



Swedish Agency for Work
Environment Expertise

Annette Nylund

Fil. Dr. in Work Science Process manager,
Senior Analytics, SAWEE

6th PEROSH Research Conference
The SAWEE Project Cultures of Silence at Work



Agenda

- Brief about the Agency
- The background and aim of the SAWEE Project: Cultures of Silence at Work
- The three reports in the project
- Some conclusions

Swedish Agency for Work Environmental Expertise



Myndigheten för
arbetsmiljöutrustning



Swedish Agency for Work
Environment Expertise

Brief about the agency

- Over 50 million in revenue by 2024
- Started in 2018
- Office in Gävle
- 25 employees
- 118 external experts





Swedish Agency for Work
Environmental Expertise



The Mission

A national knowledge centre for work environment issues.

- Compile and disseminate research-based knowledge about the work environment in a comprehensible and easily accessible way.
- Analyse developments and the effects of government decisions and policies in the work environment.
- Monitor and contribute to building knowledge of work environment issues within the EU and other countries.



SAWEE will be part of the Swedish Work Environment Authority, from January 1, 2026

- Knowledge – a new department including Analysis and Communication
 - SAWEE Analysis becomes the R&D unit, in parallel with work environment official statistics and the Authority's business analysis
 - SAWEE Communication becomes part of the communication unit, with three sections: communication coordination; digital channels; and editorial and branding)
 - SAWEE Administration becomes mainly located within the *Support and Coordination department, DG Staff, or possibly the Knowledge department Staff unit.*
- The Authority is a network organisation, with offices in different parts of the country (SAWEE will be divided into four geographical locations according to employees' wishes)
- The Gävle office will remain, probably in a new location, with some of the employees from SAWEE and the other departments' operations.



We are in the project:

Culture of silence in Swedish working life



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Annette Nylund
Fil. Dr. in Work Science
Process manager,
Senior Analytics,
annette.nylund@mynak.se



Lasse Nivér,
Communication
lasse.niver@mynak.se



UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG



Lotta Dellve
Coordinator of the research group
Professor of Work Science,
lotta.dellve@socav.gu.se



UNIVERSITÄT
LEIPZIG



Michel Knoll,
Assisting Coordinator
Fil.Dr Psychologi,
Leipzig universitet
michael.knoll@uni-leipzig.de



Ylva Wallinder
Fil.Dr Sociology,
ylva.wallinder@gu.se



Erica Nordlander
Fil.Dr Sociology,
erica.nordlander@so
cav.gu.se



Mahwish Naseer
Fil.Dr Medicin, post doc
in Work Science,
mahwish.naseer@gu.se



The background and aim of the Project Cultures of Silence at Work

- Some Swedish trade unions have conducted surveys highlighting silence within their professions, but ask for more knowledge
- Employers in public sector organisations started to create tools to prevent and manage a culture of silence, but ask for knowledge
- The Swedish research studies are few in number and focus on employee silence, not on cultures of silence.
- Researchers ask for a comprehensive concept for cultures of silence (what, why and how)
- Therefore, the study aims to contribute to better preventing and managing cultures of silence



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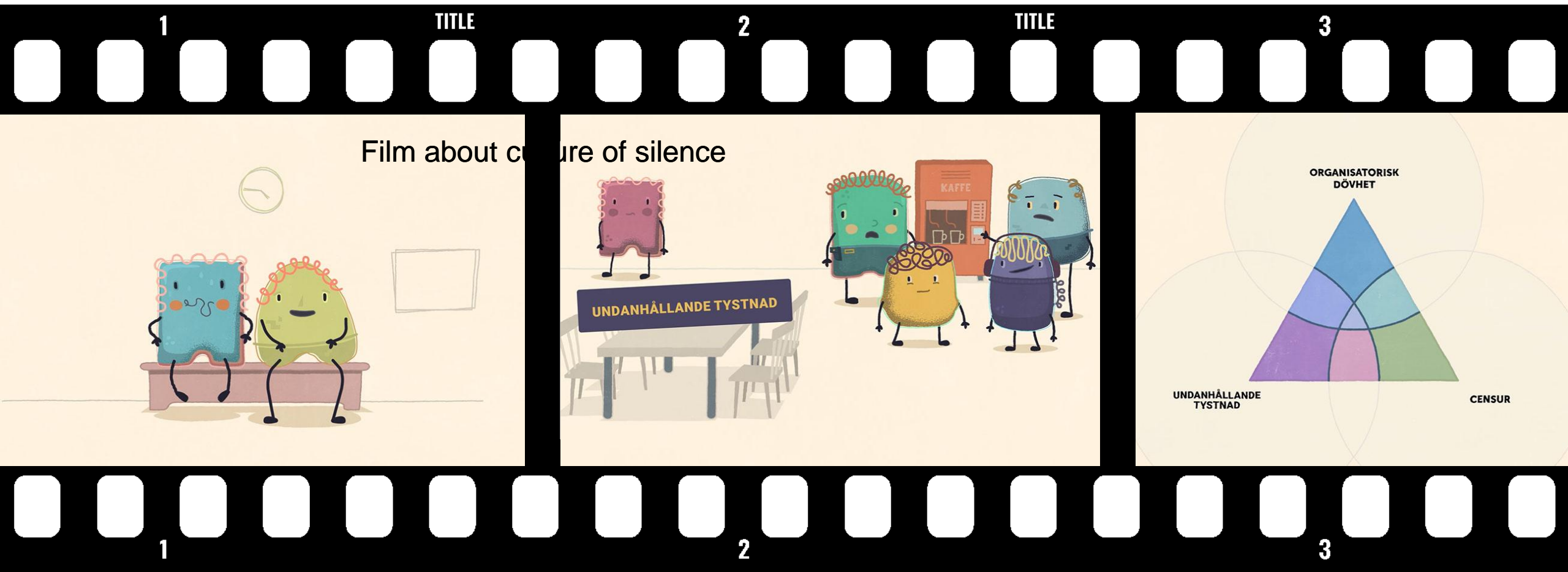
Podcast

Direct shipping

Films



Film about culture of silence



A project-ending seminar in November 2025

A project-ending seminar will be organised with Sutarbetsliv, “Healthy Working Life”.

This organisation is run jointly by trade unions and employer organisations for those working in a municipality, region, or municipal company. It supports creating a better work environment, such as through health factors.

The seminar will start the activities at Sutarbetsliv, “Healthy Working Life”, concerning silence and culture of silence.

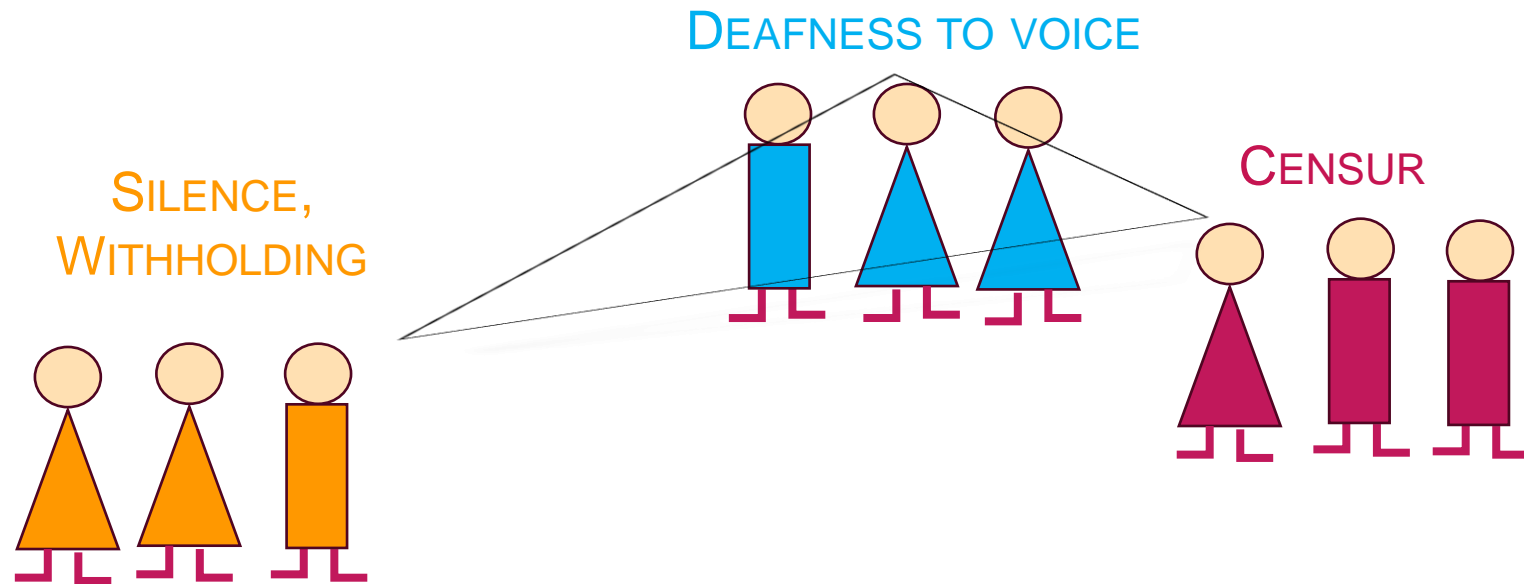


Report 1 is developing the concept of a culture of silence

Title:

Cultures of Silence at Work
Integrating and Advancing
Knowledge

The Triangle of Silence in the
Collective (Systemic Approach)





The Triangle of Silence in the Collective (Systemic Approach)





Three-layer structure for cultures of silence (Structural approach)

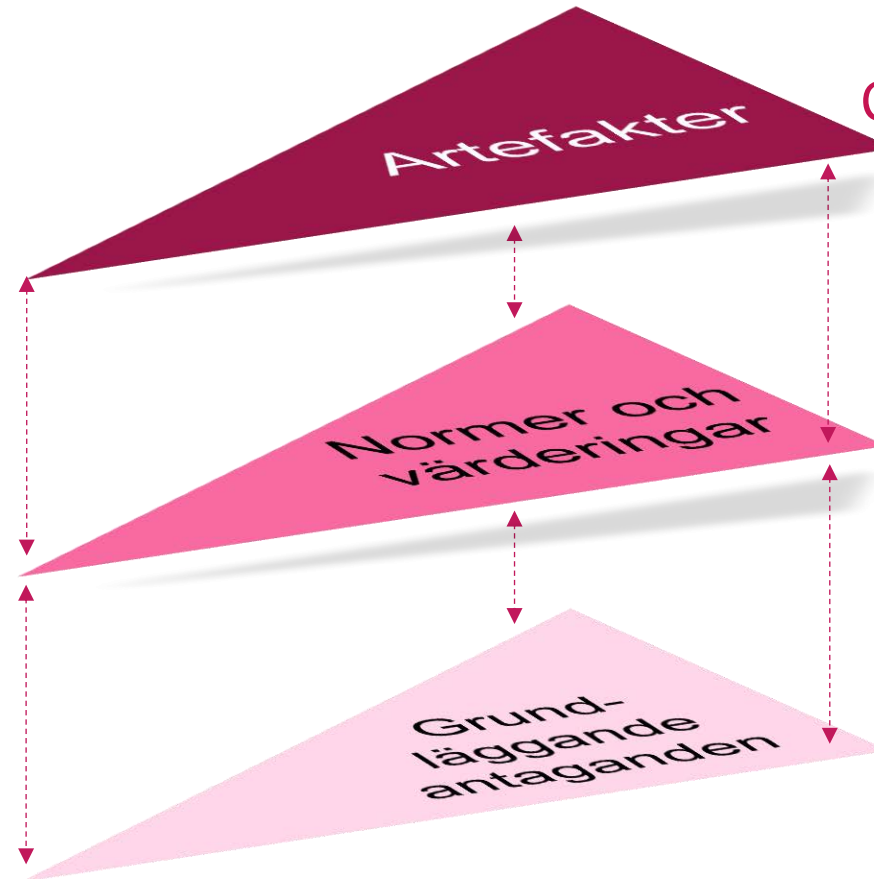
Learning by dealing
with problems of
external adaptation
and internal
integration
(Dynamic approach)



SILENCE,
WITHHOLDING

DEAFNESS TO VOICE

CENSUR



Layer 1: Factors that can be seen, heard, and experienced, ex. language, behaviour and organisational processes

Layer 2: Explicit and implicit codes for silence, such as toughness or niceness.

Layer 3: The most invisible layer. Taken-for-granted assumptions about what is appropriate. Most employees, including managers, are often unaware of these.



The strengths of the review

- A developed concept of a culture of silence at work, including individual and organisational perspectives
- Based on the front research on occupational health science and social science such as organisational development.
- The developed concept combines a social science theory-driven approach with an epidemiological, occupational health science design, which enables interpretation from multiple theoretical perspectives



Report 2 is A Measurement of Silence and Cultures of Silence Among Employees in Swedish Working Life in 2024

Purpose

The study maps the occurrence (prevalence) of silence and cultures of silence among employees in Swedish working life, generally and in different sectors, industries, businesses, and in diverse groups of the working population. Further, it examines the connection between different working and organisational conditions and a culture of silence.

Questions

- How can silence and cultures of silence be measured with survey data?
- Where do silence and cultures of silence occur on average in Swedish working life?
- What are the connections between silence and cultures of silence and the working and organisational conditions of the workplace?



Method

Design

Combined web survey and country register data

Selection

- n= 25,000 people
- in a randomised but stratified sample according to industries
- in organisations with >5 employees
- among the employed and working people
- age 20–65 years

Response rate approximately 30% (7,297 employees).

Analytical techniques used

- mean values
- correlations
- regressions



The **Silence**, withholding, was measured with one question, used in several international studies, and translated into Swedish.

The question reads: People deal with problematic situations, risks and abuses at work differently. Some express their concerns and try to change the situation, while others are silent. How often has it happened that you have been silent about a problematic situation that you should have raised?



The question was answered with four response options. A binary (0/1) categorisation was made of the options :
0=Never or Once
1=A few times or Several times

Proportions (%) were calculated for the number of employees who answered that they had been silent or withheld information at work.

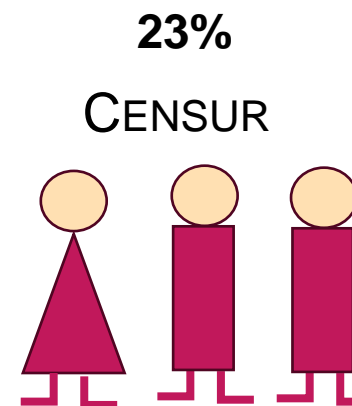


The censorship was measured with one question.

Censorship means that the respondent experienced that others discourage or hinder rather than encourage the opportunity to voice ideas, opinions and concerns, or that others even hinder or force colleagues to silence.

Censorship was measured with the question “At my work, others try to discourage or stop those who say what they think.” The response options were a scale:

From 1=Not at all true to 5=Completely true.



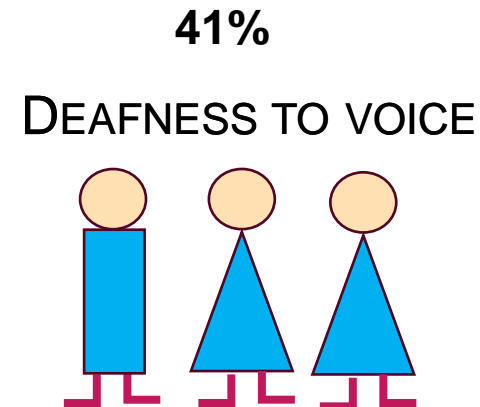


The organisational deafness was measured with one question.

Organisational deafness occurs when the respondent experiences that those who can bring about change are “deaf” to the voices that raise critical issues.

Organisational deafness to voices was assessed with the question “I work in an organisation where decision-makers turn a deaf ear to complaints.” The response options were a scale:

From 1=Not true at all to 5=Completely true.

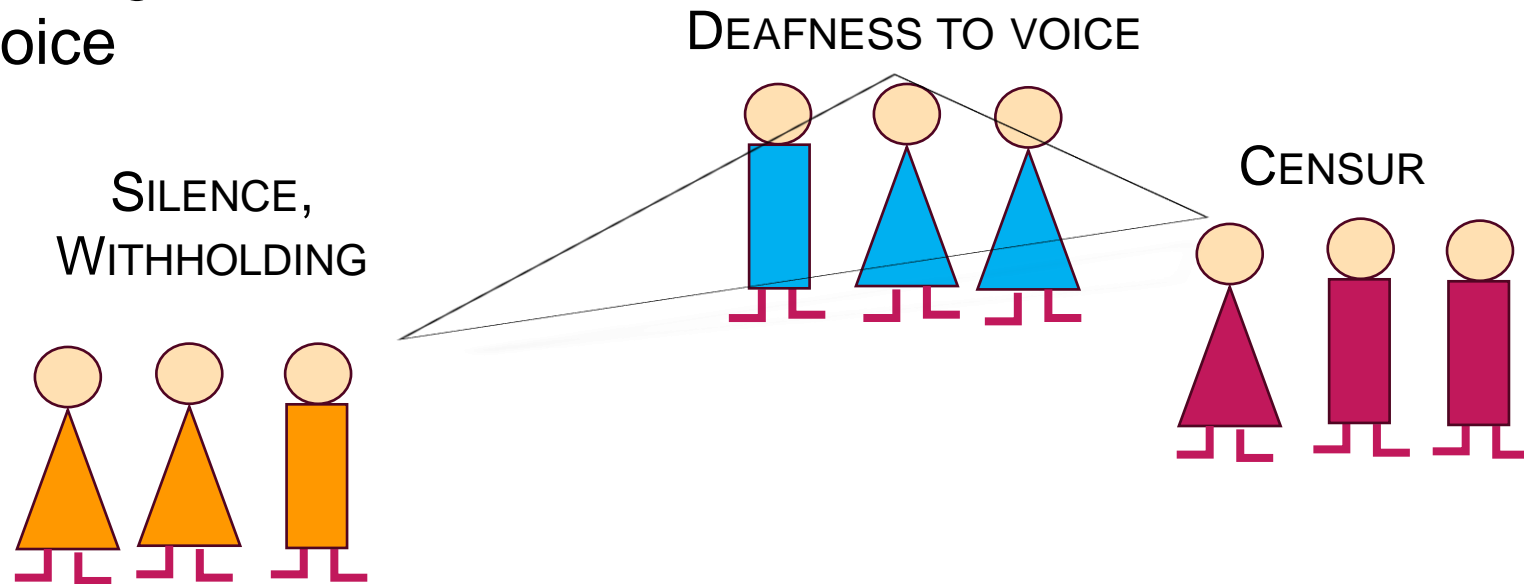




The culture of silence occurs at work when there is a high proportion of all three elements (variables):

The top quartiles are used in the study:

- Silence/withholding
- Deafness to voice
- Censur





Prevalence of silence and culture of silence in Swedish Working Life in 2024

| | Silence, Withholding | Censur | Deafness to voice | Culture of silence |
|---|-------------------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Total | 30 | 23 | 41 | 26 |
| Individual | | | | |
| women | 32 | 23 | 42 | 27 |
| Younger (<30) | 38 | 28 | 47 | 34 |
| Older(65+) | 17 | 19 | 41 | 14 |
| Disability | 43 | 36 | 54 | 34 |
| Lower education | 33 | 37 | 45 | 28 |
| Work position | | | | |
| Trade union representative | 29 | 27 | 51 | 29 |
| Executive position | 25 | 20 | 31 | 19 |
| Sector | | | | |
| Privat | 29 | 23 | 39 | 25 |
| Public | 34 | 25 | 46 | 29 |
| Industry | | | | |
| Agriculture, forestry and fishing | 33 | 31 | 48 | 33 |
| Accommodation and food service | 37 | 42 | 50 | 37 |
| Professional, scientific, technical services | 22 | 14 | 29 | 16 |
| Real estate | 39 | 29 | 45 | 30 |
| Education | 34 | 23 | 41 | 29 |
| Human health and social work | 32 | 23 | 43 | 25 |



Relationship between Culture of Silence at Work and Work Organisation

| Examples... | Silence, Withholding | Censur | Deafness to voice | Culture of silence |
|--|-------------------------|--------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| At the workplace I work in there are: | | | | |
| - Routines for reporting incidents and injuries | -0,2 | -0,3 | -0,4 | -0,3 |
| - Acceptance of opinions and perspectives | -0,4 | -0,6 | -0,6 | -0,5 |
| - Can we openly discuss quality deficiencies | -0,4 | -0,5 | -0,6 | -0,5 |
| Management: | | | | |
| <i>My immediate boss:</i> | | | | |
| - Listens and encourages contact | -0,3 | -0,4 | -0,5 | -0,4 |
| Senior managers: | | | | |
| - Listens and encourages contact | -0,3 | -0,4 | -0,6 | -0,4 |
| The organisation I work for: | | | | |
| - Are more concerned that conditions look good than are good | 0,4 | 0,6 | 0,7 | 0,5 |
| - Individualises complex problems | 0,4 | 0,5 | 0,6 | 0,4 |
| Work organisation: | | | | |
| Lack of opportunities to influence | 0,3 | 0,4 | 0,4 | 0,3 |



Summary of results (indications)

- **Individual factors are important, but need to be seen in an organisational context**
 - younger employees
 - lower educated
 - with disabilities
 - foreign background
 - in female-dominated jobs.
- **Industries that stands out**
 - hotels and restaurants; service services
 - the public sector.
- **Work places with poor communication conditions – for example in the absence of:**
 - regular workplace meetings
 - an open climate
 - present and listening managers
 - Centralisation and the lack of opportunities for influence
 - conflicting demands
 - loneliness at work
 - individualisation of problems.
- **A culture of silence was reported more often by union and safety representatives and less by managers.**



The strengths of the survey

- The first time that employee silence and culture of silence at work has been studied in a nationally representative sample, from an individual and organisational perspective
- A measure of culture of silence has been developed and tested (see the review). Employee silence, withholding, can be indicated with one question, and a culture of silence can be indicated with three questions
- The study's large sample of employees in diverse industries and the relatively high number of respondents (30 %) and the use of supplementing registered data make it possible to interpret results even from smaller groups that are otherwise underrepresented in research.
- The study combines a social science theory-driven approach with an epidemiological, occupational health science design, which enables interpretation from multiple theoretical perspectives



Report 3, Silence at Work in Country Contexts – An International Benchmarking Study with Sweden in Focus

The analyses compare Sweden with 17 countries organised in five clusters according to each country's industrial relations arrangement (Visser, 2009). Data are from Report 2 (in the project) and an international study involving 32 countries (Knoll & van Dick, 2013).

- Sweden
- Scandinavia – Denmark, Norway
- Anglo-Saxon countries – Great Britain, Ireland
- European continent – Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Schweiz
- South Europa – Frankrike, Spain, Itali, Portugal, Greece
- East Europa – Polen, Croatia, Slovenia, Rumania



Aim of the report

The report aims to develop an insightful knowledge base on the prevalence of employee silence, including its motives, with a broader context of conditions in which silence occurs in Sweden compared to five European country clusters.

Work in progress...

The first complete version of the report's manuscript will be finished in September 2025.



Table 1. Silence and silence motives, Sweden (2024) and European country cluster (2015 –2020), mean scores and standard deviations (in brackets). Mean scores for clusters are aggregated at the participant level and do not represent means of country scores.

| Country | Critical situation experienced ¹ | Responded with Silence ¹ | Silence Motives ² | | | |
|---|---|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | | | Fear | Resignation | Conflict Avoidance | Disengagement |
| Sweden (N=7.297) | 2,51 (1,09) | 1,78 (1,01) | 2,66 (1,30) | 3,29 (1,20) | 2,82 (1,19) | 2,01 (0,98) |
| Nordic³ | 2,00 (1,01) | 2,08 (0,92) | 3,20 (1,68) | 3,47 (1,78) | 3,63 (1,57) | 2,50 (1,44) |
| Denmark (N = 115) | 2,98 (0,56) | 1,97 (0,93) | 2,43 (1,18) | 2,76 (1,19) | 2,78 (1,12) | 1,69 (0,81) |
| Norway (N = 200) | 1,80 (0,94) | 2,15 (0,90) | 2,66 (1,12) | 2,81 (1,18) | 2,94 (0,98) | 2,29 (1,00) |
| Centre-East (will be recalculated) | 2,69 (0,99) | 2,51 (0,99) | 3,46 (1,95) | 4,05 (2,07) | 4,19 (1,82) | 2,72 (1,68) |
| Croatia (N = 207) | 2,63 (0,92) | 2,49 (0,92) | 3,13 (1,32) | 3,72 (1,29) | 3,52 (1,13) | 2,20 (1,17) |
| Poland (N = 195) | 2,55 (0,93) | 2,21 (0,97) | 2,46 (1,18) | 2,92 (1,32) | 3,01 (1,17) | 2,15 (1,10) |
| Romania (N = 258) | 2,67 (1,05) | 2,38 (1,02) | 2,13 (1,20) | 2,70 (1,31) | 2,99 (1,21) | 1,95 (1,05) |
| Slovenia (N = 325) | 2,44 (1,04) | 2,39 (1,04) | 2,92 (1,33) | 3,31 (1,36) | 3,28 (1,17) | 2,22 (1,09) |
| South | 2,52 (1,00) | 2,25 (0,97) | 3,31 (1,89) | 3,89 (2,03) | 4,14 (1,78) | 2,54 (1,66) |
| France (N = 247) | 2,40 (0,99) | 2,13 (0,96) | 2,88 (1,27) | 3,11 (1,30) | 3,00 (1,16) | 2,37 (1,05) |
| Greece (N = 188) | 2,55 (1,05) | 2,48 (1,04) | 2,51 (1,31) | 2,78 (1,44) | 3,18 (1,32) | 2,35 (1,26) |
| Italy (N = 264) | 2,73 (1,00) | 2,28 (0,90) | 2,38 (1,24) | 2,85 (1,35) | 3,12 (1,22) | 1,90 (1,11) |
| Portugal (N = 338) | 2,60 (0,94) | 2,25 (0,96) | 2,54 (1,25) | 2,98 (1,36) | 3,11 (1,15) | 1,89 (1,05) |
| Spain (N = 193) | 2,26 (1,00) | 2,11 (1,03) | 2,35 (1,17) | 2,84 (1,32) | 3,06 (1,13) | 1,68 (0,90) |
| Centre-West | 2,47 (0,91) | 2,22 (0,94) | 3,08 (1,80) | 3,73 (2,04) | 3,69 (1,66) | 3,01 (1,71) |
| Belgium (N = 120) | 2,58 (0,81) | 2,42 (0,87) | 2,38 (1,27) | 2,93(1,48) | 3,06 (1,26) | 1,98 (1,09) |
| Netherlands (N=198) | 1,97 (0,91) | 2,02 (0,89) | 2,51 (1,18) | 2,85 (1,30) | 2,69 (1,05) | 2,15 (1,07) |
| Germany (N = 506) | 2,62 (0,87) | 2,25 (0,96) | 2,31 (1,18) | 2,80 (1,34) | 2,75 (1,10) | 2,43 (1,15) |
| Switzerland (N = 518) | 2,55 (0,87) | 2,29 (0,95) | 2,54 (1,21) | 2,83 (1,37) | 2,91 (1,09) | 2,34 (1,13) |
| West | 2,52 (0,97) | 2,07 (0,95) | 3,62 (1,90) | 4,15 (2,03) | 3,97 (1,72) | 2,21 (1,41) |
| England (N = 179) | 2,70 (0,92) | 2,16 (1,00) | 2,90 (1,30) | 3,32 (1,35) | 3,08 (1,19) | 1,68 (0,85) |
| Ireland (N = 254) | 2,45 (0,97) | 2,06 (0,91) | 2,67 (1,23) | 3,01 (1,33) | 2,93 (1,11) | 1,88 (0,99) |



Silence and silence motives per external factor in Sweden (2024) and European country cluster (2015 –2020).

Included external factor:

Industry

Age

Gender

Native or Migration background

Contract type

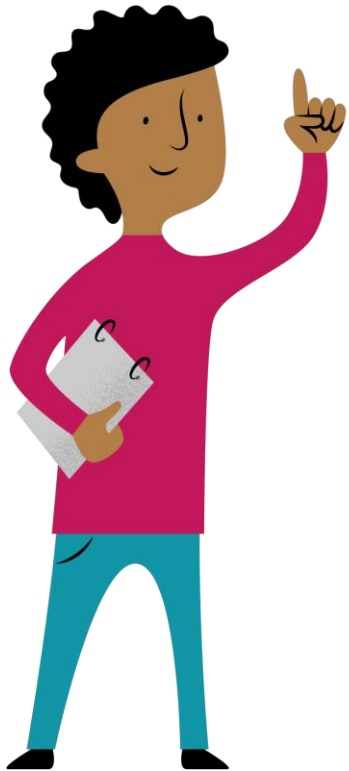
Managers' number of subordinates in five size groups

Experience/Tenure



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Questions?





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Thank you for attending the seminar!

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