

The Role of Contextual Voice Efficacy on Employee Voice and Silence

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Abstract: *Given recent studies have begun to question the nature of employee voice research. This paper attempts to theorize the boundaries between Organizational Behavior (OB), Human Resource Management (HRM) and Industrial and Employment Relations (I/ER) voice. Researchers examine specific organizational contexts that may influence employees' voice behavior, with OB researchers paying particular attention to the micro contextual influences of leadership behavior and psychological safety climate on individual voice behavior, HR researchers emphasizing the major role of HR practices that may facilitate employee voice; and I/ER researchers focusing more on how macro institutional supports such as unions and collective bargaining can protect employees and facilitate voice. The paper proposes a model of "contextual voice efficacy" as a bridge between these disparate literature, and develops propositions as to how OB, HR and I/ER voice mechanisms can combine together in a single model.*

Keywords: Employee voice, contextual voice efficacy

1. Introduction

Researchers from different disciplinary background focus their attention on specific organizational contexts that may influence employees' voice (EV) behavior (Wilkinson, Barry, & Morrison, 2020). Human Resources Management (HRM) researchers emphasize the role HR functions and management practices that may facilitate employee voice (e. g. Wilkinson *et al.*, 2013) Meanwhile, industrial/employment Relations I/ER researchers focus on how institutional supports such as collective bargaining and legislation can safeguard employees' rights and provide opportunities to voice (eg. , Freeman & Medoff, 1984). These difference in emphasis themselves reflect differences, respectively, in individual, organizational and institutional levels of analysis. EV is conceptualized by the bulk of OB literature as a behavior that "is constructive and intended to contribute positively to the organization" (Van Dyne et al., 2003, pp.136 - 1361). With a smaller OB literature focusing on justice - based voice aimed at correcting wrongdoing (see Klaas *et al.*, 2012). A central focus of the dominant OB stream has been to understand the group (e. g managers openness) and individual (e. g., prosocially motives) antecedents of workers' decision to voice or remain silent in instances where they meaningful ideas and suggestions for work - related improvement (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p.1361; Morrison, 2014). Empirical research in OB has mainly focused on how organizational and group contexts shape employees' psychological safety, which in turn influences EV behaviors (Deter & Burris., 2007: detert & Trevino, 210; Liang et al., 2012).

We posit that contexts providing strong CVE lead employees to engage in cooperative voice, such as offering suggestions about organizational practices (Morrison, 2011, 2014). By contrast, when employees experience weak CVE, their pro - organization voice motive may result in silence and their justice - based and self - interest voice motives may lead to conflictual voice (e. e., Micel & Near, 1992). We further identify four types of contextual voice mechanisms: management - led formal voice mannerisms (e. g provenance procedures, suggestion schemes), management

- led informal voice mechanisms (e. g managed openness that produces a receptive voice climate), employee - led formal voice mechanisms (e. g., work councils and made unions), and employee - led informal voice mechanism (e. g online social sharing groups and web - based chatting groups). We argue that these various voice mechanisms can either enhance or suppress employees' CVE, which in turn determines how various voice motives lead to co - operative voice, silence, or conflictual voice.

The theoretical model and the associated propositions developed in this paper allow us to open a new avenue of voice research in three ways. First the construct of CVE allows a sharper focus on how context shapes employee choices to engage in co - operative voice, or express their opposition/resistance to managerial, or simply to remain silent. Second, our proposed model incorporates three distinctive voice motives (i. e pro - organization, justice based, and self - interest motives) to provide a more complete picture, in which different and contrasting motives and translated into different forms of voice in different contexts. Third, in line with earlier critiques of the nature of voice research (see Kaufman, 2015), the model proposed in this paper is integrative and combines individual (OB), organizational (OB and HR) and institutional (I/ER) levels of analysis to include not just the OB voice literature focus on the contextual influence of socio - relational factors (such as leadership styles and group climates), but also incorporates insights from other bodies of literature, such as the impacts of structural (e. g HR policies), institutional (e. g collective voice mechanisms). And socio - cultural (e. g socio media) contexts to understand EV behaviors. Pro - organization, justice - based, and self - interest voice motives OB research has been largely based on the assumption that the primary motive of voice behavior is constructive and prosocially (Van Dyne et al., 2003: Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). As a result, in OB research, voice is seen as an expression of the desire of individual employees to communicate information and ideas to management for the benefit of the organization.

An underlying theme of “what is good for the firm must be good for the worker” (Klaas et al., 2012, pp.327 - 328) is evident and hence there is limited consideration of how the employment relationship creates a power imbalance between workers and management that can limit the capacity of workers to engage in meaningful voice (see Nechanska et al., 202). Two Meta reviews of the voice literature, however, have questioned this pro - organization assumption. Klass et al. (2012) review pays more attention to voice that is intended to alter and correct unfair organizational practices. They argued that this type of voice is largely driven by justice - based motives. Bashshur and Oc’s (2015) review, on the other hand, shows that instrumental and self - focused motives are important drives of employee voice, such as concerns about individuals’ workload allocation, pay increment, and promotion opportunities, supporting these views, research on voice in the HRM and I/ER literature have offered insights into the wide - ranging motives of voice in the workplace (e. g Dundon *et al.*, 2022; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2018).

The mainstream I/ER literature also diverges from the OB voice literature in placing great importance on how to channel and deal with discontent through the provision of voice opportunities (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). This research has remained largely consistent with the definition that Hirschman (1970, p.30) used for voice as “any attempt at all to change, rather than escape from an objectionable state of affairs”. In adapting Hirschman’s principles for an I/ER audience, Freeman and Medoff (1984) promoted collective voice via trade unions because unions can provide a strong vehicle for employee to voice their grievances - which are considered inevitable given the underlying conflict embedded in the employment relationship and have legitimacy because they are independent of the employer. I/ER, HRM and organizational justice researchers therefore focus on voice behavior that is primarily driven by employees’ justice - based, self - interest and self - determination voice motives (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016; Budd, 2004; Klass et al., 2012). They take a broad definition of employee voice as concerned with workers as well as organizational interests and define voice as “the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say, formally and /or informally, collectively and /or individually, potentially to influence organizational affairs relating to issues that affect their work, their interests, and the interests of managers and owners’ (Wilkinson, Dundon, *et al.*, 2020: 5). Despite this unity, we note that there are important distinctions between, and even within, these disciplines. At one end of the I/ER spectrum, voice is informed by Labor Process Theory (LPT) as exemplified by nechanskaet *et al.*, (2020), with management seen as being less concerned with gathering ideas and feedback and more interested in systematic silencing and control (see also Chillias & Marks, 2020; Donaghey et al., 2011).

In addition, I/ER and HRM studies have demonstrated that employees’ grievances are often the result of management restrictions on individual autonomy and freedom to pursue justified personal interests (e. g Budd, 2004). Employees are motivated to gain a certain degree of control over the processes and means for their personal goal attainment (Barrick *et al.*, 2013). Voice behavior can be seen as part of

this endeavor and as a self - control initiative rooted in concepts of industrial citizenship. Although most OB studies focus on pro - social or pro - organization voice motives, some explain how individuals’ experienced sense of self - control would also influence their pro - organizational voice behavior (Kassing 2002: Tamgora; & Ramanujam, 2012: Venkataramani & Taangirala, 2010). Therefore, unlike pro - organization voice motives, justice - based and self - interest voice motives may not only lead to constructive or co - operative voice but may also result in more resistant and conflictual forms of voice as a means to regain personal control and contest managerial dominance, as evidenced in the HRM, I/ER, and organizational justice literature (e. g Barry & Wiikinson, 2016: Klass et al., 2012: Marchington, 2007). There is however a need to develop a theoretical model that depicts when these various voice motives are translated into employees’ co - operative voice, silence, or conflictual voice. We posit that organizational contexts shape these processes, and in the following sections we develop such a model.

2. Contextual Voice Efficacy and Voice

Since upward voice Challenges the status quo and the power base of managers, it carries certain degree of personal risk (Ashford *et al.*, 1998; Morrison & Milliken, 2000) and as a result, psychological safety plays a central role for OB researchers to theorize and predict when employees tend to speak up or decide to remain silent (Detert & Burris, 2007: Detert & Trevino, 2000; Liang *et al.*, 2012). Managerial behavior such as their openness to voice and social contexts such as organization climates have been identified as the key contextual factors that give rise to employees’ feelings of psychological safety (Botero & Dan Dynes, 2009; Detert & Trevino, 2010 & Burris, 2007 Kassing 2002; Li *et al.*, 2020; Li *et al.*; 2017; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012; Xu *et al.*, 2020). However psychological safety is not sufficient to explain the outcomes of a range of voice motives, that include justice - based and self - interest motive as well as pro - organization motives. Thus, whereas employees motives by pro - organization motives may simply rein silent if they perceive voice to be too risky in the specific organizational context (see Morrison, 2014), employee driven instead by strong justice - based and self - interest voice motives are more likely to choose not to be silent but instead to engage in confrontational forms of voicing even in an unfavorable and unsafe climate (e. g Miceli *et al.*, 2008).

OB researchers Maynes and Podsakoff (2014: 90) recognized the need to move beyond looking at voice motivated by positive attributes, (e. g “improvement oriented, intended to benefit the organization, altruistically motivated) ” to include also what they called “negative attributes... (e. g hinders rather than helps, antagonistic toward the organization) ” Maynes and podsokoff (2014: 87 - 88) specifically argued that “the narrow focus of past (OB) research may have precluded investigations into other types of voice” and, accordingly, they expanded voice behaviors to include what they labeled “destructive” voice. While we agree with the wider stop of voice behaviors adopted by these authors, we do not adopt the standard OB terms of constructive and destructive voice as these words are loaded and carry strong pejorative connotations. These authors

specifically include making critical comments about organizational practices and policies as part of their definition of “destructive voice and we would note that an I/ER or LPT perspective would not see such voice as destructive.

Consistent with the call by delbeidge and Keenoy (2010) for HRM to engage more openly and critically with managerial language and assumptions, we also note that these OB terms reflect a strongly ultraist perspective on the employment relationship which disguises tendencies towards managerialism. Indeed, the term “destructive” is suggestive of voicing that is concerned with or motivated by a desire to cause (organizational) harm. But the type of voice envisaged could also be concerned with a desire to prevent harm (for example through actions such as whistleblowing). Similarly, adversarial collective bargaining might also be seen in this light as an example of destructive voice, but in many liberal market economies, collective bargaining and associated industrial action has a long history not driven primarily by a desire to cause organizational harm rather by a pragmatic strategy intended to achieve and defend workers’ interests (Doellgast & Benassi, 2020). Hence, we replace the terms constructive and destructive with three terms co - operative and conflictual voice in this paper and in our model.

To have a more complete understanding of how contexts shape employee voice, we need to (1) include co - operative voice, conflictual voice and silence in a single model; (2) identify a new underlying mechanism in the link between contextual characteristics and employee voice behavior; and (3) expand our conceptual scope of voice contexts that shape employee voice behaviors. In the rest of this section we will propose a new construct of CVE and discuss how CVE shapes the effects of voice motives on voice outcomes.

Co - operative voice, conflictual voice, and silence voices are those aimed to help the organization improve its functioning and practices, and includes challenging voice and supportive voice (Burris, 2012), and promotive voice and prohibitive voice (Liang et al., 2012) conflictual voice refers to the voice behavior that aims to resist organizational hegemony (e. g adversarial collective bargaining with management and whistle blowing) (see Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Meceli et al., 2008). Silence is defined as employees with holding their views and opinions about critical issues and problems from those who can effectively resolve these issues and problems (Milliken et al., 2003). Silence is distinct from cooperative or conflictual voice as it reflects employee’s failure to voice even though they have important information to convey (Morrison, 2014). Employees with strong voice motives may choose to express co - operative or conflictual voice or they may also suppress their voice motives to remain silent under certain circumstances. Therefore it is important to treat co - operative voice, conflictual voice, and silence as distinct voice behaviors when we consider the contextual influence on Employees’ voice.

As noted above there are also differences within disciplines, and some I/ER researcher adopt a more critical perspective on voice than others, especially within the labor process tradition where notions of control and resistance are central,

while others see voice as part of an ongoing tension between conflict and cooperation with the employment relationship. To capture the processes through which contextual characteristics shape EV or choice of voice behaviors, we propose the construct of CVE which we define as the extent to which organizational context allows for voice to be heard and acted upon, potentially through changes in organization policies, CVE is distinct from individual voice efficacy (Lebel & Patil, 2018. Morrison et al., 2011). While CVE captures individuals’ assessments of and beliefs about voice effectiveness in special organization contexts, voice efficacy is determined by individual characteristics and experiences irrespective of contextual influences. CVE is also perceptually different from the construct of implicit voice beliefs, which refer to a set of socially acquired beliefs about what makes voice risky or inappropriate in organizational hierarchies (Detert & Edmondson, 2011).

Individuals develop relatively stable implicit voice beliefs over time through their life experience and vigorous learning; CVE by contrast, is context specific whereas OB voice looks at the work (group or organization as the context we (informed also by I/ER and HRM) look at the role played by voice systems and structures as critical contextual elements. We propose that CVE may directly influence EV behavior and may determine how pro - organization, justice - based, and self - interest voice motives are translated into co - operative voice, silence, or conflictual voice. A high level of CVE manifests in employees’ beliefs that their organizational contexts are conducive to effective voice. When employees believe that their voice may make a difference, they are likely to engage in more co - operative voice and less likely to remain silent or express conflicting voice, no matter whether they are driven by Pro - organization, justice - based, or self - interest voice motives. They feel that the organization is interested in what they have to say and prepared to act rather than ignore, and this creates the appropriate context for all types of voice. By contrast, when employees believe that their voice is likely to be met with resistance, they may respond with silence or even conflictual voice to realize their motives.

In other works, a lower level of CVE may not only suppress co - operative voice and generate silence, but also induce a higher level of conflictual voice. At one end the spectrum this could include strongly oconflictual action that are oppositional to management (see eg Dundon & Dobbins, 2015; Van den Broek & Dundon, 2012) while more moderate conflictual voice might include pragmatic response to employer (in) action and recalcitrance with workers deciding to assert power through their union to address grievances or pursue collective interests (Doellgast & Benassi, 2020; Freeman & Medoff, 1984). The above argumentation lead to our first proposition:

Proposition 1. CVE is positively reeled to co - operative voice, but negatively related to silence and conflictual voice.

Our theoretical model further suggests that CVE plays a critical role in shaping the link between voice motives and employee voice, but its moderating role on the effects of pro - organization voice motives may be different from that on the effects of justice - based and self - interest voice motives.

Past OB research at the individual level has suggested that employees driven by pro-organization voice motives are more likely to voice out issues that are constructive to the organization. We argue that CVE is a critical condition that regulates the impact of pro-organization motives on co-operative voice. CVE reflects employees' beliefs as to whether their voice will be heard and acted upon in the organization context. When the context indicates a high level of efficacy, we expect that pro-organization voice motives tend to co-operative voice because voicing employees may have high expectations that voice may contribute to improvement of organizational functioning by contrast, if employees do not think that their voice behavior will make any difference in the context, they may simply suppress their co-operative and prosocial tendencies, and choose to remain silent (Morrison, 2014; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). We thus develop the following proposition.

Proposition 2. Pro-organizational voice motives are more likely to produce co-operative voice when employees experience a higher level of CVE; yet more likely to result in silence when employees experience a lower level of CVE.

As we argued earlier, the logic for psychological safety widely adopted in the OB literature may fall short in predicting employees' reactions if their voice driven by justice-based or self-interest motives is blocked by the organization. Our model and the construct of CVE provide more precise predictions of EV behavior driven by these motives. Although I/ER studies have generally assumed that voice is dissenting and antagonistic to the organization or management, these assumptions may also fall short as it is possible that when employees have high CVE they may choose to engage in co-operative voice (e.g. input into how organizations can address employees' interests by improving organizational processes rather than conflictual voice). Also when employees believe that expressing issues related to organizational fairness and personal interests can influence organizational practices they are more likely to be motivated to voice such issues co-operatively.

By contrast, when employees' CVE is low, they are less likely to believe that their voice associated with organizational fairness and personal interests will be heard by management or can make a difference: and rather than addressing such matters through co-operative voice, they may choose to remain silent, or resort to conflictual forms of voice as a means of self-determination (Budd, 2014). Hence, justice-based and self-interest motives may result in co-operative voice when CVE is high, but silence or conflictual voice when contextual voice efficacy is low. Thus we develop the following proposition.

Proposition 3. Justice-based and self-interest voice motives are more likely to produce co-operative voice when employees experience a higher level of CVE: yet more likely to lead to silence or conflictual voice when employees experience a lower level of CVE.

3. Source of Contextual Voice Efficacy

So, what contextual characteristics help generate CVE? Social information processing theory suggests that contextual factors provide employees with information clues about what behaviors are appropriate and lead to effective outcomes in specific organizational contexts (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Typology of contextual voice mechanisms: Management-led, Employee-led, Formal voice channeling, Grievance system Suggestion schemes, High involvement HR systems, Work councils, Collective bargaining Unions, Informal voice channeling culture, Managerial openness, Organizational support Informal social nomination groups, Dissidents groups, and Web-based chatting groups. We propose four organizational voice mechanisms that form the key contextual characteristics shaping employees' CVE along the dimensions of formal versus informal voice mechanisms and management: Employee-led voice mechanisms. Management-led formal voice mechanisms are those organizational policies and practices such as suggestion schemes and employee involvement programs that encourage employees to voice. Management-led informal voice mechanisms refer to managers' behavior and attitudes towards employee voice during workplace interactions. These managerial behaviors and attitudes are usually not formalized by organizational policies and rules yet may exert substantial influence on employees' experienced voice utility. Employee-led formal voice mechanisms are institutionalized entities, such as trade union and work councils. Finally, employee-led informal voice mechanisms, such as online discussion platforms and social media are operated by employees (sometimes outside the organization) and serve as a channel for employees to voice work-related concerns. Based on this typology of contextual voice mechanisms we develop an integrative multi-level model of contextual influence. Morrison and Milliken (2000) suggest that organizational structure and policy may influence how employees assess the extent to which voice is welcome and effective in the specific organizational context some formal mechanisms and practices such as grievance systems, Speak up schemes, and quality circles provide employees with a legitimized voicing opportunity to potentially influence or contest management decisions.

Proposition 3. The presence of management-led formal voice mechanisms increases employees' CVE. Theoretical and empirical works on voice have predominantly focused on how managerial behavior shapes employee voice (Morrison, 2014; Morrison & Milliken 2000) by signaling to employees the potential reaction from managers. For example, if managers demonstrate openness toward voice, employees are more likely to believe that voice will make a difference (e.g. Detert & Burris, 2007; Fact et al., 2014). By contrast, if managers constantly resist employee voice and refute employee suggestions, employees are more likely to see voice as futile. Managers' discouraging behaviors may cause employees to experience a low level of CVE. We therefore develop the following proposition.

Proposition 4. The presence of management-led informal voice mechanisms increase employee's CVE.

We also expect a joint effect of management - led formal and informal voice mechanisms on employees' CVE in Morrison and Milliken's (2000) theoretical framework of organizational silence, organizational policies or strictures (formal) and managerial practices (informal) jointly predict employees' engagement in voice behavior through changing their beliefs in the utility of voice. Indirect evidence has supported this reasoning. Huang *et al.* (2005) examined the joint effect of participative climate and formalized employee involvement on organizational silence and found that the negative relationship between participative climate and organizational silence is stronger in organizational units with more formalized employee involvement schemes than those with fewer formalized involvement schemes. The authors regard participative climate anthem result of managerial behaviors that are open to voice - a form of management - led informal voice mechanism; and formalized employee involvement as the outcome of organizational policies - a form of management - led formal voice mechanism. Thus we develop the following proposition.

Proposition5. Management - led formal and informal voice mechanisms interactively predict employees' CVE, in that the positive relationship between management - led formal voice mechanisms on CVE is strong when management - led informal voice mechanisms are more effective.

While OB voice literature has paid scant attention to the other two voice mechanisms; the employee - led formal and informal voice mechanisms, the former has been extensively studied in the I/ER literature in terms of institutionalized collective voice mechanisms such as unions and work councils (e. g Brewster *et al.*, 2015; Freeman & Medoff, 1984). However, the latter has until recently, drawn for less attention in the voice literature. Examples of informal employee - led voice mechanisms include well - chatting platforms and social media, which enable employees to express their views and opinions quickly of a wider audience (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; Khan *et al.*, 2023; Martin *et al.*, 2015; Thornthwaite *et al.*, 2020). We propose that these two employee - led voice mechanisms may influence employees' CVE indirectly, depending on the effectiveness of management - led voice mechanisms.

4. Discussion

The primary purpose of our paper to develop new insights into what drives employees to adopt different voice strategies by drawing theoretical instants from I/ER, HRM and OB research. Although most theoretical insight from previous research has been derived from an inductive approach, this accumulated knowledge enables us to synthesize a new theoretical understanding of the phenomenon using approach. The deductive approach is particularly useful when we gave sufficient established theories and abundant empirical evidence, while the inductive approach is particularly useful when theoretical explanations and empirical evidence are not available. The aim of this paper is to broaden and integrate literature. Thus, whereas most voice studies in OB demonstrate the employees' personally motives of bringing benefits to the organization drive them to engage in co - operative voice behaviors, we extend that logic to demonstrate how

employees' co - operative voice might also be driven by their concerns about fairness in the organization and their self - interests (Bashshur & Oc, 2015, *Klass et al.*, 2012; Xu *et al.*, 2020). Second, we move beyond the assumption (implicit in most OB voice research) that employee and management interests are the same and hence voice is co - operative (e. g Morrison, 2014). We do so by drawing on I/ER research which emphasizes the "structured antagonisms" between employees and management (Edwards, 1995). Thus, employee voice need not necessarily contribute constructively to the goal attainments of organizations (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016; Budd, 2004). This psychological safety has been widely employed voice researchers in OB as the key mechanism explaining how organizational or group concerns lead employees to speak up or remain silent (Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & 2000; Lang *et al.*, 2012). This framework, however, needs refinement as it cannot fully explain why employees engage in conflictual voice even in environments that are not conducive to voice (e. g King *et al.*, 2019; Lebel & Fatil, 2018; Li *et al.*, 2020). Fourth, we widen the theoretical framework developed by Morrison and Milliken (2000) to investigate two key contextual factors of employees voice that are primarily shaped by the management organizational structure, policies and managerial behaviors. Apart from management efforts, however, employees may also take initiative to shape the context voice such as by accessing collective voice entitles (Brewster *et al.*, 2015; Freeman & Medoff, 1984) or setting up web - chatting or social media platforms (Martin *et al.*, 2015). Our interest is in the conditions and motives under which employees choose to voice in a co - operative or conflictual manner or to remain silent. We therefore draw from voice research into the literature of OB, I/ER and HRM to propose or model of employee voice in which voice in which different voice motives lead to alternative voice behaviors, or silence. Central to our model is the national CVE. Our key proposition is that employees' beliefs in the extent to which their voice can make a difference in the specific organizational context plays on important role.

Our model also allows us to expend the conceptual scope of contextual characteristics and depict how various contexts may influence EV efficacy. Building on these insights from diverse disciplines, we have identified four types of contextual voice mechanisms; management - led formal voice mechanisms, management - led informal voice mechanisms, employee - led formal voice mechanisms, and employee - led informal voice mechanisms. We posit that management - led formal and informal voice mechanisms can independently enhance employees; CVE, and also these two types of mechanisms may reinforce each other's effects to buttress such belief. Our model also postulated that employee - led formal and informal voice mechanisms may influence employees' CVE only when the management - led formal/informal voice mechanisms are ineffective. Our model brings this distinctive feature of justice -based and self - interest voice motives to the theoretical forefront and makes it possible for future research to explicate why different voice motives may result in different voice behaviors.

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