

Witnessing bullying at work: Employee silence in higher education institutions

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is a widespread phenomenon within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Employee tendency to remain silent is one of the most common reactions to workplace bullying. Yet, employee silence in the context of workplace bullying is poorly studied. Building on the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) and the Learned Helplessness Theory (LHT), this study investigated employee reluctance to take action when witnessing workplace bullying (employee silence). The sample comprised 560 employees working in 20 HEIs in Ireland. Respondents filled out a survey measuring employee silence, victimisation, and team psychological safety. Results showed a negative association between team psychological safety and employee silence, indicating a reluctance to report bullying among respondents with low levels of team psychological safety. In line with the COR and the LHT, a positive association was found between victimisation and employee silence. The paper concludes with a discussion of possible actions for bullying prevention in HEIs.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying is understood as systematic abuse of power, which is characterised by five elements: frequency, negative social acts, power imbalance between perpetrators and targets, repetition, and perceived harmful intent (Baillien et al., 2017). Bullying acts may result from a conflict escalation or may begin with subtle

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behaviours that are difficult to pinpoint, while gradually taking more overt and direct forms. The prevalence of bullying in higher education is difficult to estimate due to a number of factors, including the nature of samples (i.e., studies sampling academic versus non-academic personnel), and the use of different assessment methods across various studies, along with definitional inconsistencies and conceptual paradigms (Keashly, 2021). Existing research shows that between 40% and 60% of staff members in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) endure bullying during their employment (Hollis, 2015). Between 40% and 50% of employees within HEIs witness bullying at work (Keashly, 2021). Taken together, these rates are much higher compared to the prevalence of bullying victimisation across other business sectors (León-Pérez et al., 2021).

Workplace bullying often takes covert forms, especially within the context of higher education (e.g., hidden, secret, not obvious and subtle acts involving manipulation, isolation, rumours, denigration of reputation, being exposed to an unmanageable workload, having opinions and views ignored; Zabrodska & Kveton, 2013). Indeed, HEIs are characterised by critiques, debates, and intellectual analysis, all of which could be maliciously undertaken to undermine the professional standing, authority, and competence of other fellow academics, thus resulting in covert acts of bullying (Keashly, 2021). In fact, research shows that workplace bullying does not only affect academics but also other personnel within HEIs (e.g., librarians, support staff; Björklund et al., 2021).

Although much-needed knowledge around workplace bullying in HEIs has been developed in recent years, the factors that may contribute to this phenomenon being widespread in academic institutions are unclear. One of the possible factors that might contribute to normalise workplace bullying is employee silence. Employee silence reflects a tendency to withhold views, questions, ideas, and concerns when confronted with different issues within an organisation (such as unethical behaviour; Knoll et al., 2021). Remaining silent in front of different workplace issues deprives organisations of potentially useful information, while constituting an obstacle to innovation (Knoll et al., 2021). Silence leaves bullied employees emotionally exhausted and depleted both physically and psychologically, and less productive at work (Knoll et al., 2021).

Simultaneously, employees who endure bullying at work might also witness other colleagues being bullied (Paull et al., 2012). Offering private emotional support to the targeted employee may be a safer strategy for bystanders, compared to raising formal complaints (MacCurtain et al., 2018). Although social support from colleagues contributes to decreasing mental health problems among bullied individuals (Manzano García et al., 2022), at the same time, it could replace formal bullying complaints (MacCurtain et al., 2018). However, reporting bullying entails several risks, including potential repercussions on employee career and job security (Knoll et al., 2021). Thus, employee silence might be the only option for targets who foresee high work-related risks and do not feel psychologically safe in their workplaces (Liu et al., 2020). Psychological safety can be defined as the shared belief of working in a supportive team and involves feelings of safety when taking risks within the work team or the organisation (Edmondson, 1999). Despite their potential contribution to workplace bullying, both employee silence and psychological safety have not been investigated within HEIs. Previous research conducted in different organisational contexts has found an association between being the target of workplace bullying, employee silence, and psychological safety (Liu et al., 2020). However, existing research has not explored the associations between employee silence and psychological safety (within HEIs), while taking into account employees' victimisation experiences. By exploring these issues, the present study aims to add new knowledge to existing research in the broader field. The present study also contributes to existing research with theoretical and applied contributions. More specifically, this study integrates the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989) and the Learned Helplessness Theory (LHT; Seligman, 1975), as interpretative frameworks, and paves the way for further theory development regarding employee silence from the perspective of employees who may both endure and witness bullying. From an applied perspective, the findings of this study can inform policies and best practices aimed to enhance formal employee and organisational response to workplace bullying.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Recently, scholars have stressed the need for advancing the research on employee silence through integrating multiple theoretical perspectives (Harlos, 2016). The present study builds on two theoretical frameworks, the COR (Hobfoll, 1989) and the LHT (Seligman, 1975). One of the main assumptions of the COR is that individuals will strive to preserve their current resources (conservation), while trying to acquire new resources (acquisition; Hobfoll, 1989). More in detail, when individuals are faced with stressful events, they make an effort to preserve cognitive and affective resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Organisational research shows that when employees lose resources at work, they experience mental health issues, including depression and burnout (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Thus, people engage in behaviours that avoid resource losses, to preserve their own wellbeing (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Employee silence can be an effective strategy to preserve cognitive, emotional (Liu et al., 2020), and even financial resources (given the potential impact that disclosing bullying might have on employee job security and career progression; Fahie, 2020). Also, psychological safety can affect the cost-benefit analysis when deciding whether to voice one's own concerns or remain silent (Hao et al., 2022).

In line with the LHT (Seligman, 1975), when individuals lack a sense of control in front of a negative event, they tend to experience the negative event itself as immutable, which in turn generates a sense of helplessness. This sense of helplessness is associated with motivational deficits, in that individuals will discontinue their attempt to escape or change the negative event (Overmier, 2002). Learned helplessness is also associated with cognitive deficits, in that individuals expect that future events will also be uncontrollable (Seligman, 1975). As a result, they will miss the opportunity to learn new strategies to cope with negative events. Incidents of bullying at work may be framed as negative events for which individuals lack control. High levels of helplessness can reduce the likelihood of employees taking a stance against the perpetrators of workplace bullying (Samnani, 2013). This is supported by qualitative research showing that bullied employees are reluctant to change their situation through formal complaints, rather they choose to resign or take early retirement (Fahie, 2020), which can be interpreted as an expression of their sense of helplessness.

3 | EMPLOYEE SILENCE AND VICTIMISATION

Employees might encounter situations whereby they privately think that something should be addressed, but they might be reluctant to speak-up due to a number of reasons (Pinder & Harlos, 2001), including fear that speaking up would negatively impact their careers or their relationships with colleagues (i.e., *quiescent silence*, Knoll et al., 2021). Further reasons for remaining silent are related to the lack of trust that speaking-up would bring any positive change (i.e., *acquiescent silence*) and to safeguarding one's own interests, such as protecting a knowledge advantage and avoiding additional workload (i.e., *opportunistic silence*, Knoll et al., 2021). Employees might also remain silent with the intention to benefit others; for example, they may avoid bringing up issues in the attempt to protect or not to embarrass their colleagues (i.e., *prosocial silence*, Knoll et al., 2021).

Employee silence in the context of workplace bullying has been poorly studied, especially within academic institutions, yet is one of the most common reactions to workplace bullying (Rai & Agarwal, 2018). Common reasons for not taking formal action include fear of negative consequences for the bystander career, fear of opposing the perpetrator due to their power (Paull et al., 2020), along with fear of isolation, and the perception that the organisation either discourages or ignores workplace bullying complaints (MacCurtain et al., 2018).

Interestingly, employee behaviours in bullying situations are not fixed. For instance, employees who witness bullying might become fellow targets as a result of standing-up with the bullied employee (Paull et al., 2012). In a similar way, employees who have endured bullying might avoid meddling when witnessing other employees being bullied, due to fear of being re-victimised (Paull et al., 2020). In fact, research shows that university faculty who

endured workplace mistreatment (encompassing incivility, harassment, and violence) and who have not raised a complaint, wished (retrospectively) that they had responded more assertively (Salin et al., 2014). This, in turn, raises the question as to whether employees who endured bullying at work might respond assertively to the bullying that they witness. However, past negative outcomes from formal complaints can foster silence within organisations (Mannix McNamara et al., 2018), implying that targets of bullying who were left with no remedy for their case may be reluctant to raise a formal complaint when witnessing bullying, though this has not been corroborated by empirical evidence and remains a gap in the literature.

4 | EMPLOYEE SILENCE AND TEAM PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Employee silence may be suggestive of a general perception that the workplace is not psychologically safe in terms of bringing up issues, including workplace bullying, whereas higher levels of psychological safety are associated with a reduction in employee silence (Brinsfield, 2013). Employees with low levels of psychological safety are more likely to remain silent when concerned with different organisational issues (Liu et al., 2020). In general, employees feel safer to speak up in relation to work-related issues (e.g., patient safety in the case of healthcare workers), whereas they might remain silent when confronted with personal issues, including conflicts and disagreements (O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020). On the contrary, higher levels of psychological safety are positively associated with employees being willing to take risks within teams and organisations (MacCurtain et al., 2018).

Most research studies investigating the link between employee silence and psychological safety have been conducted in healthcare organisations (e.g., O'Donovan et al., 2021). Unfortunately, research conducted within HEIs is scant. Qualitative findings showed that a culture of mistrust and silence within academic settings undermines positive interpersonal relationships (Fahie, 2020) and has been proposed to be contrary to the building up of a culture characterised by psychological safety (Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara, 2021). In this respect, employees working in HEIs might not feel confident in terms of voicing their concerns due to feeling intimidated or having been belittled in the past by those in a position of authority (Gan, 2020).

5 | INDIVIDUAL PREDICTORS OF EMPLOYEE SILENCE

Recent research has called for the need to investigate employee silence in relation to a number of factors, including demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity) and hierarchical relationships within organisations (e.g., managerial role; MacCurtain et al., 2018).

Individual factors, such as gender, predict silence among targets of bullying, whereby women are more likely to adopt passive coping strategies compared to male employees, including remaining silent when enduring bullying (Salin & Hoel, 2013). Nevertheless, female employees who witness bullying are more likely to recognise it and show intentions to help compared to male employees (Desrumaux et al., 2018). It should be noted, however, that female bystanders tend to help especially through informal actions (e.g., emotional support), rather than pursuing formal procedures (Hellemans et al., 2017).

Belonging to minority groups (e.g., ethnic minorities) may exacerbate the degree of vulnerability, as minority employees may already face some sort of social isolation, which could further discourage them from reporting bullying incidents (either witnessed or endured; Hollis, 2015). Moreover, due to their invisibility, and to the discrimination that they endure, minority employees are more likely to be silenced at work, compared to majority staff members (Bell et al., 2011). Simultaneously, they may also be less likely to seek help from organisational representatives for other employees' misconduct (Knoll et al., 2021).

In terms of the association between age and employee silence, a negative association has been found between taking no action while witnessing bullying and age, indicating that younger employees are more likely to take no action (MacCurtain et al., 2018). This is confirmed by somewhat specular findings showing that older employees are more likely to voice their concerns in relation to different organisational issues (Knoll et al., 2021).

Along with age, seniority can also affect an employee's likelihood to speak up when confronted with bullying. Newly appointed staff members are more likely to engage in silence when enduring and witnessing bullying (Gan, 2020). Simultaneously, senior employees with past experiences of not being listened to may also be discouraged from speaking up in relation to various work issues, including interpersonal conflicts (O'Donovan et al., 2021). Employees may also refrain from speaking up if they perceive a lack of organisational support and effective policies (Salin et al., 2014).

Another important factor that may affect employee tendency to remain silent has to do with their hierarchical status within organisations. Abusive supervision may foster fear among subordinates, which translates into silence (Kiewitz et al., 2016). HEIs are characterised by strong hierarchical power relationships, whereby bullying can be used to perpetuate hierarchies and maintain or gain power (Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara, 2019). Power distance (the degree to which individuals accept power imbalances as legitimate within organisations) has been theorised to affect employee likelihood to remain silent when confronted with workplace bullying (Samnani, 2013). This theoretical notion has been confirmed in cross-cultural studies showing that employees are more likely to remain silent in societies with high power distance, indicating that high power distance may facilitate conformity and a tendency to avoid conflicts (Knoll et al., 2021). In this respect, employees in higher management positions are less likely to remain silent when they are confronted with various organisational issues, compared with employees with non-managerial roles (Knoll et al., 2021). However, there is research showing that managers may be reluctant to report any bullying experiences that they endure to avoid appearing weak or incompetent (Jenkins, 2013).

Recent research has pointed to the neoliberal characterisation of universities in Western countries (a policy and ideology model encouraging free market and competition, with limited state intervention in economic matters) as one of the factors that may contribute to workplace bullying (Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara, 2021). Specifically, increased job insecurity, a high degree of competitiveness, and significant difficulties for early career researchers in obtaining a permanent position could increase power disparities, while fuelling bullying (Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara, 2021). Qualitative enquiries have shown that both academic and non-academic personnel tend to remain silent when enduring and witnessing bullying (Fahie, 2020). However, the association between previous experiences of victimisation and employee silence has not been investigated among academic and non-academic staff members in HEIs.

6 | THE PRESENT STUDY

This study aimed to investigate the associations between employee silence and several predictors in a sample of employees working across Irish HEIs. While previous research investigating the association between employee silence and workplace bullying assessed respondents' general tendency to remain silent in relation to various organisational issues (e.g., Liu et al., 2020), this study aims to specifically assess employee silence in the context of workplace bullying (i.e., remaining silent while witnessing bullying). The following hypotheses were formulated.

Based on the literature reviewed above, and in line with both the COR (Hobfoll, 1989) and the LHT (Seligman, 1975), we expected to find a positive association between enduring workplace bullying (victimisation) and remaining silent (employee silence) while witnessing other employees being bullied at work (H1).

Based on existing research in other business sectors, we expected to find a negative association between psychological safety and employee silence (H2).

Finally, we expected female and ethnic minority employees to be more likely to engage in silence, whereas we expected older employees, senior employees, and those with a managerial role to be less likely to engage in silence (H3).

Respondent work area (academic vs non-academic) was also controlled for, though no specific hypotheses were formulated.

7 | METHODS

7.1 | Sample

A total of 3983 respondents engaged with the online survey. Respondents who completed the consent form but did not respond to any questions in the survey were removed from the final dataset, reducing the number of respondents to 3832. The main outcome of the analysis in the current study is *employee silence*, a scale including items that were only presented to those respondents who indicated that they had witnessed bullying at work and did not take any action to tackle it. This means that data on the employee silence scale were only available for 560 respondents, and these are the ones that constituted the analysis sample in this study.

Demographic information about the analysis sample can be found in [Table 1](#). Approximately three out of four respondents (73.2%) were females and held non-managerial roles (71.3%). Most respondents (82.1%) identified themselves as Irish and were between 35 and 64 years old. Approximately half of the sample (47.6%) had up to 5 years of experience in their current role, while the sample was almost equally distributed between individuals covering academic and non-academic roles.

7.2 | Procedure

Twenty (20) publicly funded HEIs across Ireland were invited to participate in this study. Contact points in each of the 20 HEIs were given information concerning the aims of the study, which was then circulated to their employees. All employees were invited to take the survey, regardless of the position that they held within their institution (academic

TABLE 1 Respondent demographic characteristics.

	n (%)		n (%)
<i>Gender identity</i>		<i>Ethnic identity</i>	
Female	396 (73.2)	Irish	460 (82.1)
Male	145 (26.8)	Ethnic minorities	17 (3.0)
		Any other White background	69 (12.3)
		Prefer not to say	14 (2.5)
<i>Age</i>		<i>Years of experience</i>	
18–24	2 (0.4)	Less than 1 year	60 (10.8)
25–34	47 (8.6)	1–5 years	204 (36.8)
35–44	159 (29.1)	6–10 years	86 (15.5)
45–54	224 (41.0)	11–15 years	72 (13.0)
55–64	106 (19.4)	16 years or more	132 (23.8)
65+	8 (1.5)		
<i>Work area</i>		<i>Role</i>	
Academic	298 (54.8)	Managerial	161 (28.7)
Non-academic (professional, technical, and administrative)	246 (45.2)	Non-managerial	399 (71.3)

or non-academic roles). Two reminders were sent after the initial invitation to complete the anonymous online survey, and employees were given four weeks to complete it. Data were collected between November and December 2021.

7.3 | Ethical considerations

The Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee approved the research protocol. Survey respondents were presented with a plain language statement explaining the aims of the study. They were also informed that their participation in the survey was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Moreover, respondents were informed that data were collected anonymously and were asked to provide their consent prior to completing the survey. After completion, respondents were provided with the contact information and website links of relevant support services, which they were advised to consult if they needed help in relation to their bullying experiences.

7.4 | Measures

7.4.1 | Demographic questions

Respondents were asked to indicate their gender identity, ethnic identity, age, years of experience in the current role, work area (academic versus non-academic), and role (managerial vs non-managerial).

7.4.2 | Employee silence

Respondents were prompted to read the Irish Health and Safety Authority bullying definition (HSA, 2021; see [Supplementary Materials](#)). After reading the bullying definition, respondents were asked if they had witnessed any bullying incidents at work in the past three years, including any periods of remote working and whether they took any actions. Those who reported witnessing a bullying episode at work, without taking action ($N = 560$), were administered nine items from the Employee Silence Scale (Knoll et al., 2021) assessing their reasons for not taking action when witnessing bullying. The items assess three types of silence, including acquiescent silence (e.g., "Because I would not have found a sympathetic ear anyway"), quiescent silence (e.g., "Because I feared there would be disadvantages from speaking up"), and prosocial silence (e.g., "Because I did not want others to get into trouble"). Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with each item with response options ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. A breakdown of the proportions of responses falling under each response option of each item is presented in [Table S1](#) in the [Supplementary Materials](#).

For the purposes of this study, employee silence is not broken down into distinct types of silence; rather, it is treated as a global construct. Principal axis factoring was conducted for the construction of the *employee silence* index. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure indicated adequate sampling, with a value of .79. Bartlett's test of sphericity reached statistical significance, and all items had loadings higher than .36. The index reached acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .80$. The scores of the index ranged from one to five, with a mean of 3.6 and a standard deviation of 0.71; higher scores indicate higher levels of silence on the part of the respondent.

7.4.3 | Team Psychological Safety

Seven items (e.g., "Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilised") were used to assess respondents' confidence in relation to their team members being supportive and trusting of each

other (Edmondson, 1999). Response options ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). The negatively worded items were reversed prior to performing the principal axis factor analysis for constructing the *team psychological safety* index used in this study. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure indicated adequate sampling, with a value of .89. Bartlett's test of sphericity reached statistical significance, and all items had loadings higher than .53. The index that has a mean of 3.1 and a standard deviation of 0.85, reached acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .84$. Higher scores in the index indicate higher levels of perceived team psychological safety. A breakdown of the proportions of responses falling under each response option of each item is presented in Table S3 in the [Supplementary Materials](#).

7.4.4 | Bullying victimisation

The Short Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (SNAQ-R; Notelaers et al., 2019) was administered to collect information about respondents' experiences of enduring negative acts at work. The SNAQ-R includes nine items assessing exposure to work-orientated negative acts, which involve targeting someone's professional status, such as professional discredit and denigration (e.g., "Someone withholding information which affects your performance"). The SNAQ-R also assesses person-orientated negative acts, which involve targeting someone's personal standing through overt behaviours (e.g., "Having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person, attitudes or private life") and covert behaviours, such as social exclusion (e.g., "Being ignored or excluded"). Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they were exposed to each behaviour in the three years preceding the completion of the survey, including any periods of remote working, with response options ranging from *never* (1) to *daily* (5). A breakdown of the proportions of responses falling under each response option of each item is presented in Table S2 in the [Supplementary Materials](#).

Latent class analysis (LCA) was conducted for the construction of the groups for the bullying victimisation variable. Existing research has recommended the use of LCA in the treatment of bullying-related variables that often produce highly skewed results with response options usually being at an ordinal rather than an interval level (Eid et al., 2003). LCA classifies respondents into mutually exclusive classes (i.e., groups) with respect to a latent construct (bullying victimisation), starting with the assumption that there is only one class, subsequently estimating more classes of respondents until an LCA model statistically fits the data (Magidson & Vermunt, 2001, 2004).

The criteria used in this study to determine the number of classes that best fit the data were the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) and the Vuong-Lo-Mendell-Rubin adjusted likelihood ratio test (VLMR-LRT; Nylund-Gibson & Choi, 2018; Nylund et al., 2007). In each case, the model with the lowest BIC and the one with a statistically significant VLMR-LRT p-value was selected. The 3-class solution was the best fit for the bullying victimisation variable; Table 2 presents the percentages of respondents falling into each class. The naming of the classes was based on the conditional probabilities found in the analysis and was also informed by Galanaki and Papalexandris' (2013) naming recommendations.

TABLE 2 Numbers and percentages of respondents in each bullying victimisation class.

Class	<i>n</i>	%
No bullying victimisation	117	20.9
Occasional bullying victimisation	307	54.8
Frequent bullying victimisation	136	24.3

7.5 | Data analysis

The IBM SPSS Statistics 27 (IBM Corporation, 2020) and the Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) software were used to perform the analyses. Descriptive, bivariate, and multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to test the research hypotheses of this study. The bivariate analysis provided insight into the extent to which each one of the predictor variables (demographics, bullying victimisation, and team psychological safety) was associated with employee silence, while the multiple linear regression modelling allowed us to examine the relationship of each one of these variables with employee silence, after accounting for the other variables in the model.

8 | RESULTS

8.1 | Preliminary analysis

Given the scarcity of quantitative studies investigating workplace bullying in HEIs in the Irish context, this study adopted an explorative approach by looking at the rates of workplace bullying victimisation, employee silence, and psychological safety in the current sample. These findings can be found in the [Supplementary Materials](#) (Tables S1 to S3 in the [Supplementary Materials](#)).

8.2 | Bivariate analyses

Bivariate statistical tests were conducted to examine the relationships between employees' silence, a number of demographic and the other study variables. Respondents' gender identity, their age, ethnic identity, work area, and years of experience were not statistically significantly related to their levels of silence when witnessing bullying acts at work (see [Table 3](#) and [Tables S4](#) and [S5](#) in the [Supplementary Materials](#)).

Employees' role was statistically significantly related to their levels of silence, with those holding non-managerial roles reporting higher levels of employee silence (i.e., higher likelihood to remain silent) when witnessing bullying behaviours than those having a managerial role. The effect size of this relationship was small to moderate ($d=0.27$) ([Table S4](#) in the [Supplementary Materials](#)).

Bullying victimisation was positively and statistically significantly related with employee silence ($r = .286$). Specifically, those who reported that they more frequently experience acts of bullying at work tended to report higher levels of employee silence. Team psychological safety was negatively related to employee silence ($r = -.384$),

TABLE 3 Correlations between scale and ordinal variables.

	Employee silence	Age	Years of experience	Bullying victimisation	Team psychological safety
Age	.007				
Years of experience	-.009	.453**			
Bullying victimisation	.286**	.040*	.093**		
Team psychological safety	-.384**	-.042*	-.133**	-.562**	

Note: Pearson correlation coefficients are reported for correlations between scale variables (i.e., employee silence & team psychological safety). Spearman correlation coefficients are reported for correlations between ordinal variables (i.e., age, years of experience, and bullying victimisation).

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed). **Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE 4 Multiple linear regression of employee silence.

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i> -value
Gender identity (Male)				
Female	0.049	0.066	.031	.453
Ethnic identity (Irish)				
Ethnic minorities	-0.251	0.164	-.063	.126
Any other White background	-0.118	0.088	-.055	.179
Prefer not to say	-0.317	0.293	-.044	.281
Age	0.001	0.035	.002	.972
Years of experience	-0.010	0.025	-.019	.688
Work area (Non-academic)				
Academic	-0.058	0.062	-.041	.342
Role (Non-managerial)				
Managerial	-0.065	0.067	-.042	.335
Bullying victimisation (No bullying victimisation)				
Occasional bullying victimisation	0.320	0.076	.224	<.001
Frequent bullying victimisation	0.348	0.098	.205	<.001
Team psychological safety	-0.261	0.040	-.310	<.001
Intercept	4.205	0.207		<.001

Note: Reference category of categorical variables in parentheses.

indicating that employees who perceived their work environment as safer, tended to demonstrate lower levels of silence when witnessing bullying acts at work (Table 3).

8.3 | Multiple linear regression analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the association of employee silence with bullying victimisation and team psychological safety, while accounting for a range of respondents' demographic and background characteristics. Table 4 summarises the regression analysis results providing the unstandardised coefficients (*B*), along with their standard errors (*SE*), the standardised coefficients (β) and the statistical significance (*p*-value) for each predictor variable in the model.

The multiple linear regression results indicate that, after accounting for the contribution of demographic variables to the prediction of employee silence, bullying victimisation, and team psychological safety retain their statistical significance in explaining employee silence. Specifically, respondents who reported occasional or frequent bullying victimisation had statistically significantly higher levels of silence than those reporting no victimisation. Additionally, team psychological safety was negatively associated with employee silence, with those reporting feeling psychologically safer at work also reporting lower levels of silence. The unstandardised and standardised coefficients provide valuable information about the strength of each predictor variable and category in predicting the outcome. For example, as indicated by the relevant unstandardised coefficient ($B = 0.348$), respondents who experienced frequent bullying victimisation were expected to be placed, on average, 0.348 points higher in the employee silence scale compared to those experiencing no bullying victimisation. It should be mentioned that after accounting for other background and bullying-related factors, employees' role that was originally statistically significantly related to their silence, lost its statistical significance. The variables included in the model explain a considerable amount of the variance in employee silence; $R^2 = 18.3\%$.

9 | DISCUSSION

Building on two solid theoretical frameworks, the results from this study provide new insight into employee silence, and its association with victimisation experiences at work, and several demographic and contextual variables in a sample of staff members working in HEIs.

Existing research shows that targets of workplace bullying often avoid taking formal actions due to several reasons, including being afraid of losing their job, and fear of repercussions in terms of career progression (D'Cruz et al., 2016). The findings of this study take a step further in showing that targets of bullying within HEIs may also be afraid of taking action when they witness others being bullied at work (H1). Existing research shows that a small proportion (1.7%) of HEIs employees who endure bullying lodge a formal complaint (Zabrodska & Kveton, 2013). Thus, it is not surprising that employees who have undergone bullying opt for remaining silent when witnessing others being bullied. This could be related to their negative experience, including having been left with no remedy for their case, which may have fostered a sense of distrust in the organisation (Fahie, 2020). This also resonates with the theoretical assumptions of the LHT (Seligman, 1975). Targets of bullying may have internalised a sense of helplessness regarding how workplace bullying cases are dealt with (Liu et al., 2020). Simultaneously, in line with COR (Halbesleben et al., 2014), remaining silent could allow them to preserve their emotional and cognitive resources, which may have already been depleted due to the bullying that they have endured (Qureshi et al., 2014).

Based on the items assessing employee silence, beyond safeguarding their own interests, which is coherent with COR (Halbesleben et al., 2014), targets of bullying who witness others being bullied may also lack trust in the organisational response to bullying.

Organisational factors may also affect employee response to bullying, in that silence may become part of the organisational culture (shared beliefs and values within an organisation; Jönsson & Muhonen, 2022).

In line with H2, findings of this study show a negative association between psychological safety and employee silence, indicating that employees who feel safe in terms of sharing their concerns may be less likely to engage in silence. Indeed, the individual perception of psychological safety has been found associated with formal reporting of bullying incidents (MacCurtain et al., 2018). In line with COR, employees who have access to greater resources, including social support within a psychologically safe work environment are less vulnerable to resource loss, and are capable of using their existing resources to gain new resources. For example, employees who feel psychologically safe in the workplace will leverage their existing network to voice their concerns, and in turn, contribute to tackling bullying.

Findings of this study show no age and gender differences in terms of employee silence (H3), resonating with previous findings (Knoll et al., 2021). Further variables not examined in this study (e.g., organisational culture, power relations) may have a more important role in relation to employee silence than individual's background characteristics. Similarly, ethnicity did not reach significance in the regression model, which could be related to the homogeneous nature of the sample (82.1% of respondents identified themselves as White Irish). Finally, role, years of experience, and work area were not found to be associated with employee silence (H3). Taken together these findings show that employee silence could be driven by other factors related to the quality of relationships within co-workers, including a lack of psychological safety.

10 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite its contribution to existing research, this study is not exempt from limitations. The findings from the regression analysis should be interpreted cautiously, due to the large standard errors. The study sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, which calls for future studies to be conducted with ethnic minority employees and further underrepresented groups (e.g., sexual minorities, employees with disabilities).

Although we treated psychological safety as a predictor in our regression model, the cross-sectional design of the study prevents us from making causal inferences as to whether poor psychological safety is either an antecedent or an outcome of employee silence. Nevertheless, given that psychological safety motivates individuals to express their concerns and to take interpersonal risks within work teams, it is likely that this construct is an antecedent of employee silence (Hao et al., 2022). Future research should employ qualitative or mixed-methods approaches to investigate the factors that contribute to psychological safety, along with the reasons behind employee silence. Research studies combining different methodologies (qualitative and quantitative) showed that healthcare workers report medium to high levels of psychological safety (O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020). However, interview and observational data captured some examples of silence within teams, indicating that psychological safety might not be enough in terms of motivating employees to voice their concerns. Thus, research studies adopting a longitudinal design are needed to investigate any mediators or moderators (e.g., organisational climate) of the associations between psychological safety and employee silence.

Finally, power relations may have a role in terms of remaining silent, with employees being less likely to report bullying when the perpetrator is a supervisor as opposed to a colleague (Harlos, 2010). Future research should explore the association between employee silence and psychological safety while controlling for the perpetrator's status (subordinate, peer, senior colleague, supervisor).

11 | PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Previous studies conducted in different business sectors have shown that while not voicing their concerns, employees who witness bullying might offer private emotional support to targets of bullying (MacCurtain et al., 2018). Nevertheless, they might show discomfort and feelings of helplessness for not taking any formal actions (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2011; MacCurtain et al., 2018). Informal actions (e.g., asking for social support) could be beneficial to the mental health and wellbeing of the targeted employees (MacCurtain et al., 2018). However, informal actions prevent from eradicating the issue of workplace bullying, while replacing formal organisational actions, including anti-bullying intervention programmes (MacCurtain et al., 2018). To prevent workplace bullying from escalating, it is paramount to address the problem through formal actions.

Employees who witness and endure bullying may need to undergo formal training in terms of the possible responses to be adopted when dealing with bullying. Yet, reporting workplace bullying may be an unsafe option when employees lack trust in their organisation's ability to tackle this phenomenon. Existing research has shown that HEIs often tend to deny the existence of bullying in the workplace, which results in bullied employees receiving ineffective responses from their institutions (Fahie, 2020). Moreover, when the presence of bullying is acknowledged, managers or Human Resources frequently dismiss the cases (Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara, 2019). In some instances, Human Resources Departments may even be perceived as siding with those holding the power within HEIs (Fahie, 2020). This picture may contribute to foster employee silence and inaction (Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara, 2021). Therefore, it is paramount to increase staff members' trust that their institutions will handle bullying effectively. Safe complaint systems should be put into place for targets and bystanders to report bullying without them fearing negative consequences to their self-image, status, or career progression. One of the viable strategies to promote employees' trust in anti-bullying policies lies in the engagement of staff members in co-designing anti-bullying policies through integrating their inputs and views. This, in turn, is likely to increase employees' trust in their organisations, along with their sense of psychological safety.

A proactive approach aimed to create a positive organisational climate is paramount to prevent the issue of workplace bullying within HEIs. Building an organisational climate characterised by high levels of psychological safety may discourage bullying, while fostering employees' belief that it is safe to voice their concerns and that these will be taken seriously.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Angela Mazzone: Conceptualization; methodology; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; funding acquisition; project administration; investigation; visualization; data curation; resources; validation. **Anastasios Karakolidis:** writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; Formal analysis; data curation; visualization; resources; validation. **Vasiliki Pitsia:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; data curation; visualization; resources; validation. **Yseult Freaney:** Conceptualization; investigation; methodology; writing – review and editing; resources. **James O'Higgins Norman:** Funding acquisition; project administration.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

This study was conducted according to the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments. The Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee at the Authors' Institution approved the research protocol. Written informed consent to participate in this study was obtained from all survey respondents.

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

Written informed consent to participate in this study was obtained from all survey respondents.

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