

The HR literature won't give you a complete picture of employee voice

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For many years, Employment Relations scholars (with whom we identify) adopted the view articulated by [Freeman and Medoff \(1984\)](#) that collective mechanisms of employee voice could channel worker discontent so as to reduce the desire of dissatisfied workers to exit. They saw trade unions as the best agents to provide such voice, as they were formally independent of the employer and thus had external legitimacy. But we also observe that there is a tension between the aspiration of employees for an independent voice and a desire by management to institute voice as part of its own agenda. Thus there are differences between the Industrial Relations (IR) conception of voice that favours voice on employee terms, and the Human Resources/Organisation Behaviour conception that sees a benefit in management promoting voice to improve organisational communication and work unit performance.

Indeed, employee voice has become widely studied by Organisational Behaviour (OB) scholars and from their perspective voice is not viewed as a mechanism to provide collective representation of employee interests, but as an expression of the desire and choice of individual workers to communicate information and ideas to management for the benefit of the organisation. ([Kaufman 2015](#)) The OB literature follows the definition of [Van Dyne and Le Pine \(1998\)](#), which is that voice is a discretionary, pro-social, largely informal, individual behaviour. For OB, “pro-social” is behaviour that is defined as being other-regarding (rather than self-regarding), and of benefit to the organisation or the work unit.

This work has informed two review papers that were written with the intention of being broad integrative reviews of the entire voice field ([Klaas et al. 2012](#); [Morrison 2011](#)). We were intrigued and concerned that these reviews do not engage with conceptions of voice outside of OB, such as those coming from IR. It was not that they were unaware of other literature but that they chose not to incorporate views from outside their own disciplinary area. Our aim in this paper is to show that ignoring formal structures of voice, such as unions, works councils, staff associations or consultative committees, is a mistake if we really want to understand the full range of voice possibilities.

Our intention was not to discount the OB conception of voice, and indeed we accept that the OB conception of voice

is important in highlighting the value of constructive, individual employee voice behaviour missed by much of our discipline which discounts the contribution of communicative and relational aspects of individual voice behaviour. Equally however we want to show that the OB conception of voice is at best partial, because its definition of voice as an activity that benefits the organisation leaves no room for considering voice as a means of challenging management, or indeed simply as being a vehicle for employee self-determination.

So what's our problem with the OB conception of voice? We see it as narrow because OB researchers view employee behaviour from a unitarist lens in which 'what is good for the firm must be good for the worker'. This view does not properly consider how the employment relationship creates a divergence of interests between workers and management that gives workers cause to have a voice on their own terms, and in another way creates a power imbalance that can limit the capacity of workers to engage in voice.

Given its unitarist frame of reference, the OB conception of voice is divorced from the historical development of mechanisms of employee representation that act as vehicles for redressing distortions in power, or divergences in interests, in the employment relationship. OB voice does not consider why there is a need for voice mechanisms to promote employee interests as well as management interests. Indeed, the dominant view in OB of voice behaviour that does not meet the narrow test of being pro-social, is that it is complaining and, therefore, is not considered voice.

Equally the OB literature does not properly consider the ways in which organisations create cultures that discourage the act of speaking up, and in so doing act as supply-side constraints. Coupled with this is an inadequate consideration in the OB literature of how the broader regulatory context shapes and constrains opportunities for employees to engage in voice behaviours. OB research sees voice as operating in a world where organisational actors are divorced from an institutional context composed of such things as labour law regulation, unionisation, and company policies or statutory regulations that mandate certain forms of employee involvement ([Godard 2014](#)).

From an Industrial Relations perspective voice is an expression of the desire of workers to have their own say over matters that affect their working lives. This broad approach to employee voice brings the concept closer to that of a political process in which voice is seen as an expression of industrial democracy.

Given these observations, we would argue that the Industrial Relations field has much to offer in explaining employee voice preferences and behaviours. Industrial Relations studies have sought to explain what features of the pattern of employee relations in different settings give rise to extensive or limited forms of voice. What they show in general is that voice is likely to be more expansive where it is employee-initiated and where it is backed by statutory protections that mandate a role for employee voice in organisational decision-making.

Management-initiated voice schemes on the other hand are likely to provide voice on terms dictated by management, which are often limited to opening up lines of communication, and potentially extending voice into the provision of consultation in matters of (employer) decision-making. A critical difference between the Organisational Behaviour and Industrial Relations literatures is that the former examines the role managers play in promoting or discouraging voice, while the latter illustrates that formal voice mechanisms mandated by law can create opportunity to contest management decisions.

However, there are also some possible complementarities between Industrial Relations and Organisational Behaviour voice research. Thus, while the OB literature focuses on specific employee behaviours on an individual level whereas the IR literature tends to analyse, measure, or observe collective behaviours or actions, what IR does explain is the context in which individual behaviours and actions take place and what makes them more likely to take place. The intention of our research is to encourage integration, with the view of developing an overarching conception of employee voice, rather than seeing IR and OB voice research continuing as distinct discipline silos.



Notes:

- This post is based on the authors' paper [Pro-Social or Pro-Management? A Critique of the Conception of Employee Voice as a Pro-Social Behaviour within Organizational Behaviour](#), *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol 54 no 2 pp 261-284
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