



Review

How Should We Interpret Silence in Qualitative Communication Studies?

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Abstract: Through an interdisciplinary literature review, based on empirical evidence, this research approaches different ways of interpreting silence(s) in three qualitative research methods—ethnography, focus groups and interviews—which, by their nature, are conducive to practices that resort to silence as units of meaning. The findings presented in this paper demonstrate how, in different data collection techniques, it is possible to rethink not only the whole conception of what silence is but also what silence can (or cannot) help to express. From a qualitative perspective in the social sciences and humanities, silence can in itself be a means of expression and a valid communication resource.

Keywords: qualitative research; silence; interaction; interpretation; communication



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1. Introduction

Silence and nonverbal and indirect communication are very effective ways of conveying meaning (Dimitrov 2018, 2019). So, “silence is not an absence of communication”, but rather, it could be a communication strategy of those who participate in qualitative research (Kawabata and Gastaldo 2015, p. 5). What we choose to say or remain silent about has a function in the organization of meaning (Johannesen 1974; Kalamaras 1994).

Paying attention to silence in qualitative research has been presented as a need and a growing trend, particularly in the scientific domain (Mellor and Webster 2017) and in the context of different communication interactions (Verouden et al. 2018). The analysis of silence’s social and affective functions is necessarily more interpretative than the study of the cognitive or pragmatic functions. The affective functions of silence are linked to interpersonal communication dynamics and emotion management. The social functions of silence are related to ways of negotiating and maintaining power relations (Nakane 2007).

Silence holds varying cultural meanings across different societies. It is important to understand how different cultures interpret silence within communication studies, bringing together theoretical approaches from interpersonal, intercultural, and/or political communication. For example, to achieve effective intercultural communication, Quan (2015) investigated the contrasting perspectives on silence in American and Chinese cultures, highlighting its social and practical functions. In the context of interpersonal communication, Ling (2003) observed that to British citizens, visual nonverbal communication was more applicable than for Japanese citizens. Remarkably, Ling’s (2003) study demonstrated that all groups underwent situations and circumstances during which their silence functioned to express feelings and thoughts, demonstrating that interpreting the different nuances of silence is an interdisciplinary task that involves knowledge from areas such as (but not only) sociology, anthropology, and psychology.

In some African cultures, silence is perceived as a symbol of superiority, while it represents inferiority in some others (Agyekum 2002). In the context of political discourse analysis in Türkiye, research findings highlighted that the interpretation of silence depends on the context, with functions ranging from showing approval and seeking approval to challenging and refusing to speak (Alagözülü and Sahin 2011). Expressive silence, whether

structured or not, holds meaning and functions in communication, varying by culture, setting, topic, and interlocutor. [Moghaddam et al. \(2014\)](#) examined the pragmatic dimension of silence in Persian society, confirming that silence in Persian is a pragmatic concept dependent on cultural and contextual factors.

In any qualitative social science study, the role and subjectivity of the researcher are a vital part of the scientific research context ([Smithson 2000](#)). Through an interdisciplinary literature review, based on empirical evidence, in this article, we approach different ways of interpreting silences in three concrete qualitative research methods—ethnographic observation, focus groups, and interviews—which, by their nature, are conducive to practices that resort to silence as units of meaning.

2. Goals and Methods

The need to better interpret silence in qualitative research is recognized ([Kawabata and Gastaldo 2015](#); [Schröter and Taylor 2018](#)). This paper aims to examine explorative and reflexive ways of interpreting silences in qualitative research on communication sciences. This is particularly relevant in an increasingly intense, diverse, and often conflicting communication environment. Resorting to an interdisciplinary literature review complemented by empirical examples and suggestions for future research, we focus on three research methods—ethnography, focus groups, and interviews. The choice of these methods is related to the fact that they are three of the most used methods in qualitative research in communication sciences and with the perspective that, in qualitative studies of silence, what is not said is seen as social action ([Murray and Durrheim 2019](#)). In terms of procedures, this review synthesizes and connects existing research to offer new insights and perspectives on the communicative value of silence in qualitative studies.

2.1. Interpreting Silences in Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative method for data collection ([Kramer and Adams 2017](#)), based on “participant observation (experiencing), interviewing (enquiring) and studying materials prepared by others (examining)” ([Wolcott 2008](#), pp. 48–49). Typical ethnographic research uses three types of data collection: interviews, observation, and documents. This, in turn, produces three types of data: quotations, descriptions, and excerpts from documents, which result in a narrative and interpretative description of the observed phenomenon. This narrative usually includes graphs, tables, and/or additional supporting information that help describe the dynamics observed. However, the field of ethnographic research is vast and integrates different, often expressing conflicting views on what an ethnographic approach should be and how it should be implemented within the social sciences ([Atkinson et al. 2007](#)). The ethnographic approach is justified by the need to study the contingency of continuously negotiated activities—the theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism¹ ([Pawluch et al. 2017](#))—and to observe how people manage the various possibilities inherent to a given situation and attribute meaning to their everyday actions (ethnomethodology) ([Baszanger and Dodier 2004](#)).

The anthropology of communication introduced a cultural approach to the communication phenomenon. The ethnography of communication involves the work of empirical analysis of communicative practice, having as its main objective the description of the communication process as a symbolic determinant in human societies ([Carbaugh 1995](#)). In this context, the objective is to identify the patterns underlying interaction, considering the relationship between language and communication as a cultural phenomenon essential to the functioning of societies ([Mateus 2015](#)).

To the ethnographer, silence can be “meaningful, multivocal, ambiguous and/or opaque” ([Dragojlovic and Samuels 2021](#), p. 417). The work of listening to silence in the current communicative context of promotional cultures oriented to obtain a voice, attract attention, and persuade different audiences ([Davis 2013](#)) demands special attention within communication research ([Schröter and Taylor 2018](#); [Dimitrov 2019](#)). Interpreting silences in the ethnography of communication offers a modality for improved engagement in

ethnographic research by suggesting that we do not consider silences a failure when they arise in our interactions in fieldwork and that we do not seek to fill the silences “with univocal explanations that support a particular discursive framework” (Dragojlovic and Samuels 2021, p. 418).

The analysis of “how, why, and on which occasions people choose—or are forced—to be silent and what they are silent about” can lead to a deeper comprehension of the communication strategies and tactics of everyday life of individuals, groups, and organizations (Virloget and Alempijevic 2021, p. 1). One may use the force of silence not only to prohibit, repress, or alienate but also as a form of self-preservation and protection and as a way of empowering and resisting (Hill Collins 2000; Brown 2005; Dimitrov 2018). For example, in the context of the current sociopolitical struggles, such as environmental activist communication and human rights advocacy, “silence can provide space—protective space for the development of alternative identities” (Jungkunz 2012, p. 143). Plus, strategic thinking requires a certain kind of silent time and space (Clark 2021). Silence also allows listening, which is key to decision making, establishing trust, and engaging people (Macnamara 2016, 2023).

There are examples of possible new directions for interpreting silences in ethnographic research (Dragojlovic and Samuels 2021; Seljamaa and Siim 2016; Kawabata and Gastaldo 2015). Silence may request or decline interpretation as much as speech may do, following the “anthropology of the unknowable” that was the basis of all scientific inquiries and the search for truth (Weller 2017).

Ethnography places “something into words, which did not exist in language before” (Hirschauer 2006, p. 413). During all moments of ethnographic research, ethical concerns associated with the connection observer–participant need to be addressed (Fetterman 1998). There is also the need to consider who is part of the research, given that studies involving children will necessarily have specific methodological, ethical, and legal procedures. One of the main challenges of this method is related to the problem of an excessive approximation or distancing of the researcher from empirical phenomena and the human context. Excessive proximity between phenomena and people presents the risk of not connecting observations and interpretations with broader systems of thought, while an excessive distance can force such observations to be framed in predetermined concepts, running the risk of losing the value of contextually rich descriptions (Ramos 2020). The theoretical–practical articulation acquires special importance in this context. The ethnographer needs to know well the historical, social, cultural, and political context of the people or groups observed in order to interpret the silences that arise. Because “if the description needs an explanation, it is not a good description” (Latour 2005, p. 67). In an empirical way, qualitative studies of silence can interpret the unsaid as social and political action, and this is particularly useful for the ethnography of communication (Murray and Durrheim 2019).

As Jungkunz (2012, p. 135) explained, “insubordinate silences” attempt to empower, protest, resist, and/or refuse political, economic, and social realities. Insubordinate uses of silence also serve to illuminate who, why, and under what circumstances some voices are suppressed. *Silences that empower* are about obtaining access to different spheres where meanings are established—political, social, interpersonal, economic, educational, spiritual—and therefore are a response that highlights the absences of those “others” who are silenced. This type of silence focuses on dynamics of relationship and exclusion. They bring attention to dysfunctional relationships in participation processes and expose the negative consequences of silencing some voices and exalting others. Thus, silences that empower seek to find allies whose voices are heard, valued, and respected to call attention to the injustices of being silenced (Jungkunz 2012, pp. 135–37). In a chatty environment, *silences that protest*, such as silent vigils for the protection of human rights or peace, stand out and draw attention without resorting to words. Silences that protest focus on certain injustices and public issues and are a political expression loaded with meaning. These silences break the myth, which many activists share, that silence is always a loss, weakness, invisibility, repression, oppression, and unknown (Jungkunz 2012, pp. 137–38). In the context of the

constant struggles for attention and the right to speak, *untimely silences* are ways of defying communicative expectations. In the context of discursive interaction, listening and speaking times acquire strategic importance. The silences that precede responses and reactions represent a state of alertness, a form of anticipation and reflection. This silence can defraud the expectations of the interlocutors, if, for example, it is longer than what is expected in a conversation, provoking a purposeful discomfort in the interaction. These silences can be accompanied by absences from places where we were expected to be present, or by, for example, refusing to sing the national anthem in protest (Jungkunz 2012, pp. 138–40). *Silences that resist* are forms of indirect communication that indicate dissatisfaction and resistance to rules, including the alternative ways people find to circumvent state surveillance or tight social rules and laws considered unfair. People who work without declaring income, or those who choose to live isolated from society and not to educate their children in institutional schools, are people who not only do not trust the system but who send a clear message that they do not want to be part of it. The cultural and political goals of “changing the game” are implicit in these silences. Communities created to live alternative lifestyles away from certain environments can be forms of civil disobedience to rules and practices deemed inappropriate. Silences that resist can also be ways of subverting certain narratives, more by example, by action, and by the best results that a certain lifestyle or options can provide than by trying to argue in contexts where silence is neither understood nor welcomed. The refusal to provide certain information and stories when asked is also a form of silence that resists; in this way, “not telling helps subjects act in their interests outside the purview of authorities” (Jungkunz 2012, pp. 140–42). When ignorance is feigned, it can also be considered insubordinate silence. All insubordinate silences that empower, protest, and resist refuse something but are engaged in action, whereas *silences that refuse* adopt inaction. This refusal implies some kind of leaving, an abandonment of something, a failed worldview, a life, a self, an identity, a group, or a discussion.

The ethnographic approach in qualitative studies is best positioned to answer challenging questions about the “whys” underlying complex human interactions. To do this, attention must be paid to non-linear and creative patterns of expression and to the meaningful dialectic of silence and narrative (Kidron 2009).

French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky claims that the “authenticity fever” has gripped our age (Lipovetsky 2022, p. 9) in the context of the hypermodern combination of speed and digital technologies. In ethnographic research on certain media representations (whether legacy media or online social networks), for example, it will be very useful to observe and understand “how silence comes to figure in a metanarrative of authenticity” (Dragojlovic and Samuels 2021, p. 421). Evidence from an ethnographic study to better understand the implications of authenticity in activist communication oriented towards social change and the defence of human rights shows the tensions between the need to find a voice and forced silence (Müller 2024). Since many actors and social groups choose to act on the margins of noisy communication contexts, this choice has impacts on the communication dynamics studied through ethnographic immersion methods.

2.2. Interpreting Silences in a Focus Group

The focus group is a data collection technique that involves in-depth interviews with different individuals present in the same group/context. Specifically, it is a research technique that gathers data based on the interaction of a group on a topic determined by the researcher (Morgan 1996). In that sense, the focus group is defined as a data collection technique through group interaction on a specific topic, adding value to its understanding. The primary purpose of this methodological tool is to extract attitudes, responses, feelings, opinions, and reactions from participants through the researcher’s participant observation, gathering and developing new knowledge about the discussed topic (Galego and Gomes 2005; Salgado 2024). In this context, the focus group establishes itself as a viable technique when identifying and understanding specific feelings, attitudes, and behaviours towards a particular topic or situation (Daymon and Holloway 2010; Jordan Civil Society Program

2012), providing valuable insights for communication program development, for instance, the *Jordan Civil Society Program* (2012).

This methodology allows sharing specific examples in discussion groups, providing them with an opportunity to explore different perspectives and also formulate and reconsider their own ideas (Cameron 2005). The description of the complexity of human behaviour—such as the intensity of participants' actions, the emotions involved, what is said, and how they are influenced—makes the focus group a method where obtaining the most realistic information is possible (Jordan Civil Society Program 2012; Salgado 2024).

This definition recognizes the three essential components of the focus group: a research method devoted to data collection, demonstrating how the interaction in group discussions is the main source of data collection, and placing the researcher in an active role by creating these discussions (Morgan 1996). This active role of the researcher/moderator and the various interaction dynamics established can be one of the main advantages of conducting a focus group: "It could be argued that focus groups differ from these other methods because they are artificially formed for the researcher's purpose and therefore produce contrived speech, while interviews, participant observation, and the like capture more 'natural' speech" (Hollander 2004, p. 605). For instance, the focus group is frequently used in the health sector (Santo 2022) or in consumer behaviour studies (Daymon and Holloway 2010; Belk 2017; Salgado 2024), specifically in the strategic planning phase. This allows a better understanding of potential target audiences and, consequently, the development of effective communication strategies (Morgan 1996).

Despite various techniques available to understand a specific target audience, more commonly used in communication, the interactive nature of the focus group is believed to encourage participation and facilitate the emergence of new questions, answers, and opinions (Daymon and Holloway 2010; Bryman 2012). Regarding the application of the technique, the process begins with planning, followed by recruitment, moderation, analysis, and finally, the presentation of results (Daymon and Holloway 2010). Therefore, the focus group is considered to enable a more realistic understanding, as all information undergoes a process of argumentation where various perspectives are discussed and confronted (Bryman 2012).

However, there are several limitations and criticisms of this methodology as it may favour some kind of "groupthink," where participants may be influenced to adopt opinions similar to those expressed by the moderator or assertive individuals in the group (Belk 2017; Salgado 2024). Another concern is the temporal and spatial limitations of the focus group due to the need to identify, recruit, and gather the group in one location. The rapid development of technology and the emergence of COVID-19 have reduced or completely eliminated this limitation, allowing for a broader—online—use of these focus groups. Additionally, online focus groups, on one hand, provide participants with a sense of anonymity, increasing their comfort and, consequently, willingness to participate in the discussion. On the other hand, they reduce visual distractions that could occur in face-to-face focus groups (Stewart and Shamdasani 2017).

We argue, as do Daymon and Holloway (2010), that the focus group is a viable qualitative data collection technique when it comes to identifying and understanding specific feelings, attitudes, and behaviours towards a particular topic or situation. Discourse interaction is one of the most diverse forms of interaction present in our daily lives. Therefore, all contextual variables are considered important, implying that we are dealing with an instrument that refers to a conversational context: "Would the other participants have told the stories they did in a different conversational context—for example, in a mixed-sex group where the first speaker was a woman who described her fear of violence" (Hollander 2004, p. 625).

Despite the interactive potential of this technique being associated with limitations such as the possible influence of social pressure on individual responses (Daymon and Holloway 2010; Jordan Civil Society Program 2012), we believe that the focus group is

the technique that best allows us to understand the target audience in an exploratory and in-depth first approach.

Ajzen (1991) looks at this social pressure that an individual feels to perform behaviour as something that occurs in proportion to the likelihood of a certain reference group approving or disapproving of the behaviour and/or the likelihood of certain groups important to the individual engaging in the behaviour. Thus, we agree with Hollander (2004) on how focus groups constitute multidimensional contexts: “Focus groups are also multidimensional contexts. Depending on the composition of the group, participants may be concerned about their relationships with other participants or with the facilitator, with the consistency of their comments with what they have said (or saying in advance) in other contexts, with the interpersonal dynamics of the group, with their role in the conversation, and so on” (Hollander 2004, p. 613).

Despite the non-generalist nature of this data collection technique, the fact that it allows interaction among participants, facilitating the emergence of new questions, answers, and opinions—leads us to the importance of the moderator as a manager of the participation of all participants in focus groups (Belk 2017; Krueger 2002; Hollander 2004; Santo 2022; Salgado 2024). But some ethical considerations in focus groups are crucial due to this complex nature of group interactions. Any researcher, when addressing different ethical issues diligently, must conduct focus groups that respect and protect participants’ rights and well-being (Hennink 2015), and also must ensure informed consent, clearly explaining the group setting and potential for sharing personal information. Maintaining confidentiality is challenging, as participants’ anonymity cannot be fully guaranteed in a group discussion.

Moderators play a vital role in creating a secure environment, actively observing for signs of discomfort and intervening to prevent psychological harm. For instance, in a focus group discussing sensitive health issues, a moderator might pause the discussion if a participant appears distressed, ensuring their well-being is prioritized throughout the session (Santo 2022). As Hollander (2004) indicates, a moderator “who shares similar characteristics with the group participants” will promote “rapport, trust, or both” (p. 521). Therefore, one of the main roles that any focus group moderator should play is to analyse the responses received and also deal with discrepancies that arise in the different dynamics of the discussion; for example, if a situation occurs where one (or several) member dominates the discussion so that theirs is the only opinion clearly articulated. When this happens, Smithson (2000) advocates for the construction of collective voices, i.e., “a group process of collaboratively constructing a joint perspective, or argument, which emerges very much as a collective procedure which leads to consensus, rather than as any individual’s view” (p. 109).

Any focus group moderator plays a pivotal role in managing “sound” and “silence” (Hollander 2004; Morgan 1996; Daymon and Holloway 2010). According to Hollander (2004), concerns are frequently raised about the issue of disclosure (for instance, how do we encourage participants to divulge any information in which we are interested). Every participant response in focus groups is always shaped by the context, composition, and facilitation of the group. Other moderator strategies for dealing with silences may involve, for example, role-playing dynamics or alternative assessment (Krueger 2002).

It is important to highlight that the moderator’s functions have essentially a strategic dimension. This dimension is important for the facilitator to develop a set of skills to promote reflective and shared reflection throughout the focus group’s duration. For a moderator, managing silence effectively involves recognizing when to allow the group to sit with the silence and when to gently prompt further discussion. We can also find a dichotomy between group silence and group behaviour—where participants may be influenced to adopt opinions similar to those expressed by the moderator or assertive individuals in the group (Belk 2017). By strategically using silence, the moderator can create an environment where participants feel comfortable engaging in introspection and expressing their genuine perspectives, ultimately enhancing the quality and depth of the data collected.

Any focus group implies an interactive dimension that should allow for greater speech fluidity. The existence of a common background and, above all, a shared objective helps different participants to alternate moments of silence with moments of openness: “What focus groups tell us is how people communicate with others. This vitally important point is often ignored in focus group research (. . .). Practitioners must analyse the particular social contexts of the group and how they affect group dynamics and individual incentives to disclose. Perhaps the most appropriate use of focus groups is to obtain a window on face-to-face interaction and discourse, which is always contextual” (Hollander 2004, p. 628).

2.3. *Interpreting Silences in Interviews*

In qualitative research, in the context of interviews, silence is often seen as problematic, revealing an absence of knowledge from the interviewee or a deficit in interviewing skills from the interviewer. Interviewers are trained to use different types of questioning (Saunders et al. 2016; Cassell and Symon 2012) to foster the flow of the conversation, to probe interviewees’ knowledge, perceptions, or interpretations, bounding the available data to analysis, to the verbally expressed words in the context of a conversation. Interviewees often resort to self-presentation strategies to be perceived as knowledgeable about the topic of interest and the research, thereby exhibiting knowledge through the wording, opinions, and tone of voice. Displaying a fluid conversation is one of the most sought-after objectives to be fulfilled in a successful interview.

Nonetheless, “in many cases, what is not said may be as revealing as what is said” (Poland and Pederson 1998, p. 294). Watzlawick et al. (1967) stand for the impossibility of non-communicating. If there is no option but to communicate, then each communicative act, whether it be verbal or nonverbal, encompasses the production of meaning. Hence, silence in interviews becomes relevant, both from the perspective of the interviewer and the interviewee. Despite the assumed significance of silence, research still underestimates the attention and importance of silence as a meaningful act and would prefer to focus on the vocalization of words within the interview context. Interviewers are trained to probe for further questions and meaning elicitation through deep diving into the words of the interviewee. Silence is usually perceived as an interruption of meaning or of the communicative process to be avoided, corrected, or resolved. Silence is also seen as a problem in the interviewing context, a sign of an absence of rapport between interviewer and interviewee, to be taken care of and remediated through strategies that promote further probing of the interviewee’s answers (Poland and Pederson 1998).

On the other hand, silence is not considered a proper field of reflection. Silence may also signal a need for further elaboration and thus be used by the interviewer to collect more information. It, therefore, becomes an opportunity for the well-trained interviewer to obtain richer data. It becomes a signal of listening. Poland and Pederson (1998) stand for the need to further train the interviewer to be able to not only ask questions but to allow for listening in an empathic way (Rogers 1959), that is, listening and trying to understand the interviewee’s meaning, through the eyes and references of the interviewee.

Allowing the respondent to progress at his own rhythm is counter to the present-day need to voice actively and rapidly over any pressing topic, disregarding the necessity of waiting for meaning to build and unfold. Silence can signal the interviewer’s bond with the interviewee with respect to his/her decision to address (or not) a painful memory/story (Bengtsson and Fynbo 2018). Silence can signal possibilities of constructing constellations of meaning between the interviewer and interviewee and stitching and negotiating power relationships within the context of the interview (Bengtsson and Fynbo 2018). Seen like this, silence is not a break in data collection, but it can signal the interviewee’s reluctance to categorization, intended by, or perceived as intended by the interviewer’s questions. Silence then becomes a way to protest against the limited options provided by the interviewer for the interviewee to choose from.

Silence is then a legitimate focus within qualitative research and not a problem of the interviewer’s skills or the interviewee’s lack of knowledge (Poland and Pederson

1998). This way, a focus on silence as a meaningful unit of analysis urges further attention in communication studies in (1) training interviewers to observe and interpret both the words and silences, (2) training interviewers to exercise self-reflexivity in interpreting the observed “silences in conversation” and (3) urging researchers to pay close attention to the interview context that may inform the presence and interpretation of silence (Bengtsson and Fynbo 2018).

The meaningfulness of silence is also seldom considered a priority of analysis in qualitative research within the context of interviews. Often, silences are signalled in transcriptions to refer to “interruptions” in speaking and considered moments of the emptiness of data rather than unexplored possibilities of undeclared and not verbalized meaning. Silence is also culturally bonded to its meaning within different contexts. As Poland and Pederson (1998) remember, silence in the West represents frailty in self-presentation and a lack of social intervention in an ever-increasing vocalized loud world. In Eastern religions, on the other hand, believers are bonded by votes of silence that signal introspection and self-awareness processes and development. “In these contexts, silence is not perceived as an emptiness but as a fullness of experience that is allowed into being by the removal of talk, which is seen as a distraction.” (p. 297). In this context, silence becomes a barrier for researchers willing to assess the realms of interior meaning, inaccessible through questioning and probing in an interview context and only available by the more holistic and complex process of knowing the interviewee.

Researchers can also ingrain their analysis with silences coming from their interpretative agency. Poland and Pederson (1998) speak of silences of estrangement when participants in interviews feel misinterpreted and do not recognize the meaning ascribed to their words. Misinterpretations can come from a lack of cultural alignment or knowledge that urges diverse interpretations from the interviewer than the ones intended by the interviewee. Encultured silences can emerge from the absence of willingness or ability of the researcher to accommodate a different approach to the interviewee’s social world and, therefore, not being able to ascribe a “shared meaning” in the interview process. Ultimately, encultured silences can signal that one social group is powerful enough to silence or colonize the silence of others.

Dehlig (2023), in a conceptual paper on silence from the perspective of the consumer experience, represents the objective and subjective sources of the silence experience, and notes that silence can stem from an inner quiet state of mind; it can signal the absence of voice in a relational context, and be objectively identified (in the length of verbal pauses, in the absence of verbal interaction, in the absence of an interlocutor, as a signal of sociocultural conventions) or subjectively assessed (in the avoidance of topics, by using discretion in the conversation, by omitting or by signalling ignorance on a topic).

Dehkharghani et al. (2023), in a review assessing silence in an organizational context, look at 92 studies from the last two decades to identify a gap in the production of qualitative studies. As for using interviews, studies look at the reasons for silence and detect fear as one of the most critical elements for employee silence, link organizational silence to women teachers’ career barriers, or even identify power differences in “racial hierarchies”, or “silencing” in the context of English professional footballers. Either way, coding for these manifestations of silence offers further ways to grasp the totality of meaning embedded in an interview situation.

Silence can also be addressed for the procedural data analysis used. In interview coding, for example, Aguinis and Solarino (2019) advise methods of increasing transparency and replicability in qualitative research in the context of interviews with elite informants. They recommend twelve criteria to enhance transparency and replicability in qualitative research. Of the twelve suggested transparency criteria, the authors refer to being explicit in sampling procedures, the relative importance of the participants, documenting interactions with participants, considering eventual unexpected opportunities, challenges, and other events in the course of the research process, reporting situations of a power imbalance between researcher and participants, strategies used for the first order and second-order

data coding, and data analysis procedures. All these transparency criteria are useful lenses in addressing silence within an interview context.

Explicitly reporting the sampling procedures and relative importance of the interviewees when addressing silence urges the considerations needed to interview different participants: interviewing adults is different from interviewing children, and the presence or absence of silence within the interview context would be better viewed in light of the interviewees' age and ethical concerns derived from it.

By documenting interactions with participants thoroughly, researchers become intentionally attentive to words, signals, gestures, and silence within an interview context and recuperate its presence in the data analysis process.

By coding silence as significant, it can either represent an unforeseen opportunity, a challenge, or a signal of a power imbalance situation, at least as perceived by the interviewee. Silence can present itself as signalling unavailability to discuss, as a feeling of lack of freedom to express truly, amongst other eventual possible meanings. Nevertheless, a need for interpretation emerges, and a reference frame to do it is contextual and unavoidable.

When coding, it is helpful for the researcher to compose the narratives stemming from the combination of first-order codes with second-order codes by adding to the interpreted meanings of nonverbal cues and silences, adding to the constellations of meaning to be elicited from the whole experience of the interview. Coding for silence(s) and their perceived and interpreted meaning(s) from the reference frame of the interviewee, without leaving aside the reference frame of the interviewer, is then adding another layer of interpretation, new voice(s) to the meaningful silences within the encounter between interviewer and interviewee (Rogers 1959).

3. Discussion and Concluding Notes

When studying the role of silence in communication using ethnography, interviews, and focus groups, several common themes and differences emerge across these methods. The common themes discovered are as follows: (1) Contextual understanding: all methods explore how cultural, social, and situational factors influence the use and interpretation of silence. (2) Meaning and interpretation: they investigate how silence is interpreted, whether as agreement, disagreement, contemplation, etc. (3) Nonverbal communication: silence is seen as a key aspect of nonverbal communication. (4) Power dynamics: each method examines how silence reflects or challenges (direct or indirect) power dynamics. Regarding the differences between these methods, the most visible are as follows: (1) Ethnography: contextual, natural settings, cultural insights. (2) Interviews: personal, reflective, detailed individual perspectives. (3) Focus groups: group dynamics, collective views, real-time reactions.

Often, common sense regards silence as a mere absence of speech or verbal communication and, consequently, as a non-communicative behaviour. However, this study demonstrates how, in different data collection techniques, it is possible to rethink not only the whole conception of what silence is but also what communication entails, that is, what silence can (or cannot) help to express, as well as the proper communicative act established between the moderator of a focus group and their interviewees, for instance. In this sense, it seems correct to assert that from a qualitative perspective in the social sciences and humanities, silence can in itself constitute a means of expression and a good communication resource. Using ethnography, interviews, and focus groups together provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of silence in communication, making the research more robust, insightful, and relevant to real-world contexts. By integrating these methods, researchers gain a comprehensive understanding of silence, capturing individual and collective experiences alongside contextual nuances, thus enhancing the robustness of findings and enabling practical applications across various fields such as education, counselling, consumer behaviour, and organizational communication, benefiting practitioners and theorists alike.

Researching silence in communication sciences can be quite complex, given the multifaceted nature of silence and its contextual meanings. To innovate in this field, combining various methods from both qualitative and quantitative research can provide a more comprehensive understanding. Some mixed-methods approaches (Creswell et al. 2003) to studying silence in communication sciences could include the following: (1) Ethnographic observation and interaction analysis (for example, the use of video recordings to analyse nonverbal cues, body language, and the timing and duration of silences, identifying patterns and functions in communication). (2) Surveys and in-depth interviews. (3) Content analysis and discourse analysis. (4) Experimental study design (experiments with controlled communication tasks, managing silence variables to study effects on comprehension, relationship dynamics, and conflict resolution) and conversational analysis (analysing recordings of conversations to study the structure and function of silences, focusing on turn-taking patterns, interruptions, and the strategic use of silence). (5) Cross-cultural comparative studies. (6) Technology-enhanced methods like machine learning and Natural Language Processing (NLP) (using algorithms and NLP tools to analyse large communication datasets, identifying patterns and contexts of silence often missed in manual analysis). Innovative research on silence in communication sciences requires a flexible, multi-method approach that can adapt to the complexity and subtlety of silence in human interaction.

Addressing the absence of voices, particularly those who are silent within the research process, is also crucial. By acknowledging and discussing this silence, researchers can uncover hidden perspectives, biases, and systemic issues that may otherwise remain unexamined. Moreover, actively seeking out and amplifying silenced voices can enrich the research process, promoting inclusivity and fostering a deeper understanding of complex phenomena. Therefore, by embracing silence as a topic of inquiry and actively addressing its absence, researchers can strive for a more comprehensive and equitable approach to knowledge production.

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Notes

- ¹ Symbolic interactionism originated in the Chicago School with one of its main representatives, George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), but the term was only created in 1938 by Herbert Blumer (1900–1987), one of the authors who continued Mead’s pioneering work. The main interest of this movement is the interaction processes mediated by the symbolic character of social action, and the ways to access these processes would be the analysis of the empirical world through the observation of everyday experience (Prus 1996).

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