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Voices from across the divide: an IR perspective on employee voice

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Abstract

In this commentary we note there is increasing interest in the topic of employee voice, however we argue that there has been little effort to broaden our existing conceptualisations of voice which are artefacts of disparate disciplines. The siloed approach, we argue, applies in particular to the view of voice in the field of organisational behaviour (OB) which dominates much of this special issue. We explain how taking an Industrial Relations (IR) perspective on voice can add value to our understanding by looking at voice as a means to challenge management, or as a vehicle for employee self-determination

Keywords: Voice, Silence, Human Resource Management, Organizational Behavior, Industrial Relations

JEL codes: D23, D83, I31, J50, J53, J81, J83, M12

Introduction

The topic of employee voice has attracted much interest in recent years. In this commentary we are primarily concerned with the academic literature and audience but it is worth noting that voice or the lack of it is often given as a reason for organisational failure with the cases of Enron, Bundaberg hospital, BP Deepwater, VW all held up as examples where things go wrong. In the academic world , special issues (Wilkinson & Fay, 2011), books (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009; Wilkinson et al., 2014) and review articles (Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Klaas, 2014; Morrison, 2011, 2014; Mowbray, Wilkinson, & Tse, 2014) suggest increasing attention to this area but it is not clear if we have an holistic view of voice or a partial view reflecting our disciplinary lenses. So while we may all be talking about voice, are we talking about the same thing? Given the academic world does not have a consistent view of what voice means it is not surprising then that academics talk past each other or adopt views of the world convenient to them so that they do not need to move too far from their comfortable theoretical armchair. This siloed approach, we argue, applies in particular to the view of voice in the field of organisational behaviour (OB).

The OB literature is dominated by studies that seek to examine the antecedents of the choice of individuals to voice or to remain silent, and voice itself is predominantly seen as a pro-social behaviour, meaning that it is offered for the purpose of organisational improvement. This leaves little room for considering voice as a form of criticism or dissent, or as a means

by which employees can contest organisational decision making. In this short piece we sketch out the components of an Industrial Relations (IR) perspective on voice which are very different to the OB perspective which is also the predominant view evident in this special issue.

Industrial relations and voice

Scholars in Industrial Relations (IR) take a broad view of voice and indeed see a strong relationship with other concepts such as participation and involvement, and industrial democracy (Wilkinson et al., 2010; Wilkinson, Dundon, & Marchington, 2013). Our commentary draws from this perspective. While historically scholars can trace the roots of voice in the works of Karl Marx and Adam Smith (Kaufman, 2014) most IR scholars start with the work of Hirschman (1970) who defined voice as "any attempt at all to change, rather than escape from an objectionable state of affairs". Hirschman's model of exit/voice/ loyalty (EVL) was later developed for an IR audience by Freeman and Medoff (1984) who saw unions as the essential vehicle for independent voice, and as an alternative to employee exit. However the decline, or in some places collapse, of unions in the western world has meant that the union-only form of voice has all but disappeared in countries where unions once dominated. Indeed survey evidence shows that only 5 per cent of British workplaces relied on union-only participation (Willman, Gomez, & Bryson, 2009, p. 102), and we can see similar trends are evident across much of the rest of Europe, America and Australia.

From an IR perspective voice has value for a number of reasons. First it can contribute to organisational effectiveness, with human capital theory (Becker, 1964) suggesting that harnessing employees' skills and knowledge can add economic value to the firm. Equally, providing employee voice can enhance decision‒making by tapping employees' direct knowledge of possible solutions to organisational problems, which Deming (1988) refers to as 'extracting the gold from the (employee) mine'. Such a view is also consistent with the resource-based view of the firm (Barney, 1991), with employees' skills and knowledge and opportunity seen as a source of unique sustainable competitive advantage. Higher levels of organisational citizenship behaviours [OCB] (Cappelli & Rogovsky, 1998) should improve firm performance (Dietz, Wilkinson, & Redman, 2009) by making use of employees' tacit knowledge to suggest improvements to organisational processes, and here we can find common ground with the dominant OB model. However, the IR perspective sees two

additional reasons to value voice. First, IR sees voice as the expression of worker interests that are separate and distinct from those of the firm, (see also Wegge et al., 2010) and related to this gives emphasis to formal institutional mechanisms by which workers obtain voice, such as trade unions, the role of collective bargaining, arbitration, speak up schemes and grievance procedures. This is very much informed by the underpinning of IR in notions of pluralism, reflecting that IR academics view the employment relationship as contested, and as constituting divergent interests. Second, from an IR perspective voice is an expression of the desire of workers to have their own say over matters that affect their working lives (Dundon & Rollinson, 2011). This brings the concept of voice closer to that of a political process in which voice can be seen as an expression of worker rights. Along this line of reasoning Budd (2004, pp. 23-28) argues that it is not necessary for voice to fulfil a constructive purpose. Rather, it is sufficient in itself for voice to be a means of employee self─determination and also an expression of human dignity. Following from this, voice then extends into influencing the psychological and economic well─being of employees with implications for public policy through governmental regulation of the employment relationship (Budd & Zagelmeyer, 2010).

This background is important as it then goes to the approach taken by IR researchers to understanding voice, which can be heavily contrasted to that espoused by OB researchers (Kaufman, 2015). Yet in OB research we see little evidence of an attempt to incorporate insights from the IR voice literature, including in OB papers such as those by Morrison (2011, 2014) and Klaas, Olson─Buchanan and Ward (2012) that are intended to be integrative. Instead, these reviews tend to ignore or push to one side IR conceptions of voice. Thus Morrison's (2011, p. 373) widely cited review of employee voice highlights three common threads, namely:

"One important commonality is the idea of voice being an act of verbal expression, where a message is conveyed from a sender to a recipient. Second, voice is defined as discretionary behavior. Individuals choose whether or not to engage in this behavior at any particular moment in time, a choice that is affected by a variety of factors. A third commonality is the notion of voice being constructive in its intent. The objective is to bring about improvement and positive change, not simply to vent or complain."

The IR perspective would see these components ─ that voice is verbal, individual, discretionary and constructive ─ as forming at best a partial conceptualisation of voice. An acknowledgement of this appears in the Editors contribution to the SI in which they argue the need for a "multi─level theory" of voice which brings together studies of the individual antecedents of voice and the contextual factors that promote or inhibit voice and silence at individual, group and organisational levels (Knoll et al., 2016). The Editors suggest an approach that looks at antecedents, mediating processes and outcomes (i.e. voice or silence) at different levels. In IR research, a great deal of emphasis is placed on collective institutions and mechanisms, such as unions and collective bargaining that can be seen as mediating and promoting voice. Formal institutions and mechanisms can also allow workers' voice to attain a level of influence that would surpass that which individual workers could achieve through verbal communication. Moreover, the articulation of voice through formal, collective representation is generally capable of reaching higher levels of management, whereas OB voice is generally viewed as that offered by an individual employee to a direct supervisor. In certain jurisdictions voice is also underwritten by laws that mandate employee involvement in organisational processes, making voice a mandated rather than discretionary behaviour. Here again we see value in the approach adopted by the Editors of this SI which sees voice and silence as "embedded within a historic, political, cultural and legal context" and calls "for considering antecedents of voice and silence that are situated beyond the organizational boundary".

Equally, by ruling out voice as a mechanism to "simply to vent or complain" Morrison excludes a conceptualisation of voice based on interests other than those of the employer, or the performance of the organisation. Excluding voice as a means of expressing dissatisfaction or dissent also breaks the link to Hirschman's notion of voice where exit or voice were alternative responses to customer dissatisfaction with a deterioration of the quality of an organisation. Thus, voicing was specifically about articulating dissatisfaction rather than exiting the relationship. Also seemingly silent in OB research is the issue of who decides whether voice is constructive? Presumably this reflects the preferences of those in power who can then shunt off inconvenient voice as not constructive or deem it to be complaining. Is suggesting a manager should be sacked for racist or sexist behaviour constructive?

A broader view from a recent text is that employee voice concerns the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say and potentially influence organisational affairs about issues that affect their work and the interests of the organisation. This can involve a variety of voice mechanisms (e.g., formal and informal, direct and indirect, union and non-union). Voice encompasses individual discretionary employee behaviours but also includes the ways in which employees challenge managerial behaviour, either individually or through collective behaviours and mechanisms, and also includes self-determining efforts by employees to identify themselves in ways that are set aside from the interests of the firm (Wilkinson et al., 2014, p. 5).

Within the IR field voice is often connected (as a critical step) to participation with voice seen as "any vehicle through which an individual has increased impact on some element of the organisation… without voice, there can be no enactment of participation" (Glew et al., 1995, p. 402).Taking these points together, we would argue that the OB perspective ignores the historical and well documented role of mechanisms of employee representation as vehicles for creating voice opportunity, and severs this link from its conceptualisation. Instead, OB research falls back on the unitarist assumption that management and workers both seek voice to share information solely designed to improve organisational processes. In so doing the OB lens misses out on the power-centred role of management in structuring employee voice and silence on a range of issues in the employment relationship (Donaghey et al., 2011). To correct the firm-centric and organisational performance bias of the mainstream OB view, our assertion is that the broader regulatory and institutional context needs to be brought more explicitly into our analysis (Godard, 2014).

Developing a new lens?

The research shows that employees want the opportunity to have a voice say and to contribute to the work issues that effect them (Boxall, Haynes, & Freeman, 2007). But the extant conceptualisation of voice will remain incomplete so long as researchers remain blinkered by their disciplinary approaches. There are many opportunities to explore new agendas, such as a diversity voice agenda given the many missing and neglected voices from parts of a labour force (Syed, 2014), or the challenge relating to social media as a form of voice. But without some re-engineering we are likely to continue to splinter the research in

the field of voice. In a review of OB voice research from an OB perspective, Brinsfield (2014, p. 128) echoed this concern, noting that "We also need to thoughtfully question our paradigmatic assumptions surrounding voice and silence which may unwittingly constrain our thinking" (See also Knoll et al., 2016)

If there are emerging signs of recognition that silos need to be broken down, there is also some evidence emerging of the possibility in to integrate disciplinary approaches. Mowbray, Wilkinson and Tse (2014) identify that both IR and OB scholars examine improvement-related employee voice; that voice may be considered both an extra-role and an in-role behaviour; and that dissatisfaction (so often prominent in IR research) may motivate employees to engage in various types of voice, including pro-social voice behaviour which is so often the focus of OB voice research. These authors propose that OB and IR studies consider both formal and informal voice, to enable the study of employee voice from both a systems and behavioural perspective. This approach could also have the benefit of reducing the need for practitioners to navigate the fragmented research on employee voice and will assist them in the design, implementation and management of their voice systems. As they point out ironically, although the disciplines are interested in the voice of employees, they have not always listened to the voice of their fellow scholars and this has too often led to fragmentation rather than integration.

What we need is to combine agency and structure and related behaviour and systems, and here there are some possible complementarities between IR and OB voice research. Thus unlike IR, the OB literature focuses on specific employee behaviors at an individual level. However what IR does explain is the context in which those behaviours and actions take place and what makes them more likely to take place. The OB literature examines the role managers play while IR illustrates that formal voice mechanisms mandated by law can create opportunity to voice and contest management decisions (Barry & Wilkinson, 2015). There are opportunities to build bridges (as the Editors of this issue suggest) but there are also pressures to keep going down the same path. Again, while the editors of the special issue talk about voice being embedded within a historic, political, cultural, and legal context, and call for considering antecedents of voice and silence that are situated beyond the organizational boundary, there is scant evidence of that in the papers themselves but we do note that the editors themselves have provided a wide ranging and ambitious multi─level model

combining collective and individual voice (and silence) and by doing so have laid down a possible new direction for voice research.

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