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# Reconceptualising employee silence: problems and prognosis

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## **Abstract**

*A growing literature has emerged on employee silence, located within the field of organisational behaviour. Scholars have investigated when and how employees articulate voice and when and how they will opt for silence. While offering many insights, this analysis is inherently one-sided in its interpretation of silence as a product of employee motivations. An alternative reading of silence is offered which focuses on the role of management. Using the non-union employee representation literature for illustrative purposes, the significance of management in structuring employee silence is considered. Highlighted are the ways in which management, through agenda-setting and institutional structures, can perpetuate silence over a range of issues, thereby organising employees out of the voice process. These considerations are redeployed to offer a dialectical interpretation of employee silence in a conceptual framework to assist further research and analysis.*

## **Keywords**

*employee voice, employee silence, managerial power, non-union employment relations*

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## Introduction

Employee voice is a theme that is widely ensconced in both practitioner and academic concerns on management and organisational analysis. Invariably, interest in voice has ranged from the high performance literature (Boxall and Macky, 2009), wherein it is conceived as part of a bundle of practices, to ethically-driven notions of industrial citizenship (Wilkinson *et al.* 2009). One of the more significant contributions to the area of voice has been research dedicated to examining the antithesis of voice: employee silence. Defining silence as an employee's 'motivation to withhold or express ideas, information and opinions about work-related improvements' (Van Dyne *et al.* 2003, p. 1361), this strain of analysis has sought to investigate when and how employees in organisational settings exercise voice and when and how they opt for silence (Milliken *et al.* 2003). A number of research questions have been generated to examine why employees make the decision to be silent, what types of issues employees are likely to be silent about and how organisations might surmount this 'problem'.

This article seeks to draw attention to some of the underlying *conceptual* weaknesses characterising the analysis of employee silence. Weaknesses lie in the types of questions being asked and the unitarist premises upon which much of the debate has been predicated. The central argument of this article is that existing efforts have generally focused on silence as something which employees choose, thereby overlooking the more significant constraints imposed by management in preserving their supposed prerogative. Central to the argument is that management, through agenda-

setting and institutional structures, may well perpetuate silence on a range of issues which are effectively organised out of the voice process in favour of less threatening items. It is argued that a re-fitting of the conceptual lens onto how employee silences are structured could offer a potentially more salient mode of enquiry.

The article proceeds as follows. First, the literature on employee silence is considered followed by a section explaining the limitations of existing interpretations. Section three then elaborates our mode of re-conceptualisation, focusing on the role of management. To illustrate this elaboration, evidence is drawn on the operation of employee voice schemes of non-union employee representation (NERs). It is, in many ways, a product of contemporary circumstance that as union-based modes of employee voice precipitously decline, interest in other forms of employee voice has grown steadily, as scholars are increasingly concerned with how voice is articulated in union-free environments. The reasons are twofold. First, NERs are becoming increasingly prominent as a vehicle for employee voice in countries marked by union decline and are likely to be of growing relevance for understanding voice dynamics in contemporary organisations. Secondly, given the operational difficulties which inevitably surround a conceptual proposition which has at its focus the often unobservable process of management agenda-setting, the literature on NERs is instructive given its focus on motivations for introducing arrangements of this sort, as well as their subsequent administration and control. The literature has consequently discerned what types of issues management allow

on the voice agenda and those areas they would rather leave untouched. In section four, a conceptual framework is outlined which allows a more holistic approach to organisational silences than extant efforts. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of the main arguments and suggestions for future research in section five.

### **The Study of Employee Silence: A Review and Critique**

The literature on employee silence is a relatively new phenomenon. Nonetheless, a resonance of its concerns can be found in earlier research on voice. In his now classic Exit-Voice-Loyalty (EVL) framework, Hirschman (1970) sought to demonstrate the ways in which customers might break their silence in an attempt to change objectionable states of affairs through either voice or exit. Where neither option applied, they could opt to “suffer in silence, confident that things will soon get better” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 38). Similarly, when the EVL literature was adapted to employment relations, it was proposed that employee dissatisfaction could produce slack and disregardful behaviour, allowing the relationship to atrophy, as alienated employees withdrew from committed organisational participation to more silent, alienative postures (Rusbult *et al.* 1982; Farrell, 1983; Naus *et al.* 2007). Indeed employees’ efforts to break silences could often bring about a further deterioration in one’s relationship with the firm. Feuille and Delaney (1992), for instance, observed that individuals who opted to exercise voice tended to suffer adverse consequences for doing so. Furthermore, these employees had higher turnover rates than those who remained silent. Similarly, others have

indicated that silence is often the best option for employees, as those who exercise voice often faced a risk to reputation, frequently suffering sanction or retaliation (Graham, 1986; Nord and Jermier, 1994).

It is only more recently that employee silence has emerged as a formal category of analytical investigation in its own right. Principally, this literature has sought to understand how individuals in organisations make the decision to be silent about issues that concern them and about which types of issues employees are likely to be silent. Specifically, silence has been conceptualised as information which is consciously held back by employees, rather than an unintentional failure to communicate or simply having nothing to say (Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008). It is thus a communicative choice which employees may *decide* to adopt. This approach tends to focus explicitly on the intentional withholding of ideas, information and opinions *with relevance to improvements in work and work organisation* (Van Dyne *et al.* 2003). Indeed, Van Dyne and Lepine (1998, p. 109) assert that the study of employee communication (or lack thereof) should be located in organisations where the work environment is “dynamic” and “new ideas facilitate continuous improvement”. Rolling back employee silence is seen as an organisational imperative: its existence prevents management from receiving information that might allow for improvements or circumvent problems before the effects become seriously damaging.

While largely conceiving employee silence as something of a freely undertaken choice, the literature has acknowledged that it can be

influenced by top management. Morrison and Milliken (2000), for example, have sought to explain why silence is systemic in many workplaces, and the kinds of norms and forces that set it in process and reinforce it. Principally, they target the role of top management. Pinder and Harlos (2001) argue that a climate of silence amongst employees is likely where speaking up is perceived to be futile or dangerous. These perceptions emanate from a management who act in a way that discourages communication from below so that where management are intolerant of dissent, employees are consequently averse to voicing their concerns (Ashford *et al.* 1998; Dutton *et al.* 2001). These perceptions, Morrison and Milliken claim, are a product of managements' recalcitrance to receiving negative feedback about either them personally or about a course of action associated with them. Whilst in another study, Milliken *et al.* (2003) cite silence as a product of resignation amongst employees due to a perception that their voice falls on 'deaf ears' (c.f. Pideri and Ashford, 2003; Van Dyne *et al.* 2003). Complementing these ideas is Edmondson's (2003) work, which has pointed to the importance of leaders in creating a voice climate wherein employees feel comfortable about raising problems.

Serving as a backdrop to these relational dynamics are the structural constraints of wider demographic and organisational constraints, all of which are hypothesised to produce tendencies towards employee silences, e.g. management with financial background; homogeneity of the management grouping; cost focused organisations operating in competitive environments with a

diminished resource base; the density of social network ties amongst mid- to lower-level employees and so on (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Similarly, Huang *et al.* (2005) have hinted at the determining influence of social context, arguing that cultures with large 'power distance' will have higher levels of employee silence. Others have seen fit to shift away the analysis from hierarchical-based dynamics to more lateral influences in terms of how silence is influenced by employee perceptions of what their co-workers think. This analysis proposes that the withholding of true opinions is generated from an individual's fear of isolation from the workgroup, particularly where they believe that they hold a minority viewpoint (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003; Milliken *et al.* 2003). Finally, there has also been a tendency to treat silence as a product of psychological factors stemming from individual employee's personality characteristics (Premeaux and Bedeian, 2003).

Although the existing literature can be credited with making inroads into the analysis of employee silence, the approach has been debilitated by a pervasive managerialist bias that narrows the kinds of questions it asks and the explanations it offers. Much of this approach stems from the remit of its orientation as evident in the Van Dyne and Lepine quotation above; the study of silence is confined to those firms where the workforce is 'dynamic' and where the articulation of voice would be of benefit to management. Indeed, according to Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008, p. 38), silence is only "negative" insofar as a "continuous process improvement requires the ongoing identification of operational problems

that can illuminate faults in existing work practices". Similarly, Huang *et al.* (2005) counsel management that encouraging employees to voice their concerns, opinions and dissenting views will enable organisational change and development in a competitive market. In many ways, these kinds of argument suffer from a paradox: Morrison and Miliken (2000), for example, submit that management are often hostile to employee voice, but such hostility is construed to be concerned entirely with improving business performance. Such themes are not addressed given the overriding concern with apparently shared goals.

Morrison and Milliken (2000), while stating encouragingly that employee silence is likely to pose an obstacle to "truly pluralist organizations" (p.707), offer a truncated reading of what organisational pluralism might represent, in claiming, for instance, that pluralism allows for a "tolerance of multiple and often conflicting viewpoints" (p.719). Another view of pluralism would extend this interpretation to a recognition that it is as much about workers having structurally conditioned independent interests and goals which frequently stand apart from management, as it is about different shades of opinion. This rather diluted take on pluralism is further in evidence when Morrison and Milliken (2000, p. 719) proceed to claim that workers can be free to "deviate" from the management line provided that it "has a positive effect on both the quality of organizational decision making and company performance". Yet such deviation can hardly be characterised as pluralism: genuine pluralism rests upon social values which recognise the right of employees to an effective voice in their own

destiny, regardless of the consequences for management (Fox, 1985).

Indeed Morrison and Milliken (2000, p. 731) talk about management "capitalising on pluralism", essentially circumventing 'plurality' to monistic and employer-defined goals. They go further in suggesting that unlimited employee input is not desirable: "too much input" might overload decision-making processes and impede timely and effective decision making. The argument resonates with a number of other efforts on employee silence wherein absences of voice are interpreted such that the phenomenon is portrayed as an *organisational good*, i.e. concealment of trade secrets, professional confidences and so on (Podsakoff *et al.* 2000). Ultimately then, voice is favoured, but it is a deficient rendering, framed only in terms of the benefits it could deliver to managerial efficiency.

Unfortunately, these assumptions run through the literature in other ways and are often manifested through the articulation of Human Relations assumptions about organisational relationships. The characteristic tendency of such efforts is to reduce the employment relationship to a chiefly inter-personal affair, inebriated by psychological and even emotive features. For example, Morrison and Milliken (2003, p. 1564) propose that management do not accept or embrace information from employees on the basis of "very human reasons" or some inevitable, even innate "human tendency". There is a danger of viewing managerial opposition to voice as something of a personality quirk, in contrast to other explanations

which would emphasise structural-based issues of power, authority and control.

At one level this tendency is unsurprising, given that the literature on employee silence appears heavily indebted to communication theory. Obvious examples are Van Dyne *et al.* (1995), who declare their focus is on employees' actual communicative choices, rather than perceptions of procedural opportunities, a somewhat odd posture given the probability that communicative choices are likely to correlate with procedural opportunities. Indeed, in spite of respondents in Milliken *et al.* (2003) citing hierarchical structure and organisational characteristics as the second most important reason for remaining silent, they entirely over-look this explanation in their discussion, opting instead to focus on employees' fears of being viewed "a tattletale" (pg. 1470). Indeed much of the literature appears to be underscored by an assumption that the requisite vehicles for voice are present in organisations. What is missing from the literature is an appreciation of the institutional opportunities employees have for articulating voice. While the presence of institutional arrangements in no way guarantees voice (Harlos, 2001), where they are absent, or procedurally ineffective, then this absence is likely to be of some explanatory importance in understanding the existence of employee silence. Furthermore, it might be said that the extant literature has adopted a somewhat naïve view about the particular interests which organisational participants bring to bear in the workplace. Notable is the idea that management should be concerned about silence and should try to rectify it. The problem with this approach is that

it ignores whole areas of organisational life where silence is expedient for management and where it may often be in their interest to maintain the status quo. Indeed, Morrison and Milliken (2003, p. 1567) confirm this expediency when they indicate that silence can be functional for management, advising that unrestricted voice is, in fact, "dysfunctional".

Equally, the assumption that employees seek active involvement in the organisation and hold altruistic motives of concern for the corporation which are only stymied by faulty management practice is questionable. Whilst it is plausible that employees may be keen to articulate ideas for the improvement of their organisation and may be prevented from doing so by a lack of management support, there is also evidence that employee silences might, at times, be a product of cynicism, distrust or merely a defensive positioning in the frontier of control that is the employment relationship. Indeed the former interpretation, which dominates the silence literature, stems from an over-reliance on certain occupational groupings. Thus, employees used to make wider generalisations hitherto have been the likes of management consultants (Milliken *et al.*, 2003) or nurses (Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008): occupational types which might be expected to exercise high affective commitment to either their employing organisation or profession. An engagement with other occupational groupings, like those frequently found in the wider sociology of work, may demonstrate very different interpretations. Here, the silence from below is often characterised as a survival strategy, where employees with low attachment to the

organisation 'mentally withdraw' to cope with work's more unpleasant aspects (Delbridge, 1998; Ezzamel *et al.* 2000).

In summary, the bias in underpinning assumptions that dominate current efforts tends to miss some of the more significant questions that surround employee silence. Furthermore, the consequences of unitary preconceptions result in rather thin prescriptions for change that appear to offer little to either management or employees. Huang *et al.* (2005, p. 475), for example, end their work by pleading with management to make an "extra effort" and "pay more attention" to reducing employee silence in large power distance cultures, a thesis which in many ways confounds the logic of their preceding culturally determinist analysis. That is not to say that the current literature on silence has produced little of value. Rather, what needs to be done is for current understandings of silence to be extended and pursued under a less constricting remit. Already there have been some efforts to broaden the study of silences which have taken the analysis down the route of a more post-structuralist, linguistic turn (Brown and Coupland, 2005; Fletcher and Watson, 2007). Whilst these efforts have advanced understandings of employee silence, they have tended to move the analysis away from issues of control and organisational rules to one which focuses heavily upon the construction of working life through cultural and symbolic resources. Thus, the materialist organisation of production is altogether left out in favour of the discursive reproduction of organisations. While an interesting intellectual pursuit as it stands, by remaining focused on self-referential discourse, these efforts appear to

ignore the fact that such ideologies are not self-sustaining, but are rather a product of particular institutional underpinnings. Arguably, there is scope to examine the critical efforts that integrate material institutions, the interplay between social actors and the bounds of their structural context.

### **Re-thinking employee silence: some conceptual considerations**

For all the promise displayed in the literature on employee silence, there are crucial conceptual limitations. A largely unremitting unitary bias has tended to by-pass the potential for management to deliberately fashion a climate of silence in organisations. This section attempts to re-balance and re-conceptualise the phenomena of silence by focusing on how management, through agenda-setting and institutional structures, may perpetuate a climate of silence. Theoretically, conceptualisations link to political science interpretations of social power, which posit how dominant groups can effectively organise out of the political-exchange arena issues of potential concern to other interest groups, i.e. a *mobilisation of bias* (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). Certainly, Allen and Tselmann (2009) have recently argued for the centrality of power in the voice construct and point out that managers play an important role in determining what can and cannot be addressed by voice mechanisms. In this context, management might try to confine and enclose the voice process in organisations, with the result that silence reigns supreme on issues which might reasonably be assumed to be of interest to employees.



To illustrate this dynamic, the literature which addresses the operation of non-union employee representation (NER) schemes, i.e. employer sponsored bodies of formally organised employee voice, is drawn. Of course, a crude institutional focus might be construed as unhelpful. Often macro-orientated, institutional studies have measured voice by the extent to which a set of institutional mechanisms, such as union recognition or joint consultative committees, are present in a particular organisation (Bryson *et al.* 2007; Charlwood, 2006). These studies often assume that the presence of a voice mechanism is equated with voice utility. In contrast, micro-level institutional accounts counsel that incidence per se tells little, if anything, about the richness of the voice process. Whilst the focus is very much on the “methods that provide for employees to have a say in matters that affect them” (Dundon and Rollinson, 2004, p. 52), analysis is often conditioned by an awareness of the corresponding *scope, range* and *embeddedness* of the processes and related structures. The prevalence of an institutional mechanism may be *shallow* or *deep*, or it may be geared towards a focus on minor operational tasks than with issues of a more fundamental, power-sharing nature (Wilkinson *et al.* 2004). Thus, a voice structure may exist, but it may be little more than a ‘hollow shell’ (Charlwood, 2003), whilst even the presence of a union as a vehicle for voice may be substantially hindered if that union is weak or ineffectual (Ackers *et al.* 2005). The aim here is to sensitise readers to a more institutional focus and to introduce the relevant points of concern which highlight ways that organisational silence might be re-interpreted.

What is central to this analysis, and largely missing from the approaches reviewed earlier, is an appreciation of how institutions might serve to inhibit voice and enforce silence. One of the assumptions of the literature reviewed hitherto is that workers have some element of choice as to whether they remain silent; that is, they actively engage in a rational, cost-benefit based decision as to whether to remain silent or not. However an approach is adopted that emphasises employee silence as being the result of

*A situation where workers do not have avenues to pursue issues of concern to them, either because of a failure of a pre-existing voice mechanisms or because of the absence of them altogether.*

Central to the above definition is a consideration of management and the manner in which it constructs voice arrangements. It is necessary to be sensitive to the fact that

“employee voice mechanisms are often defined according to management’s own interpretations of what the expression of voice is taken to mean, thus shaping the prevailing climate in an organisation and the extent of influence which employees feel they have over matters that affect them” (Dundon and Rollinson, 2004, p. 55).

While it is possible that regulatory rules and laws force management to do things that they would otherwise neglect (Marchington *et al.* 2001),

management are likely to retain some choice, at least in determining the robustness of voice at workplace level (Willman *et al.* 2006). Management behaviour then lies at the heart of the debate on the management of voice structures and is of analytical significance in illustrating how management can actually perpetuate silence across the organisation.

While it clear that NERs are not simply about union avoidance, there is nonetheless a strain of evidence which shows how management frequently attempt to circumvent more intrusive forms of employee representation through institutional arrangements (Kaufman and Taras, 2009). NERs have been established to stave off encroachment into substantive areas of the managerial prerogative and to perpetuate a climate of silence on issues which might be made vulnerable to subordinate influence. Thus, Gall's (2004) study of anti-union employers in the UK found evidence of firms creating NER arrangements to reduce the likelihood of outside involvement by unions in organisational decision making. Taras (2006) demonstrated similar efforts by management in Canada, even in the face of the more exacting legislative constraints which seek to prevent suppression of union-based voice. Indeed, research shows that employer-initiated structures may be little more than cosmetic devices to silence more difficult forms of union voice, confining the airing of employees' interests to an innocuous remit under management control (Terry, 1999; Wills, 2000). Likewise studies of larger non-union employers demonstrate their willingness to devote considerable time and effort to implementing non-union voice channels to prevent more robust and

militant forms of voice emerging in the form of union structures (Broad, 1994; Flood and Toner, 1997). Others have drawn attention to how these structures have been found to wither away progressively once the union threat has subsided (Peetz, 2002). Even where there is no obvious threat to managerial prerogative, studies on NERs illustrate how such bodies can be substantively debilitated by management concerns to enclose voice to issues of business efficiency and little else (Kirkbride, 1986).

Whilst such deficiencies in NER type structures might be closely linked to the permissive voluntarism of Anglo-Saxon employment relations, there is evidence from more juridified systems of worker voice and participation which indicates a not dissimilar pattern. Royle (1998) has demonstrated how McDonald's in Germany was able to manipulate the existing system of co-determination by narrowing the scope of the Company Works Council "to issues exclusively of managerial concern like customer service, quality and new working methods". In Schulten's (1996) study of MNCs, a panoply of tactics were deployed, ranging from nominating salaried managers to the role of employee representatives alongside blatant attempts to influence election campaigns in a manner favourable to non-union candidates. Whitely (1999) has outlined how statutory provisions for voice can be further circumvented as companies exploit the internal heterogeneity of national business systems and locate units in, for example, less developed areas, areas of high unemployment or low union organisation and where consequently the workforce is less likely to raise issues challenging

the managerial prerogative. As Kahn-Freund's (1977, p. 2) has argued, legal provisions are likely to be but a "secondary force in human affairs, and especially in labour relations"; there are limits to how far the law can be used to shape the behaviour of institutional actors and social outcomes.

This approach does not suggest that it represents the full range of NER structures or management motivations. Equally, it does not suggest there is an omniscient management; employees retain agency and this agency will affect their willingness to air concerns across both issues which may be beneficial to the organization and on issues where concerns are not mutual. Studies in the institutional literature have shown that managerially-imposed shackles on NER's sphere of influence can often prove, for management, partial and counter-productive. Two outcomes in particular appear noteworthy. One is the further withdrawal of an increasingly cynical workforce. Workers based in a Japanese MNC in Waitling and Snook's (2003) research saw the NER scheme as lacking independence, being 'all talk' and 'no voice'. Employees tended to be disparaging of NER delegates, perceiving them as being in the 'pockets' of management. In Dundon and Rollinson's (2004) study of NERs, the voice schemes were designed and controlled from above. Where employees could contribute, it was on matters deemed appropriate by management. The most striking feature is that on more substantive issues, such as wages or conditions, few employees in these case studies expressed satisfaction with the arrangements. The result is that employer imposed restrictions on what

employees can seek influence over leads to the diminution of the structures: voice over an already limited remit recedes and employee silences are further deepened and perpetuated. This result may not necessarily have been management intent, but a disinclination to open up more substantial areas of decision-making to employee influence produces such outcomes. The second response to managerially defined walls of silence appears more paradoxical; management efforts to open up space for employee voice under the rubric of management-sponsored structures prove counter-productive. Taras and Copping's (1998) study of an NER at Imperial Oil found that management encouraged the view amongst employees that their voice was important and would be taken seriously in influencing strategic decisions. The NER arrangements led to widened expectations for voice, with employee representatives over-estimating their capacity to halt corporate-led initiatives. Despite management efforts to preserve employee silences on issues which would infringe on prerogatives, the reality of a less than receptive management seeking to keep substantive issues off the agenda, led to employee frustrations, a consequent rejection of the voice structure and a switch in allegiances to a previously marginalised union.

What the studies suggest is that underscoring practices of maintaining employee silences is essentially a managerialist interpretation of voice about increasing information and communication, rather than negotiation or bargaining. Specific to the above analysis of NERs, it appears that management view such structures as a means of increasing company efficiency and promoting an

understanding of company policy rather than an effective forum of representation for the diverging interests of employees. What is notable in Dundon *et al.*'s. (2005) study of management attitudes to voice is the pervasive tendency to view it as simply the transmission of information to employees to improve organisational performance, rather than dialogue or the two-way exchange of information. Employees were seen as receptacles of knowledge; voice was about the generation of ideas that could help improve organisational effectiveness: not one management respondent interviewed, for example, mentioned grievance procedures as a form of voice. Similarly, as Butler (2009) outlines, efforts by employees to raise more substantive issues, outside of typical "tea-and-toilet roll" concerns, fell upon deaf ears as management sought to preserve the realm of the NER to issues subservient to their prerogative. As Terry (1999, p. 29) has argued, management might be in favour of systems of employee participation but "they just draw the line at sharing meaningful information with them". What resonates here are agency theories of the firm which propose that when the principal delegates to the agent, it wants an effective decision-making structure and one which leads to outcomes that maximize the principal's goals and not some other goals of the agents (Gollan, 2005). Such pressures create a disincentive to prolonging decision-making processes, given that they provide less than optimal outcomes for the firm. There may be an incentive for employers to contain consultation and bargaining processes within the organisation to ensure minimum disruption occurs during the 'production process', thus safeguarding continuity in the managerial prerogative.

### **Advancing the conceptualisation of silence**

Hitherto it has been argued that the organizational behaviour literature has offered a novel development into the relatively unexplored realm of organisational silences. This literature has suffered from a number of deficiencies, frequently rooted in the unitarist underpinnings of this approach. Consequently, this article refocuses the analytical lens on management "silencing" workers and illustrates this approach with recourse to the institutional literature on NERs. The remainder of this section broadens out these lessons, presenting a conceptual framework and research agenda conjoining extant interpretations so as to develop a multi-dimensional understanding of employee silence.

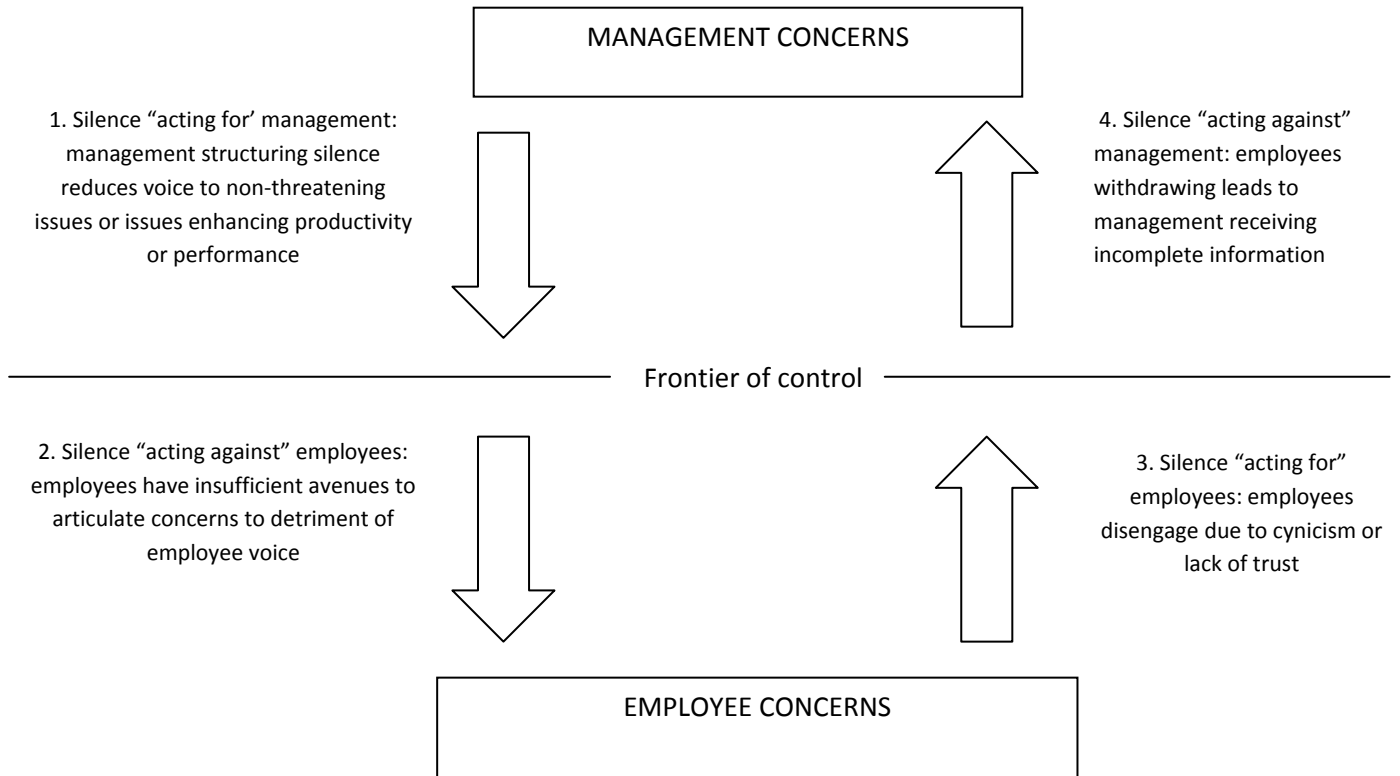
The core of this framework revolves around notions of silence as a relational dynamic – focusing on the phenomena as something derived from either management or workers. Seeing silence as a relational concept leads to interpreting the phenomena as functioning as part of the "frontier of control" in the workplace. A frontier of control develops between those aspects of the employment relationship set unilaterally by the employer and those aspects which are inherently more contestable as part of the wage-effort bargain (Goodrich, 1920). Also termed a "contested terrain", the frontier is not static and is shaped by the interaction of both management and employee strategies in furthering their respective concerns in the employment relationship (Edwards *et al.* 2006, p. 129). Control is therefore situation specific, dependent upon the variability of managerial intent and behaviour as well as worker resistance and consent.

Organisational silence under our framework is perceived as a component in the control dialectic, with silence acting either 'for' or 'against' either parties respective concerns. The corollary is that the capacity to articulate voice is one of the principal vehicles in which agents may attempt to pursue their particular agendas. Figure one presents these ideas in graphical form, with the arrows signifying whether silence is advancing or thwarting the concerns of either party.

In the 'northwest' of the figure, as outlined in the previous section, management may opt to 'close off' areas for employee voice, preserving their capacity for control and ensuring minimum disruption to the exercise of their prerogative. In terms of a research agenda, there are multifarious implications. It may involve, for example, examining how management explicitly construct and include issues on the voice agenda. The consequence of this quadrant, given that management enclosure of voice has occurred, is that silence operates to the disadvantage of employees, thwarting their capacity to have their

own particular independent concerns adequately raised and addressed. The literature often appears to suggest that this silencing can be delivered in the form of either the 'velvet glove' or 'iron fist'. A classic example is Garrahan and Stewart (1992) study of a management inculcated corporate culture which was designed to displace any opportunities for workplace antagonism at Nissan. Even where this consensual ideology failed to be embraced, employee passivity and in turn, their silence, could be guaranteed by the less sophisticated formula of telling employees to simply 'put up or shut up'. Management intentions and outcomes can be quite different; Creating voice structures also creates expectations and while management may wish voice to be defined around certain issues, their ability to do so cannot be taken for granted. Equally, if management intent is to create a weak or non-threatening structure then it can be seen by workers as a body with no independence that, paradoxically, may well encourage workers to look outside for someone to represent their views (Kaufman and Taras, 2009)

**Figure1**



In terms of developing a research agenda, questions are raised as to how employees respond to the consequences of the 'southwest' of the figure, indeed if at all. It may simply be that employees themselves are not aware of managerial efforts to design a voice architecture that is heavily circumscribed. Management might, for example, present a vehicle which is *de facto* ineffectual for the articulation of independent employee voice, but this action may come to be simply acquiesced by the employees depending upon the particular aspirations they bring to the employment relationship (Rosseau, 1995). This potential acquiescence, of course, makes it problematic to read the construction of silence by

management as acting against employees concerns unless one is prepared to declare, as much of the voice literature implies, that the latter have an 'objective interest', whether they realize it or not, in articulating a robust voice agenda that invariably clashes with management. Indeed, it might be said that the approach to date has been to interpret the lack of voice avenues as a negative for employees, without gaining a deeper understanding of the ways in which it may actually affect them.

Where the deliberate pursuit of voice by employees is curtailed or blunted by virtue of existing organizational arrangements or where

employees believe that it may not be to their advantage to 'speak up', it is argued that the southeast is the attendant outcome. In this regard, it is possible to re-integrate some of the typical concerns expressed in the organisational behaviour approach to silence without succumbing to their unitary predilections. In the 'southeast' of the figure, workers may withhold information from management in an effort to exert control over the work relationship and not just through the fear of management reprisal. Given that organisations are composed of a myriad of competing agendas, workers may choose to be silent in order to advance their concerns vis-à-vis management. It may be that workers in particular circumstances come to recognise the importance of information as a resource and thus choose to withhold it in what are perceived to be zero-sum situations with management (c.f. Moule, 1998).

In many respects, the 'southeast' aspect of the figure might be read as causally related to the outcomes of the 'southwest', where workers are consciously aware that their sphere of influence within voice regimes is being curtailed by an recalcitrant management. Under such circumstances, frustrated hopes lead to employee disengagement who upon perceiving their voice to be curbed, respond by refusing to participate meaningfully in management sponsored arrangements. This approach resonates with Fox's (1974) thesis that a management perceived to treat its workforce in a low-trust fashion, subsequently engenders low-trust responses from disapproving employees. Under these conditions, as the 'northeast' specifies, managerial ambitions for the voice regime languish in the face of an

organizational silence predicated on employee cynicism and mistrust. For example, management efforts to affect a voice regime under the strictly business orientated remit of quality circles and/or team meetings may fail to take root upon unfertile soils where poor employee morale and low commitment find a mainstay. One unexplored aspect of this area is the response of management to worker abstinence in such situations.

### **Conclusions**

This article has critiqued the dominant approach to conceptualising employee silence in the literature. A case has been made that shows how present efforts suffer from a number of limitations, principally revolving around the narrow unitarist assumptions underlying the research and the predominant focus on organisational silences as a communicative choice undertaken by individual employees. The central argument is not that this approach is incorrect, but rather that it misses out on the significant power-centred role of management in structuring employee silences on a range of issues in the employment relationship. It is thus necessary to focus on how management can, through the design of particular institutional arrangements, perpetuate a climate of silence over a range of issues, effectively organising them out of the voice process in organisations. Whilst 'observing' silence might be seen to pose challenges with regard to appropriate research instruments, it need not be so. The essence of the framework points to the importance of examining management and worker motivation and behaviour in advancing, curtailing or suspending voice in organisations. Attitudes, behaviours and their underlying motivations in this context can be

readily captured through established research methods and in turn reviewed and explained by recourse to the framework. The intention in advancing this framework is to re-train existing debate around silence into a much richer sociology of work research agenda. This framework could incorporate further research around wider issues such as the role of silence in gender or bullying, as well as more traditional voice scholarship. Certainly, there is scope for this agenda in the

context of how management are responding to new legal regulations aimed at institutionalising voice at work. While research carried out to date on the institutionalisation of voice has focussed on the structures which this legislation has prompted, the framework presented above could be used to understand both how employers may limit the efficacy of such bodies and the reasons why employees may be reluctant to engage with them.

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