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Speaking up when feeling job insecure: The moderating role of punishment and reward sensitivity

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# Speaking up when feeling job insecure

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## The moderating role of punishment and reward sensitivity

1107

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the extent to which felt job insecurity facilitates or hinders employees from raising voice (i.e. speaking up to their authority). The authors introduce punishment and reward sensitivity, two constructs of reinforcement sensitivity theory, as dispositional factors that might lead employees to appraise felt job insecurity as a hindrance vs challenge stressor. The authors propose employees high on punishment sensitivity to feel more constrained in raising voice because felt job insecurity to them is akin to a threat. Employees high on reward sensitivity should see felt job insecurity as a challenge, making it more likely that they will speak up.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Hypotheses were tested using moderated structural equation modeling analysis. The sample consisted of 232 employees confronted with organizational change.

**Findings** – The results are in line with the view of felt job insecurity as a hindrance stressor. Felt job insecurity negatively affected voice among both high and low punishment-sensitive individuals. Similarly, felt job insecurity was negatively related to voice in both low and high reward-sensitive individuals, although in the latter group the relationship was less pronounced.

**Originality/value** – The literatures on felt job insecurity and voice have developed parallel to one another, without much cross-dialogue. Furthermore, the few existing studies that did relate felt job insecurity to employee voice have yielded conflicting results. The present study offers a theoretical account of the existing ambiguities in the literature, and generates new insights into why some employees more than others react to felt job insecurity by self-censoring their ideas and opinions.

**Keywords** Employee voice, Job insecurity, Job challenges, Job hindrances,  
Reinforcement sensitivity theory

**Paper type** Research paper

On April 26, 1986, a sudden surge of power during a reactor systems test destroyed Unit 4 of the nuclear power station at Chernobyl, Ukraine, in the former Soviet Union. The accident and the fire that followed released massive amounts of radioactive material into the environment. Post-accident reviews revealed that one of the junior engineers knew about the dangers inherent in carrying out the test. In spite of his knowledge, he decided to remain silent knowing that speaking up would harm his reputation and could even get him fired.

Also in less extreme cases, employees are often reluctant to voice their concerns, suggestions, and ideas to their superiors, though doing so could prevent harm or bring



about significant and positive change. Recent years have seen a significant increase of studies aimed at identifying barriers and facilitators to employee voice (e.g. Aryee *et al.*, 2014; Detert and Treviño, 2010; Grant, 2013; Liang *et al.*, 2012; Lin and Johnson, 2015; Maynes and Podsakoff, 2014; Ng and Feldman, 2012; Ng *et al.*, 2014; Wei *et al.*, 2015; for overviews, see Morrison, 2011, 2014). A key finding of this literature is that employees often refrain from speaking up because of perceived individual costs and risks. Conversely, a plausible assumption is that employees speak up when there are obvious individual gains. Such costs and gains are exacerbated in high-stake situations, for example, in situations of organizational change that evoke feelings of job insecurity.

Felt job insecurity has traditionally been seen as a hindrance stressor – an undesirable work-related demand that interferes with work achievements (Cavanaugh *et al.*, 2000). According to this hindrance perspective, employees react to the threat of job loss by reducing efforts that may benefit the organization, for example, by engaging less in extra-role behavior, such as voice behavior. Consistent with this logic, some empirical evidence indicates that felt job insecurity is negatively associated with employee voice (Berntson *et al.*, 2010). However, there is also reason to believe that felt job insecurity may positively associate with employee voice. After all, not all employees feel equally threatened by the possibility of job loss, and some may even feel challenged by felt job insecurity: such employees may appraise the situation as an opportunity to improve the organization's success and to help safeguard their own position (Staufenbiel and König, 2010). Employees who appraise job insecurity as a challenge tend to use an active problem-oriented style of coping (Cavanaugh *et al.*, 2000). Accordingly, they are expected to put forth more effort in their work and to go beyond formal role definitions, for instance by engaging in voice behavior. Evidence from the literature supports this notion, indicating that employees who feel most insecure are most likely to raise voice (Sverke and Hellgren, 2001).

Despite the importance of questions regarding for whom felt job insecurity will be positively or negatively related to employee voice, no systematic treatment of these issues has appeared in the literature. Thus, the purpose of this research is to: first, develop a theoretical model outlining factors that might lead employees to appraise felt job insecurity as a hindrance or a challenge to speaking up; and second, empirically examine the propositions of this model.

Gray's (1990) reinforcement sensitivity theory serves as the backbone to develop our research model. Reinforcement sensitivity theory suggests that employees appraise the situation according to their sensitivity to punishment and reward. Sensitivity to punishment refers to the disposition to react with high levels of anxiety when facing potentially threatening situations or when anticipating negative reactions from others (Carver and White, 1994; Gray, 1990). Sensitivity to reward, in contrast, refers to the disposition to react with positive feelings and show goal-directed behavior when confronted with cues of reward. We expect a negative relationship between felt job insecurity and voice, and expect this relationship to be stronger for individuals with high punishment sensitivity. In contrast, we expect a positive relationship between job insecurity and voice among individuals with high reward sensitivity, but a negative relationship among individuals with low reward sensitivity.

The present study tries to make several contributions to the literature. First, we provide a theoretical account of the existing ambiguities in the literature on felt job insecurity and voice. By introducing reinforcement sensitivity theory (Gray, 1990) as a theoretical lens, we aim to push forward the academic conversation on when and why felt job insecurity acts as a hindrance vs challenge stressor. Second, in conjunction with

recent insights from the voice literature (e.g. Maynes and Podsakoff, 2014), we conceptualize voice as an important form of extra-role behavior, rather than merely a response to unsatisfying conditions. In doing so, our study significantly differs from previous studies on felt job insecurity and voice, which relied largely on Hirschman's exit, voice, loyalty framework (Berntson *et al.*, 2010; Sverke and Goslinga, 2003; Sverke and Hellgren, 2001). Finally, the initial tests of the model are of applied value because they indicate which employees, when faced with felt job insecurity, are more likely to voice their ideas and opinions for helping their organization cope with change.

## Conceptual background

### *Employee voice*

Employee voice, a concept introduced to the organization literature by Hirschman (1970), refers to "the voluntary expression of ideas, information, or opinions focussed on effecting organizationally functional change to the work context" (Maynes and Podsakoff, 2014, p. 6). In other words, voice is an important form of extra-role behavior aimed at challenging the status quo with the intent of improving the situation (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). The voice message may target team members or someone external to the organization, but conventionally the voice recipient is the supervisor or another person in a higher organizational position who has the power to change the status quo (Morisson, 2014).

Voice is assumed to prevent harm, for example, the curtailment of illegal and immoral behavior (Detert and Edmondson, 2011), and to bring about many benefits to the organization. Examples of such benefits include better working conditions (Hirschman, 1970), improved work processes and innovation (Argyris and Schon, 1978), organizational and team learning (Milliken and Lam, 2009), crisis prevention (Schwartz and Wald, 2003), and unit-level effectiveness and financial performance (Detert *et al.*, 2013; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2011).

The effects of voice for employees are far less straightforward: voice may bring along benefits associated with feelings of control and the opportunity to express one's viewpoint (Morrison, 2011), but it may as well imply risks, for example, when supervisors perceive voice as criticism or complaint. These risks may take the form of retaliation, for example, exclusion from interesting projects, status loss, or unfavorable career prospects. A major hypothesis in the voice literature is that employees refrain from speaking up when perceived costs are high (Burris, 2012; Morrison, 2011; Zhou and George, 2001). Though less well established, a plausible assumption is that employees may voice their ideas and concerns when they anticipate potential benefits.

This risk-benefit idea may have particular resonance in high-stake situations, for example, when workers are threatened with imminent job loss. Some workers may react to felt job insecurity by reducing voice in an attempt to reduce risks, and others may increase voice in an attempt to maximize gains associated with voice. In the next paragraph, we define job insecurity and provide a theoretical account of the relationship between felt job insecurity and employee voice.

### *Job insecurity: hindrance or challenge?*

Job insecurity refers to an individual's overall concern about the continued existence of, or the threat to, his or her job (Bernhard-Oettel *et al.*, 2011). Job insecurity is a subjective, perceptual phenomenon (hence: felt job insecurity): two employees in the same situation may experience different degrees of job insecurity because they will perceive and interpret the situation differently (Sverke *et al.*, 2002). Taking this idea

one step further, some scholars have argued that employees may also appraise feelings of job insecurity differently, that is, either as a hindrance or as a challenge (Staufenbiel and König, 2010).

The idea that people differ in the extent to which they appraise the same situation as hindering or challenging has its origin in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive theory of stress and coping. According to this theory, the appraisal process consists of two phases. The first phase, called primary appraisal, involves people determining whether or not an event or a situation is harmful. During the second phase, the secondary appraisal, people assess the amount of resources they have to cope with the event. If resources are insufficient, the event is perceived as stressful, otherwise it is not. Primary and secondary appraisal jointly determine whether the encounter is regarded as significant for well-being, and if so, whether it is primarily hindering or challenging (Folkman *et al.*, 1986).

Many, if not most, workers may appraise felt job insecurity as a hindrance stressor: hindrance appraisals interfere with or hinder an individual's willingness and ability to achieve valued work goals (Cavanaugh *et al.*, 2000; Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2010). This perspective has attracted considerable scholarly attention, mostly from a resource-loss perspective. According to the resource-loss perspective, felt job insecurity poses a considerable threat to employees' resources and ultimately also consumes these resources, so that employees can no longer invest in the organization, for example, by voicing their concerns. They risk losing their job and associated valuable aspects, including income, social support, personal status, and opportunities for personal development and growth (Jahoda, 1982). When feeling threatened, people try to preserve resources as much as possible, and tend to act conservatively without taking too many risks (Hobfoll, 1989; Staw *et al.*, 1981). When it comes to voice, it is safer and more conservative to remain silent and accept the status quo than to speak up and challenge it. Furthermore, felt job insecurity is stressful because of the feeling of powerlessness, alienation, and lack of control arising from it. In order to combat such feelings, employees need to invest extra psychological and physical resources, which in the long run will deplete the resources available for extra-role behaviors such as employee voice (Hockey, 1997; Ng and Feldman, 2012). Hence, the resource-loss perspective claims that because of the threat of job loss, job insecure employees avoid taking risks, and lack the energy needed to engage in effortful behavior, such as employee voice.

Alternatively, some employees may appraise feelings of job insecurity more positively in terms of a challenge. Though energy-depleting, challenge appraisals have the potential to provide opportunities for personal gain, growth, learning, and accomplishment (LePine *et al.*, 2005). In this view, the possibility of job loss may actually motivate employees to actively cope with the situation, and to potentially benefit from it. The rationale is that employees will try to secure their endangered position by exhibiting exceptional work behavior, such as voice, and thereby stand out from the pack. Furthermore, organization scholars have highlighted the beneficial effects of uncertainty on individuals as well as on organizations. For example, uncertainty has been found to be a driver of problem solving (Michel, 2007), and some organizations even go so far as to increase uncertainty to spur learning, innovation, and performance (Kim, 1998).

The pattern of research findings so far supports the idea that felt job insecurity can be appraised as hindrance or challenge, although appraisals in terms of hindrances seem to be most dominant. The majority of findings points to a negative relationship between felt job insecurity and performance outcomes, including voice (Berntson *et al.*, 2010; for meta-analyses, see Cheng and Chan, 2008; Gilboa *et al.*, 2008; Sverke *et al.*, 2002). Yet, there is some evidence that job insecurity motivates people to

stand out and to increase work efforts. For example, De Cuyper *et al.* (2014) established a positive correlation between felt job insecurity and exemplification (i.e. a specific impression management behavior used with the aim to appear a model employee). Furthermore, job insecure employees have been found to work longer hours (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2008), to be more productive (Probst, 2002; Probst *et al.*, 2007), and to make more use of voice options (Sverke and Hellgren, 2001). Staufenbiel and König (2010) found empirical support for the “opposing effects” hypothesis. In their study, felt job insecurity was overall negatively related to job performance via work attitudes, but these effects were partly suppressed by a direct positive effect of felt job insecurity on performance.

Based on the available empirical evidence, we predict:

*H1.* An overall negative relationship between felt job insecurity and employee voice.

However, this hypothesis is based on the assumption that the majority of employees appraises felt job insecurity negatively (i.e. as a threat). From the above discussion, however, it becomes apparent that not everyone suffers from job insecurity to the same degree and that some may even appraise felt job insecurity positively in terms of opportunities for gain. In the following section, we probe this idea in greater detail. More specifically, we propose that employees appraise the situation according to their sensitivity to punishment and reward, and introduce punishment and reward sensitivity as possible moderators of the felt job insecurity-voice relationship.

#### *The moderating role of punishment and reward sensitivity*

Reinforcement sensitivity theory (Gray, 1987, 1990; Gray and McNaughton, 2000) is a biologically based theory of personality that postulates two broad dimensions of personality: impulsivity and anxiety. These two personality dimensions represent manifestations of individual differences in the sensitivity of two independent neurological systems that are involved in responding to relevant environmental cues. These systems are referred to as the behavioral inhibition system (BIS) and the behavioral activation system (BAS).

The BIS is sensitive to signals of punishment and non-reward. BIS may lead to negative or painful outcomes and is responsible for feelings of anxiety, frustration, and sadness. In terms of individual differences, greater punishment (BIS) sensitivity should be reflected in greater anxiety proneness, at least when the person is exposed to the proper situational cues (Carver and White, 1994). In contrast, the BAS is sensitive to signals of reward and escape from punishment. Activation of the BAS is thought to be associated with positive emotions, such as hope, elation, relief, and happiness (Corr, 2004; Pickering and Gray, 1999). In terms of individual differences in personality, greater reward (BAS) sensitivity should be reflected in a greater proneness to engage in goal-directed behavior, and to experience positive feelings when the person is exposed to cues of impending reward (Carver and White, 1994).

We propose that punishment sensitivity aggravates the negative effect of felt job insecurity, such that when faced with felt job insecurity, the negative effect on employee voice is more pronounced for individuals high rather than low on punishment sensitivity. This proposition is based on the work of Gray and McNaughton (2000), who argued that high punishment-sensitive persons engage in external and internal scanning for threat-relevant information in response to potentially threatening situations. As such, punishment sensitivity may foster appraisals that the situation is potentially harmful, and that little or nothing can be done to change the matter (Williams *et al.*, 2014). Empirical support comes from studies showing that punishment sensitivity is associated with a tendency to focus on negative information (Noguchi *et al.*, 2006), recall of

negatively valenced words in a free-recall task (Gomez and Gomez, 2002), and negative judgments and expectations of failure (Smith *et al.*, 2006). Additionally, in the work domain, punishment sensitivity has been found to associate with higher levels of perceived work stress, for both high and low environmental demands (Van der Linden *et al.*, 2007; Williams *et al.*, 2014).

We propose that reward sensitivity moderates the relationship between felt job insecurity and employee voice, such that when faced with job insecurity, high reward-sensitive persons feel more encouraged to speak up than low reward-sensitive persons. High reward-sensitive persons are assumed to see ambiguous stimuli in a more positive light than low reward-sensitive persons. As such, reward-sensitive persons tend to see the chances that a new situation offers, and tend to grasp opportunities for change. Reward sensitivity has been found to be associated with a tendency to focus on positive information (Noguchi *et al.*, 2006), recall of positively valenced words (Gomez and Gomez, 2002), and positive judgments and expectations of success (Smith *et al.*, 2006). Van der Linden *et al.* (2007) found reward sensitivity to be associated with positive indicators of well-being.

Taken collectively, these arguments suggest that punishment and reward sensitivity will differentially influence how felt job insecurity is appraised and how it relates to employee voice. High, relative to low, punishment-sensitive persons will interpret felt job insecurity as a threat that is difficult to overcome. For them, felt job insecurity is a hindrance stressor preventing them from speaking up. In contrast, high, relative to low, reward-sensitive persons will appreciate the new opportunities that a situation offers. For them, felt job insecurity is not an impediment preventing them from speaking up, but rather a chance to change the situation by being heard.

Accordingly, we predict that:

*H2.* Punishment sensitivity moderates the relationship between felt job insecurity and employee voice, such that the negative relationship is more pronounced for high punishment-sensitive persons than for low punishment-sensitive persons.

In addition, we predict that:

*H3.* Reward sensitivity moderates the relationship between felt job insecurity and employee voice, such that the relationship is positive for high reward-sensitive employees and negative for low reward-sensitive persons.

## Methods

### *Procedure and participants*

Data were collected via two different approaches. First, data were collected from a stratified sample of current employees of four large companies that publically announced impending organizational changes between December 2013 and March 2014. Three of the four companies were multinationals (telecommunications, media, department store) with US headquarters, and one being UK-based (energy provider). Participants were found through the professional social networking site LinkedIn. We applied to join the companies' LinkedIn groups, explaining the survey and were granted access by the group administrators at each organization. The telecommunications company had circa 10,000 members, the multimedia company had circa 14,000 members, the department chain had circa 2,000 members, and the energy company had circa 5,000 members. The members of the group were sorted by current employment, given a unique number, and 200 per group were randomly selected for contact using a random number generator.

These persons were then sent an invitation to participate in the study. Of the 800 individuals contacted, 152 began the survey (19 percent) and 135 fully completed it (16.8 percent). Shih (2013) declares that on average 93 percent of LinkedIn's users are active. Upon this assumption the target population size shrinks to 744, giving a response rate of 20 percent and a completion rate of 18.1 percent. A possible reason for this low response rate is that the participants had not agreed to partake the study, were not expecting any contact, and may have been reluctant to speak to an unknown researcher about their professional attitudes, even when confidentiality and anonymity was guaranteed.

Second, in order to increase the sample size, additional data were collected through snowball sampling from employees that worked for companies of various sizes and locations around Europe and the USA via other LinkedIn groups. In the instructions it was explicitly stated that only employees facing organizational changes were eligible to participate in the survey. The respondents circulated the survey around their workplaces and professional contacts, giving an additional 97 responses. The snowball sampling strategy is particularly effective in locating members of special and hard to reach populations where the focus of the study is on a sensitive issue (Faugier and Sargeant, 1997). Both felt job insecurity and employee voice qualify as sensitive issues because they are associated with a strong critical stance toward the organization (Hirschman, 1970; Schreurs *et al.*, 2014). Snowball sampling has been successfully used in previous research on organizational change (e.g. Schreurs *et al.*, 2014; van den Heuvel *et al.*, 2009). No response rate can be provided with this sampling strategy.

The total sample consisted of 232 respondents. The respondents' average age was 34.8 (SD = 11.9). Respondents were predominantly male (53.9 percent), and well educated (31 percent MSc or equivalent, 39.7 percent BSc or equivalent, 16.4 percent college or similar level, 9.1 percent high school level). The majority had tenure less than three years (30.1 percent between 0-12 months, 31.9 percent between one and three years, 15.9 percent between four and six years, 9 percent between seven and ten years, 12.1 percent > 10 years), worked full time (87.5 percent), and on permanent contracts (87.5 percent). Respondents that were not supervisors or management made up 47.4 percent of the sample, management personnel (junior, middle, and senior) at 34.1 percent, supervisors and team leaders at 12.5 percent, and directors/CEOs at 6.1 percent. Most of the respondents worked in the UK (40.5 percent) or the USA (30.2 percent). The remaining 29.3 percent were employed in continental Europe, Canada, or Australasia.

The stratified and the snowball samples differed significantly from each other,  $F(4, 227) = 5.91, p < 0.01$ . Compared to the stratified sample, respondents in the snowball sample were less job insecure, and were more likely to raise voice. For this reason, sample was included as a control variable in all of the analyses (see below).

### Measures

In line with the recommendations by Whitley and Kite (2013) in their most recent edition of "Principles of Research in Behavioral Science," we selected instruments that have been used extensively in the field and in different settings, and for which psychometric information is available. The following measures were used.

*Punishment (BIS) sensitivity.* Punishment sensitivity assesses how people generally react to and tend to avoid potentially threatening situations. It was measured using the seven-item version of Carver and White's (1994) BIS scale. Items are scored on a four-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree; 4 = completely agree). A sample item is "I feel pretty worried or upset when I think or know somebody is angry at me." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.83.



*Reward (BAS) sensitivity.* Reward sensitivity assesses the strength of the drive for reward and its associated positive affect. It was measured using the 13-item version of Carver and White's (1994) BAS scale. Although Carver and White originally proposed three different BAS scales (i.e. drive, responsiveness to rewards, fun seeking), others have convincingly argued for using a single BAS factor (e.g. Quilty and Oakman, 2004). Accordingly, we also use the overall BAS score in the current study. Items are scored on a four-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree; 4 = completely agree). A sample item is "When I want something, I usually go all-out to get it." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.89.

*Felt job insecurity.* Felt job insecurity was measured using the four-item scale developed by De Witte (2000) and extensively validated by Vander Elst *et al.* (2014). A sample item is: "Chances are I will soon lose my job." Respondents were asked to rate these items on a five-point Likert type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.76.

*Employee voice.* Employee voice was measured using an adapted version of the five-item scale developed by Maynes and Podsakoff (2014). In the original version, respondents were instructed to think about a co-worker that they work with frequently in their job, and to rate this co-worker on the items measuring voice. Instead, in the present study we instructed respondents to evaluate their own voice behavior. Self-reported measures of employee voice behavior are common in the organizational sciences (Axtell *et al.*, 2000; Parker *et al.*, 2006). Items are scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree; 5 = completely agree). A sample item is "I frequently make suggestions about how to improve work methods and practices." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.94.

*Control variables.* Gender (0 = male, 1 = female), job tenure (1  $\leq$  six months; 2 = six to 12 months; 3 = one to three years; 4 = four to six years; 5 = seven to ten years; 6  $\geq$  ten years), and sample (0 = stratified sample, 1 = snowball sample) were included as control variables in all the analyses because of their potential link with the independent, moderating, and outcome variables considered in this study (e.g. Detert and Burris, 2007; Schreurs *et al.*, 2014; Stamper and Van Dyne, 2001). In addition, we controlled for perceived voice climate, which has been shown to be a strong predictor of employee voice (e.g. Morrison *et al.*, 2011). Voice climate was measured using the six-item scale by Frazier and Bowler (2015). Items are scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree; 5 = completely agree). A sample item is "The employees in my work group are encouraged to develop and make recommendations concerning issues that affect the group." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.94.

#### *Data analysis approach*

All analyses were conducted using Stata version 12 (StataCorp, 2011). Prior to hypotheses testing, we compared various measurement models via confirmatory factor analysis. First, we tested a measurement model including four latent variables: punishment sensitivity, reward sensitivity, felt job insecurity, and employee voice. Scale items were used as indicators of the latent factors. The latent factors were allowed to correlate. We allowed two sets of errors to co-vary within factor, but not between factors in order to allow for covariance caused by high content overlap, similar wording, and potential subfactors (e.g. Cole *et al.*, 2007; Gerbing and Anderson, 1984). Next, we compared the hypothesized four-correlated-factor model to an alternative three-correlated-factors model in which punishment and reward sensitivity were collapsed into one factor. Finally, to examine the potential for common-method bias, we tested two models: Harman's single factor model

(in which all items loaded on one factor) and a latent common-method factor model (in which all items loaded on both their expected factors and a latent common-method factor) (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

The hypotheses were tested with moderated structural equation modeling. Following the procedure proposed by Mathieu *et al.* (1992), as described in Cortina *et al.* (2001), we tested a structural model that, in addition to the control variables, included five exogenous factors (i.e. felt job insecurity, punishment sensitivity, reward sensitivity, and their interaction terms) and one endogenous factor (employee voice). Consistent with the Mathieu *et al.* procedure, each exogenous factor had only one indicator, namely, the standardized scale score of the respective factor. The scale items were used as indicators of the endogenous factor employee voice. The model tested included direct paths from the exogenous factors to the endogenous factor. The paths from the latent exogenous factors to their indicators were fixed using the square roots of the scale reliabilities, while the error variances of each indicator were set equal to the product of their variances and one minus their reliabilities. The reliability of the interaction term was calculated according to the formula provided by Bornstedt and Marwell (1978), as described in Cortina *et al.* (2001). Felt job insecurity, punishment sensitivity, and reward sensitivity were allowed to correlate, while the correlations between the main terms and the interaction terms were fixed to zero. Finally, the residual errors of the outcome variable were allowed to correlate. A significant interaction effect is evident when the path coefficient from the interaction term to the endogenous factors is statistically significant. The final step is to test the model with and without the path from the interaction term to endogenous factors, thus allowing a  $\chi^2$  test of the differences in fit between the models.

The fit of the models was assessed with the  $\chi^2$  statistic, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker Lewis index (TLI). For RMSEA and SRMR, values less than 0.05 represent good fit, values of 0.05-0.08 represent moderate fit, and values of 0.08-0.10 represent adequate fit (Browne and Cudeck, 1993). For CFI and TLI, values of 0.90 are acceptable, whereas values of 0.95 or higher are indicative of excellent fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics*

Table I shows the means, standard deviations, bivariate correlations, and the internal consistencies (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ 's) of the scales included in the analyses. As can be seen from Table I, employee voice related negatively to felt job insecurity and punishment sensitivity, and positively to reward sensitivity, voice climate, job tenure, and sample. Felt job insecurity was positively associated with punishment sensitivity and negatively with reward sensitivity and sample. Reward and punishment sensitivity were unrelated.

### *Measurement models*

The four-correlated-factor model provided an adequate fit to the data (cf. Table II). All items loaded significantly on the intended latent factors. The fit of the four-correlated-factors model was significantly better than the fit of the alternative three-correlated-factors model in which punishment and reward sensitivity were collapsed into one factor ( $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 562.65, p < 0.001$ ) and Harman's single factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 1,348.85, p < 0.001$ ).

**Table I.**  
Means, standard deviations, internal consistencies (on the diagonal) and bivariate correlations among the study variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Gender	0.46	0.50	—							
2 Job tenure	3.28	1.52	-0.11	—						
3 Sample	0.42	0.49	0.04	-0.25**	—					
4 Voice climate	3.67	0.92	0.01	0.04	0.06	(0.94)				
5 Felt job insecurity	2.79	0.91	0.15*	-0.05	-0.17**	-0.33***	(0.76)			
6 Reward sensitivity	2.95	0.49	-0.01	-0.13*	0.03	0.18**	-0.23***	(0.89)		
7 Punishment sensitivity	2.76	0.55	0.27***	-0.13	-0.07	-0.05	0.17*	-0.11	(0.83)	
8 Employee voice	3.73	0.86	0.01	0.14*	0.17**	0.44***	-0.42***	0.25***	-0.16*	(0.94)

**Notes:** *n* = 232. Gender: 0 = female; sample: 0 = stratified sample, 1 = snowball sample. \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001

Model	$\chi^2$	df	<i>p</i>	RMSEA	90% CI RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI
<i>Measurement models</i>								
1. Four-correlated factors	628.35	355	< 0.001	0.06		0.07	0.93	0.92
2. Three-correlated factors	1,191.00	358	< 0.001	0.10		0.11	0.79	0.76
3. One factor	1,977.20	361	< 0.001	0.14		0.18	0.60	0.55
4. Common-method factor model	528.11	332	< 0.001	0.05		0.06	0.95	0.94
<i>Structural models</i>								
1. Hypothesized structural model	70.14	54	0.07	0.04	(0.00-0.06)	0.04	0.99	0.98
2. Path from felt job insecurity/ punishment sensitivity interaction term to voice constrained to 0	62.99	49	0.09	0.04	(0.00-0.06)	0.04	0.98	0.98
3. Path from felt job insecurity/reward sensitivity interaction term to voice constrained to 0	74.39	49	0.01	0.05	(0.02-0.07)	0.05	0.98	0.97
4. Paths from both interaction terms to voice constrained to 0	74.87	50	0.01	0.05	(0.02-0.07)	0.05	0.98	0.97
<b>Notes:</b> <i>n</i> = 232. RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root mean square residual; CFI, comparative fit index; TLI, Tucker Lewis index; CI, confidence interval								

**Table II.**  
Goodness-of-fit  
indices (maximum  
likelihood estimates)  
for the measurement  
and structural models

However, the fit of the latent common-method factor model was significantly better than the fit of the four-correlated-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(29) = 100.24, p < 0.001$ ). The implications of this finding will be elaborated further below.

### *Test of hypotheses*

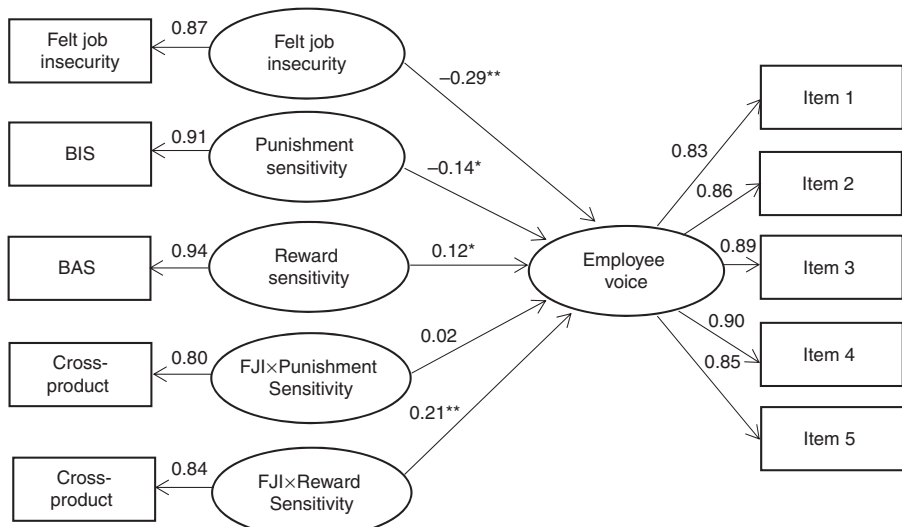
The  $\chi^2$  of the hypothesized structural equation model, including the control variables, was not statistically significant, indicating a good fit of the model to the data:  $\chi^2(54) = 70.14, p = 0.07$  (cf. Table II). Consistent with *H1*, proposing a negative relationship between felt job insecurity and employee voice, job insecurity was significantly related to voice:  $\beta = -0.29, p < 0.001$ . Voice climate ( $\beta = 0.32, p < 0.001$ ), reward sensitivity ( $\beta = 0.12, p < 0.05$ ), job tenure ( $\beta = 0.17, p < 0.01$ ), and sample ( $\beta = 0.14, p < 0.05$ ) were positively related to employee voice. Punishment sensitivity was negatively related to voice:  $\beta = -0.14, p < 0.05$ . Contrary to *H2*, felt job insecurity and punishment sensitivity did not interact in their association with employee voice:  $\beta = 0.02, p = 0.83$ . Finally, as predicted, the interaction term between felt job insecurity and punishment sensitivity had a significant effect on employee voice, substantiating *H3*:  $\beta = 0.21, p < 0.01$ .

In a next step, the model was tested without the path from the latent product term felt job insecurity/punishment sensitivity to employee voice, allowing a  $\chi^2$  test of the difference in fit between the models with and without this path. The constrained model was not significantly different from the unconstrained model ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.00, ns$ ). However, elimination of the path from the latent interaction term felt job insecurity/reward sensitivity to employee voice did produce a worse fit to the data than the hypothesized model ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 11.40, p < 0.001$ ). Not surprisingly, elimination of both interactions paths to employee voice yielded a worse fit compared to the hypothesized model ( $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 11.88, p < 0.01$ ). Taken together, the interaction between felt job insecurity and reward sensitivity was significant for predicting employee voice, whereas the interaction between felt job insecurity and punishment sensitivity was not.

All resulting relationships (except for the control variables) are graphically displayed in Figure 1. We plotted the felt job insecurity  $\times$  reward sensitivity interaction at three levels of reward sensitivity (i.e. +1 SD, 0, and -1 SD; Bauer and Curran, 2005), and conducted a simple slope test to examine the nature of the interaction. The interaction is graphically represented in Figure 2. A visual inspection of the graphs and a simple slopes test showed that at low levels of reward sensitivity, felt job insecurity was more negatively related to employee voice ( $\beta = -0.30, t = -5.06, p < 0.001$ ) than at average ( $\beta = -0.24, t = -4.20, p < 0.001$ ), and high levels of reward sensitivity ( $\beta = -0.18, t = -2.86, p < 0.01$ ). In *H3*, we predicted that at high levels of reward sensitivity felt job insecurity would relate positively to employee voice. Contrary to what we predicted, at high levels of reward sensitivity felt job insecurity was still negatively related to employee voice, albeit significantly less so than at low and average levels of reward sensitivity. The model explained 45 percent of the variance in employee voice.

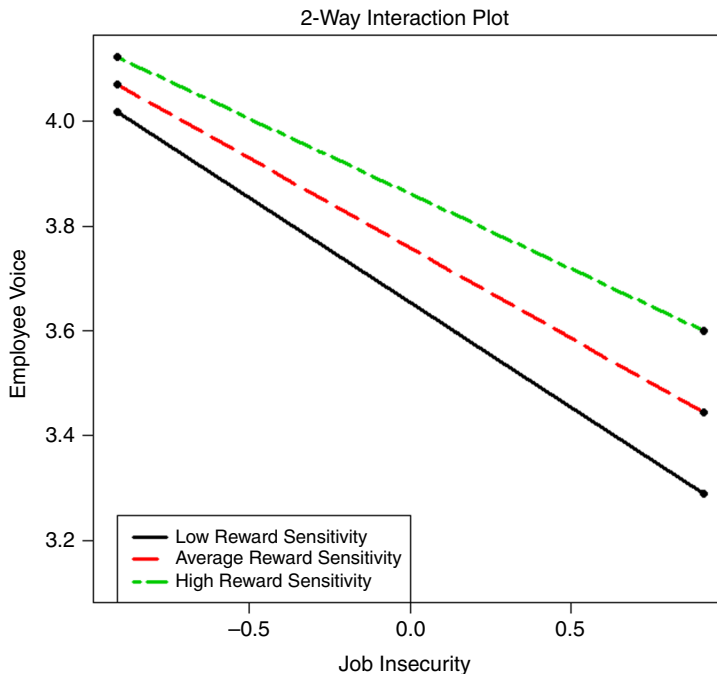
### Discussion

In this study, we developed and tested a model studying the association of felt job insecurity and voice behavior and how reward and punishment sensitivity moderated this relationship. We did so in order to accomplish two goals. One goal was to integrate insights from two largely disconnected streams of literature, that is, felt job insecurity and voice behavior. Consistent with the resource-loss explanation and in line with our expectations, we found felt job insecurity to negatively associate with employee voice behavior. The second goal was to generate insights into why some employees react to felt job insecurity by self-censoring their ideas and opinions, whereas others react by voicing them. Using reinforcement sensitivity theory (Gray, 1990) as a theoretical platform for developing our arguments, we proposed employees high on punishment sensitivity to feel more constrained in speaking up because felt job insecurity to them is



**Figure 1.** Standardized coefficients of main variables

Notes:  $n=232$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$



Speaking up  
when feeling  
job insecure

1119

**Figure 2.**  
Interactive effects of  
reward sensitivity  
and felt job  
insecurity on  
employee voice

akin to a threat. Employees high on reward sensitivity, in contrast, should see felt job insecurity as a challenge, making it more likely that they would speak up when their job is on the line.

Our results provide partial support for these hypotheses: punishment sensitivity seems not to aggravate the tendency in employees to refrain from speaking up when faced with felt job insecurity. Reward sensitivity, however, attenuates employees' concerns when faced with felt job insecurity making it more likely for them to voice their ideas and opinions (as compared to those low on reward sensitivity). However, even among high reward-sensitive employees the relationship between felt job insecurity and employee voice was negative, indicating that also for them felt job insecurity is more a threat than a challenge.

### *Theoretical implications*

Our findings suggest that employees, overall, appraise felt job insecurity as a hindrance rather than a challenge (see Staufenbiel and König, 2010). As such, our results are consistent with the majority of studies which find a negative relationship between felt job security and performance (Cheng and Chan, 2008; Gilbao *et al.*, 2008; Sverke *et al.*, 2002). The results are not supportive of the view that felt job insecurity may boost employees' performance as was found in a few studies (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2008, 2014; Probst, 2002; Probst *et al.*, 2007). One of the main differences between this study and the latter studies is the type of performance under investigation. De Cuyper *et al.* (2014) focussed on exemplification, an impression management behavior aimed at appearing hard working and loyal, and on number of hours worked. Probst *et al.* (2007) used productivity and task

proficiency as indicators of employee performance. Clearly, there is little risk in working hard and being productive, and therefore employees might rightfully assume that these behaviors will help them in safeguarding their job. Speaking up, on the other hand, is believed to be risky and requires courage (Detert and Edmondson, 2011). The resource-loss perspective on job insecurity posits that, when feeling insecure, employees lack the resources to engage in such effortful behavior. This may be particularly true when employees believe that their behavior may even increase chances of job loss. As such, a paradoxical situation emerges: in high-stake situations, such as organizational change, when employees' input is most needed, they are least likely to speak up.

Earlier studies investigating the relationship between felt job insecurity and voice relied predominantly on Hirschman's (1970) exit, voice, loyalty framework in conceptualizing voice. In these studies, voice is broadly operationalized as employees' willingness/ability to participate in decision making as a response to unsatisfying work conditions ("perceived ability to affect decisions," Berntson *et al.*, 2010; "involvement in union activities," Sverke and Goslinga, 2003; and, "inclination to make use of voice options," Sverke and Hellgren, 2001). Contemporary definitions of voice, however, differ from Hirschman's original conceptualization in that they see voice as an important form of extra-role behavior, rather than merely a response to unsatisfying conditions (Morrison, 2014). Accordingly, the current study contributes to theory by bridging two literatures that, to this point, have been largely separate: the literature on job insecurity and the literature on employee voice as extra-role behavior.

Our study also contributes to the literature on felt job insecurity and voice by introducing reward and punishment sensitivity as important, hitherto overlooked, moderating dispositions. In general, the idea that individual differences affect the way that employees react to feelings of job insecurity is not new and has been pursued in previous studies (e.g. Chirumbolo and Areni, 2010; König *et al.*, 2010; Näswall *et al.*, 2005; Schreurs *et al.*, 2010). Unlike previous studies, however, we examined dispositions from the perspective of Gray's (1990) reinforcement sensitivity theory of personality. Application of reinforcement sensitivity theory might extend current knowledge about this topic both empirically and conceptually.

Empirically, reinforcement sensitivity measures are claimed to surpass other personality measures (i.e. extraversion and neuroticism) in predicting interactions between the individual and the environment (Carver and White, 1994; Corr, 2004). The main reason for this is that the items in the BIS and BAS scales are, more than traditional measures, in line with the reactive nature of reward and punishment sensitivity, and therefore have higher predictive validity (Carver *et al.*, 2000; Gomez and Gomez, 2005). Conceptually, reinforcement sensitivity theory is much more coherent and explicit than other personality theories about the basic motivational processes underlying a person's reactions to the environment. The theory provides explanations for individual differences at different levels: the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional level (Carver and White, 1994; Corr, 2004). In addition, it allows for some clear predictions about the situations in which personality has the strongest impact on behavior and mood (van der Linden *et al.*, 2007). Hence, reinforcement sensitivity theory provides a powerful theoretical lens through which to study how interpersonal differences (i.e. reward and punishment sensitivity) moderate the effects of felt job insecurity.

We proposed that reward sensitivity would moderate the negative effect of felt job insecurity on employee voice, so that the relationship between felt job insecurity and employee voice would be positive among high reward-sensitive persons. The hypothesis was partially supported. We found reward sensitivity to buffer the negative effect of felt

job insecurity, but not to the extent that the direction of the relationship turned positive. The results are consistent with the idea that high reward-sensitive people appraise their feelings of job insecurity as less threatening than their low reward-sensitive counterparts, and add to the growing literature on dispositional moderators of felt job insecurity (Chirumbolo and Areni, 2010; König *et al.*, 2010; Näswall *et al.*, 2005; Schreurs *et al.*, 2010). However, the results do not support the idea that felt job insecurity is a driver for high reward-sensitive people to speak up. In line with Staufienbiel and König (2010), we interpret these findings as evidence that felt job insecurity can be appraised simultaneously as hindering and challenging, but that the hindrance appraisal aspect overrules the challenge appraisal. High reward-sensitive persons may be more likely than low reward-sensitive persons to appraise their job insecure situation as challenging. Yet, also in the former group, feelings of threat seem to predominate and dictate the effect of felt job insecurity.

We also proposed that punishment sensitivity would exacerbate the negative effect of felt job insecurity on employee voice, so that high punishment-sensitive persons would be less likely to speak up than would be low punishment-sensitive persons. Contrary to our prediction, high and low punishment-sensitive persons responded equally negatively to feelings of job insecurity. These findings suggest that feelings of job insecurity are unambiguously threatening, regardless of the level of punishment sensitivity. Even for low punishment-sensitive persons there may be little doubt that their situation is potentially harmful. This explanation aligns with our previous suggestion that felt job insecurity is predominantly appraised as a hindrance stressor. The hindrance appraisal may be so strong that even low punishment-sensitive persons undeniably experience the threat of looming job loss.

#### *Limitations and future research*

Our study is subject to a set of limitations that future research may want to overcome. First, in measuring our model variables, we relied on self-reports of employees exclusively, raising common-method concerns. The results of model comparisons showed that common-method variance may indeed have influenced the relationships between our study variables. These concerns, however, should be ameliorated by the fact that our primary interest was in moderation effects which are rather unlikely to be influenced by common-method bias (Evans, 1985). Nonetheless, we believe that future research investigating voice behavior should try use other-report measures for voice behavior in order to reconfirm the association between voice and felt job insecurity.

Similarly, all our data were collected at one point in time. Thus, because we did not establish temporal precedence of felt job insecurity relative to voice behavior (Aguinis and Edwards, 2014), we cannot fully rule out the possibility that voice behavior may have influenced felt job insecurity (i.e. the causal influence is in the opposite direction to what we expected). For instance, felt job insecurity may be higher in those employees who tend to voice their ideas and concerns often, as compared to employees who remain silent (e.g. because leaders may react defensively toward voice or signal in other ways that they disapprove of the voiced ideas and suggestions). Although conceivable, we believe this explanation to not hold for the data collected in the context of our study: we focussed on organizations that had announced impending organizational changes, thus, felt job insecurity was grounded in an objectively given change reality. That voice behavior would systematically alter employees' perceptions of these objectively given organizational changes (and associated job concerns) seems rather unlikely, and certainly less likely than that felt job insecurity influences voice behavior. Ultimately,



however, this remains an empirical question. To give a more definitive answer to this question, cross-lagged panel studies into the association between felt job insecurity and voice behavior seem imperative.

Although this study focussed on the moderating effects of reward and punishment sensitivity, future research should attempt to investigate mediating mechanisms that link sensitivity to perceptions of type of stressor and motivation to engage in voice behavior. For instance, research could examine whether individuals with high levels of reward sensitivity perceive stressful situations as a challenge and see an opportunity to better their positions by engaging in voice behavior. Likewise, future research should test whether individuals with high levels of punishment sensitivity perceive stressful situations as a hindrance and are afraid to speak up for fear of negative consequences.

It may also prove worthwhile for future research to consider other factors that may modify the relationship between felt job insecurity and voice. In our current research, we focussed on reward and punishment sensitivity as dispositional moderators of the felt job insecurity-voice relationship. Other factors that may lead employees to appraise their felt job insecurity differently are promotion and prevention focus (Higgins, 1998), and approach and avoidance motivation (Elliot and Thrash, 2002). Likewise, future research could extend this work by examining whether felt job insecurity is differentially related to different types of voice. For instance, felt job insecurity may be more strongly negatively related to challenging types of voice than to supportive types of voice, and to upward voice than to lateral voice, because both supportive and lateral voice are less risky.

#### *Practical implications*

Our findings have several implications for practice. Our findings indicate that managers should be especially wary of employee silence when organizations undergo change or when in economic distress, because perceived job insecurity – which negatively correlates with voice behavior – is typically heightened in such situations. This implies that organizations need to invest additional effort and time in eliciting ideas, opinions, and suggestions from employees in times of change when perceived uncertainty and job insecurity is likely to be elevated. Taking this one step further would imply that organizations also need to pay particular attention to temporary employees and other employees in precarious work situations because these employees might experience chronically high levels of job insecurity, which, in turn, may cause them to remain silent.

Results of our study have implications for selection decisions, particularly for selecting people into boundary spanning positions and positions that require monitoring compliance with legal, safety, accounting, and financial laws and regulations. Boundary spanning jobs are inherently stressful, yet it is important that people in such jobs speak up against policies and procedures that are not helping but hindering the organization. Likewise, individuals entrusted with compliance face increasing pressures to cut corners and show compliance which in the long run may hurt the organization. Selecting individuals with high levels of reward sensitivity into such jobs will reduce the tendency to cover up.

#### **Conclusion**

Competitive forces are driving organizations to undertake change at an unprecedented rate. Thus, it is not surprising that employees are experiencing feelings of job insecurity more frequently than ever. In the present study, we investigated the extent to

which felt job insecurity facilitates or hinders employees from speaking up to their authority (i.e. employee voice). We found that felt job insecurity acted as a hindrance stressor: job insecure employees were reluctant to speak up, presumably because they lack the resources needed to engage in employee voice. Felt job insecurity also acted as a barrier for high reward-sensitive employees (those who tend to see the chances that a new situation offers), but to a somewhat lesser extent. The overall conclusion of this study is that in high-stake situations, such as organizational change, when employees' input may be most needed, they are least likely to speak up. This study matters because it integrates two largely disconnected streams of literature, that is, felt job insecurity and voice behavior, and generates new insights into why some employees more than others react to felt job insecurity by self-censoring their ideas and opinions.

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