use of. Within this scope, firstly the participants' views have been transferred exactly to the computer environment and raw data has been created. Afterwards, this data has been transferred to the Nvivo program and the views have been united under appropriate themes by being coded in accordance with content analysis.

Validity and Reliability Studies

The following has been carried out in order to achieve the validity and reliability of the study:

- The interview form prepared within the scope of the study has been presented to the view of six experts for scope validity. Through the corrections and suggestions received from the experts, the interview form has been finalized and then the interviews have been carried out. In fact, expert analysis is stated as one of the methods used to achieve validity in qualitative studies (Yildirim and Simsek, 2011; Meriam 2013).
- In order to test the clarity of the questions on the interview forms, a pilot interview has been carried out with two research assistants.
- In the selection of the study group, with the intent of purposely creating variety and contrast (Merriam, 2013), research assistants who work in different universities and faculties with different educational states have been included in the study.
- For the external reliability of the study, the data collection and analysis process of the participants who were the source of data in the study have been defined in detail as suggested by Yildirim and Simsek (2011).

- In order to test the reliability of the study, the reconciliation percentage formula expressed by Miles and Hubermann (1994) has been used. The percentage has been calculated as $P = \sim\%85.91$.
- To achieve the internal reliability of the study, direct quotations have been given place (Shenton, 2004; Yildirim and Simsek, 2011).

Findings

The findings obtained as a result of interview analysis with the purpose of analyzing the reasons and consequences of the situations in which research assistants remain silent and display the behavior of silence have been presented under the main themes of (1) the situations and issues in which research assistants remain silent (2) the reasons why research assistants remain silent and (3) the consequences of research assistants' remaining silent.

The findings related to the situations and issues in which research assistants remain silent have been presented in Figure 1.

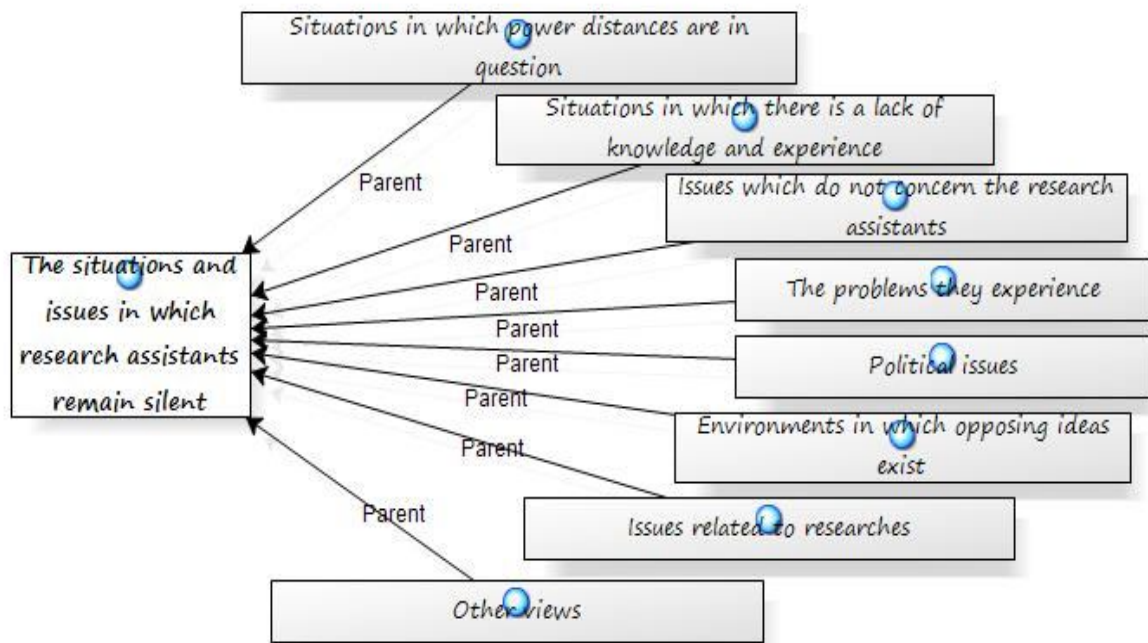


Figure 1: The situations and issues in which research assistants remain silent

Source: The figure is drawn by authors through the NVivo program.

As it can be seen in Figure 1, the research assistants have stated that they remain silent in universities in certain situations and issues. The frequency and percentage distributions of the situations and issues stated by the research assistants and the direct quotation samples related to these issues have been presented in Table 2.

Table 2: The frequency and percentage distributions of the situations and issues stated by the research assistants

Themes	Statements Obtained from the Interviews	f	%
Situations in which power distances are in question	<i>I prefer to remain silent about situations where the professors or administration is the majority. (RA14)</i>	15	28.8
Situations in which there is a lack of knowledge and experience	<i>The assistants were able to express their problems freely there. I was not able to talk since I had just started working there. (RA11)</i>	13	25.0
Issues which do not concern the research assistants	<i>I remain silent about almost all issues which do not concern me. (RA9)</i>	5	9.6
Problems they experience	<i>We prefer to remain silent instead of talking about the problems we experience in our positions as assistants. (RA2)</i>	5	9.6
Political issues	<i>I refrain from talking about political issues. (RA1)</i>	4	7.7
Environments in which opposing ideas exist	<i>If I'm arguing for an opposing idea in the environments but an opposing idea is being expressed in a very strong manner, I personally prefer to remain silent in such environments. (RA7)</i>	4	7.7
Issues related to researches	<i>I generally try to remain silent about issues which are related to the thesis or method part of my researches. (RA4)</i>	3	5.8
Other views	<i>I remain silent in scientific conferences, especially if they are national. If they are international, I do not remain silent. (RA9)</i>	3	5.8
Total		52	100

As it can be seen in Table 2, a majority of research assistants prefer to remain silent in situations where power distance is in question ($f=15$, %28.8). In other words, the participants refrain from openly expressing their views in particular next to academicians who hold higher titles in comparison to them or administrative officials. This shows that, hierarchical structuring in universities can prevent research assistants from expressing their views as well. In addition to this, in cases where research assistants lack knowledge and experience ($f=13$, %25), on issues which do not concern them ($f=5$, %9.6), on problems they experience ($f=5$, %9.6), on political issues ($f=4$, %7.7), in environments where opposing views exist ($f=4$, %7.7), on issues related to researches ($f=3$, %5.8), they can remain silent. The findings as to why research assistants remain silent in these situations have been summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Frequency and percentage distribution on the reasons why research assistants remain silent

Themes	Expressions obtained from the Interviews	f	%
The fear of receiving negative feedback	<i>If I express my opinions and my opinions clash with one of my superiors, I believe that this will confront me during doctorate proficiency with the thesis jury. (RA1)</i>	20	29.8
The belief that speaking will not provide any solution	<i>If I openly expressed a few things a couple of times and the person I spoke to did not change his behavior or his decision which affects me as well, then I give up and prefer to remain silent. (RA4)</i>	14	20.9
Organizational culture	<i>There is already a certain structure at school anyway. You try to integrate into that. Everyone is already silent. You become silent as well when you go there. (RA12)</i>	12	17.9
Prejudices	<i>None of the advisers like their knowledge to be questioned and being thought as having certain shortages. (RA4)</i>	8	11.9
Individual reasons	<i>Personality wise, I'm not a person who likes to put himself to the fore, speaks a lot and is at the forefront of such organizations. (RA7)</i>	5	7.5
Strict attitude of superiors	<i>Usually, as long as the professor is not very strict, I am able to talk. (RA5)</i>	2	3.0
Voicing opinions making people blacklisted	<i>When I voice my opinions, I mean when I claim my rights, I become an intolerable and problem causing person; I become the person who constantly snaps at everyone. (RA6)</i>	2	3.0
Personalizing of opinions	<i>In Turkey, comments are perceived in a personal and offending manner, rather than being about the work itself. (RA3)</i>	2	3.0
Other reasons	<i>I do not speak to preserve professionalism; I prefer "academic personality" to be in the foreground. (RA3)</i>	2	3.0
Total		67	100

As it can be seen from Table 3, the themes which most appear in the foreground about the research assistants' reasons for remaining silent are the fear of receiving negative feedback ($f=20$, %29.8), the belief that speaking will not provide any solution ($f=14$, %20.9) and organizational culture ($f=12$, %17.9). Accordingly, it is possible to say that research assistants remain silent with the fear that they will be harmed in some way especially when they express their views. In addition, in terms of remaining silent the participants' belief that speaking, that is voicing their views, will not provide any solution and the existing organizational culture in relation to research assistants remaining silent in universities have an important impact as well. Besides these reasons, various prejudices they have, individual reasons, the strict attitude of superiors, voicing opinions making them be blacklisted and the personalization of opinions cause research assistants to remain silent as well.

In order to determine what kinds of consequences the research assistants' behavior of silence has, the participants have been asked what kinds of effects remaining silent has. The findings on the consequences of research assistants' remaining silent have been presented in Figure 2.

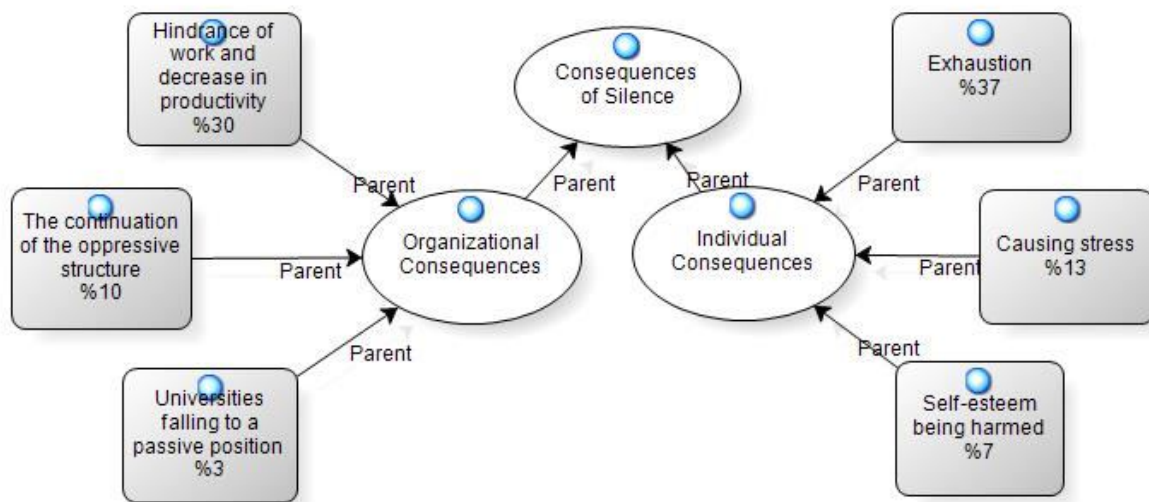


Figure 2: The consequences of research assistants' remaining silent

Source: The figure is drawn by authors through the NVivo program.

As it can be seen in Figure 2, according to the views of research assistants, remaining silent has both individual and organizational consequences. In terms of individual consequences, the consequences of research assistants' remaining silent are grouped under the themes of exhaustion (37%), causing stress (%13) and self-esteem being harmed (%7). In terms of organizational consequences, the consequences of research assistants' remaining silent are grouped under the themes of hindrance of work and decrease in productivity (%30), continuation of the oppressive structure (%10) and universities falling to a passive position (%3).

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, which aimed at identifying the situations in which research assistants who work at universities remain silent and determining the reasons why they remain silent and its consequences, research assistants generally refrain from speaking in situations where power distance is in question and about issues where they lack knowledge and experience. As it can be seen, the culture of power distance appears as an important factor in terms of research assistants' preference in remaining silent. Huang, Van de Vliert and Van Der Vegt (2005) state that, in societies where power distance is high, employee silence is high as well. According to these writers, in these societies ideas such as "the superiors know the best", "the superiors are right" are dominant.

According to De Mooij (2003), in societies where power distance is high (for instance, France, Belgium, Portugal, all of Asia), everyone has a place in society which they deserve and in these societies, the status a person has is more important in comparison to societies where power distance is low.

In fact, research assistants express that they in particular prefer to remain silent in environments where there are experienced academicians. The view of one of the research assistants is as follows:

"I cannot say that I act the same in front of a young academician and an experienced academician. I remain silent next to an experienced academician." (RA11)

In universities, in cases where there is power distance, it has been shown through qualitative studies that the behavior of silence changes. Cakici (2008) in his study conducted on academicians has analyzed the behavior of silence of assistant professors and instructors and has similarly concluded that instructors are more silent in comparison to assistant professors. In another qualitative study conducted in Turkey about the organizational silence of academicians, it has been seen that the score averages of organizational silence scale of academicians with different titles significantly change depending on their duration of work, age and whether they have administrative duties or not (Bayram 2010).

One reason why research assistants prefer to remain silent in cases where there is power distance can be the result of Turkish culture as well; because the phenomenon of silence is a concept which is approved and supported by the Turkish culture. In daily life, expressions such as "Do not talk, you are young", "When the elderly speak, the young remain silent", "Do not talk, do not step in" can be frequently heard. In fact, this concept has so penetrated into the Turkish culture that, it has reflected on proverbs as well; "Speech is silver, silence is gold (Eroglu, Adiguzel and Ozturk, 2011). In this study, one of the participants has stated his reason for remaining silent in his relationships with experienced academicians as saying "*Silence is for the young, speech is for the elderly*" (RA14) and has drawn emphasis to the culture which is widely seen in society.

It has been seen that the views which have been stated by research assistants in terms of refraining from expressing their opinions have been grouped under the themes "The fear of receiving negative feedback" and "The belief that speaking will not provide any solution". This can be interpreted as research assistants' displaying quiescence silence and acquiescence silence types. In a study carried out in the USA on 260 employees who work in 22 organizations which shows similarity with the results of this study, it has been determined that the two most common reasons expressed by employees in terms of remaining silent are the belief that speaking openly about these issues will not create difference and the fear of receiving a negative answer (Ryan and Oestreich, 1991; quoted by Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

Research assistants have stated that remaining silent has harmed them psychologically and emotionally, they experience exhaustion as a consequence of that and this situation causes a hindrance in terms of work and decreases productivity. The consequences created by silence on individuals appearing as exhaustion has also been determined in the studies of Tahmasebi, Sobhanipour and Aghaziarati (2013); Aktas and Simsek (2015). In addition, it is stated that exhaustion causes unwanted behaviors in organizations such as absenteeism and labour turnover (Bagheri, Zarei and Aeen, 2012). In fact, when the views of the participants about hindrance of work and decrease in productivity are taken into consideration; it is possible to say that employees gravitate towards unwanted behaviors when they remain silent in organizations. Cakici (2008) in his study has put forward the perceived consequences of silence in organizations respectively in three dimensions as prevention of performance, limiting improvement and development and making employees unhappy. As it can be seen, these findings show similarities with the findings of this study.

As a result, the findings of the study show that the behavior of silence both harms research assistants who are to be the academicians of the future psychologically and emotionally and make them feel unworthy. In addition, this behavior is regarded as an important barrier in the development of universities. Thus, it is quite important that research assistants express their views more freely and be more active in universities. For these to be possible, it is considered that research assistants being able to work in environments where they are not subject to any kind of pressure and negative feedback, express their views freely and their views are taken into consideration and valued is important both in terms of universities and research assistants.

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