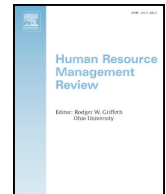




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Employee voice and work engagement: Macro, meso, and micro-level drivers of convergence?

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ABSTRACT

Direct forms of individual employee voice are potentially important yet underexplored antecedents of work engagement. Based largely in job demands–resources theorizing, we develop a conceptual multi-level framework that explores how individual employee perceptions of voice practices affect their level of work engagement. We argue that the extent to which voice practices might converge as ‘best practice’ to create work engagement is influenced by factors at three levels: macro-level national culture (the degree of power distance), meso-level organizational climate (the extent of empowering leadership and participation), and micro-level relationship quality between employee and supervisor (leader–member exchange). Positioning this framework in the human resource management convergence/divergence debate, we develop propositions for future research linking direct employee voice and work engagement.

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1. Introduction

The debate whether the human resource management (HRM) practices adopted by organizations across the world are converging to a ‘best practice’ model, or are diverging based on contextual factors that encourage local responsiveness is well rehearsed in the international HRM literature (see, for example: [Brewster & Mayrhofer, 2012](#)). One area of strategic HRM that has received little attention in this debate, however, is employee voice. More frequently addressed in studies of labor relations on a cross-national scale (e.g. [Frege & Kelly, 2013](#)), HRM researchers have largely ignored this significant area of practice that is of fundamental importance to the effective operation of any organization ([Wood & Wall, 2007](#)). As an Economic Intelligence Unit ([EIU, 2014, p. 15](#)) report claims, “if employees are valued and their voices are heard, then they will be much more willing to provide their full commitment and stay in the firm”. Employee voice, as we argue, is no longer reserved for the domain of collective representation through worker bodies, but is a daily people management task and hence a cornerstone of HRM.

Employee voice refers to employees either receiving information, being consulted, or being part of joint decision-making within the organization ([Wood & Fenton-O’Creedy, 2005](#)). The employee relations literature defines employee voice as a broad concept that includes both indirect and direct mechanisms ([Kaufman, 2015](#)). Historically, more emphasis has been placed on voice practices involving *indirect* mechanisms such as collective bargaining through trade unions. More recently, organizations have adopted *direct* voice mechanisms such as attitude surveys, suggestion schemes, teams and individual employee–manager meetings ([Lavelle, Gunnigle, & McDonnell, 2010](#)). Although not to diminish the relevance of indirect, collective mechanisms today ([Wood & Fenton-O’Creedy, 2005](#)), we focus here on the less-explored direct individual-level employee voice practices provided by the employing organization, often implemented through line management.

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Direct voice typically is a matter of individual choice rather than being part of a formally required collective voice process. The increasing emphasis in many organizations on direct voice may have significant implications for workplace outcomes in terms of employee attitudes and behaviors, as it raises the question of whether these practices are perceived by employees as facilitating involvement in the organization's decision-making process. In addition, direct voice mechanisms are primarily implemented by supervisors, whereby individual employee experiences of voice practices are influenced by the quality of interaction with their supervisor. We argue therefore that the role of supervisors plays an even greater role in direct employee voice than in indirect voice.

Taking a direct, individual-level perspective, we define employee voice practices as organization practices that create opportunities for employees to be involved in the organization's decision-making process, particularly regarding issues related to work. This definition is based on the 'AMO' (Ability/Motivation/Opportunity) model (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000), whereby 'Opportunity to participate in the organization is considered a critical element for improving performance in organizations. In particular, we are interested in how direct employee voice affects the individual-level performance outcome of work engagement. Work engagement as a construct has become popular among practitioners and academics alike, yet in practice, it continues to pose significant organizational challenges (The State of HR survey, 2013). This is perhaps unsurprising as it promises much in terms of performance outcomes (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Although initial studies demonstrate that employees who believe their opinion is listened to and valued will be more engaged, particularly in Western contexts (Beugre, 2010; Cheng, Lu, Chang, & Johnstone, 2013; Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013), there are still many unanswered questions regarding this relationship especially in different cultural contexts.

Firstly, there is a lack of research exploring the relationship between the intended employee voice practices of an organization and how employees perceive these practices. Although implementing a specific practice may result in employees perceiving that the practice provides a welcome opportunity for involvement (with employees having the option whether or not to actually use the practice), it is likely that this only happens for those employees where there is convergence between the practice and their own values (Nishii & Wright, 2008). Many factors may be involved in creating this sense of convergence (Luthans, 2011), including socio-cultural values (Rowley & Benson, 2002) and organizational climates created through senior leadership (Zohar & Tenne-Gazit, 2008).

Secondly, we do not have a clear understanding of the basic relationship between voice and work engagement in different cultural contexts. As multinational corporations (MNCs) expand globally, the implementation of standardized 'best practices' for employee voice embedding Western values in different cultural contexts has been increasing (Pudelko & Harzing, 2007). In particular, direct, individual-level voice practices have been found to be preferred by these MNCs to avoid involvement in local institutionalized collective voice processes with which they are unfamiliar (Loise & Drucker, 2002). However, such convergence of best practice across countries is challenging due to cultural constraints (Marchington & Grugulis, 2000; Rowley & Benson, 2002). Each country has a unique national culture that may impact an individual's reaction to voice activity. Among the multiple dimensions of national culture identified to date, Landau (2009) argues that the level of power distance is the most relevant to employee voice. Power distance is defined as "the extent to which a society accepts the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 1980, p. 45). People from low power distance cultures tend to be less favorable toward limited voice in the decision-making process than people from high power distance cultures (Brockner et al., 2001).

Thirdly, we need to shift our attention from macro-level national cultures and meso-level organizational climates to the micro-level of the supervisor–subordinate relationship to understand the voice–engagement relationship. This final level is a necessary condition, as it is at this level that the individual employee's experiences in the workplace are translated into attitudes and behaviors. Although acknowledging that there are potentially multiple collective voice channels within an organization (e.g. through trade unions or worker associations), our focus here is on direct voice mechanisms in which the line manager plays an active role. The quality of the supervisor–subordinate relationship has previously been found to mediate the outcome of perceptions of voice practices in terms of organizational commitment (Farndale, Van Ruiten, Kelliher, & Hope-Hailey, 2011), and is therefore interesting to explore in the context of employee voice and work engagement.

In summary, we present a theoretical overview linking direct individual-level employee voice and work engagement in the context of organizations operating in high and low power distance cultures. We develop a conceptual multi-level framework and related propositions, contrasting the spread of best practice through MNCs with the demands of socio-cultural values to contribute to the convergence/divergence debate in the international HRM field. We start by exploring the concept of work engagement, then develop each element of the framework, including employee voice practices (intended and perceived), power distance, organizational climate, and supervisor–subordinate relationships. We conclude with a discussion of the context-free and context-dependent interactions among the elements of the proposed framework, providing suggestions for future research and practice.

2. Employee voice and work engagement

Many studies have explored work engagement as an antecedent to elicit positive organizational outcomes such as high performance, high customer loyalty, low turnover, and low absenteeism (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Saks, 2006; Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008), hence its value as a subject of study. Khan explains that engaged employees "express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performance" (1990, p. 694). Engagement operates not only at the state level, including "feelings of enthusiasm, focus, and being energized" (Macey, Schneider, Barbera, & Young, 2009, p. 5), but also as a behavior, including "working proactively, role expansion, working beyond expectation, persistence, and adaptability"

(Macey et al., 2009, pp. 6–7). Consequently, work engagement is most commonly defined as: “a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002, p. 74).

Important steps have been taken to identify antecedents of work engagement, particularly in the job demands–resources (JD-R) model developed by Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli (2001). The JD-R model explains how the work environment can be divided into job demands that require employee efforts that have physiological and psychological costs, and job resources that help employees attain their goals (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job resources including participation in decision-making, as well as pay, career, job security, support, team climate, role clarity, and the task itself predict work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Employee voice has been studied as a critical condition to motivate employees to respond as organizations desire (Farndale et al., 2011; Holland, Pyman, Cooper, & Teicher, 2011; Mellahi, Budhwar, & Li, 2010). Since Hirschman (1970, p. 30) first defined voice as “any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs”, the definition has evolved to include any type of mechanism, structure, or practice that enables employees to express their opinion or to influence work activities and decision-making processes in the organization to which they belong (Lavelle et al., 2010). Here, we concentrate on employee voice at the individual level through direct mechanisms. Based on JD-R theorizing, employees will feel able to expend more effort and to be more engaged in their work if they believe that the organization provides them with valuable resources, such as opportunities to participate in the decision-making process that can provide benefits to them. Indeed, employee voice has been shown to have a positive association with various desired employee behaviors such as job satisfaction (Holland et al., 2011; Wood & De Menezes, 2011), organizational commitment (Farndale et al., 2011), and low intention to quit (Spencer, 1986).

Various models have been developed to explore the antecedents of work engagement, although employee voice, despite its relevance (Guest, 2015), has largely been ignored. In the few exceptions, research on the relationship between JD-R and work engagement has demonstrated that a lack of job resources including participation in decision-making is associated with disengagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Voice directed toward superiors (upward dissent) has also been found to have a positive relationship with work engagement, while voice directed toward co-workers and people outside the organization has a positive relationship with turnover intentions (Kassing, Piemonte, Goman, & Mitchell, 2012). Beugre's (2010) conceptual discussion argues that multiple moderators (such as the value of voice, the degree to which voice is taken into account, the degree to which voice is expected, and the degree to which voice corresponds to a cultural norm) will influence the relationship between voice and engagement. We may therefore rarely expect to witness standardization to a best practice model of voice to create engagement, especially across different cultural contexts.

An empirical study in the UK confirmed that employee voice has both a direct relationship with engagement, as well as being mediated by employee trust in senior management and the supervisor–subordinate relationship (Rees et al., 2013). Moreover, Cheng et al. (2013) demonstrated there is a positive relationship between employee voice and work engagement in Taiwan, mediated by leader–member exchange (LMX). Both studies focus on micro-level conditions that mediate the link between employee voice and work engagement. However, they do not consider broader contextual conditions that function as critical preconditions for individual employees to develop perceptions of the voice practices.

To date, no extant research has simultaneously investigated macro, meso, and micro contextual conditions influencing individual employee perceptions that link voice practices and work engagement. The framework developed here (see Fig. 1) explores the moderating effects of national culture and organizational climate on the relationship between intended employee voice practices

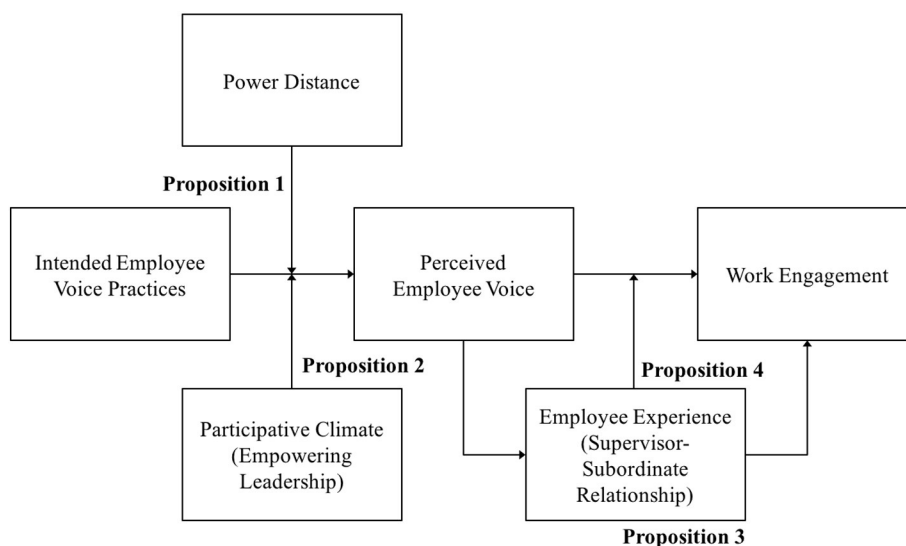


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework linking employee voice and work engagement.

and employee perceptions of these practices. The framework further considers the mediating and moderating micro-level influence of supervisor–subordinate relationships between employee perceptions and work engagement. A contribution of this framework is that it is discussed in the context of the HRM convergence/divergence debate: we raise the question whether employee voice practices can be detached from their context, allowing convergence of ‘best practice’ globally?

As Fig. 1 demonstrates, we argue that individual-level employee voice practices are created for implementation in the organization as a job resource, which in turn is expected to enhance employees' attitudinal and behavioral reactions, such as work engagement. These intended practices create a certain employee perception, whereby they may or may not be seen as creating opportunity for involvement in decision-making, moderated by typical employee cultural values and beliefs and the prevailing organizational climate. Employees further experience the voice practices as they interact with their supervisor, who (as one agent in the organization) enacts or facilitates these practices. This ultimately has an impact on employee levels of work engagement. If the experience has been positive, this job resource is likely to result in a positive employee attitude toward their supervisor and the organization, increasing levels of work engagement. In different cultural contexts, however, these relationships may play out differently, forcing MNCs to adopt divergent voice practices across their operations worldwide. We explore each of the steps in the framework in the following sections.

3. Proposition development

3.1. Intended versus perceived practices

Voice practices create employee perceptions of those practices in terms of facilitating involvement in decision-making, regardless of whether employees actually utilize them. As a job resource (Demerouti et al., 2001), mere accessibility to these practices can provide employees with a sense that their organization encourages employee participation in decision-making. Nishii and Wright (2008) propose, however, that simply having a practice only represents the intention of the organization, and that this may or may not align with employee experiences. For example, employees can be concerned that using employee voice practices may negatively affect their future careers, because it can be seen as disruptive or insubordinate, and therefore would decide to be silent (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). Thus, merely exploring intended employee voice practices is insufficient to understand resultant outcomes. Instead, we need a greater understanding of the various factors that can facilitate or hinder the relationship between the intended practice and actual employee perceptions.

Many of these factors are described as a ‘black box’, i.e. it is unclear what is happening between input (voice practices) and output (work engagement). It is important to unlock this black box by understanding employee perceptions of practices, as these perceptions are better predictors of actual employee-level outcomes (Nishii & Wright, 2008; Robbins & Judge, 2011). Perceptions are a filter that individuals use to interpret their environment through a complex cognitive process, such as organizing and interpreting their sensory impressions, which results in different attitudes and behaviors (Luthans, 2011). When people observe a practice and interpret its attributes, their interpretation is strongly influenced by a range of contextual characteristics (Robbins & Judge, 2011).

The underlying assumption on which our framework is based is that actual employee voice practices create employee-level perceptions of opportunities to be involved in organizational decision-making. This is a universal assumption, i.e. one that we propose is not context dependent. To understand how these opportunities are perceived by the employee, however, requires a more context-specific argument. As the convergence/divergence literature notes (e.g. Hofstede, 1980), making assumptions in diverse contextual settings may lead to false expectations that employee experiences are converging. In the following sections, we provide support for the divergence thesis, presenting arguments why we expect contextual factors to color employee experiences.

3.2. Power distance

Contextual characteristics affecting employee perceptions extend to the broad societal setting (Robbins & Judge, 2011). At the macro socio-cultural level, national culture plays a critical role in shaping the norms of organizations within a given nation, which can determine appropriate employee attitudes and behaviors. The convergence thesis argues that due to accelerating globalization, organizational practices implemented by MNCs are becoming isomorphic regardless of country (Pudelko & Harzing, 2008). As MNCs continue to increase in number, many adopt successful practices created in the home country. It is not, however, guaranteed that these practices will achieve the same level of effectiveness in other national contexts because of different national cultures. Unique national cultures can be significant determinants in shaping the values and beliefs of individual employees, as culture represents “the collective mental programming” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 43) of a nation. As studies of convergence in HRM practices have concluded, results tend to indicate that HRM is largely a localized practice, and question the notion of convergence generally (Mayrhofer, Brewster, Morley, & Ledolter, 2011; Von Glinow, Drost, & Teagarden, 2002).

Although there are many dimensions of national culture, power distance is particularly relevant to employee voice (Landau, 2009). As the level of power distance determines appropriate attitudes and behaviors according to a person's position, this governs the level of decision-making power among members of a society or organization. Since employee voice facilitates the input of opinions of less powerful members of an organization in the decision-making process, the level of power distance can influence employee voice.

Direct individual-level voice practices are often implemented with the expectation of enhanced organizational performance based on the perceived benefits by employees of having the opportunity to participate in decision-making (Appelbaum et al., 2000). Furthermore, voice practices are provided to employees as important resources that enable a sense of fair treatment and being valued, which is important for legitimizing an organization's actions toward employees (Paauwe & Boselie, 2005). This reasoning is quite clear in cultures where low power distance is dominant (Hofstede, 1980), and from which many MNCs originate. In low power

distance cultures, there is a tendency to reduce the unequal power distribution among employees in the various levels of decision-making (Brockner et al., 2001). It is believed that good ideas can come from all levels of employees, and employees in lower positions do not feel intimidated by management to speak out (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009). This belief means that employees in low power distance cultures accept voice practices and are willing to share their concerns and opinions with their supervisors to bring about constructive change in the organization (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009). At the same time, management is willing to share its decision-making power (at least to an extent) with employees in subordinate positions. This demonstrates how employee voice fits the socio-cultural environment of low power distance cultures as required to achieve social legitimacy (Paauwe, 2004).

The situation is, however, often quite different in high power distance cultures that have received less attention in research. In high power distance cultures, implementing 'best practices' in employee voice to obtain work engagement may be counterproductive, because the voice practices that encourage power-sharing do not fit the culture. Research has shown that employees in high power distance cultures are unlikely to believe that they can have a say in decision-making, and are less likely to voice their concerns and opinions in order to avoid possible conflict with their supervisor and the organization (Huang, Van de Vliert, & Van de Veegt, 2005). This is explained by people being socialized to accept uncritically what others higher in the hierarchy demand (Hofstede, 1980). Moreover, management in high positions is also more likely to try to retain their decision-making power rather than share it with subordinates. Therefore, it is expected that implementing voice practices in high power distance cultures will result in different employee perceptions of those practices than in low power distance cultures, preventing convergence of a so-called 'best practice'.

Projecting societal culture to the individual level, individual cultural orientations on power distance are equally expected to influence voice perceptions. People with a high power distance orientation have been found to be less willing to share their opinions (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Landau, 2009). Cross-cultural studies also support this argument: Brockner et al. (2001) found that people tend to show lower organizational commitment when there is less opportunity for voice in low power distance cultures than in countries with high power distance. In developing our voice–engagement framework in line with this theorizing, we propose the following (see Fig. 1: Proposition 1):

Proposition 1. An employee's power distance values will moderate the relationship between intended and perceived employee voice practices, such that employees embracing low power distance values are more likely to perceive intended voice practices as providing opportunity for involvement in organization decision-making.

3.3. Participative organizational climate

At the meso organizational level, we focus on organizational climate, i.e. “employees' shared perception of organizational events, practices, and procedures” (Patterson et al., 2005, p. 380). Organizational climates that can be described as participative are particularly pertinent to facilitating employee voice. Participative climates refer to the “employees' collective perception of the extent to which new ideas, suggestions, and even dissenting views are encouraged by management (Huang et al., 2005, p. 463). A participative climate thus “supports employee participation in work-planning, decision-making, and on-the-job problem solving” (Tesluk, Vance, & Mathieu, 1999, p. 275).

Top management attitudes and behaviors toward employee participation play a critical role in establishing a participative climate (Edmondson, 2003; Huang et al., 2005); Leader's messages and conducts are observed and interpreted repeatedly by organizational members, and these interpreted behaviors become shared by organizational members and constitute the core meaning of facet-specific climates (Zohar & Tenne-Gazit, 2008). HRM practices can produce a positive organizational climate, but the role of leadership in supporting these practices is critical (Rogg, Schmidt, Shull, & Schmitt, 2001). Top management's active involvement in practices and procedures can create a context that encourages the cascading of desired attitudes and behaviors. Without this behavior, middle managers and supervisors who are key actors in implementing direct voice practices cannot recognize and then act on the messages from top management regarding their intentions for employee participation (Shadur, Kienzle, & Rodwell, 1999).

Empowering leadership through top management (defined as “behaviors whereby power is shared with subordinates and that raise their level of intrinsic motivation”: Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006, p. 1240) creates a participative climate that facilitates employee involvement in decision-making through voice practices. Empowering leaders can stimulate independent employee actions such as searching for solutions and making decisions without direct supervisor involvement (Van Dijke, De Cremer, Mayer, & Van Quaquebeke, 2012). The goals of empowering leadership align with the aims of voice practices: allowing employees to influence decision-making in their work. More specifically, participative decision-making is a sub-dimension of empowering leadership (Gao, Janssen, & Shi, 2011). Leaders who encourage employee participative decision-making deliberately use employee opinions and information when they make decisions, as well as continuously attempting to provide channels for voice (Gao et al., 2011). A leader's participative decision-making effort forms a “strong voice-supportive context” that will mitigate other factors that inhibit employees from speaking out (Gao et al., 2011, p. 790).

Taken together, we propose that individual employee perceptions of voice practices will be influenced by their perception of the organizational climate created by top management, such that employees working within an organizational climate that facilitates employee voice are more likely to perceive that the voice practices will provide opportunity for involvement in organizational decision-making. This leads to the second proposition regarding the moderating role of organizational climate on employee perceptions of voice practices (see Fig. 1: Proposition 2):

Proposition 2. An employee's perception of the organizational climate will moderate the relationship between intended and perceived employee voice practices, such that employees perceiving a participative climate will perceive intended voice practices as providing opportunity for involvement in organization decision-making.

3.4. Supervisor–subordinate relationships

Once employees have formulated a perception of the intended voice practices within the organization, interpreting these in light of their power distance values, and their perception of the prevailing organizational climate, we argue that there is a final step before this perception results in work engagement. The link between receiving a benefit from the organization (a job resource) to an increase in work engagement may be weak unless the employee believes the direct voice practices are being enacted appropriately (Nishii & Wright, 2008).

At the micro level, as a primary agent in enacting direct voice practices, supervisors play a critical role in contributing to the employee experience of the practice. Supervisors act as gatekeepers, permitting individual employees to access organizational voice practices, as well as potentially offering additional voice practices based on their personal supervisory style. Although some voice practices have a direct path to the top management (e.g. town hall meetings and attitude surveys), many voice practices are implemented by lower-level supervisors (e.g. problem-solving groups, suggestion schemes, and meetings between managers and individual employees). Voice practices may thus be enacted and hence experienced differently, since actual implementation is carried out by individual supervisors (Farndale & Kelliher, 2013).

Voicing opinions to a supervisor is not always considered 'safe' to employees because, in many organizations, the supervisor is in a position of power to decide the employee's work status such as pay raises, promotions, and work assignment (Landau, 2009). Therefore, employees are only likely to voice to their supervisors when the benefit from voicing out is greater than the cost (Landau, 2009). Employees are therefore most likely to speak out to their supervisors when they believe the supervisors can be sufficiently trusted to treat their voice seriously and apply it to decision-making. The quality of the supervisor–subordinate relationship (as defined by leader–member exchange—LMX) is important here. Employees with high LMX quality: "share mutual trust, respect, reciprocal influence, loyalty, linking and a sense of obligation with their leaders" (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009, p. 87). They have more opportunities to communicate and share information or ideas with their supervisors regardless of whether informal or formal voice practices exist (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Van Dyne, Kamdar, & Joireman, 2008).

Employees with high LMX quality have greater opportunity to participate in decision-making by using voice practices, as supervisors more readily enact voice practices for these subordinates. Employees who can access voice practices sense that they have received favorable treatment and, in return for this job resource, respond with a higher level of work engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001). Farndale et al. (2011) demonstrate a partial mediating role of LMX in the case of perceptions of employee voice and organizational commitment. They suggest that employees consider the positive experience from voice practices as recognition, because they feel their voice is appreciated by their supervisor. Similarly, both Rees et al. (2013) in the UK and Cheng et al. (2013) in Taiwan found partial mediation effects of the supervisor–subordinate relationship in the link between employee voice and engagement. LMX is acting as one mechanism through which perceptions of voice are translated into engagement because of the supervisor's ability to enact voice practices. This leads to the third proposition from our voice–engagement framework (see Fig. 1: Proposition 3):

Proposition 3. The quality of the supervisor–subordinate relationship will partially mediate the impact of employee perceptions of voice practices on work engagement.

In addition to a mediating relationship, there is also strong evidence to suggest a moderating role of LMX. For example, high quality LMX moderates the relationship between person-organization fit and certain affective outcomes, as LMX provides employees with resource-based support (Erdogan, Kraimer, & Liden, 2004). Furthermore, high quality LMX is associated with stronger negative reactions when psychological contracts are breached (Restubog, Bordia, Tang, & Krebs, 2010) due to a sense of betrayal by the supervisor. Specific to voice, LMX moderates the relationship between an employee's trust in a leader and his or her use of voice practices (Gao et al., 2011). This is explained by employees only being willing to voice opinions when they perceive that their supervisor is inviting and encouraging them to do so. We therefore propose that, with supervisors as gatekeepers, when there is a condition of high LMX quality, we would expect to see a stronger relationship between perceptions of voice practices and engagement. LMX is therefore either facilitating or hindering voice, dependent on whether it is high or low quality respectively. Our final proposition is therefore (see Fig. 1: Proposition 4):

Proposition 4. The quality of the supervisor–subordinate relationship will moderate the impact of employee perceptions of voice practices on work engagement, such that in high quality LMX situations, there will be a stronger relationship between employee perceptions of voice practices and work engagement.

4. Discussion

In developing our conceptual framework of employee voice and work engagement (see Fig. 1), we have identified moderating factors at the macro and meso level that are expected to influence individual-level employee perceptions of voice practices. In addition, we have argued that the micro level influence of the employee–supervisor relationship will, through mediation and moderation, also affect how the voice practice perceptions are translated into work engagement. However, there is also the potential

for these intervening variables to interact to confound or amplify the anticipated effects on the voice–engagement relationship. These interactions create more novel consequences of voice practices in organizations, potentially rejecting the convergence thesis that voice practices can be standardized to achieve desired outcomes. We enter into a discussion of these possible interaction effects here (see Fig. 2), considering which factors might be considered more context-free (supporting convergence), and which might be more context-dependent (supporting divergence).

First, we postulate that although a participative climate is a fundamental part of encouraging employee voice in low power distance cultures, in high power distance cultures, it becomes even more important: a participative climate can address the potential incongruence between the principles of employee participation and the values of a high power distance culture. We therefore propose that a participative organizational climate is a context-free facilitator of employee voice, and as such supports the implementation of standardized employee voice practices into high power distance cultures.

Huang et al. (2005) study of 24 countries demonstrated that in high power distance countries, formal voice mechanisms are only effective in a strong participative climate, while in low power distance cultures, formal voice mechanisms are sufficient to facilitate employee voice. The authors suggest that the participative climate is created by implementing structured voice mechanisms as well as by managers' encouraging behavior. Therefore, we argue that empowering leadership plays a critical role in creating a participative organizational climate in high power distance cultures, and expect that this leadership style will facilitate employees perceiving voice practices as an opportunity to be involved in organizational decision-making process.

Empowering leadership is not, however, a common leadership style in high power distance cultures. In such cultures, employees neither expect to play an active role in decision-making nor to have a direct impact on their working environment. Instead, employees are socialized to work under more autocratic leadership, where management and supervisors provide decisions and guidelines in a formally-structured work environment (Raub & Robert, 2013). Individuals in high power distance cultures might perceive a leader's empowering behaviors, such as encouraging participation, informing about the organization, or coaching, as inconsistent with the expected leadership role (Raub & Robert, 2013). In line with this supposition, researchers have argued that an empowering leadership style can have negative effects on employee behavior, and fails to create positive organizational outcomes in high power distance cultures. For example, Eylon and Au (1999) demonstrated through a business simulation of MBA students that individuals from high power distance cultures performed significantly worse in the empowered environment than individuals from low power distance cultures.

Other studies have, however, observed that empowering leadership has some positive effects on employee behavior even in high power distance cultures, although the extent of this effect might be small. Raub and Robert (2013) demonstrated through a comparative study among hotel chains across the Middle East and the Asia Pacific region that the overall impact of empowerment is positive, although weaker in higher power distance cultures. Robert, Probst, Martocchio, Drasgow, and Lawler (2000) found mixed support for their hypothesis that empowerment leading to job satisfaction would be contingent on power distance. As expected, the Indian sample (high power distance) demonstrated a negative result on job satisfaction under empowered conditions, while the U.S. sample (low power distance) showed a positive result. However, samples from Mexico and Poland, both high power distance cultures, demonstrated positive results as in the low power distance U.S. The authors reason that employees in these countries might have high tolerance for strong hierarchy conditions, but still prefer a more participative system (Robert et al., 2000).

These studies demonstrate that having a participative climate shaped by empowering leadership can supplement an incongruent fit between employee voice practices and high power distance cultures. This means that employee perceptions of voice as being encouraged and facilitated by the organization converge to a universal norm in high power distance cultures. Moreover, a similar argument might be applied in low power distance cultures. Even though employee voice appears a better fit for low

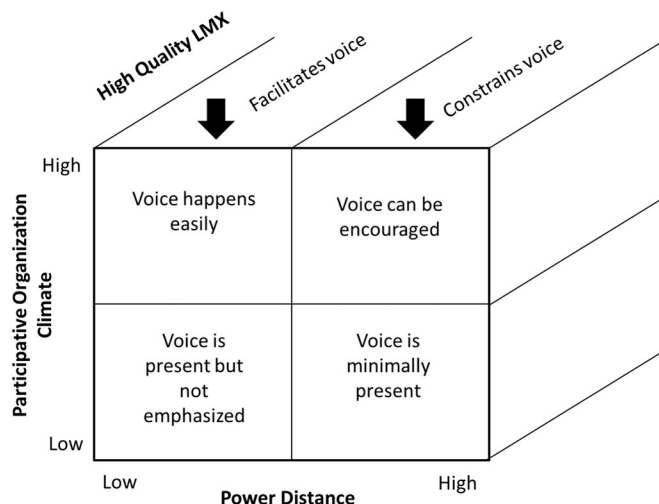


Fig. 2. Interaction effects of LMX, participative organization climate and power distance on voice.

power distance cultures and is expected to create desired outcomes, an appropriate organizational climate is still required. Should the organizational climate be more authoritarian than participative, the voice practices may not be perceived as a welcome opportunity for involvement in organizational decision-making by employees, and hence they would feel frustrated, since the organization's leadership may block the path for voice mechanisms to work.

For the second interaction effect, we argued that employee perceptions of voice practices alone do not result in work engagement, and emphasized the role of high quality supervisor–subordinate relationships that enable employees to perceive these job resources as an opportunity to be involved in the organizational decision-making process. As part of this mechanism, power distance again may function as a critical precondition that determines the context-dependent nature of this supervisor–subordinate relationship.

Botero and Van Dyne (2009, p. 90) theorize that high quality LMX provides employees with: “more freedom to act on their individual beliefs about appropriate supervisor–subordinate relationships”. Therefore, employees in low power distance cultures are more likely to speak out when they have a good relationship with their supervisor. Conversely, employees and supervisors in high power distance cultures are socialized to believe that a high quality relationship is sustained when keeping to the traditional values of respecting hierarchical order, which includes not voicing opinions to supervisors. To illustrate this, Pellegrini and Scandura (2006) suggest that in the Turkish (high power distance) context, high quality supervisor–subordinate relationships are manifested through employee loyalty, deference, and compliance, and therefore, good relationship quality is maintained when employees comply with supervisors rather than speaking out. The high level of power distance makes employees feel more constrained about voicing their concerns and opinions about the organization when they have high quality LMX (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009). Employees in high power distance cultures may therefore keep silent to maintain the good relationship with their supervisors, since speaking out may be seen as inappropriate behavior that counters socio-cultural values. This does not, however, mean that employees with low quality LMX are more likely to use voice practices in high power distance cultures, but rather that they may feel less constrained than employees with high quality LMX. In summary, the effect of LMX in the voice–engagement relationship is expected to be context-dependent, having a differential effect in high and low power distance cultures.

Finally, in this interaction between power distance and LMX, participative climate again becomes even more important in encouraging employees to have a positive experience of voice practices. Employees in high power distance cultures may feel comfortable about speaking out only when there is a participative climate in the organization that helps them believe that participating in decision-making is not risky and even welcomed. Even employees with high quality LMX can then have the freedom to speak out. This suggests that it is therefore possible to implement standardized employee voice practices across different cultures, providing an appropriate organizational climate is created. If the organizational climate remains autocratic, as is traditional in high power distance cultures, employees may not perceive the voice practices as facilitating a welcome opportunity for involvement in organizational decision-making, and employees with high quality LMX are more likely to keep the traditional values, not valuing the voice practices, hampering any convergence.

Moreover, it is difficult for supervisors in high power distance cultures to enact and facilitate voice if the practices do not match the organizational climate and expectations of top management: supervisors find it more difficult to encourage employees to use voice practices and speak out when such behaviors are not consistent with the engrained norms (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). We argue that a participative climate created and developed by empowering leadership may support supervisors in high power distance cultures transform their traditional values about power-sharing into valuing a more participative style. In turn, this action by supervisors can encourage employees to voice their concerns and opinions in good quality relationships, and as such, is more likely to result in work engagement as the process is supported at the organizational and supervisory levels. In summary, organizations are able to mitigate the impact of national culture values by encouraging appropriate organizational climates to encourage employee voice.

5. Conclusions

Work engagement is broadly conceived as delivering positive organizational outcomes, and various antecedents have been identified to date (e.g. Khan, 1990; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli et al., 2002). We have suggested that direct employee voice functions as an important antecedent, generating work engagement based on the principles of the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001): voicing concerns and opinions to influence the work context is a significant job resource. We have focused here on the contextual factors that affect employee perceptions of direct voice practices, which in turn are expected to increase work engagement as a result of the intention-enactment-experience mechanism of employee voice practices (Nishii & Wright, 2008). We have argued that there are both context-free (organizational climate) and context-dependent (LMX and power distance) factors that MNCs should consider when implementing voice practices in different countries. Whilst the context-free factors favor convergence, the context-dependent factors can result in inconsistent outcomes from implementing the same voice practices globally. In pursuing incongruent practices, this can result in employees rejecting them as inappropriate due to their lack of legitimacy in a given context (Paauwe, 2004).

In our conceptual framework, we proposed that intended voice practices generate employee perceptions of opportunities to be involved in organizational decision-making, and these perceptions of voice are translated into work engagement. This relationship between intention, perception, and work engagement is, however, affected by multi-level contextual factors (power distance, organizational climate, LMX), potentially generating different outcomes from implementing the same employee voice practices globally. The impact of power distance and LMX supports the divergence thesis. High power distance cultures do not value employee participation in decision-making, thus employees may be less accepting of voice practices compared to employees in low power

distance cultures. High quality LMX is expected to be associated with more access to voice practices for employees, however, the nature of a high quality LMX relationship in a high power distance culture actually implies employees will be less inclined to use these practices. In contrast to these two factors, the organizational climate created by top management's leadership style is expected to support the convergence thesis. A participative climate facilitates employee perceptions of voice practices as an opportunity to participate in decision-making in both high and low power distance cultures.

This theorizing has implications for practice as well as theory. Throughout, we have highlighted the critical value of macro socio-cultural, meso organizational, and micro individual factors in the relationship between voice practices and work engagement. This emphasis on the importance of context counters the MNC trend of standardizing best practice in order to obtain competitive advantage through efficiency (Pudelko & Harzing, 2007). Our argument is consistent with many divergence and crossvergence theory scholars' critiques of the best practice model, that this view is too simplistic, ignoring diverse cultural and institutional factors constraining convergence (e.g. Gooderham & Nordhaug, 2011; Mayrhofer et al., 2011; Morley, 2004; Rowley & Benson, 2002; Sidani & Al Ariss, 2014; Zhang, 2012). Not only do we propose the influence of power distance on the relationship between intended and perceived employee voice practices, but we also highlight the complexity derived from potential interactions between power distance, organizational climate and supervisor–subordinate relationships. In practice, when the principles of employee voice do not converge with local cultural values (i.e. there is a perceived lack of legitimacy of practices), employees prefer to avoid direct conflict with their supervisors to maintain high quality relationships.

The only factor that we propose to be a standard 'best practice' in implementing voice practices to increase employee participation globally, is to create a participative organizational climate, which is expected to play a facilitating role in both high and low power distance cultures. Although more difficult to create in a high power distance culture, a participative organizational climate can alter traditional employee ways of conceptualizing the expected relationship, and can function as a facilitator of voice practices.

In building our conceptual framework, we have included factors at the macro, meso and micro levels. There are, however, other factors that may also be relevant. For example, we have not focused here on the role of individual-level characteristics such as attitudes, personality, motivation, interests, and expectations (Robbins & Judge, 2011). These characteristics are the product of different educational backgrounds, family situations, and past experiences, so that people may react differently to the same situation and stimuli (Luthans, 2011). Every employee has his or her own unique characteristics created and developed from his or her own background, and these characteristics can create different perceptions in response to the same voice practices. Similarly, future research might also focus on differentiating between grades of employees, such that variation may be found in employee perceptions of voice practices dependent on their role in the organization.

Countering the role of variation in individual characteristics, this is said to be narrowed to a relatively homogenous group of employees when observing a single organization. Schneider (1987, p. 442) demonstrates this process through the attraction–selection–attrition (ASA) model: “attraction to an organization, selection by it, and attrition from it yields particular kinds of persons in an organization”. He proposes that people sharing individual characteristics to some extent are attracted to the same organization, are selected by the organization through the selection process, and then leave if they do not fit, so that the range of variance in individual differences in the same organization is much less than people outside the organization. Consequently, employees with similar perspectives and attributes in the same organization are likely to perceive and experience the work environment similarly (Schulte, Ostroff, & Kinicki, 2006), minimizing the potential role of individual factors in our framework.

At the macro level, we have focused on socio-cultural values through the lens of national culture. Other societal-level institutional factors may also shape employee perceptions of voice practices. For example, employees may have different perceptions of whether direct voice practices provide opportunity to be involved in organizational decision-making based on the extent of mandatory regulation of voice practices, and the extent of power of collective voice mechanisms, such as trade unions. These are fields for future development of the proposed framework.

Linked to this issue, another limitation of our framework may lie in its focus on only one dimension of national culture—power distance. Although power distance arguably has the strongest influence on employee voice (Landau, 2009), other cultural dimensions may also have a significant influence on shaping employee perceptions. For example, collectivist cultures place more value on group identities, consciousness, and group benefits than do individualistic cultures (Sullivan, Mitchell, & Uhl-Bien, 2003). Employees therefore more likely desire to maintain group harmony: complaining or making suggestions through employee voice practices might be seen as behaviors to disrupt the group and organizational harmony. Further research could explore these and other cultural dimensions further.

A final limitation of this study is that it has not considered more collective forms of employee voice. Such collective mechanisms (such as trade unions, works councils, and consultative committees) may form additional mediators in the relationship between perceived employee voice and work engagement, for example. They may also interact differently relative to participative organizational climates, and in different national culture settings. Future research should consider including this alternative collective voice perspective.

In conclusion, this conceptual multi-level framework depicting the relationship between employee voice and work engagement presents a number of propositions for future research. In so doing, this framework promises to extend our understanding of voice practices and the conditions under which they might be perceived by employees as opportunities to participate in decision-making. We have also contributed to the HRM convergence/divergence debate by identifying which contextual factors affecting perceptions and outcomes of voice practices in organizations are expected to be context-free (organizational climate at the meso level) and which are context-specific (LMX at the micro level and power distance at the macro level). We look forward to further empirical and conceptual developments in this field to enhance our understanding of these important aspects of people management practices in organizations globally.

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