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Employee Voice in the Asia Pacific

This Special Issue of the *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources* explores the theme of employee voice in the Asia Pacific. Whilst there is an extensive literature on employee voice in western countries in regions such as Europe and the United States (Freeman, Boxall and Haynes, 2007; Wilkinson et al., 2004, 2020a b ; Morrison, 2011, 2014; Johnstone and Ackers, 2015), we know rather less about the state of employee voice in the Asia Pacific regions including in China, India, Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan, The Philippines, Vietnam, Australia and New Zealand. This gap relates to how the institutional factors (such as regulation and laws) as well as national cultural factors influence the employee voice arrangements and mechanisms that enable and facilitate voice or the factors that influence employee voice behaviour, such as leadership behaviour and supervisor-subordinate relationships. Certainly, governance and representation structures of voice are embedded in particular institutional contexts that have deep historical and cultural roots and therefore we are likely to find significant differences not only between Asia Pacific economies and the rest of the world, but also between and within the Asia Pacific economies themselves.

Over the past thirty-five years, since Farrell (1983) first applied Hirschman's (1970) concept of voice in relation to employees and Freeman and Medoff (1984) introduced the role of unions, we have accumulated a vast body of literature concerning employee voice. This research has largely spanned across employment relations (ER), human resource management (HRM), organisational behaviour (OB) and labor economics disciplines (Wilkinson et al 2020a). There are of course significant differences in approaches to employee voice from these various management disciplines. Voice has encapsulated notions of industrial democracy, individual/collective worker representation, articulation of grievances, worker participation, problem-solving and contribution to decision-making in the organization (Batt et al., 2002; Wilkinson and Fay, 2011). OB scholars see voice as a discretionary behaviour that, while challenging the status quo, is concerned with bringing about constructive change for the organisation (Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2014; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012). The focus is on the micro-level factors that encourage or discourage voice (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). ER scholars take a very different approach, seeing voice as the expression of worker rights and interests that are separate and distinct from those of the firm, and as a vehicle for

employee self-determination (Budd 2004, Kaufman 2014, Barry and Wilkinson 2016). These scholars are particularly interested in formal bodies, such as trade unions, collective bargaining, and grievance resolution, which they see as facilitating employee voice and are often linked to a legal strand of research, which is also concerned with institutionalising voice (Patmore, 2020). The HRM literature draws from both of these traditions, and in addition to looking at union or collective forms of voice, also examine other mechanisms for employees to engage in voice behaviour and to express their interests directly, such as through suggestion schemes or quality improvement teams (see Wilkinson et al 2020a). Combining these schools, we now have greater insights concerning the institutional and organisational factors that may contribute to the establishment and management of both direct and indirect employee voice mechanisms, along with the delineation of antecedents that may encourage employees to engage in voice behaviour directly to managers. Thus, we can observe that the notion of employee voice has moved from its traditional roots of indirect, representative union forms of voice, to one that is more inclusive of direct employee-managerial interactions (Mowbray, Wilkinson and Tse, 2015). Employee voice is now seen, therefore, as both the opportunity to have a say over employee and employer interests and to participate in organisational decision-making (Barry and Wilkinson 2015), as well as a discretionary behaviour whereby employees may raise ideas, issues, opinions and concerns in order to bring about change (Morrison, 2014).

Before we turn our focus to how employee voice has been studied within the context of the Asia Pacific and our introduction of the five papers in this special issue that contribute to our understanding of voice in the Asia Pacific, it is important to note that while there are distinct differences between how the various disciplines define and conceptualise voice, we take an inclusive approach to capture the multiple meanings and define employee 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 et al 2020 p 5).

It is also important to elucidate the role of context in employees' voice in organisations. While there is no consensus on the definition of context (Cooke, 2018), scholars have long called for more attention to the influence of national culture and societal structure on human resource management practices in general (e.g. Brewster, Mayrhofer, & Cooke, 2015; Budhwar, Varma, Patel, 2016) and employee voice in particular (e.g. Galang, 1999; Kwon

and Farndale, 2020; Matsunga, 2015). Most previous studies on employee voice have been carried out in "Western" cultures and arguably, this predominance by the Western perspectives is partly responsible for the narrow conceptualization of the voice construct from assertiveness-centered perspectives, failing to recognize more subtle, nonconfrontational voice behaviors found in other cultures (Matsunga, 2015). While existing studies tend to focus on "speaking up" as the only form of voice, there is little theorizing about the complexity of voice enactment patterns (Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, & Kamdar, 2011), especially in different cultures.

Cross-cultural differences in employee voice have been demonstrated in not only the traditional East-West distinction, but also among European countries. For example, a study (Balabanova, Ehrnrooth, et al, 2019) examined within- and between-cultural differences in the relationships between psychological contract breach (PCB) and exit and constructive voice among white-collar employees in Russia and Finland, showing that neither transactional nor relational PCB are associated with voice among Russian employees, while the relationship is significant between relational PCB and voice among Finnish employees. Price et al.'s (2001) cross-cultural study using samples from four countries, i.e. the United Kingdom (UK), Mexico, Netherlands, and the US, found across these four cultures, participants in the experiment valued their voice being solicited, and that increases in the magnitude of voice increased fairness perceptions. However, the magnitude of the value of voice differed across cultures; expectations of the value of voice were lower in Mexico and the US than in the UK and Netherlands.

Although more limited in scope and size, if we look to the body of research that has based their voice studies within the Asia Pacific context, these provide a useful starting point to identify our current state of knowledge and to suggest where future research should be directed. For example, research on emerging economies has recorded different models of employee voice aimed at promoting employee participation and voice, whereby there are those developed independently, while others are influenced by developed countries (see Pyman et al 2017). This can be seen in the context of discussions of convergence versus divergence of HRM. (Brewster, Mayrhofer, & Cooke, 2015; Budhwar, Varma, Patel, 2016).

For example, China has adopted a mixed voice model combining the traditional "iron rice bowl" paradigm with Western HR practices (Warner, 2004; Chan 2020). Farndale and

Sanders (2017) note that cultural dimensions of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, performance orientation, in-group collectivism and cultural tightness/looseness, are likely to have a significant influence over HRM system strength and employee attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. Kwon and Farndale (2020) point out that given organizations do not operate in contextual vacuums, one needs to consider how national culture values influence organizational voice norms to affect safety and effectiveness signals. These cultural differences have been empirically tested in some studies. Park and colleagues (Park & Kim, 2016; Park & Nawakintphaitoon, 2018) argue that Korean employees respond to negative situations at work based on criteria of whether their behaviors comply with their face-saving concerns, or whether their behaviors will mean they or a colleague will lose face in the organization. Comparing employee voice behaviors between participants from the automotive industries in Korea and the United States, they found that collectivism, face-saving, and conflict avoidance were negatively related to employee voice and conflict avoidance also moderated the relationship between LMX and employee voice in the Korean sample, but not in the US sample.

Hence, there are likely to be a variety of national and cultural influences that will influence aspects of employee voice. For example, Venkataramani et al.'s (2016) study of Chinese employees working in project teams for a construction company found that social networks and organisational configurations were important factors influencing the employees' likelihood of speaking up with ideas and suggestions, but they note that cultural factors such as collectivism and power distance may also have been important. Applying the promotive and prohibitive voice types to power distance (Hofstede, 1984), Hsiung and Tsai's (2017) study in Taiwan determined that power distance orientation inhibited the performance of promotive voice but did not inhibit the performance of prohibitive voice, possibly because of the different degrees of urgency. Furthermore, power distance orientation did not necessarily lead to low voice behaviours, even in a culture where strongly held beliefs inhibit voice. Their findings show that employees engage in voice behaviors when they have high activated negative moods and their workgroup has a favorable voice climate, which can lessen the psychological barriers to both promotive voice and prohibitive voice.

We also see differences in the role of unions and the state across different countries. Liu et al.'s (2012) study of a bilateral project on labor in China, undertaken with support from the

U.S. Department of Labor and in cooperation with China's Ministry of Labor and Social Security, assessed a demonstration project creating worker-management committees in the city of Qingdao designed to discuss and resolve workplace issues. While they note that these may not be a substitute for unions, they point to the experience workers gained in these worker-management structures: engaging with management, developing the capacity for free election and organization, and negotiation. In contrast, a study conducted in Malaysia by Kumar, Lucio and Rose (2013) found that trade unions had visbility issues and had limited influence over decision-making due to restrictions from the state and employers. Examining non-union employee representation (NER) in Korea, Kim and Kim (2004) found that there were structural weaknesses to NERs and that union members were more satisfied with their union arrangements than their non-union counterparts were with the non-union works councils. A later study conducted in Korea by Shin (2014) examined the influence of unions in relation to the adoption of high performance work systems (HPWSs), and in this instance found that there were tensions involved with the employers when more comprehensive HPWSs were used.

Another example of finding cultural differences in employee voice can be seen in India. Although the labor regulatory framework in India provides a conducive environment for social dialogue and collective participation in the organizational decision-making process, research has shown that collective worker participation and voice is at best modest in the public services and weak in the private manufacturing and private services. Indeed there is evidence of growing employer hostility and refusal to engage in a meaningful social dialogue with unions (Badigannavar, 2016).

There are a growing number of organizational behaviour voice studies that use samples from the Asia Pacific region, which provide us with some insights regarding how voice behaviour may be influenced by the cultural context. In some cases, while the study is conducted using Chinese samples, there is an effort to generalise this to other contexts. For example, Liang, Farh and Farh's (2012) study on the antecedents of two different types of voice, promotive and prohibitive voice has led to their voice measures of promotive and prohibitive voice being widely used in voice studies regardless of cultural context. They found that felt obligation was most strongly related to promotive voice, psychological safety was most strongly related to prohibitive voice and organization-based self-esteem was reciprocally related to promotive voice. Interestingly, they argued that their study in China enabled them

to test whether an accepted Western voice model could be generalised to a high-power distance context, and in doing so, succeeded in generalising their findings to other cultural contexts. Others choose countries such as China as their place of study, and yet have little to say about the generalisability of their findings and often only consider it as a limitation. For example, the study conducted by Xu, Qin, Dust and DiRenzo (2019) examined the importance of psychological safety on employee voice, found to be an important variable in contexts such as China and India, but warned against these findings being generalisable to Western contexts. Therefore, greater clarity and preciseness is needed to determine whether the findings from studies conducted within Asian contexts are distinct or able to be generalised to the Western context.

Many organisational behaviour voice studies have focused on leadership behaviours that may be distinctly related to the Asia Pacific context. For example, Zhang, Huai and Xie, (2015) chose to study paternalistic leadership, considered a traditional Asian construct, and found that this could both facilitate or hinder employee voice. In the case of authoritarian paternalistic leaders, the effect was a reduction of employee voice, as there was a reduction in their status judgment which relates to whether their contributions to the group are recognized and whether their superiors value them. Conversely, benevolent paternalistic leaders encouraged employee voice by enhancing both leader member exchange (LMX) and status judgment, while moral paternalistic leaders also positively influenced employee voice, mainly through LMX processes.

Li & Sun (2015) found a trickle-down effect of authoritarian leadership in hindering employee voice in China, while humble leadership, a form of leadership seen as being more likely to occur within the Asian context, has been linked to a greater motivation to voice under conditions of high personal sense of power and low power distance (Lin et al., 2017). Another construct closely associated with the Chinese context is guanxi, and supervisor-subordinate guanxi has been found to influence employee voice through the mediating roles of psychological ownership and psychological empowerment (Wang, Wu, Liu, Hao and Wu, 2019). Holley, Wu and Avey (2019) intentionally chose to study the relationships between leader trust worthiness, employee voice and performance within a Chinese setting, given their view that voice is not perceived as a traditional part of Chinese culture, and hence it is considered more challenging for employees to voice. They found that voice was a partially

mediating mechanism between cognitive, or character-based evaluations of leader trustworthiness and performance.

Similar results are also found from samples other than China. India has also been cited as being a culture where upward communication is discouraged and was the context for Subhakaran and Dyaram's (2018)'s study of the interpersonal antecedents of voice, which found that coworkers' upward voice and manager pro-voice behaviour significantly impacted employee voice and was mediated by psychological safety. A Japanese and Korean study analysing the relationship between formal voice mechanisms and prosocial voice among portfolio career workers (PCWs) in Japan and Korea, focused on leadership activities of managers as human resource management agents and issue sellers. They found that when PCWs perceive employment relations based on a social exchange relationship, they are more active in providing their prosocial voice (Kim, & Ishikawa, 2019).

Scholars from the communication field take a different perspective in examining employee voice in organizations. (Kim, 2002; Kitayama & Markus, 1999; Oetzel, Ting-Toomey et al, 2001). They posit that Western cultures encourage assertive communication but not the quintessential aspect of the voice phenomenon. For Westerners, expressing oneself unwaveringly across contexts is deemed as evidence of integrity, whereas social competence for the Japanese people is the ability to act adaptively for a given context (Kim, 2002; Kitayama & Markus, 1999). This suggests that the existing literature's focus on direct and assertive expressions might reflect the value orientations of the "Western" cultures. This distinction has led to a new construct and measure called voice strategy, defined as a set of direct and indirect communicative approaches that organizational members utilize to share ideas with intentions to exert constructive influence to their work group (Matsunga, 2015).

The above-mentioned studies shed some light on the features of employee voice in Asia Pacific area by presenting some selective findings from different perspectives. We believe that more systematic studies will help us better understand the mechanisms and related factors on this topic and we offer our issue as a contribution to this endeavour.

Our special issue includes five papers and covers economies from across the Asia Pacific, including Australia, India, China , Taiwan and Vietnam. Edakkat et al. (2020) highlight the nature of employee voice in the context of contemporary Indian organisations. The paper draws

on senior executives' accounts of employee voice that represent varied industry sectors, exploring how workforce diversity shapes voice in the workplace. The paper extends management perspectives on employee voice behaviour and contributes towards understanding the intricacies of individual dynamics and human experience in voice scholarship. They observe that voice expressed moved beyond the interests of management towards individual and personal interests that are not necessarily aligned with that of the organization. In addition, initiating upward inputs and voicing to managers was noted as a tricky phenomenon, due to societal and cultural reasons.

Examining voice within the context of China, Liu et al. (2020) comment that while employee voice can be beneficial for the organization, power and positional authority can create a "leaders' bubble" which is hard to penetrate unless leaders proactively solicit voice from employees. Drawing on the situated focus theory of power and supervisor-subordinate goal congruence literature, they examine how followers' perspective-taking affects leaders' voice solicitation through supervisor-subordinate goal congruence. Survey data collected from Chinese employees provide support for a positive indirect relationship that existed between perspective taking and voice solicitation through supervisor-subordinate goal congruence, and this indirect relationship was stronger when the employees' perception of organizational politics was low.

Wu et al. (2020) explores how and when authoritarian leadership makes subordinates reluctant to voice in Chinese organizations, examining whether subordinate psychological safety mediates the relationship between authoritarian leadership and subordinate voice and the moderating effect of supervisor-subordinate guanxi. Using survey research, they obtained supervisor-subordinate dyad data in Taiwan and reveal that subordinate psychological safety mediates the relationship between authoritarian leadership and subordinate voice and that this mediating effect is weaker for high supervisor-subordinate guanxi than for low supervisor-subordinate guanxi. In short, they shed light both on how and when authoritarian leadership inhibits subordinate voice but also how the interplay between authority and relationalism in Chinese culture determines subordinate voice.

Alang et al (2020) explore how the implementation of government policy with respect to Indigenous voice practice impacts on the workplace participation of Indigenous employees in Vietnamese public sector organisations. A qualitative case study approach was adopted

capturing the perspectives of managers and Indigenous employees in three public sector agencies. The findings showed that, while government policies have led to increased Indigenous workforce participation, there are a range of barriers at the organisational level that limit and undermine workplace participation. These include inconsistencies in the interpretation and implementation of these policies at the organisational level due to the reliance on the discretion of individual managers and lack of awareness of underlying racism of non-Indigenous managers. This was exacerbated by inconsistency in direct employee voice practices. Finally, trade unions played a minor role in integrating Indigenous voice with collective voice.

Almeida et al.'s (2020) study of voice in Australia, points out that doctors and nurses face varying challenges in their job roles, which are exacerbated in a semi-rural hospital setting with stressful job demands and long work hours. The Job Demands-Resources (JDR) model is used to explore how organisational mechanisms (resourcing, decision-making processes and culture) provide a voice for staff. The study found that the semi-rural context, characterised by high levels of centralised decision-making and resourcing and low levels of confidentiality and anonymity, has limited employee voice and the ability for staff to participate in decisions affecting their work. This lack of voice has consequently had negative effects on engagement levels. They propose that employee voice be viewed as a distinct job resource, manifest through an organisation's resourcing, decision-making processes and culture, to generate a direct and positive effect on employee engagement. Active involvement and participation of healthcare professionals in resource allocation and the decision-making process in hospitals is likely to improve their ability to manage the stressful job demands and long work hours, resulting in better employee engagement, retention and patient care.

Looking forward, a number of issues deserve to be highlighted for future research on employee voice in different societies and cultures. First, the conceptualization and measurement issue. The construct of context plays an important role in employee voice, particularly in the explanation of differences among countries. National culture, institution, social structure/system, and the like, have been used as indicators of context in previous research but few of them provide a clear definition of context which results in variations in the measures used in empirical studies. For example, a couple of frameworks or their dimensions about national culture (Hofstede, 1980; House et al, 2004) have been used in classifying countries

but we do not always see how the roles and relationships of different dimensions influence employee voice.

One of the challenges for empirical studies is the data collection methods for country level variables. The most widely adopted method is using aggregation of individual responses to represent group, organisation, and country level variable. Then the problem becomes who can be a representative sample for a country? Moreover, given the limitations of the existing frameworks and dimensions of culture in explaining differences across countries, in addition to the assumption that differences within culture is bigger than between cultures, scholars expended cultural value into an individual level variable, such as power distance orientation, psychological collectivism. It will be worthwhile to differentiate the level of these constructs by providing more precisely both conceptual and operational definitions.

Similarly, the construct of employee voice also needs to be further elaborated. Previous studies from different fields deployed different definitions (i. e., Detert, & Burris, 2007; Kassing, 1998; Liang, Farh, et al 2012; Morrison, 2011, 2014; Mowbray, Wilkinson, & Tse, 2015; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Voice can be described in terms of the content (satisfaction, dissent, grievance), the methods (formal/ informal, oral/written, public/private), target (supervisor, colleague, top management, union), motivation, nature (right/duty, mandatory/voluntary). One central definition and measurement, that of promotive and prohibitive voice (Liang et al, 2012) is unable to reveal the multiple characteristics of employee voice in different societies. At the individual level, voice behaviour, voice propensity (Landau, 2009), voice strategy (Matsunga, 2015), as well as voice and silence should be clearly and distinctively defined. At organisation level, voice mechanisms also need to be clarified. It has been reported that organisations may use 12 voice methods (mechanisms) to encourage employees to speak up (Landau, 2009) but the question remains as to what is the relationship of these mechanisms to context.

Second, causal relationships need to be considered. If we do find differences across countries, to what extent can/should we attribute these differences to national culture or institution? In a meta-analysis about country differences in the relationship between high performance work system (HPWS) and business performance, the findings suggest that both national culture and managerial discretion can help to explain the variations of the relationship across countries (Rabl, Jayasinghe, et al. 2014). Diversity of cultural value orientation, variety of capitalism/socialism, distinct national business systems, diverse regulations and trade union

presence and power and even the heterogeneity of intra-nation (such as China and India) are all potential factors which may lead to or relate to employee voice. We recommend scholars to use, or hopefully develop, more convincing theorisation to justify the potential causal relationships between context factors and employee voice.

Third, looking at cross-level issues, a large number of voice predictors have been proposed (e.g. Kaufman, 2015; Landau, 2009; Mowbray, Wilkinson, & Tse, 2014) and some have been empirically tested. Obviously, these predictors can be classified at different levels (country, organisation, and individual employee). The potential interaction among these factors at different levels requires more rigorous research design—cross-level or multi-level research. There is the need for further studies utilising cross-level studies of employee voice, especially from a cross-country perspective. For example, to what extent will national culture determine voice mechanisms at organisation level and eventually impact employee voice behaviour or voice strategy? Cross-level studies could help us to identify what predictors are context-specific or context-free and under what circumstances?

We are also keen to see studies examining if there are any differences between individual level variables, such as personality trait or supervisor support, and employee voice in different cultures. Are these identified relationships universal or culture-specific? In this regard, the integrative framework for cross-cultural HRM analysis (Budhwar, Varma, Patel, 2016) or that offered by Farndale and Kown (2019) could be useful in studying employee voice in different contexts.

Taken together, these special issue contribution articles draw our attention to the range of work from the Asia Pacific region being done today on employee voice including drawing from several disciplines, using a range of methodologies. In addition to contributing to academic knowledge the insights here should provide insights for policy and practice in helping to facilitate more effective voice.

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