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Voices unheard: employee voice in the new century

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Voices unheard: employee voice in the new century

Abstract

The concept of employee voice has attracted considerable attention in research since the 1980s primarily in the fields of Employment Relations/Human Resource Management (ER/HRM) and Organisational Behaviour (OB). Each of these disciplines focuses on different aspects of employee voice, the former examining the mechanisms for employees to have 'a say' in organisational decision-making (Freeman, Boxall, & Haynes, 2007; Gollan, Kaufman, Taras, & Wilkinson, 2015; Wilkinson & Fay, 2011) and the latter considering voice as an 'extra-role upward communication behaviour' (Morrison, 2014, p. 174) with the intent to improve organizational functioning. The purpose of voice is seen by each of these disciplines in a different way. ER/HRM perspectives are underpinned by the assumption that it is a fundamental democratic right for workers to extend a degree of control over managerial decision-making within an organisation (Kaufman, 2015; Wilkinson, Gollan, Lewin, & Marchington, 2010). Thus, everyone should have a voice and a lack of opportunities to express that voice may adversely affect workers' dignity. In contrast, OB perspectives are underpinned more by a concern with organisational improvements, therefore leaving it much more to managerial discretion to reduce or change existing voice arrangements due to, for example, an economic downturn (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016).

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Voices Unheard: Employee voice in the new century.

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The concept of employee voice has attracted considerable attention in research since the 1980s primarily in the fields of Employment Relations/ Human Resource Management (ER/HRM) and Organisational Behaviour (OB). Each of these disciplines focuses on different aspects of employee voice, the former examining the mechanisms for employees to have ‘a say’ in organisational decision-making (Freeman et al., 2007; Wilkinson and Fay, 2011; Gollan, Kaufman, Taras and Wilkinson, 2015) and the latter considering voice as an ‘extra-role upward communication behaviour’ (Morrison, 2014: 174) with the intent to improve organizational functioning. The purpose of voice is seen by each of these disciplines in a different way. ER/HRM perspectives are underpinned by the assumption that it is a fundamental democratic right for workers to extend a degree of control over managerial decision-making within an organisation (Wilkinson, Gollan, Marchington and Lewin, 2010, Kaufman 2014). Thus, everyone should have a voice and a lack of opportunities to express that voice may adversely affect workers’ dignity. In contrast, OB perspectives are underpinned more by a concern with organisational improvements, therefore leaving it much more to managerial discretion to reduce or change existing voice arrangements due to, for example, an economic downturn (Barry and Wilkinson 2015).

The term employee voice is somewhat weaker than that of other related terms such as employee participation because it does not denote influence or power-sharing and may thus be at times no more than trickle up voice. However, ‘without voice, there can be no enactment of participation’ (Glew et al. 1995, 402) and thus all voice models in the ER/HRM tradition begin with the presence of a voice opportunity for participants, which refers to ‘any vehicle through which an individual has increased impact on some element of the organization’ (Glew et al. 1995, 402). From an ER/HRM point of view the extant research examining employee voice focuses primarily on the “definitions, structures, processes and effectiveness of employee participation” (Gollan and Patmore, 2013:499). Research covers a variety of voice mechanisms: collective and individual, formal and informal, direct and indirect, union and non-union and combinations thereof (Gomez, Bryson and Willman, 2010). While voice in this field can be prosocial, in the sense that it can be used to benefit the organisation, it can also be a means through which employees challenge managerial behaviour, either individually or collectively. Self-determining efforts by employees to identify themselves in ways that are set aside from the interests of the firm (Barry and Wilkinson 2016) are also included in this sphere of research.

Much of the extant ER/HRM literature investigates how voice systems are established, why they are established (Dundon and Gollan, 2007), how they are implemented as well as their outcomes (Wilkinson et al. 2014a, b). A voice system, which is set up within an

organisation to shape and channel participation (Marchington 2007) has both institutional and human elements, that is, both structure and agency. Although the voice system does not always operate exactly as designed, it nevertheless represents the intent of its designers. Failure within this research stream is attributed to institutional factors: the decline or collapse of the voice system.

Wilkinson, Dundon and Marchington (2013) provide a useful framework to examine a voice system through the following elements: the degree, level, range of issues which are within its purview and the form that participation takes. First, **degree** indicates the extent to which employees are able to influence decisions about various aspects of management – whether they are simply informed of changes, consulted or actually make decisions. Second, there is the **level** at which voice is expressed; for example, task, departmental, establishment, or corporate. The **range** of subject matter is the third dimension, incorporating a gamut of issues from the relatively trivial (e.g. parking), to operational concerns, such as how to improve practices on the manufacturing line (Viveros, Kalfa and Gollan, 2017), to more strategic concerns for example, investment strategies. Fourth, there is the **form** that voice takes which could include ‘online’ involvement (Appelbaum and Batt 1995), where workers make decisions as part of their daily job responsibilities as distinct from ‘offline’, where workers make suggestions through a formal scheme.

Researchers have reported that managers identify a number of benefits to a firm from enabling voice – for example, increased employee loyalty and commitment, increased organisational performance and decreased absenteeism (Wilkinson et al ., 2004). Equally there are arguments around legitimacy that suggest voice is important to the organisation. However, we must avoid the assumption that only formalised structures resolve problems associated with providing voice (Dietz, Wilkinson and Redman 2009). In recent years we have seen the growth and importance of informal voice: non-programmed interactions between managers and workers which provide opportunities for information-passing and consultation (Morrison, 2011, Marchington and Suter 2013). Indeed, most employees appear to want the opportunity to have a say and to contribute to the work issues that matter to them, and they also want a range of voice choices rather than a single channel. This has created some debate in the literature and has highlighted the variety of different aspects of employee voice (Morrison, 2011; Mowbray, Wilkinson and Tse, 2015; Pohler and Luchak, 2014).

Although the research on employee voice has generated important findings, we have to acknowledge its limitations. Much of the employee voice research looks at organisational levels and emphasises the role of *managers* who can through agenda-setting and institutional structures, perpetuate silence over a range of issues, organising them out of the voice process (Dongahey et al 2011; Dundon and Gollan, 2007). In focussing on different voice *structures* it has tended to neglect employees who have limited avenues to express their voice or feel they cannot freely do so. Research on employee silence has addressed this to an extent by examining an employee’s ‘motivation to withhold or express ideas, information and opinions about work-related improvements’ (Van Dyne, Ang and Botero 2003, 1361). Numerous reasons have been identified for employees choosing silence: ineffectiveness of voice system,

fear of consequences, lack of resources or employer motivations or strategies (Morrison, 2014).

As such, we argue that there are still voices in contemporary organisations which remain to be heard and this Special Issue has been designed to explore those. We suggest there are several levels at which voices are missing, beginning with the academic world. As Wilkinson and Barry (2016) have argued, certain influential disciplines such as OB, regard employee voice as a discretionary, individual behaviour, and seek to understand the antecedents of the choice to either raise or withhold voice. However, OB does not consider the ways in which organisations create cultures of voice or silence that act as supply-side constraints. In the same vein, the authors note that the mainstream ER view has, in its own way, narrowed employee voice through an excessive focus on airing and redressing employee grievances (see Budd 2014). By focusing only on individual choice or voice structures, the notion of voice has been somewhat impoverished and the shrinking concept has meant voices are indeed unheard.

Instead, we propose that voice, or lack thereof, should be examined on societal (macro), organisational as well as departmental (meso) and individual (micro) levels (see also Kwon et al 2017). We argue that the macro level consists of the regulatory framework, which determines organisational policy. The meso level pertains to the voice systems that organisations espouse as well as the extent to which these are utilised in practice. The micro level examines the individual-level motivators and inhibitors to voice, such as dispositions, attitudes and perceptions, emotions and beliefs (see Morrison, 2014). Of course, as any other heuristic model we expect one level to spill over to the next. The macro and meso levels are addressed primarily by the ER/HRM literature, whereas the micro level is the domain of Organisational Behaviour. Our focus here is the macro and in particular the meso level and the ways in which the literature has left certain voices unheard.

On a macro level, voices can be designed out at the policy and regulatory level and in fact, most studies of employee voice focus on managers as policy actors operating within a framework of legislation or public policy prescriptions (Gollan and Patmore, 2013). The Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) literature provides a useful lens through which to examine “how governance and representation structures of participation are embedded in particular institutional contexts that have deep historical and cultural roots” (Barry, Wilkinson, Gollan and Kalfa, 2014:523). For example, in many continental European countries the State plays a role in supporting employee voice (Gollan and Xu, 2014; Gollan and Wilkinson, 2007). Other countries, including the USA or Australia, place much less emphasis on statutory provisions for employee voice and instead focus on the preferences of managers and unions to establish their own arrangements, which are contextually specific and shape the practice of voice on an organisational level (Block and Berg, 2010; Frege and Godard, 2010). Although the VoC framework is a useful analytical device the taxonomies offered in this literature set are often “stylised ideal types, broad macroeconomic data and/or case-study based evidence of firm practices” (Goergen et al, 2012: 506). Research on emerging economies has recorded different models of employee voice. For example, Jackson (1999) noted that South Africa has moved from autocratic racial Fordism to more inclusive paradigms that combine collective

bargaining with direct forms of voice. Similarly, China has also adopted a mixed voice model combining the traditional “iron rice bowl” paradigm with Western HR practices (Warner, 2004) (see Pyman, Gollan, Wilkinson, Xu and Kalfa, 2017 for a Special Issue).

On an organisational and departmental (meso) level, we can envisage at least five types of unheard voices (see Table1). First, what we call “black holes”: organisations such as many small firms that have no structures in place for voice. Similarly, many organisations that rely on precarious workers offer no opportunities for voice, leading to the assumption that in those situations voice has little legitimacy. How do you tell the owner that he /she is the problem? Second, there are situations where voice structures exist and employees utilise them but no one listens. This might not be due to a “conspiracy”, but simply because the active voice of employees takes place against a background of institutional noise, making it likely that voice is not heard, rather than deliberately repressed. Third, there are situations where voice structures exist, employees use them and grievances are heard by management but are ignored (deaf ear syndrome as coined by Harlos, 2001). At Bundaberg hospital, for example, managers heard employee voice but under time and resource pressures and a sensitivity to issues of power and professional expertise, they either discounted it or set the bar so high that single voices were ignored unless there was corroborating data, which managers never sought (Wilkinson et al 2015). Fourth, organisations might have structures in place, but instead they create and perpetuate a climate of silence “through agenda setting and institutional structures” (Donaghey, Cullinane, Dundon and Wilkinson, 2011: 57). Thus, employees decide to not speak up either because of fear of consequences or because they have internalised the rules of the “game” (Kalfa, Wilkinson and Gollan, 2017).

Fifth, individual staff may also have differential access to employee voice and/or different propensities to utilise these opportunities. The scholarship on employee voice tends to treat workers as homogeneous and theorises about the voice vehicles in a universal way. Indeed it is widely accepted that organisations are generally designed for and dominated by mainstream employees, e.g., white Anglo-Saxon, protestant, heterosexual persons in the UK, US, Canada and Australia (Greene, 2015). However, workers are diverse, and their opportunity or tendency to voice may be shaped by their gender, race, sexuality and personal perceptions in addition to institutional factors. Thus, these diverse voices may be missing in the workplace or they may be expressed in rather different ways (Syed 2014). For example, Syed (2014) argues that prevalent voice arrangements (trade unions or employee committees) are insufficient in addressing the needs of diverse others such as women and ethnic minorities. Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard and Sürgevil (2011) examined LGBTQIA persons and claimed that they often opt for *silence* in the workplace either in an effort to protect themselves from mistreatment or because they feel that speaking up is futile. The result is voices that are not heard and/or a lack of appropriate vehicles to enhance non-mainstream voices (Morrison, 2014). The increased diversity in the workplace has led to interest in research around managing heterogeneity and inclusion and the need to pay attention to the perspectives, insights and concerns of diverse employees in order to ensure they are integrated in the workplace (Garcia & Martin, 2010; Özbilgin & Syed, 2015). If voice

structures are there to gather what employees want to say, then we need to be mindful of the diversity within the employee body (Dyne et al., 2003; Gunawardana, 2014).

Table 1

Voice architecture	Outcome	Examples
Non-existent	Black holes	<p>SMEs, new firms, precarious employees</p> <p>“Despite an increased focus on the study of HRM practices in SMEs, the concept of employee voice in SMEs remains under-theorised and under-researched” (Gilman, Raby and Pyman, 2015:564)</p> <p>“The shift towards increasingly precarious and atypical forms of employment, the fragmentation of organizational boundaries and an absence of effective employee voice has led to the call for alternative institutional arrangements in order to provide workers with a greater input into managerial decisions” (Dundon and Gollan, 2007:1183)</p>
Voice structures exist but...	Speaking up is lost to noise	<p>Ashford, Sutcliffe and Christianson (2009: 188-191) present some of the reasons why leaders may not hear employee voice. These reasons include a) cognitive biases (e.g. confirmation bias); b) fallacy of centrality (‘if it was important I would know about it’); c) structural constraints (e.g. too much voice; voice on topics considered peripheral to the leader; voices from different teams/ departments that contradict each other).</p>
Voice structures exist and...	Voices are heard but no action follows – the caravan moves on.	<p>“Nurse Hoffman pointed out her concern about Patel’s choice of practices not reflecting best practice guidelines in Australia. Dr Keating’s response to the inquiry about this complaint was he was not made aware of the situation from an anaesthetist, and if such a problem existed, he believed the anaesthetists would have brought it to his attention (T6834). In practice, then, only certain voices were to be given credence with others to be discarded or discounted” (Wilkinson et al, 2015:8).</p> <p>United Airlines flight 173 crash landed into a</p>

		wooded area of suburban Portland, Oregon killing 10 people and seriously injuring 23. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) determined that the cause of the accident was “the failure of the captain to monitor properly the aircraft’s fuel state and to properly respond to the low fuel state and crew members’ advisories regarding the fuel state” (NTSB Report 1979: 29).
Voice structures exist but...	<p>Employees are silent because they:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Internalise the rules of the game 2. Fear consequences of speaking up. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “In the end, those with power have power. We're not going to change them by standing there shouting at them” (Kalfa et al, 2017:12). 2. “You tell your boss what he wants to hear, even when your boss claims that he wants dissenting views... Your job is not to report something that your boss does not want reported, but rather to cover it up” (Jackall,1988)
Voice structures exist but...	Assume homogeneity in the workforce	<p>Kidder (2002:638), in conceptualising voice as a form of civic-oriented organisational citizenship behaviour, found that “females were significantly less likely to report performing civic virtue behaviours [compared to] males”.</p> <p>“I don’t want to be a one issue person. Other staff might believe that I’m only concerned about gay rights, and I have many other interests beyond homosexuality. It might hurt my relationships with other department heads within the hospital and lessen the degree of respect in which I am held. My relationships with conservative or fundamentalist staff members would be damaged. (Bragg 1997:29-30 in Bowen and Blackmon, 2003:1412)</p>

In this Special Issue of *IJHRM* we take a broad approach to shed light on missing voices.

Ravenswood and Markey point out that the role of gender in employee voice is a particular research gap in female-dominated industries, such as residential aged care. Thus, the authors investigate the role of ‘embedded’ voice mechanisms, with a focus on informal voice and managerial agency in residential aged care in New Zealand and examine the impact of the external environment on organisational voice. Ravenswood and Markey question the role of voice in maintaining low wages and examine the role gender has in the embeddedness of

voice. They conclude that managerial agency is important at an organisational level, but that gender regimes influence institutional forces that have a greater effect on employee voice.

Hu and Jiang examine how Employee-Orientated Human Resource Management (EOHRM) is related to Chinese employees' voice. Drawing on the trust literature, they develop and test a model that involves the mediating role of trust in management in the effect of EOHRM on voice behaviour and the moderating role of employees' moral identity in the EOHRM effects. Results show that trust in management partially mediated the relationship between EOHRM and voice behaviour. The effect of EOHRM on trust in management and the indirect effect of EOHRM on voice behaviour via trust were stronger in employees with higher rather than lower levels of moral identity. These findings suggest that organizations may promote employee voice by implementing HR policies and practices that focus on employees' personal and family needs and consider employees' moral identity.

Jiang, Le & Gollan examine cultural intelligence (CQ) as an antecedent of voice behavior and explore the mediating role of leader-member exchange (LMX) in the CQ-voice relationship. Results showed that migrant employees with higher CQ were more likely to engage in voice behavior. The positive relationship between CQ and voice behavior was partially mediated by LMX. Thus they verify a relatively new individual antecedent (i.e. CQ) of voice behavior and reveal the underlying mediation mechanism that explains the effects of CQ on employee voice. This study also has implications for managing culturally-diverse workforces (i.e. migrant workers) regarding the promotion of voice

Daymond and Rooney take as a starting point that society faces complex social, environmental and economic problems and that supra-organisational, cross-sector collaborations will increasingly be the vehicles for addressing those problems. The increased use of such supra-organisational collaborations requires collaboration practitioners who design and facilitate projects. However, cross-sector collaborations present new challenges for HRM. An interpretive analysis of the practitioners' perspectives reveals that aspects of voice are considered essential for the success of cross-sector collaborations, and that voice is improvement-oriented in these contexts. Voice creates an understanding of the different perspectives among cross-sector collaborators and establishes trust. Voice forms a platform from which the differing objectives of the collaborators can be met, it engages multiple parties from very different organisations and professions, and it maximises the potential of the collaboration. Membership and representativeness of governance groups are closely linked to voice and its benefits in cross-sector collaborations.

Felix, Mello and von Borell investigate how the individual actions of gay employees influence the development of a climate of voice or silence in the workplace. The authors revealed two types of boundary tactics, micro-level and structural, that the research participants use to promote their ideal level of separation or integration of their personal and professional identities. Adopting a grounded theory approach, they demonstrate that whereas structural boundary tactics promote respect and a climate of voice, micro-level boundary tactics soften conflicts in the short term but solidify a climate of silence from a long-term perspective. The authors also propose that the insufficiency of institutional mechanisms to

support gay people's right to have a voice at work reduces the likelihood that these workers will risk confronting those who attempt to silence them. They focus on actions that gay employees can perform to co-construct a climate of voice that positions them as active social actors and not merely passive recipients of organisational and institutional conditions.

McNulty, McPhail, Inversi, Dundon & Nechanska examine organizational mechanisms supporting LGBT voice opportunities for global mobility. In this study, they use respondent data from 15 LGBT employees in combination with data from five global mobility managers to examine the role of Employee Resource Groups. Using the depth, scope and level of voice to frame the study in relation to stereotype threat theory, the findings show that discrimination and stigmatization are prevalent features affecting voice. The findings advance three distinct contributions concerning marginalized (LGBT) employee voices about expatriation: the importance of 'informal' social dialogue, the shallow 'depth' to voice decision-making roles about LGBT expatriation, and a consideration of 'silence' in voice literatures.

Mcfadden and Crowley –Henry examine the separation and isolation from the mainstream workforce that lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees experience as a result of their sexual orientation, and how this can affect their voice and silence in the workplace. In response to perceived threats and actual experience of stigma in the workplace, they highlight the need for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) voice in organizations, while unpacking the complexities and concerns for LGBT employees in publicly voicing their sexual orientation at work. They explore how LGBT employee networks help mitigate LGBT isolation at work, and can directly and indirectly provide them with voice in the organization. However, they question the value of LGBT employee networks in providing voice for all sexual minority employees.

Beauregard, Arevshatian, Booth and Whittle note that only 17 percent of FTSE 100 company websites refer directly to transgender ('trans') individuals, illustrating the extent to which trans voices are unheard in the workplace. They propose that these voices are missing for a number of reasons: voluntary silence to protect oneself from adverse circumstances; trans voices being subsumed within the larger LGBT community; assimilation, wherein many trans voices become affiliated with those of their post-transition gender; multiple trans voices arising from diversity within the transgender community; and limited access to voice mechanisms for transgender employees. They identify the negative implications of being unheard for individual trans employees, for organizational outcomes, and for business and management scholarship, and propose ways in which organizations can listen more carefully to trans voices. They introduce an agenda for future research that tests the applicability of the theoretical framework of invisible stigma disclosure to transgender individuals.

Prouska and Psychogios observe that while research has emphasized the organizational and individual factors that influence employee voice and silence at work, it is less known how employee voice/silence is affected by the economic context. In examining the Greek crisis context, they explore how employee silence is formulated in long-term turbulent economic environments and in more vulnerable organizational settings like those of small enterprises.

Their study suggests a new type of employee silence, social empathy silence, and offers a conceptual framework for understanding the development of silence over time.

Ann and Bramble examine the factors determining why some Chinese migrant workers remain silent when their rights are violated and the consequences of them doing so. The results of the survey show that the migrant workers who are more vulnerable in demographic factors, family dependency, job insecurity and social networks are more likely to stay silent in such circumstances. The results further indicate that silence leads them to be worse off in relation to social security benefits and labour rights. This research challenges the traditional organisational behaviour perspective on silence. It is evident that silence can be a survival strategy for second-class workers and it appears that the disadvantaged have no say and remain silent in exchange for work opportunity, but by doing so are more likely to suffer unfair treatment

Mowbray observes that within the employee voice literature while the voice of the ordinary shopfloor employee has resonated loudly and the role that line managers play in encouraging or inhibiting that voice has also been well documented, within the literature there has been silence with respect to line managers themselves being considered as voicers. In her paper, these missing managerial voices are amplified through the presentation of a case study of front and middle line manager voice within a university setting. It was found that line managers' voice was thwarted due to relational and structural blockages in their formal voice channels. In some cases, this led to constrained voice and a sense of abandonment. However, some managers were able to construe this into a form of proactive and productive resistance. While for others, these blockages motivated line managers to use covert "underground channels" where their voice was raised informally. The paper extends our knowledge by considering the line manager as a voicer, and not merely a manager of voice.

Hatipoglu and Inelmen examine the relationship between demographic diversity principles and evaluations of employee voice. An analysis of survey data from 707 employees working at 37 hospitality institutions confirmed that trust in the employer, was of most importance in the evaluation of voice systems by all employees. Employee evaluations of voice opportunities were found to display differences between male and female employee groups. While generational cohort was a differentiating attribute for the male group, job tenure had the same effect for the female employees. Implications for future research and for HR managers are discussed.

Soltani, Liao and Gholami examines perceptions on employee voice in the largely overlooked heterogeneous Middle East region. Through an inductive design and exploratory methodology they examine the dynamics of employee voice in six multi-site organizations with domestic and international operations. While Islamic teachings and national labor law lay stress on employer-employee's mutual, win-win relationships, the extent to which employee voice was embedded in the HR policies of the organizations relied primarily upon the need for compliance with minimum legislative and industry-specific requirements. Furthermore, they suggest that much remained at the sole discretion of the management who were seen as having a 'short-sighted and unenlightened' orientation.

Brooks notes that upward challenge may go unheard in organisations. She comments that formal voice mechanisms are largely considered to be advantageous for encouraging employees to share their views and concerns but using a sample of UK police officers it was evident that formal voice mechanisms could be considered risky for upward challenge. The findings can be used by scholars and practitioners as a framework to identify where challenging voices may be going unheard.

In summary, the papers within this Special Issue illustrate a range of important macro and meso level variables that can, among others, influence the extent to which voices are heard or even raised in organisations: gender, trust, sexual orientation, economic context, job insecurity and education. In challenging existing norms and providing fertile ground for future research, these articles represent a unique and growing body of literature central to our understanding of how employee voice will be shaped and identified in the future. Developments at work such as increasing insecurity due to crowdsourcing “in which digital platforms act as a form of ‘internalised offshoring’” (Findlay and Thompson, 2017:132) will pose further challenges for employee voice, challenges which have yet to be theorised let alone researched empirically. In order for employee voice to continue being “a vibrant area of research and practice that engages with cutting edge theory as well as with workers and their organizations in everyday lives” (Budd 2014: 485) we urge scholars to keep seeking voices that remain unheard.

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