



International Journal of Organizational Analysis

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Andrew R Timming Stewart Johnstone , (2015), "Employee silence and the authoritarian personality", International Journal of Organizational Analysis, Vol. 23 Iss 1 pp. 154 - 171

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-06-2013-0685>

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Employee silence and the authoritarian personality

A political psychology of workplace democracy

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to, drawing from Adorno *et al.*'s (1950) *The Authoritarian Personality*, explain why some workers reject participation in decision-making on principle, preferring instead to defer to managerial authority and remain silent.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reviews the literatures on employee voice and silence and then builds a conceptual framework that can be used to explain employee silence in relation to personality structures.

Findings – It is argued that some employees have personality structures that make them more susceptible to anti-democratic thoughts. Potentially fascistic personalities, as measured by the F-scale, are expected to derive pleasure in submission to the will of management.

Research limitations/implications – The paper has implications for political and social psychologists, especially those seeking to understand how best to promote employee voice in the workplace.

Originality/value – This study makes an original contribution to the employee voice and silence literatures by being among the first of its kind to examine the political psychology of fascism in the micro-context of the workplace.

Keywords Authoritarian personality, Employee voice, Fascism, F-scale, Silence

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The vast literature on employee involvement and participation generally posits that voice is something that managements offer (or not) to employees. It does not typically question the extent to which voice is something that employees want. This is not a simple matter of splitting hairs. Whether or not a particular organisation offers a mechanism through which its employees can be involved in decision-making is quite a separate issue from whether or not the employees want to be involved in the first place. Whilst there is a plethora of research on the effects of voice on organisations and employees, there is a dearth of research on the political psychology of whether or not employees want to participate in decision-making.

The authors want to thank the editor and reviewers for helpful suggestions on the manuscript. The authors also want to thank Matthias Benzer for his advice on Adorno.



Drawing from Adorno *et al.*'s (1950) classic study, *The Authoritarian Personality*, this investigation explores theoretically the political psychology of employees' personality structures, particularly in reference to the concept of workplace democracy. Recognising the limitations (methodological and otherwise) of the authoritarian personality theory (Martin, 2001), and of the corresponding F-scale (Ray, 1984), the paper nevertheless seeks to re-frame the current debate surrounding employee voice away from the dominant question of whether or not managements *offer* voice to workers, and towards a more comprehensive theoretical model, which additionally questions whether or not workers *want* to be involved in decision-making.

The following section examines the current state of the employee voice and silence literatures and identifies a gap that this paper fills. After that, the basic tenets of the authoritarian personality theory are discussed and critiqued. The concept of employee voice is then combined with the authoritarian personality theory to provide a framework through which the political psychology of workplace democracy can be analysed. Lastly, the implications of the paper are discussed and avenues for future empirical research are proposed.

Previous work on employee voice and silence

Employee voice

Employee participation and involvement in decision-making are well-established areas of research and have attracted interest from a wide range of social science perspectives in recent years. The term employee voice, in particular, has become fashionable in contemporary human resource management (HRM). Academic discussions of voice often reflect upon the work of Hirschman (1970, p. 30) who, in the context of consumer relationships, contrasted "voice" with "exit" or "suffering in silence". Similarly, LePine and Van Dyne (1998, p. 853) define voice as "speaking out and challenging the status quo with the intent of improving the situation". However, employee voice can potentially also be in favour of the status quo and in support of existing organisational practices (Burriss *et al.*, 2012). Universally acceptable definitions of voice thus remain elusive, and the relationship with related terms such as participation remains blurred (Budd *et al.*, 2010).

In a recent attempt to synthesise a wide range of disparate definitions, Morrison (2011) suggests that voice is normally used to refer to verbal dialogue which is upward, constructive, proactive and discretionary in nature. Whilst this might fit within the context of a mainstream HRM conceptualisation of voice, interest in the expression of voice far precedes the relatively recent birth of human resources. Employee involvement in decision-making has been discussed in the management literature since at least the 1930s (Handel and Levine, 2004), and the participation of employees in organisational decisions has always been a core concern of the industrial relations field (Webb and Webb, 1897).

However, despite the wealth of research on the topic, scholars' understanding of employee voice is still hindered by several factors. First, there remains a lack of agreement regarding the rationale and motives for voice provision. Industrial relations commentators, on the one hand, are primarily interested in issues of industrial citizenship and social democracy. Employee voice is thus viewed as a right in modern democratic societies, in contrast to the more authoritarian and Taylorist workplace regimes, which are believed to undermine the idea of liberal capitalist democracy. On the

other hand, commentators writing from an HRM perspective tend to emphasise how giving employees a voice can make good business sense and hence improve organisational performance. The assumption is that employee voice is a potential means of unlocking and capturing discretionary effort that can benefit organisations. Feeling heard, it is argued, can also improve employee satisfaction and motivation (Burris *et al.*, 2012).

Inevitably the two perspectives result in different views regarding the most appropriate and effective means of expressing employee voice. For most industrial relations commentators, the focus on improving working conditions, combined with an imbalance of power between employers and employees, means collective employee representation and joint regulation through trade unions and collective bargaining are the best vehicles for expressing employee voice. From an HRM perspective, where voice is viewed more in terms of potential links to business performance, employers tend to favour more individualistic, direct and task-centred employee involvement initiatives. In turn, the two perspectives result in a lack of agreement regarding the scope of employee voice and the range of issues that should be on – or indeed kept off – the agenda. These tensions are compounded by the fact that the same terminology is often applied to a diverse range of organisational voice practices, meaning that the names of the voice practices used reveal very little about their purpose, operation or motives.

Yet, while a steady stream of research has examined the various motives, processes and outcomes of employee voice, less attention has been paid to fully exploring the crucial issue of employee demand and utilisation of “voice opportunities” (Avery and Quiñones, 2002). The advocates of employee voice generally assume that voice is, in some way, a “good thing” for workers and organisations (Timming, 2012), and that therefore they ought to want it. Yet, some studies report how workers who are the targets and recipients of voice initiatives – both task-centred and power-centred – can demonstrate apathy, ambivalence and even cynicism towards such channels, whilst others have suggested that speaking up can result in negative employee outcomes (Milliken *et al.*, 2003). For this reason, employee voice is best conceptualised alongside the related concept of employee silence.

Employee silence

Whilst managements have a degree of latitude in shaping the channels and mechanisms of employee voice, employees also have a choice regarding how and whether they wish to use such mechanisms. Some employees might not choose voice despite potentially having something to express, and the availability of voice channels (Harlos, 2010). There is a need, therefore, to understand more about why workers may or may not *want* to take up voice opportunities even when they may have something meaningful to say (Detert and Edmondson, 2011; Greenberg and Edwards, 2009). Some progress in addressing this issue has been made in the evolving employee silence literature.

Again, there is firstly a need to understand exactly what constitutes employee silence, and several definitions have been proffered. Van Dyne *et al.* (2003) have defined silence as “intentionally withholding ideas, information, and opinions with relevance to improvements in work and work organisations”. From this perspective, silence is when employees choose not to share or express their opinions or ideas; silence is not about failing to communicate or having nothing to say. This definition focuses on ideas concerning organisational improvements, reflecting a business, rather than an ethical,

case for voice. The implication is that a dominant pattern of silence among employees results in a climate of organisational silence, which can seriously impede organisational decision-making and performance (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

There is also a need to consider how silence relates to employee voice. However, it remains unclear whether silence should be viewed as the opposite of voice, or whether it is best understood as a distinctive construct (Ashford *et al.*, 2009). On the one hand, it is possible that employees make a simple choice between expressing their views (voice) or keeping quiet (silence). Silence can thus be viewed as the antithesis of voice (Donaghey *et al.*, 2011). On the other hand, while voice can be viewed as a deliberate choice, silence might be not be a conscious decision, but the result of more general feelings of disengagement, psychological withdrawal or simply having nothing to say. The absence of intentional silence, defined as the deliberate withholding of information, does not mean the presence of voice behaviour (Brinsfield, 2012). Silence and voice can thus both be thought of as complex and multi-dimensional constructs (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003), and understanding the different motives for silence is therefore crucial. In this respect, Pinder and Harlos (2001) make a useful distinction between acquiescent silence (where employees passively withhold ideas) and quiescent silence (where employees actively withhold ideas for a particular reason). This concept is developed further by Van Dyne *et al.* (2003), who suggest that silence and voice can both have acquiescent, defensive and prosocial forms.

Where employees deliberately refrain from speaking up, there is a whole range of possible reasons. While much of the extant research has focused on silence as a “risk avoidance” strategy, recent studies suggest a wider range of explanations for silence, including deviant behaviour, to avoid damaging a relationship, fear of speaking up, lack of confidence, perceived ineffectiveness and general disengagement (Brinsfield, 2012).

The relationship between voice and silence is further complicated by the possibility that employees might decide to voice concerns about certain issues while remaining silent about some others, depending on both the nature of the issues or the particular period of time. For example, Ryan and Oestreich (1998) suggest that concerns about issues such as pay inequity, managerial incompetence and decision-making procedures are often considered to be difficult to raise. The situation is further complicated, depending on whether or not the voice is challenging or supporting the status quo. The former is most likely to be met by resistance from managers and potentially generate conflict (Burris *et al.*, 2012). Patterns of employee voice and silence are therefore neither fixed nor absolute, reflecting the discretionary nature of employee voice behaviour (Morrison, 2011).

Given that variations in patterns of employee voice and silence are dynamic, both within and between organisations, several studies have attempted to explain employee inclinations towards both voice and silence, the factors that shape these choices and the types of issues more likely to be associated with silence (Milliken and Morrison, 2003). Several organisational and individual factors have been identified as potentially influencing the propensity for voice or silence, respectively.

In understanding variations between, and dominant patterns within, organisations, one can consider how “favourable” the organisational context is for promoting voice, and the nature of organisational norms (Argyris, 1977). Relevant factors that might influence the contextual “favourability” include formal organisational structure, levels of hierarchy and status differences, the behaviour of managers and supervisors and the

general organisational culture and climate (Morrison, 2011; Wang and Hsieh, 2013). These factors can, in turn, influence the perceived consequences of voice. Where the consequences are perceived to be negative, this could actively discourage employees from speaking up, such as fear of repercussions, being labelled as a troublemaker, isolation from peers and an uneasiness communicating “bad news” (Milliken *et al.*, 2003). A commitment to pluralism, which values different perspectives and opinions, is likely to be very important in promoting the expression of voice (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). However, in addition to perceptions of negative consequences, employees may also perceive that their input will simply not make a difference (Ryan and Oestreich, 1998) in reference to pseudo-voice opportunities (Pateman, 1970) where employee opinions are not taken seriously (Vries *et al.*, 2012).

In this sense, the choice between voice and silence can be viewed as one that is mediated by the balance of contextual factors that determine organisational favourability, as well as a balance of the factors that determine the perceived efficacy of voice (Milliken *et al.*, 2003). Other analysts, who also emphasise the importance of context, are less convinced that employees necessarily make voice decisions by conducting a calculated cost/benefit analysis, and highlight instead the importance of social and political relationships. Equally, it is possible that employers may also have an interest in perpetuating silence over certain issues to protect their managerial prerogative (Donaghey *et al.*, 2011) or because they believe employees to be self-interested or that managers know best (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

So, where do these literature on voice and silence leave us? What gaps are there to fill? How can this study fill these gaps? On the whole, it can be concluded based on this literature review that: management can choose (or not) to offer voice to employees, and when voice is offered, it is generally thought of as being good for employees and for organisations. We also know, based on this literature review, that employees can choose (or not) to be silent when offered voice and that most choices to be silent or to speak up are conceptualised in relation to the contextual environment in which employees find themselves. The fact that voice and silence are conceptualised in terms of external and environmental factors is not a bad approach. Voice and silence are thus strongly sociological concepts. But they are also psychological constructs characterised by a large degree of introspection. As such, the decision to speak up or to remain silent has arguably as much to do with internal personality structure as it does with external organisational structure. In short, there is a need for a much more in-depth treatment of the internal and social psychological dynamics surrounding attitudes towards workplace democracy. More specifically, there is a clear need to explore why some employees might choose to remain silent even when voice is offered, especially in light of the fact that voice is widely regarded as a good thing.

We are not arguing that voice and silence have never been examined from the point of view of personality structure. Several extent studies have incorporated psychological variables. For example, LePine and Van Dyne (2001) examined voice and silence as a product of individual personality characteristics. Similarly, Premeaux and Bedeian (2003) looked at voice in relation to self-monitoring personality structures, and Harlos (2010) has examined the relationship between person-centred characteristics such as gender and work self-esteem, and the use of formal voice mechanisms. Although Van Dyne *et al.* (2003, p. 1383) do not explicitly include personality structure into their model of employee silence, they acknowledge that personality is a moderating relationship that should “be added to the model”. The present study thus adds to these contributions by focusing specifically on one

particular form of personality structure that has heretofore never been explored in the context of the employee voice and silence literatures: the authoritarian personality.

The authoritarian personality theory

The authoritarian personality theory can be situated in the broader context of the Frankfurt School (Jay, 1996; Bottomore, 2002; Tarr, 2011), the key members of which include: founder Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Friedrich Pollock and later Jurgen Habermas, among others. Though it would be inadvisable to paint the Frankfurt scholars with the same brush – they are not, after all, simply a homogenous group of “Jewish Marxists” who always agreed with one another (Hohendahl, 1985) – there are nevertheless some underlying commonalities that appear to coalesce into an identifiable school of thought. The Frankfurt scholars, both pre-World War II (WWII) and post-WWII, were influenced strongly by Marx, but Hegel, Weber, Kant, Lukács and particularly Freud were also formative voices in the development of what is known today as critical theory (Held, 1991). The origins of the Frankfurt School can be traced back to various historico-cultural contexts, including:

[...] the defeat of left-wing working-class movements in Western Europe after the first world war, the collapse of left-wing parties in Germany [...] the degeneration of the Russian revolution into Stalinism and the rise of fascism and Nazism (Held, 1991, p. 208).

It was the ascendancy of the Third Reich that planted the seeds that would later grow into a major production of the Frankfurt School: *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno *et al.*, 1950). In the study’s forward, Horkheimer and Flowerman (1950, p. v) pose a question: “How could [men] explain the willingness of great masses of people to tolerate the mass extermination of their fellow citizens?”. The authors sought to understand not so much the nature of fascism as an ideology, but rather the inexplicably warm reception it received in the broader society. To explain the acceptance of the rise of the likes of Hitler and Mussolini, Adorno and his colleagues posited the existence of an authoritarian personality type, or syndrome, marked by anti-democratic tendencies and extreme obsequiousness to authority.

The Authoritarian Personality sits curiously within the context of Adorno’s wider *oeuvre*. Indeed, the Frankfurt School, with its emphasis on culture and ideology, is almost universally recognised as anti-positivist in philosophical orientation (Agger, 1992). All of the Frankfurt scholars shared the same skepticism that social scientists could discover social laws, much like natural scientists discover natural laws (Carr, 2005). Adorno and Popper famously engaged in a “positivismusstreit”, a debate on positivism (Fuller, 2003), with the former rounding harshly on the idea that logical empiricism can lead to truth. Yet, *The Authoritarian Personality*, from a point of view, could ironically be read as a study in positivist social psychology. Its use of social statistical methodology and explicit attempt to identify personality types set it quite apart from the conversely interpretive and hermeneutic body of Frankfurt studies.

The “major concern [in *The Authoritarian Personality* is] with the *potentially fascist* individual, one whose structure is such as to render him particularly susceptible to anti-democratic propaganda” (Adorno *et al.*, 1950, p. 1). The study “began with anti-Semitism in the focus of attention” (Adorno *et al.*, 1950, p. 2) and “leaned most heavily upon Freud” (Adorno *et al.*, 1950, p. 5). Anti-democratic tendencies within the individual can thus, according to classic Freudian tenets, be traced back to repressive

(sexual and otherwise) childhood experiences within the family structure. The researchers, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, sought to draw “inferences about the deeper layers of the subject’s personality” (Adorno *et al.*, 1950, p. 17), particularly with respect to anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism and ideological prejudice. In short, they argued that the authoritarian personality is composed of nine interrelated latent constructs, each of which is listed as follows:

- (1) *Conventionalism*. Rigid adherence to conventional, middle-class values:
 - Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.
 - A person who has bad manners, habits and breeding can hardly expect to get along with decent people.
 - If people would talk less and work more, everybody would be better off.
 - The business man and the manufacturer are much more important to society than the artist and the professor.
- (2) *Authoritarian submission*. Submissive, uncritical attitude toward idealized moral authorities of the ingroup:
 - Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.
 - Science has its place, but there are many important things that can never possibly be understood by the human mind.
 - Every person should have complete faith in some supernatural power whose decisions he obeys without question.
 - Young people sometimes get rebellious ideas, but as they grow up they ought to get over them and settle down.
 - What this country needs most, more than laws and political programs, is a few courageous, tireless, devoted leaders in whom the people can put their faith.
 - No sane, normal, decent person could ever think of hurting a close friend or relative.
 - Nobody ever learned anything really important except through suffering.
- (3) *Authoritarian aggression*. Tendency to be on the lookout for, and to condemn, reject and punish people who violate conventional values:
 - A person who has bad manners, habits and breeding can hardly expect to get along with decent people.
 - What the youth needs most is strict discipline, rugged determination and the will to work and fight for family and country.
 - An insult to our honour should always be punished.
 - Sex crimes, such as rape and attacks on children, deserve more than mere imprisonment, such criminals ought to be publicly whipped or worse.
 - There is hardly anything lower than a person who does not feel a great love, gratitude and respect for his parents.
 - Most of our social problems would be solved if we could somehow get rid of the immoral, crooked and feeble-minded people.

- If people would talk less and work more, everybody would be better off.
 - Homosexuals are hardly better than criminals and ought to be severely punished.
- (4) *Anti-intracception*. Opposition to the subjective, the imaginative, the tender-minded:
- When a person has a problem or worry, it is best for him not to think about it, but to keep busy with more cheerful things.
 - Nowadays, more and more people are prying into matters that should remain personal and private.
 - If people would talk less and work more, everybody would be better off.
 - The businessman and the manufacturer are much more important to society than the artist and the professor.
- (5) *Superstition and stereotypy*. The belief in mystical determinants of the individual's fate; the disposition to think in rigid categories:
- Science has its place, but there are many important things that can never possibly be understood by the human mind.
 - Every person should have complete faith in some supernatural power whose decision he obeys without question.
 - Some people are born with an urge to jump from high places.
 - People can be divided into two distinct classes: the weak and the strong.
 - Someday it will probably be shown that astrology can explain a lot of things.
 - Wars and social troubles may someday be ended by an earthquake or flood that will destroy the whole world.
- (6) *Power and "toughness"*. Preoccupation with the dominance–submission, strong–weak, leader–follower dimension; identification with power figures; overemphasis on the conventionalized attributes of the ego; exaggerated assertion of strength and toughness:
- No weakness or difficulty can hold us back if we have enough will power.
 - What the youth needs most is strict discipline, rugged determination and the will to work and fight for family and country.
 - An insult to our honour should always be punished.
 - It is best to use some prewar authorities in Germany to keep order and prevent chaos.
 - What this country needs most, more than laws and political programs, is a few courageous, tireless, devoted leaders in whom the people can put their faith.
 - People can be divided into two distinct classes: the weak and the strong.
 - Most people do not realize how much our lives are controlled by plots hatched in secret places.
- (7) *Destructiveness and cynicism*. Generalized hostility, vilification of the human:
- Human nature being what it is, there will always be war and conflict.
 - Familiarity breeds contempt.

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- (8) *Projectivity*. The disposition to believe that wild and dangerous things go on in the world; the projection outwards of unconscious emotional impulses:
- Nowadays, when so many different kinds of people move around and mix together so much, a persona has to protect himself especially carefully against catching an infection or disease from them.
 - Nowadays, more and more people are prying into matters that should remain personal and private.
 - Wars and social troubles may someday be ended by an earthquake or flood that will destroy the whole world.
 - The wild sex life of the old Greeks and Romans was tame compared to some of the goings-on in this country, even in places where people might least expect it.
 - Most people do not realize how much our lives are controlled by plots hatched in secret places.
- (9) *Sex*. Exaggerated concern with sexual “goings-on”:
- Sex crimes, such as rape and attacks on children, deserve more than mere imprisonment, such criminals ought to be publicly whipped, or worse.
 - The wild sex life of the old Greeks and Romans was tame compared to some of the goings-on in this country, even in places where people might least expect it.
 - Homosexuals are hardly better than criminals and ought to be severely punished (Sanford *et al.*, 1950).

The above nine interrelated latent constructs summarise the F-scale, a “quantification of antidemocratic trends at the level of personality” (Sanford *et al.*, 1950, p. 223). It assumes that respondents scoring highly on each of the nine dimensions suffer from an anti-democratic personality structure. The items that make up the F-scale (Sanford *et al.*, 1950, pp. 226-227) attempt to measure fascism indirectly. As Benzer (2011, p. 65) points out, “[a]lthough these “items” contained no explicitly fascist or anti-Semitic ideas, the respondents’ evaluations were supposed to disclose attitudinal patterns”. The objective of the instrument was to tap respondents’ “secret” thoughts (Adorno *et al.*, 1950, p. 4) and consequently relay a quantitative score that is indicative of one’s general disposition toward fascism.

According to Adorno and his colleagues, the fascist individual shares several traits in common, including: an obsession with conventional, middle-class values; total submission to the authority of the country’s leaders; aggression toward anyone critical of leaders and conventional, middle class values; opposition to subjectivity, imagination, and tender-mindedness; a belief in the supernatural and a tendency to stereotype; disdain for weakness and a preoccupation with strength; a cynical hostility toward human beings; belief that the world is dangerous and out of control; and an obsession with sex and sexuality.

As Benzer (2011, p. 65) notes, *The Authoritarian Personality* has “attracted severe methodological criticism”, including Hyman and Sheatsley (1954), Ray (1984) and Samuelson (1992). These critiques mainly centre around the poverty of the psychometric methods that were used to design and validate the F-scale. Martin (2001, p. 1) even goes

so far as to argue that *The Authoritarian Personality* is “probably the most deeply flawed work of prominence in political psychology”. His critique focuses on what he perceived to be deep-seated methodological bias in the study. Other researchers argue that authoritarianism is more of an attitude than a personality structure (Roiser and Willig, 2002). Still, others (Lasch, 1991; Zizek, 2006) slammed Adorno *et al.* (1950) for suggesting that left-wing ideology implies mental sanity, whilst right-wing politics imply a psychiatric illness.

Whilst it is important to recognise such criticisms, it is equally important to recognise the study’s strengths. Brewster Smith (1997, p. 159), for example, notes that “*n spite of warranted criticisms of the F-scale, the major substantive findings of TAP [The Authoritarian Personality] have held up well*”. Similarly, Meloen (1993) presents meta-analytic evidence over decades that supports the validity of the F-scale and its predictive ability. The major strengths of Adorno *et al.* (1950) are at least three. First, the items in the F-scale were developed not in isolation, but rather on the basis of many in-depth qualitative interviews that provided conceptual direction. Second, the F-scale is the end result of a long process that went through multiple iterations and modifications before it was finalised. Third, the scale has been validated time and again among political and social psychologists. These three strengths justify why the authoritarian personality theory was used in this paper.

A political psychology of workplace democracy

The authoritarian personality theory was always meant to be a macro-level conceptual framework aimed at linking personality to the broader societal structure. It was never meant to be a micro-level framework with applications to organisations and workplaces. So, to the extent that it can be transposed at the level of the workplace, one can expect some teething problems. But there have already been several examples of the integration of fundamentally social theory in the micro-context of the workplace (Thompson, 1989; Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Korczynski *et al.*, 2006). So, it would seem that nothing precludes the application of the authoritarian personality theory to the micro-political context of workplace democracy.

Having said that, Adorno *et al.* (1950) made no reference whatsoever to the concept of employee voice, so one can only extrapolate how their framework might be integrated into a political psychology of employee participation. In short, it can be argued that employees suffering from the authoritarian personality ultimately take “pleasure in obedience and subordination” (Adorno, 1950a, p. 759), in this case, to the will of capital and the employer. They are, therefore, likely to oppose trade unions by virtue of the fact that they pose a real challenge to leaders’ decision-making authority. But similarly, they are also likely to oppose any employer-initiated forms of workplace democracy because authoritarians are categorically opposed to joint decision-making.

Subjects scoring highly on the F-scale, and thus exhibiting a potentially fascistic character, were also interrogated by the researchers in the context of qualitative interviews in respect to their views on labour unions. Adorno (1950b, p. 704) conclude that one who suffers from the authoritarian personality disorder would like “to do away with unions altogether”. This type of authoritarian was described as a:

“company man”, and consequently, as having the company point of view. When he works for a company, he is one hundred per cent for that company’s interests, otherwise he would not stay with them (Adorno, 1950b, p. 707).

Drawing a Freudian/Oedipal metaphor, Adorno and his colleagues assumed “that the typical high scorers [on the F-scale], above all, fear the father and try to side with him” (Adorno, 1950b, p. 709). In this metaphor, the authoritarian worker views the employer as a father figure and thus always sides with paternal interests, rather than “run the risk of arousing the father’s anger – and hence the subject’s castration anxiety” (Adorno, 1950b, p. 709), whereby castration could refer to the power to render one unemployed. Conclusions such as these, it should be noted, resonate closely with Reich (1980), who argued that fascist tendencies are directly related to sexual repression.

These passages from *The Authoritarian Personality*, however, appear to suffer from a major flaw. They assume – wrongly – that if workers choose to promote their own material interests, for example, through labour unions or participation in decision-making, they are, by default, choosing to go against the interests of the employer or organisation, as if one party wins at the expense of the other. Whilst there may be some element of win-lose dynamics in the employment relationship (Kelly, 1998), there is also plenty of evidence to suggest that employee voice delivers mutual gains for employers and employees (Lewin, 2011). But, despite this limitation, the authoritarian personality theory can be used to explain not only why an employee would choose (or not) to join a union but also why he or she would want (or not) to have a voice in the workplace.

In short, it is expected that those who score highly on the F-scale, thus exhibiting strong authoritarian tendencies, will reject employee involvement in decision-making on principle, preferring instead to defer to managerial authority. Conversely, low-scoring respondents will likely seek a pro-active voice in the workplace, evincing a healthy dose of scepticism towards the notion that managements always know best. Whether or not these assumptions are true is ultimately an empirical question. The mechanism underlying them is an important theoretical question that can serve as a starting point for an empirical investigation.

Although it would be an interesting academic exercise to ask whether or not fear of castration or sexual repression are somehow linked to whether or not an employee wants to have a voice in the workplace, this would hardly be a practical question to ask. Setting aside the academic question of repressed sexuality and some metaphoric fear of castration, Adorno *et al.*'s (1950) framework can still be used to ask, practically speaking, what type of personality structures are likely to embrace and/or reject workplace democracy. Furthermore, this question is easily testable, empirically speaking. It would not make much sense to attempt to correlate individual items in the F-scale with support for the concept of workplace democracy. After all, as Sanford *et al.* (1950, p. 242) point out, “no item taken by itself could be regarded as diagnostic of potential fascism”. But having said that, seven of the nine latent variables articulated above could reasonably be expected to correlate with the extent to which an employee might want to participate in decision-making.

For example, conventionalism could be expected to correlate negatively with support for employee voice. The conventionalistic individual prefers normative workplace power structures and “could in good conscience follow the dictates of the external agency wherever they might lead him” (Sanford *et al.*, 1950, p. 230). Authoritarian submission and authoritarian aggression, two hallmarks of the fascistic individual, are expected to relate negatively to support for workplace democracy. The propensity to submit to authority, the emotional need for a strong leader, and the condemning of anyone who challenges the

powers-that-be are potential indicators of resistance to worker empowerment. Anti-intracception, defined as opposition to subjectivity and imagination, could be associated with negative attitudes towards employee voice inasmuch as voice, by definition, is subjective. What Sanford *et al.* (1950, pp. 237-238) refer to as power and “toughness” might reasonably correlate negatively with support for employee voice. Subjects scoring highly on this latent variable are obsessed with power figures and the dynamics of dominance–submission, strength–weakness and leadership–followership. They admire “power in others and [are] inclined to submit to it” (Sanford *et al.*, 1950, p. 237). Destructiveness and cynicism, characterised by an intense hostility towards that which is human, clearly lends itself to an opposition to employee voice. If human beings are perceived generally as worthless, they are unlikely to have any opinions that matter in the workplace. Finally, projectivity, or the belief that the world is a wild and dangerous place, might be associated negatively with support for workplace democracy. If indeed the world is wild and dangerous, then it might follow logically that strong, decisive leaders are the only means of salvation to ensure the future of the organisation.

The remaining two latent constructs in the F-scale, sex and “superstition and stereotypy”, are perhaps not as obviously related to support for employee voice as the other seven. There would appear to be no *a priori* reason to believe, for example, that an exaggerated preoccupation with sex and sexuality would have any bearing on whether or not one desires to have a voice in the workplace. Similarly, belief in the supernatural and mystical is not clearly and unambiguously related to attitudes toward employee involvement and participation. But just because these two variables are not likely to correlate with support for workplace democracy does not imply that those relationships should remain unexplored empirically.

In sum, the key question this paper seeks to answer is: why might an employee not want to have a voice in the workplace? If, as established earlier, employee voice delivers multiple benefits to the employee, then why exactly would one elect not to exercise one’s voice, or indeed prefer that others remain quiet as well? It appears that there must be a countervailing force, quite possibly an authoritarian personality structure, that compels the individual away from democracy and towards silence and subservience.

Implications and future research

Looking at the big picture, this paper has broad, and practical, implications in the area of employee silence (Wolfe Morrison and Milliken, 2000, 2003; Vakola and Bouradas, 2005; Fletcher and Watson, 2007; Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008; Greenberg and Edwards, 2009; Donaghey *et al.*, 2011). The literature on employee voice is vast and dominant, whereas the literature on employee silence is smaller, yet emergent. Voice and silence, participation and non-participation, involvement and non-involvement are two sides of the same coin: the one that cannot be fully grasped without a theoretical and empirical understanding of the other. Of course, it is easy to explain employee silence when the employer offers no voice. There are power dynamics in the employment relationship such that employers can choose to silence workers simply by not providing the mechanisms for voice (Willman *et al.*, 2006). But precisely why some employees choose silence over and above voice even when the mechanisms for participation are in place is not fully understood.

This paper has provided a tentative explanation to this conundrum. Resistance to employee voice and workplace democracy, it is argued, is rooted in one’s personality

structure. In particular, the paper argues that some employees derive pleasure in obedience and subservience to the will of the employer. Such employees are said to suffer from an authoritarian personality syndrome, “a more or less enduring structure in the person that renders him receptive to antidemocratic propaganda” (Sanford *et al.*, 1950, p. 228). They prefer total and absolute submission to revered leaders and take offense to the idea that employees should participate in decision-making. This contempt for democracy in the workplace stands firm even in the face of evidence linking employee voice to any number of clear benefits for the employee.

The paper obviously invites further inquiry and empirical analysis, and hopes to serve as a theoretical foundation for such investigations. The next step, clearly, is to conduct an empirical analysis, most likely some sort of latent variable model, to test the integrity of the theory articulated in this paper. Such a study should throw some light on the scope of the authoritarian personality and its effects. Simultaneously, some qualitative research is to discover not just whether or not some employees prefer silence over voice, but why this might be the case. Another avenue, in light of the criticism surrounding Adorno *et al.* (1950), might be to use a set of alternative measures of the authoritarian personality. For example, Altemeyer (1981) is widely recognised (for example, see Martin, 2001) as providing a comparatively more robust, or at least a more contemporaneous, set of quantitative measures of what he has referred to as “right-wing authoritarianism”.

A further area of future research is to evaluate the impact of the authoritarian personality on calls for a more multi-cultural workplace. Multi-culturalism draws heavily from the literature on workplace discrimination, diversity and inclusion (see Ozbilgin, 2009 for an overview). This framework assumes that all groups of workers should be given an equal voice at work, and that the silencing of certain groups of employees over and above others is oftentimes a consequence of employer discrimination (Bell *et al.*, 2011). The authoritarian personality theory could present a potential challenge to this assumption. Again, this is an empirical question that can only be answered through the collection of quantitative and qualitative data on authoritarianism, multi-culturalism and employee voice.

Another idea for future research surrounds the potential for authoritarian personalities to thrive within the union movement, not just the workplace. There are links here to longstanding questions surrounding the nature of union democracy, and in particular Michels (1962) “iron law of oligarchy” thesis, which suggests that even organisations committed to the principles of democracy, such as unions, will eventually – and inevitably – become dominated by a small elite. For some, union democracy is possible given the presence of specific contextual factors (Lipset *et al.*, 1956), but is likely to be very much the exception that proves the rule. Again, this would be an interesting area for empirical enquiry and theories of authoritarianism could provide a useful theoretical framework.

One last area that lends itself to further research is that, whilst the present study has focused on authoritarianism and the motivation to make voice heard, authoritarianism could also be examined by considering the potential to silence the voice of others. Processes such as agenda setting and influencing, which cannot necessarily be easily observed, might perpetuate silence on certain issues. Often, it is assumed to be management who might wish to leave particular topics untouched (Donaghey *et al.*, 2011), though it is plausible that employees would also prefer not to raise some issues.

In conclusion, no paper is without limitations and shortcomings. The most obvious are the questionable theoretical foundations of the authoritarian personality theory. It is true, as established previously, that Adorno *et al.* (1950) suffers from some damaging methodological flaws (Hyman and Sheatsley, 1954; Ray, 1984; Samuelson, 1992; Martin, 2001). But one must be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. This holds particularly true because the hypothesised relationships have not been tested empirically. Despite the potential flaws of this framework, critical judgement should be withheld at least until the paper's theory has been proved false through rigorous investigation.

Another limitation may be the (lack of) timeliness of the framework. One could certainly question the extent to which authoritarianism is as relevant today as it was in the 1950s, when the F-scale was first developed. Right-wing authoritarian political regimes have been displaced, at least in Western societies. In a similar vein, one could argue that other pathological personality structures have risen in prominence and taken the place of authoritarianism. For example, Lasch (1979) has highlighted narcissism as the defining trait of the modern age. One could even go so far as to argue that the emergence of narcissism explains why employee "voice" has become an important issue in the field of HRM. After all, narcissists want nothing more than to have their voices heard. These critiques are perfectly valid and suggest that the authoritarian personality theory may just be the tip of the iceberg. In many ways, the hallmark of a successful research paper is whether it generates more questions than it started with.

One should not permit the limitations of a study to cast a dark shadow over its strengths, at least five of which deserve mention in conclusion. First, this paper effects a welcome change in dialogue away from the dominant question of whether or not managements offer voice towards asking whether or not workers even want to have a voice in the first instance. Second, the paper provides a refreshing break from the more popular question of the organisational effects of voice. This return to the employee as subject in some ways is like a return to the roots of industrial democracy, but with a unique twist. Third, the paper inventively links a macro-political framework with the micro-politics of the workplace. Fourth, the study makes an original contribution to the literature on employee voice by uniquely explaining resistance to voice as a function of the authoritarian personality and taking a more introspective approach than is typical of studies on employee voice. Fifth, and lastly, this paper goes some way in reversing the "silence" surrounding the field of critical management studies (Ozcan, 2012).

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