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Towards an integration of employee voice and silence

Eva Nechanska, Emma Hughes and Tony Dundon.

Abstract

There is a growing interest in conceptualising employee voice across various theoretical disciplines- including Human Resource Management (HRM), Organisational Behaviour (OB), Industrial Relations (IR) and Labour Process (LP) – which approach the phenomena from diverse ontological anchor points. However, few consider the antithesis of voice, employee silence. This paper aims to advance a conceptual framework of voice and silence based on the inter-disciplinary integration of OB, IR and LP perspectives. Such an integrated approach may offer scholars, policy advocates and HR audiences a more reflective understanding of the social and psychological antecedents of employee voice and silence. The framework advances a critical pluralist view of employee silence by drawing on the concept of ‘structured antagonism’, which has been neglected in HRM and OB studies. A suggested future research agenda is outlined to help better integrate diverse approaches on employee voice and silence.

Introduction

Much analysis of employee voice can be traced back to Hirschman (1970:30), where voice is viewed as a vehicle for “changing the objectionable state of affairs”. However employee silence remains underexplored, which can be a manifestation of ‘exit’ under Hirschman’s framework (e.g., employees leave when faced with no voice) or extend ‘loyalty’ (e.g., workers remain but may suffer in silence hoping things will improve). HRM tends to use OB insights to explain voice and silence (e.g., for example, Kwon et al. 2011; Morrison et al., 2011; Farndale et al., 2011; Park and Nawakitphaitoon, 2018; Rees et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2018). In this article it is proposed that HR audiences can gain deeper insight from the integration of what are often competing approaches, namely organisational behaviour (OB), industrial relations (IR) and labour process (LP) perspectives. Wilkinson et al (2014:5) define voice as the “opportunities for employees to have a say and potentially influence organizational affairs relating to issues that affect their work and the interests of managers and owners”. Silence may reflect situations where employees either do not have opportunities for voice, or do not use them for various reasons (Donaghey et al., 2011).

The article provides a multi-dimensional and multi-layered conceptual framework of voice and silence, based on the inter-disciplinary integration of OB, IR and LP perspectives. The article contributes to advancing HR knowledge in four important ways. First, the integrated framework encourages HR audiences to extend HRM beyond any one paradigm by incorporating indirect, direct, informal and formal forms of social dialogue. In this way the approach captures how voice and silence reflect a power-centric relationship; that is, a relationship shaped by an unequal power exchange. Second, the integrated framework enables HR scholars to connect different contextual levels, layers and dimensions of employee silence to paint a ‘fuller picture’ of why employees do not speak-up. While OB renders useful insights

into forces such as collective sense-making, managerial behaviours, individual traits and psychological safety, IR helps understand the institutional contexts for voice, and LP informs a deeper appreciation about agentic influences connecting wider social structures of accumulation with the politics of enterprise level HR decision-making. Third, the article builds on HRM literatures (e.g., for example Farndale et al., 2011; Morrison et al., 2011; Rees et al., 2013; Knoll and Redman, 2011; Avery et al., 2011) to build a critical pluralist perspective on voice and silence across diverse workplace settings (Wright, 2000; Ramsay et al., 2000; Godard, 2014). In particular, the article evokes the critical pluralist concept of ‘structured antagonism’ (Edwards, 1986), neglected in the majority of HRM studies (e.g., Knoll and Redman, 2011; Morrison et al., 2011; Avery et al., 2011; Kwon et al. 2011; Farndale et al., 2011; Park and Nawakitphaitoon, 2018; Wang et al., 2018). ‘Structured antagonism’ elucidates how structural power imbalances may undermine voice and silence, depending on the formation and articulate of competing interests between employer and employee (e.g. between cooperation vs conflict and control vs consent tensions). Finally, the proposed integrative framework can support managerial, union and wider public policy debates. For example, the article highlights to HR audiences that silence may occur because effective voice mechanisms are inaccessible; or employees remaining silent may be a form of resistance and/or misbehaviour. HR practices can then be critically evaluated using understandings from multiple disciplinary perspectives to help move beyond narrow performance-driven metrics that could have little meaning to employees.

This review considers the intersection of OB, IR and LP analysis concerning voice *and* silence. The article is structured as follows. Next, a short overview of HRM voice is provided. OB contributions on voice and silence are then reviewed, incorporating HRM when appropriate. Following this, the relevance of structured antagonism to voice and silence is considered, which

is extended in section four to advance an integrated OB-IR-LP sensitizing framework. The paper concludes with possible directions for further research based on the arguments posed.

HRM voice and silence

The main focus of HRM literature is typically how the opportunities for ‘direct’ voice mechanisms help improve organisational processes (Huselid, 1995; Knoll and Redman, 2016; Fu et al., 2017). For example, Knoll and Redman (2016:832) focus on employer-sponsored upward voice where employees “express ideas that aim at process improvements and innovation”. Rees et al., (2013:2782) examine “employees’ perceptions of the extent to which they engage in voice behaviour aimed at improving the functioning of their work group”. Fu et al., (2017:344) encourage “easy-to-implement HR practices focusing on creating opportunities for employees to get involved as a means to pursue high performance”. They suggest internal newsletters, or social media intranets, where employees can exchange knowledge, information and ideas for improving existing practices.

Furthermore, HRM interpretations often assume that voice mechanisms can align employee and organizational goals through enhanced commitment and engagement (Farndale et al., 2011:115). Holland et al., (2011:97) explain that union decline “has been accompanied by the diffusion of direct voice, with priority being placed on voice as a means to enhance productivity and employee commitment to the organization.” Rees et al., (2013:2780) claim a positive link between employee voice and engagement, where engagement strategies are ways of “aligning employee interests more closely with organizational goals, predicted on an assumption that this in turn will improve organizational performance”. Such a narrative presents a unitary focus on direct voice where employees share ideas to benefit organizational goals. However, this can

overlook divergent (or conflicting) interests between managers and employees and the structural power imbalance between them (Cullinane and Dundon, 2014; Kaufman, 2015; Marchington, 2015).

Scholars have argued that employer-led voice schemes provide employee voice on managements' terms, which may be limited to lower-level communications and short on decision-making inclusion (Barry et al., 2018). Scrutinizing the 'depth' (i.e., extent of influence), the 'scope' (i.e., over what issues), 'level' (i.e., department, team or company) and 'form' (i.e., direct, formal, informal) of voice mechanisms is vital for HR academics and practitioners (Wilkinson et al., 2014). Indeed, Holland et al. (2011:106-107) recognize that they measure the presence of a voice mechanism, which is not "how embedded (the depth and breadth) of voice arrangements are at workplace level". Rees et al., (2013:2793) further caution: "we have considered perceptions of voice, not the reality of voice". Similarly, Farndale et al., (2011:124) note, "this study has used an indirect measure of voice, exploring how well employees *believe* their managers provide opportunities for voice, rather than actual voice."

It could be argued that HRM focuses heavily on generating employee perceptions of voice, rather than providing insight about the depth of voice. For instance, Farndale et al., 2011 (:116 *emphasis added*) state: "voice may engender long-term positive attitudes because employees perceive the potential to influence decisions, *regardless of whether the impact of employee voice on the decision outcome is realized*". Moreover, they infer that perceptions of voice builds trust relationships "irrespective of whether the decision outcome is favourable for employees or not" (:123). 'Perceptions of voice' without extensive voice may "motivate employees to respond as organizations desire" (Kwon et al., 2011:3) and legitimate decisions with negative employee outcomes in the short-term, but this is unsustainable.

Overall, then, the danger is that a unitary HR view of voice is premised on a misconceived notion of a voice mechanism as evidence of common interests and shared goals. Further, this becomes a pro-market orientation where voice is primarily predicated on presumed value for shareholder and organization interests, rather than a right to extend or enhance workplace democracy (Boxall et al., 2008; Dundon and Rafferty, 2018). HRM literatures on voice and silence often evoke OB insights (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2011; Kwon et al., 2011; Knoll and Redman, 2011; Avery et al., 2011; Farndale et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2018 Park and Nawakitphaitoon, 2018; Rees et al., 2013) and are therefore incorporated into the following section, where appropriate.

Organizational behaviour voice and silence

Similarly to HRM, OB research overwhelmingly emphasizes how ‘opportunities to have a say’ are provided by direct voice mechanisms premised on unitarist, improvement-orientated assumptions (Detert et al., 2013; Grant, 2013; Burriss et al., 2008; Fast et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2010; Tangriala and Ramanujam, 2008; Ashford and Barton, 2007). For example, building on multiple OB voice definitions, Morrison (2011:375, *emphasis added*) conceptualizes it as the “communication of ideas or suggestions about work-related issues with the *intent to improve organisational or unit functioning*”. Similarly, Grant (2013:1703) defines voice as “a proactive behaviour that involves speaking up with suggestions for improvement”. Detert et al. (2013: 626) explain that “Voice is a challenging, prosocial, organizational citizenship behaviour specifically intended to be instrumental in improving the organization by changing existing practices. They investigate three different “voice flows of ideas or proposals to attract more business, improve customer satisfaction, and improve effectiveness” (:659). Voice flows

include employees voicing to 1) peers, 2) immediate managers and 3) other managers. Their aim is to “see if and how they are different in ways relevant to predictions that might be made about their impact on performance” (:629).

Reflecting a unitary perspective where conflict is perceived as dysfunctional, employee complaints and grievance-raising are not usually considered ‘voice’ because they do not directly support organisational goals (Barry and Wilkinson, 2016; Mowbray et al., 2015). According to Detert et al. (2013:641), a disadvantage of voice between co-workers is that it will be “coded by outside observers or internal leaders as “venting,” “blowing off steam,” or even “complaining” and that “while such communication may make speakers feel better in the short run it likely only detracts from the unit’s climate and performance over time”. This echoes Morrison’s (2014:179-180) statement that “the primary intent [of voice] is to bring about positive change, improvement, or redress, and not to merely complain or get a positive outcome for oneself.” Tangriala and Ramunjam (2008:2008) convincingly argue that employees with a lack of autonomy express voice. But they view voice as “change-oriented ideas and suggestions about work-related issues” not “personal grievances resulting from perceived injustice.”

OB voice mechanisms are typically direct channels, building on work around organisational climate and socially shared cognition between workers and leaders (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Morrison et al., 2011). Morrison (2011:386) explains that recent OB research “have not given much consideration to the role of formal communication mechanisms, probably due to the conceptualization of voice as a discretionary extra-role behaviour occurring in a face-to-face context.” Exceptions include Morrison and Millken, (2000), who encourage formal upward communication channels to promote voice, and Miceli et al. (2008), who state that whistleblowing is more likely if internal reporting procedures exist.

Employee silence within OB literature is the “purposeful withholding of ideas, questions, concerns, information or opinions by employees about issues relating to their jobs and organisation in which they work” (Van Dyne et al., 2003:1389). Silence is portrayed as undesirable because employees not communicating their ideas may harm organisational interests. For example, silence has “significant implications for team and organizational performance” because, “key decision makers or teams may not have the information that they need to make appropriate decisions or to correct potentially serious problems.” (Morrison, 2011:374). Fast et al. (2013:1028) state that “withholding improvement-oriented voice denies the organization access to ideas that fuel growth, learning, and adaptation.” Similarly to HRM research highlighting employee engagement, Morrison (2014:88) notes how silence can stimulate “high levels of employee stress, dissatisfaction, and disengagement, which can undermine performance and retention”.

OB studies discuss two important issues shaping whether employees speak-up or not (Morrison, 2011, 2014). First, employees judge ‘voice efficacy’, hence, they may remain silent if they perceive speaking-up is futile and/or nobody will listen (Milliken et al., 2003; Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Detert and Trevino, 2010; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Second, voice is shaped by ‘psychological safety’, “people’s perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in a particular context such as a workplace” (Edmondson and Lei, 2014). Silence in such contexts is labelled ‘quiescent silence’ (Pinder and Parlos, 2001) and ‘defensive silence’ (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Negative repercussions may concern how others perceive their image, co-worker relations, identity, social capital, termination, career development restrictions and unappealing job tasks (Ashford and Barton, 2007; Bowen and Blackmon, 2003; Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison and Milliken, 2003; Miceli et al., 2008; Grant, 2013; Liang et al., 2012). These OB ideas are applied in HR studies; for instance, Goldberg et al. (2011) evoke psychological

safety and voice efficacy (see also Kwon et al., 2011; Farndale et al., 2011; Park and Nawakitphaitoon, 2018; Rees et al., 2013).

‘Organizational identification’ is a salient notion within OB voice and silence, echoing ideas about commitment and engagement with a unitarist posture for shared goals and common interests. Organizational identification is “the extent to which employees feel oneness or belongingness with their organization and include attributes of the organization in their self-definition” (Tangrimala and Ramunjam, 2008:1190). It reflects “the perceived amount of interests an individual and an organization share” (Smidts et al., 2001:1051). Ashford and Barton (2007:231) affirm that organizational identification fosters voice by creating “a motive to try and help and improve those organizations.” Liu et al. (2010:199) contend that “managers who want to encourage voice behaviour need to establish or strengthen employee identification.” They find a positive relationship between transformational leaders and voice. Such leaders “emphasize the collective identity as well as the values and vision of a whole organization (or a group)” and make “the organizational or group goal meaningful for the employees” (:192). Organizational identification is also considered a positive by-product of voice. Smidts et al. (2001) contend that when employees perceive voice opportunities, organizational identification is enhanced. Moreover, as Morrison and Milliken (2000) state, if employees evaluate voice opportunities favourably they feel valued, thereby increasing commitment and organizational identification.

Of interest is the argument that organizational identification can also instigate silence, because the attachment to the organization overrides employee dissatisfaction (Tangrimala and Ramunjam, 2008). Related, Ashford and Barton (2007) contend that employees may not speak-up because it may threaten their (and the organization’s) identity. Highly identified employees do not always recognize issues outside the organizations’ current frame of reference and they

tend not to contradict a prevailing norm, hence remain silent. Burriss et al.'s (2008:914) research does not support the hypothesis that the greater employees are psychologically attached to the organization (that is, "identify with their organization's goals and values"), the more they engage in improvement-orientated voice. They suggest this may be because strongly attached employees like the organization as it is. Similar arguments are made within HRM literatures. For example, Knoll and Redman (2011:833) find that employees who feel "a sense of belonging to the organization" and show "a strong psychological connection to their organization", are likely to engage in promotive voice. However, they conclude that such employees may also engage in pro-social silence where they "withhold views that might disturb the unimpeded functioning of the workplace" (:832) and "withhold their opinion or concerns if they think expressing them would challenge relationships at work" (:833).

Like HRM, OB silence and voice research is therefore overwhelmingly predicated on a unitary view of common goals and interests, where employees speak-up to meet shared objectives, and may be silent because of strong organizational identification. Morrison and Milliken (2000:2000) acknowledge that reducing employee silence is essential for creating pluralist organizations, which they define as "one that values and reflects differences among employees and that allows for the expression of multiple perspectives and opinions". However, as Fox (1979) notes, although pluralism is attractive in principle, it can be aspirational and difficult in practice owing to various external forces and because management hold a structural power advantage. Furthermore, a pluralist organization providing mechanisms to express alternative concerns is different to a pluralist organization that facilitates power-sharing in decision-making through those mechanisms. There seems more of a focus within OB on observing perceptions of voice rather than establishing workplace democracy. For example, Milliken et al. (2003:5) note that when top management are "perceived to be willing to listen", this

motivates voice, but this is not the same as assessing whether managers share power over decision-making outcomes when voice is expressed.

OB insights do draw attention to how positional and hierarchical power relationships shape voice and silence (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Fast et al., 2013; Kish-Gephart et al., 2009; Detert and Trevino, 2010). Kish-Gephart et al. (2009:174) argue that the emotion of ‘fear’ has a significant bearing when employees consider confronting authoritative individuals. In this context, “contemplating voice stokes a prepared fear of angering higher-status others, which automatically triggers recognition of the potential for negative consequences.” Similarly, Detert and Trevino (2010:263) find that fear prevents employees exercising voice to managers and that this “fear can stem simply from the notion of speaking up to more senior authority figures”. They argue that employees develop beliefs about interacting with authoritative individuals from early relations with parents, teachers and religious figures. Furthermore, Morrison and Milliken (2000) and Fast et al. (2013) affirm that managerial perceptions of employee voice as threatening and suspicious are largely shaped by position power and hierarchical relations. HR studies also discuss similar power relations (e.g., Kwon et al., 2011; Avery et al., 2011; Farndale et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2018).

In summary, OB/HRM perspectives generally gravitate towards direct voice mechanisms, downplaying indirect forms. While OB research focusses on informal voice behaviours (Morrison, 2011), HRM literatures examine formal and informal practices (Mowbray et al., 2015). OB offers useful coverage of employee motivations to speak-up or remain silent, including voice efficacy, psychological safety, leader-member exchange, identity, emotions and positional and hierarchical power sources (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009; Detert and Trevino, 2010; Morrison, 2014; Detert and Edmondson, 2011). These ideas feature in HRM research with a distinct psychological bent (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2011; Kwon et al., 2011; Knoll and

Redman, 2011; Avery et al., 2011). However, OB shortcomings include giving too much attention to individual-level factors and neglecting broader socio-economic, political and institutional forces (Godard, 2011; Barry et al., 2018), as discussed in forthcoming sections.

Moreover, a weakness in much OB and related HRM research is the premise of unitarist shared goals and aligning employee and organizational interests (e.g., Ashford and Barton, 2007; Liu et al., 2010; Tangriala and Ramunjam, 2008; Farndale et al., 2011; Rees et al., 2013). This creates a bias towards ‘improvement-orientated’ voice (Detert et al., 2013; Grant, 2013; Burriss et al., 2008; Fast et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2010; Tangriala and Ramanujam, 2008; Ashford and Barton, 2007; Morrison, 2011; Knoll and Redman, 2016; Fu et al., 2017) and overlooks how divergent employer-employee interests within a structurally imbalanced power relationship shape voice and silence outcomes. Finally, the focus in OB/HRM seems to be on the presence and perceptions of voice behaviours and mechanisms, rather than whether they provide workplace democracy or how deep such arrangements are embedded (Holland et al., 2011; Farndale et al., 2011; Rees et al., 2013; Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Milliken et al., 2003).

Similarities within IR and LP interpretations

In keeping with the definition of voice as ‘opportunities to have a say’, employees may use these opportunities to support organizational goals; but importantly, they may also contest management and HR practice by seeking to influence alternative outcomes. Crucially, ‘opportunities to have a say’ reflect ‘structured antagonism’ permanently embedded within people management systems (Edwards, 1986; Kaufman, 2014).

While different positions are adopted within IR/LP streams, including pluralist, Marxist, post-modernist and critical discourse dialectics, our framework supports a critical pluralist orientation favouring inclusion and integration (Edwards, 1986; Dundon and Dobbins, 2015). Underpinned by structured antagonism and political economy theory, the framework seeks to chart phenomena surrounding employee silence to better capture how and why workers remain silent, recognising both external and endogenous contexts and processes.

A HRM approach building a critical pluralist view of acknowledges that the common goal alignment may be desirable yet problematic. Despite a degree of mutual dependence between employers and employees, an inherent power imbalance usually favours employers. Power here is more structurally rooted and extends deeper than the ‘position’ and ‘hierarchical’ power relations featured in some OB/HR studies (Fast et al., 2013; Kish-Gephart et al., 2009; Detert and Trevino, 2010). Both parties have structurally opposed interests because employers and employees seek control. Potential tensions exist, where employees can pursue individual interests and beliefs that differ from those of management, which can instigate conflict. However, both parties also seek to secure potentially shared objectives, for example the continued survival of the firm (Edwards et al., 2006), generating opportunities for co-operation (Edwards and Ram, 2009; Dobbins and Dundon, 2017) and organisational efficiency (Johnstone and Wilkinson, 2016). Furthermore, employers not only actively seek to control worker effort and job tasks, but also seek to support employee commitment and loyalty (Fox, 1966; Edwards, 1986; Johnstone and Wilkinson, 2016).

Employee costs and benefits including social and monetary rewards, reflect an indeterminacy where employee exchanged effort is unbalanced, unpredictable, variable and can be perceived differently by workers when comparing to referent groups (Fox, 1966; Baldamus, 1961). Accordingly, employers and employees are engaged in continuous effort-reward bargain and

their respective concerns may converge or diverge day-to-day. But how different managers adapt to or engage in voice relations is complex. Managers are under pressure to deliver company goals and constrained by owner and shareholder interests, particularly under financialized capitalism (Thompson, 2003, 2013). This is evident within HR literature, for example Ulrich (1998:125-126) states: “Line managers have ultimate responsibility for both the processes and the outcomes of the company”. However, as Jaros (2005:8) reminds us, managers may have “a degree of discretion that is independent from profit or value maximisation imperatives”, which can determine the nature and quality of voice or the extent of structured antagonisms. Managers are employees themselves, yet also agents of owners, and thus can pursue their own objectives which may contradict owner (and worker) concerns. Manager preferences to balance conflict-co-operation and control-consent tensions are important, as elaborated on in the following sections.

Based on the view that employment embeds ‘structured antagonism’, IR/LP perspectives may help explain three key issues around employee voice and silence neglected in HRM/OB perspectives discussed in the previous sections. First, given a power imbalance relationship and potentially divergent employer-employee interests, IR/LP perspectives provide thicker explanations of why employees do not always express voice to benefit organizations, but rather to advance their individual and/or collective interests, which can compete with organizational goals. Importantly for HR audiences, providing employees with effective mechanisms to express these potentially conflicting interests may benefit organizations in the long-term (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018; Mowbray et al., 2015). Second, employees may withhold potentially valuable information to resist managerial authority, or ameliorate degrading work. Such ideas have a long and established pedigree in work sociology and policy theory studies about work and employment relationships (e.g. Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979, Roy, 1980;

Thompson, 1989). These recognise both cooperative and conflictual debates over how human resource practices can alter work practices that expose exploitative outcomes, or enhance sustainability and protect workers and organizations over time and space. Third, acknowledging the intricate tensions underpinning managing people, silence may manifest as a form of co-operation and compromise, which may be manipulated or coerced by management actions (Burawoy, 2013). For example, MacMahon et al. (2018) report incidents where HR procedures to counter workplace bullying were at times futile and management actions engendered a culture of employee silence owing to perceptions of fear about possible reprisals against those who speak out.

Although IR/LP perspectives incorporate a more socio-political world view of workplace relations grounded in ‘structured antagonism’, their explanations of voice and silence differ in some major aspects, uncovered in the forthcoming sections.

Industrial relations voice and silence

IR analysis evokes numerous academic disciplines such as history, economics, law, politics, sociology and psychology, and focuses broadly on all employment actors, including management, labour, worker/employer associations and government agents (Kaufman, 2014). Multiple levels of analysis are explored within IR, examining external influences on the behaviours of ‘actors’, labour market ‘institutions’, on IR ‘processes’ (e.g. bargaining, reward, commitment etc), and ‘outcomes’ (such as voice and silence). IR research has for decades contributed to public policy; from the Wagner Act (1935) of the US New Deal and the UK Donovan Commission (1968), to gig-economy employee rights, or robotic technology implications on work (Ackers, 2010; Kochan, 2015; Berg, 2016). While IR examines

managerial behaviour, the way it connects workplace relations to macro-level factors, such as legal and institutional job regulation, helps inform a broader understanding of contextual diversity within contemporary HRM vis-à-vis employee voice and silence (Wilkinson et al, 2018). Contrary to HRM/OB, IR builds a unique structure-agency focus for employee voice oriented towards both direct and indirect forms, including trade unions, works councils, consultative committees and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) (Williams et al., 2011).

Institutional voice outcomes are studied within IR. For instance, mandatory works councils have been shown to support two benefit claims. The first is a rent-producing effect: when workers have a collective voice via a works council, employee quit rates have been shown to be lower (Nienhüser, 2014). The effect has been to share information and support organisational efficiencies. The second is a rent-seeking outcome. Through mandatory collective dialogue workers are able to regulate labour supply and support higher earning than under free competitive labour markets (Nienhüser, 2014:247). Furthermore, institutional economists have demonstrated that collective bargaining has evidenced positive income distributional effects, along with social and ethical values about supporting greater fairness (Kaufman, 2011). Studies have also examined relations between union and non-union employee voice mechanisms (Willman et al, 2009; Bryson et al, 2013). For example, Dundon et al (2014) find both union and non-union HRM voice mechanisms across multi-plant organisations in the UK and Ireland to be complex, involving contestation alongside coexistence. A well cited finding in union settings is that reported by Black and Lynch (2004), who demonstrate a positive relationship between bargaining and labour productivity. Likewise, Dobbins and Gunnigle (2009) report in capital-intensive manufacturing, that workplace union-management bargaining systems can help reconcile divergent interests that support new and innovative HR arrangements.

Contrary to OB, IR analysis seeks to capture the ‘depth’ of voice influence, over which issues employee can contribute, and at what level in the organisation (Wilkinson et al., 2014). This is important because research suggests that silence may be a by-product of shallow voice systems, and managers imposing decisions unilaterally. According to Cullinane and Donaghey (2014:402), ‘unintentional’ silence may foment where ‘no voice’ prevails in organisations. Further, Dobbins et al. (2017) examine the outcomes of organization-level voice mechanisms established under the Information and Consultation Regulations (ICE) (2004) in the UK and Ireland. They find that minimalistic weak regulations provided employers with high levels of discretion when responding to legal regulations for voice that resulted in shallow worker participation over minor/trivial issues.

To this end a relevant contextual factor acknowledged in IR research is social-economic and political characteristics across different employment regimes (see also Barry et al., 2014). For instance, voice is generally shallower in Liberal Market Economies (LME), such as the UK, US, Australia or Ireland, where voice and employment regulations lack mandated statutory support (see also Gallie, 2011). In contrast, voice may be more expansive in Coordinated Market Economies (CME), such as Germany, when voice is backed by harder institutional support for social dialogue (Dobbins et al., 2017). IR also recognizes that institutional structures can be radically different. For instance, Artus (2013) discusses shallow voice found in precarious service sectors in Germany. Important here is that institutional employment regime divergence matters in terms of employment practices and HR design (Holman and Rafferty, 2018).

Arguably, therefore, IR contributions have a lot to offer in addressing issues of employee voice and silence. Few OB studies analyse beyond organizational level (e.g., Morrison and Milliken, 2000). IR research links workplace level voice and silence to institutional arrangements such

as unionisation, labour law and regulation, civil society organizations and employer associations.

However, an exclusive IR approach can be seen as partial for several reasons. First, despite shifts to direct forms and employee involvement (Ackers, 2010), IR studies generally focalize indirect employee voice to the neglect of individualised or hybrid voice systems combining unions and non-union mechanisms (Barry and Wilkinson, 2016). Only some studies highlight the growing importance of informal voice (Marchington and Suter, 2013; Townsend et al., 2013). For example, non-union SME workers may utilize familial and friendly relations to modify employment conditions (Edwards and Ram, 2009). Relatedly, IR often prioritises the institutional level of analysis, mainly job regulation, collective bargaining and more recently non-union representation (Wilkinson et al., 2014). This can lead to IR downplaying the influence of individual-level factors that OB sheds insights about; for example, employees may feel they are not treated with dignity, even if they are satisfied with other conditions (Hodson, 2001).

Similarly to OB/HRM, pluralist IR strains do not always acknowledge deep-rooted structural contradictions to the same extent as more radical perspectives (Dundon and Dobbins, 2015; Edwards, 1986; 2014). Extensive voice is widely perceived as somehow good for employees because it will be good for unions and managerial effectiveness (Goodman et al., 1998). Yet, this view may not fully appreciate that employees could remain silent even when voice mechanisms are extensive, possibly as a form of distress (e.g. suffer in silence) or to ameliorate the effects of inherent power imbalances (e.g. change the current state of affairs) as discussed in the following section (van den Broek and Dundon, 2012, Woodcock, 2017; Burawoy, 1979). Hence, pluralist IR downplays silence as benefiting employees or as a rational and intentional worker action. Further, recent “neo”-pluralist IR (Ackers, 2014) is less encompassing when

explaining situations where employee voice suppresses worker interests; for instance, employees sharing knowledge of organisational improvements and processes with management may instigate exploitation through increased workload, reduced autonomy, or job insecurity (Adler, 1993).

In sum, IR research may lack an appreciation of individual-level social processes and psychological traits, informal voice and line management involvement underpinning HRM. It does draw insight about institutional structures, regulations and other macro-level context factors which may leverage or pattern silence. LP voice and silence research offers added explanatory utility in these areas, considered in the next section.

Labour process voice and silence

Sociological LP antecedents may assist with a more integrative approach by examining contradictions and tensions in people management, with an inclusion of societal forces and the attendant implications on worker voice at the organizational-level.

LP stresses that because of an indeterminacy of labour power and the potential for conflicting interests, voice and silence can become manifest in forms of individual and/or collective worker resistance (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999:31). LP theory adds that employee silence may manifest in various forms of resistance, misbehaviour and/or mischief, to contest HR practices that workers believe undermine their interests. Resistance may stem from concerns around autonomy, skills, reconfigured manager control boundaries, organizational structure and job design. It may involve employees seeking to ‘get-back’ at management for some prior decision or imposed condition by withholding information/ideas that could otherwise improve

the job or organisational outcomes, or increase managements' ability to control or intensify employee effort. For example, Graham (1993) shows that Subaru-Isuzu employees purposely refused to share job improvement information with management. Here, silence effectively limited management's ability to speed-up the production line. Thompson (1989:137) discusses silence by Chrysler workers, who followed management instructions to fit doors on vehicles, despite knowing that management sent the vehicles on the line in the wrong order. The error meant costly corrections. Van den Broek and Dundon (2012) find that workers in non-union call centres regulated information flows and feedback to customers and management as distinct acts of employee silence, to 'get-back' at managers for intense surveillance. Woodcock (2017) makes similar observations. Importantly, these may or may not be acts employees want to carry out, but they are embedded within a power-centred economic and social relationship.

As well as seeking to 'get-back' at management, silence may help workers cope and 'get-by' in degrading jobs. For example, employees may feel 'alienated' because they have limited job autonomy and ownership over the decisions that affect them and their work (Donovan et al., 2016; Woodcock, 2017). While OB research discuss the influence of managerial beliefs with a concern for organisational effectiveness, LP assumes that managerial beliefs can have an altogether ideological value, such that voice may be regarded by managers as "an undesirable obstruction of effective work processes" (Kaufman, 2014:19). As such, employers may actively limit the opportunities for employees to have voice as a way to actively consolidate employer power and worker silence can elicit control gains from a managerial point of voice (MacMahon et al., 2018:14). Reflecting to some extent OB 'psychological safety', workers acknowledging negative managerial attitudes towards voice or unions, may remain silent for 'fear' of retaliation should management view them as troublemakers (Artus, 2013).

However, unlike OB, LP situates these ideas in a broader political economy framework that recognises structured antagonism associated with how people are managed at work. For example, the perceived consequences of voicing to employers is influenced by worker views of management style, occupational identity, gender, contract status and job security, legal rights along with employee interests at any given point in time (Artus, 2013). For example, at *Nippon CTV* in Delbridge's (1998:132) factory study, workers believed management "did not want to hear questions" at meetings. Under LP, indeterminacy of labour power embedded within unbalanced employment relationships means that conflict and co-operation co-exist (Edwards, 1986; Edwards et al., 2006; Dundon and Dobbins, 2015; Wright, 2000). Co-operative relations may motivate employees to suggest ideas in support of organizational goals, reflecting the OB idea of a good quality leader-member exchange. However, acknowledging structured antagonism also uncovers other implications. Managers may create a more favourable environment for voice in particular contexts, even if this contradicts some manager interests, to gain employee co-operation over other matters. For example, Dobbins (2010) explains how managers relaxed direct control at Anquish Alumina and gave work-teams a voice over different matters, ranging from minor issues like scheduling holidays to more major budgeting issues. However, permitting employee voice enabled managers to introduce indirect control measures like performance targets and technical controls.

Furthermore, silence may occur because employees are 'getting-on' with their employment experience through relations of compromise and co-operation. In Dobbins' (2010) study, giving voice to teams (which also included union representatives) sparked less conflict and grievances decreased from 150 per year to 3-4 a year. Moreover, remaining silent about issues which compete with organizational goals may mean other future favours from management relating to career development, work-life balance, job tasks or other perks. In MacMahon et

al's (2018:13) research, employees did not speak-out against bullying actions when they had previous negative experiences of HR procedures that failed to protect employees who voiced their grievances.

Notwithstanding, employees 'getting-on' with their work can indicate the manufacturing of silence: that is employees do not necessarily view HR policy as undermining their interests or forming shallow participation. For instance, in Burawoy's (1979, 2013) factory study, union-employer concession bargaining gave an 'illusion' of employee involvement. The piece-rate system made workers compete against co-workers, yet also gave them opportunities to have a say over how they carried out their work tasks (e.g. how much effort was expended working the piece rate system). However, the system divided workers, undermined collective employee representation, and ultimately concealed a reality that the company was enjoying increased productivity while paying workers very little. Nyberg and Sewell (2014) also find evidence of an illusory compromise, where a 'happy family' culture was built to persuade employees that union voice was not required, which further legitimated managerial control over workers. Hence, LP theory shows deeper insight about otherwise less visible power dynamics and how they may be played out through HR policy for voice.

A crucial point for OB/HR audiences is that manager-employee co-operation must be understood in a context of structural power imbalances and divergent employer-employee interests (Edwards et al. 2006; Belanger and Edwards, 2007). For example, silence as a form of 'co-operation' does not indicate that conflict is somehow eliminated, and when employer and employee interests are aligned, antagonism can still be present. Equally, if employees voice concerns co-operatively in support of organizational goals, an underlying conflict of interest can remain, which may instigate voice in other contexts that undermines organizational objectives. Similarly, if managers provide deeper employee voice and participation to secure

co-operation, a structural power imbalance can linger. As Dobbins and Gunnigle (2009:23) note, providing workers with more voice “constituted new ways of managing contradictions in the employment relationship and negotiating workplace order. Management control was not displaced, but re-cast in new guises.”

LP further adds to conceptualizations of voice and silence by considering broader forces in the circuit of capital, such as financialization and globalization. As advanced in Thompson’s (2003) *Disconnected Capitalism Thesis (DCT)*, due to volatile markets and economic uncertainty, management emphasis turned towards financialization, which tends to intensify HRM around narrow market-driven performance metrics (Cushen and Thompson, 2016). Consequently, managers often fail to deliver their side of the expected deal (aka psychological contract violation), including renegeing or simply being unable to provide the opportunities for employees to have a say. This may fuel a collective counter-mobilisation (e.g., through unions), or result in a culture of silence either as a form of resistance or employee withdrawal owing to fear of managerial reprisals. For instance, in Artus (2013:416) precarious workers had little access to union protection, and non-standard contract employees were more likely to remain silent because of insecurity and “a permanent fear of opening one’s mouth”. To some extent, silence can be seen as a way to ameliorate precariousness and poor working conditions.

Ramsay’s (1977:481) ‘cycles of control’ thesis argues that “participation has not evolved out of humanisation of capitalism, but appears cyclically based on tightening conditions within the labour market”. Accordingly, managers are more likely to implement employee voice initiatives to secure labour compliance when employer authority may be challenged by organised labour, such as during rising union membership periods. However, Ackers et al. (1992) questioned Ramsay’s (1977) thesis because of its macro-level societal focus. They find that because organizational-level managerial approaches are reconfigured over time by

interactions between numerous micro and macro level forces, employee voice initiatives emerge in fluid ‘waves’ rather than cycles. Therefore, while examining how employee voice and silence is shaped by the balance of broader social, political and economic forces under capitalism, it is not the only approach and intra-organizational analysis remains important, including individual values, management choices and institutional regulations.

Overall, LP analysis has a rich explanation of the contested nature of people management under contemporary capitalism, which adds a utility to examining silence and voice. It weaves and dovetails with IR perspectives (especially radical and critical pluralist frames), while also signalling discrete points of intellectual divergence. LP helps explain how voice and silence could be outcomes as well as processes through which employees seek to ameliorate degrading effort-reward exchanges. Amelioration may include workers ‘getting back’ at management by withholding information; willingly ‘getting-on’ with co-workers and/or their employer because of compromise or ‘manufactured consent’, or they may find themselves simply ‘getting-by’ when facing a tough job.

Some influencing forces discussed in LP research relate to OB, for example, managerial attitudes/perceptions, voice repercussions, voice futility and manager-employee exchanges. But, LP adds another valuable analytical lens, based on the dynamic contestation of micro and macro level forces, within antagonistic and unbalanced social relationships. One possible way to integrate these debates and issues into a multi-layered sensitising framework of voice and silence is considered next.

Integrating IR, LP and OB perspectives: towards a multi-layered voice and silence framework

The discussion thus far has provided an overview of OB, IR and LP positions on employee voice and silence, pinpointing their strengths and weaknesses. In advancing a future research agenda, we propose a critical pluralist framework integrating OB, IR and LP perspectives to help develop a more heuristic HRM perspective of voice and silence complexities.

Extending HRM voice and silence

Research suggests that weak voice systems permitting shallow and narrow worker influence, prevent organizations from reaping the full benefits of worker voice, and may instigate ‘silence’ in the long-term (Cullinane and Donaghey, 2014). Recognising variations around the depth, scope, level and forms of voice mechanisms can help HR audiences, including managers (Wilkinson et al., 2014).

Formal and informal voice often takes place simultaneously in organizations (Marchington and Suter, 2013). HRM, IR and LP perspectives could give more attention to face-to-face informal voice, as more widely captured in OB research (Morrison, 2011). Similarly, OB literatures could focus more on behaviour of actors within formal institutions affecting direct and representative voice, including trade unions, works councils and civil society agents, as covered in IR/LP. Furthermore, HRM approaches generally lean towards management-initiated voice systems, but employees are more likely to secure deeper voice by influencing the initiation and terms of voice (Barry et al., 2018). Combining direct, formal, indirect and informal mechanisms may generate a deeper conceptualization of worker voice, its motives and variable contested outcomes. Finally, IR/LP traditions need not side-step non-union voice, classing union voice as effective and non-union voice as ineffective, which has been argued as too simplistic (Cullinane and Dundon, 2014).

Although HRM discusses ‘employee grievance procedures’ and OB research considers alternative voice motives (Burris, 2012; Klaas et al., 2012), the focus is mainly predicated on a unitarist assumption of improvement-based voice supporting common interests (Barry and Wilkinson, 2016). Some OB studies note ‘organizational pluralism’ reflecting different employer-employee interests (Morrison and Milliken, 2000), however too often the OB literatures do not integrate cooperative with conflictual dynamics, or combine internal and external factors surrounding ‘structured antagonism’ (Edwards, 1986; Dundon and Dobbins, 2015). In contrast, more critical pluralist perspectives stress how employee voice and silence reflects enduring structural determinants, potentially conflicting employer-employee interests, relational power imbalances, and changing institutional and legal contexts affecting HR policy and practice.

More consideration is needed within OB streams of HRM of these fundamental structural factors to better explain why employees express voice, irrespective of the presumed need to defend organisational goals, and how employees may contest management objectives by resistance, mischief or acts of silence. Viewing voice and silence in this way may be perceived by HR audiences as undermining management objectives, but this is context-dependent and, indeed, it may stimulate positive outcomes for organizations long-term.

Deepening HRM theorization of the forces shaping voice and silence

The proposed sensitising framework, graphically depicted in Figure 1, is drawn from Goodrich’s (1920) ‘frontier of control’. It builds on and extends the contested nature of silence advanced by Donaghey et al. (2011:61) through the potentially integrative synergies across OB/HRM, IR and LP, as discussed in the previous sections thus far. As noted in Figure 1, some

of these dimensions overlap between disciplinary boundaries, while others remain distinct and separate. Stage 1 depicts ‘interest formation’ and ‘structured antagonism’ as foundational principles shaping silence and HR practice. OB contributions include insights into pro-social behaviour, informal voice, its efficacy and safety, sense-making, emotions and individual traits and behaviours. In addition, LP helps comprehend a range of contextual influences including the influence of the market and capitalism, management beliefs, voice depth and scope, skill and gender identity (among others). Crucially, LP theory connects these to structured antagonism and diverse manager-employee interests. IR contributions provide a fine-grained institutional canvas, unpicking dynamic interactions among *contexts* (e.g., markets, financialisation), *actors* (e.g., trade unions, management styles, the state etc.), *processes* (e.g., union bargaining, voice depth and scope etc.) and *outcomes* (e.g., feminisation of work, precarious employment contracts, engagement or satisfaction). These ideas prompt important HR debates around how managers can better balance competing internal/external forces under contemporary capitalism, to provide deeper employee voice and protect the sustainability of work practices.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Stage 1 influencing factors combine with inter-organisational HR practices to shape manager/employee interest formations, voice and silence. Crucially, such mediating influences may coexist in organisations simultaneously, depending on the issue (e.g., whether it is an employee concern about wages, hours, etc.; and/or a suggestion that would make employees’ jobs more intense and repetitive), management/supervisory power resources (including more latent power) and employer/employee interests. Importantly for HR audiences, depending on the unique configuration of Stage 1 forces (e.g., management support or opposition to trade

unions, market changes, employee-supervisory support, etc.), the type of HR practices implemented can differ across and between contexts.

Interactions between Stage 1 forces help explain *meaningful* voice, *intentional* and/or *unintentional* silence, and workers ‘getting-back’, ‘getting-on’ and ‘getting-by’, as illustrated in Stages 2 and 3. Shallow/weak voice may engender episodes or a culture of ‘*intentional*’ and/or ‘*unintentional*’ silence. These may provoke silence whereby workers seek to ‘get-back’ at their employer; for example by withholding information in various ways. Such silence may ameliorate degrading employment experiences, but could decrease productivity and co-operation. Cooperation often prevails and coexists alongside dissatisfaction: otherwise, the relationship would cease over time (Johnstone and Wilkinson, 2016). Thus, employees may pro-actively ‘get-on’ with their job through relations of compromise, without contributing ideas or expressing grievances and are compliant, but not necessarily committed to organizational objectives. Further, workers may purposely withhold information or withdraw emotionally and psychologically, yet continue to be compliant. Fear, potential retribution and/or the futility of speaking-out may engender degrees of employee silence (MacMahon et al., 2018). To some extent, silence may function as a rationale coping mechanism for employees to ‘get by’ in their jobs. Equally, employees may engage in ‘*meaningful voice*’ through union bargaining and/or non-union employee representation channels (Kaufman, 2014). However, the scope and degree of such voice is not static or universal, but is elastic and underpinned by structured antagonism.

HR audiences would benefit from a more critical pluralist and integrative approach to explain whether, and if so why, workers are silent to ‘get-back’, ‘get-on’ and/or ‘get-by’. All three actions indicate that diverse worker interests are not being met and are likely to inhibit organizations from fully meeting their objectives either now, or in the future. The task then for policy-makers, HR practitioners and OB/IR/LP academics, is to explore ways of better meeting

worker interests, for example by providing more effective worker-initiated voice and making jobs less degrading and insecure. To this end, the sensitizing framework has potential wider public policy as well as organisational practice implications.

The final column, Stage 4, depicts voice and silence outcomes shaped by how manager/employee interests, structural antagonisms and subsequent HR policy interventions mediate the aforementioned social relationship interactions across Stages 1, 2 and 3. Recognising structural antagonisms arguably embellishes a deeper HR understanding of why employees may express voice to challenge management as a power dynamic, as well as to support organisational objectives. This is not to judge whether employee (or indeed HR manager) behaviours are good or bad in mobilising power resources for particular interests. The integrative contribution is predicated on a social science paradigm of knowledge generation to develop a heuristic picture of why workers may speak-up or not by locating HRM voice and silence within a multi-level political economy and institutional framework (Thompson, 2013; Kaufman, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2018).

Such a critical pluralist HRM orientation has a pro-business ontology. For example, it can help move beyond the narrow assumption of correcting or improving organisational effectiveness. It does not reject the importance of meeting organizational objectives, yet acknowledges embedded power imbalances significantly shape how people are managed, which may in part help address labour market and societal inequalities.

Future research and conclusion

This article has reviewed OB, IR and LP perspectives to develop a multi-layered and multi-level conceptual framework that HR audiences can use to better understand employee voice, and more importantly silence. OB voice and silence research has utility, but could be integrated

with an IR-LP fusion, which connects actors, processes, and institutions, while embedding micro workplace relationships with macro and meso socio-political contexts of change and continuity. Our framework contributes understanding to both voice and silence as a dynamic interface combining the formal/informal, direct/indirect and structure/agency within a context of structural power imbalances and diverse interests.

Designing effective voice systems to benefit workers and organizations into the future requires a thicker conceptualization of what voice is, and an understanding of why silence exists as a distinct purpose in its own right. The framework extends HRM voice and silence by considering how it reflects ‘structured antagonism’ as a deeply-entrenched power imbalance that is multi-layered. Relatedly, the framework also encourages HR audiences to critically evaluate the voice mechanisms provided to employees. This includes examining their depth, level and scope, how indirect and informal voice could compliment direct HR forms and whether employees could initiate voice practices (Barry et al., 2018).

Second, the framework seeks to help explain the multi-dimensional internal and external situational factors and social relations shaping the forms and patterns of employee silence in context (e.g., intentional silence, unintentional silence, meaningful voice). This includes OB ideas around pro-social motivations, psychological safety, identity, image, group norms, position power, perceptions, emotions, leadership and co-worker relations (Morrison and Milliken, 2000, 2003; Morrison, 2011, 2014). Notwithstanding, IR/LP insights into the ‘structured antagonism’ embedded within people management processes captures wider external political economy forces operating under capitalism (Thompson, 2013). The framework also offers deeper silence meanings, for example, it may reflect worker strategies of ‘getting-back’, ‘getting-on’ and ‘getting-by’. This will hopefully ignite debate amongst HR

audiences as to how to better fulfil divergent worker concerns, in the interests of employees, organizations and society.

The analysis calls for a future research agenda that tests, refutes and adapts sources of relationship influence about voice and silence as sources of observable and more covert power. To gain fuller and deeper insights, future research could be anchored around a critical pluralist approach linking micro individual actions to meso organizational contexts and broader macro political economy forces. Examining how workers, unions, local managers, the state, shareholders, consumers and civil society groups shape voice and silence could better enrich a more reflective HR knowledge base. Such research may employ qualitative and/or quantitative instruments designed to probe ‘why’ employees remain silent and/or ‘how’ employers restrict employee voices that socially regulate forms of engendered or systematic silence. Unpicking the internal/external challenges HR managers face concerning voice and silence also merits attention to stimulate debates around ways of better balancing these tensions without suppressing employee interests.

Although OB’s unitarist posture towards supporting organisational goals has been critiqued, this does not mean established psychological research methodologies have limited appeal. Indeed, capturing both employee and management attitudes about silence is important and has a valuable contribution to make, but could benefit from linking to structured antagonism and macro-level political economy forces. A challenge here remains around how to encourage rich interdisciplinary research using disciplinary approaches that address related phenomena (e.g. voice and silence), but speak alternative dialects of meaning and understanding. To this end, future research may explore employee silence in relation to inter-disciplinary issues and methodologies reflective of employment fragmentation, precarious pressures and demands, flexible work arrangements, reward or pay determination and the extent to which employers

include, or exclude workers when designing voice arrangements. We hope the framework offers a future research path for HR/OB/IR/LP scholars and practitioners to better explore empirical nuances about employee silence.

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Figure 1: A Sensitizing framework of HRM voice and silence

