

**A Configural Approach to Understanding
Voice Behavior in Teams**

A Configural Approach to Understanding Voice Behavior in Teams

Een Configuratiebenadering van Suggesties voor Verandering in Teams

Thesis

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The idea of cover image was generated by Jing Wu, and the image was painted by Jie Yan. It depicts a classic scene of Emperor Renzong (the man in red) of Song Dynasty (1010 – 1063 AD), having a meeting with his cabinet members. Renzong's reign has witnessed the peak of Song Dynasty. This is attributed, at least partly, to two management aspects he has strived to promote: a climate of openness and inclusiveness and a formalized voice system. Consequently, ministers across different levels were encouraged to freely express their opinions and raise suggestions that promoted various aspects of national development.

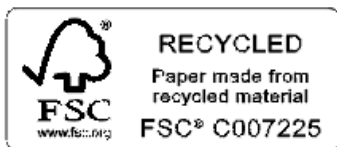
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Before having decided to pursue a PhD, I had been warned that doing a PhD sometimes feels like living alone on an isolated island and struggling to survive – you need to be self-reliant to face and tackle many problems, the solutions to which seem to play hide and seek with you often times. At different points of my PhD trajectory, I came to get how that means. Yet, after all these years, I truly feel and firmly believe that my “island” is connected with many many others. They have provided tremendous support for me, for which I am very much grateful.

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CHAPTER 1

General Introduction

Voice behavior refers to employee's expression of suggestions aimed at improving collective functioning (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Yet, employees do not always feel comfortable with expressing their suggestions or concerns and might prefer to remain silent even when they have opinions in mind. We have known some devastating collective failures, such as the Columbia space shuttle disaster, the recent Boeing crisis, and belated governmental interventions against the COVID-19 spread. These events happened, in part, either because employees remained silent when they had identified problems, or because raised problems were not tackled properly in a timely manner. Hence, it is not only necessary to encourage employees to express their ideas freely, but also important to advance our understanding of how raised voice can be translated into substantial change.

The major of extant research has approached voice as an individual behavior and identified a variety of factors that may predict employee voice behavior, including employee attributes, leader behaviors, and other contextual factors (Morrison, 2011; Morrison, 2014; Chamberlin, Newton, & LePine, 2017). In recent years, voice scholars have started to address whether voice from employees can be turned into improved collective outcomes, as assumed in the definition of voice (Detert, Burris, Harrison, & Martin, 2013), and how (e.g., Li, Liao, Tangirala, & Firth, 2017; Sherf, Sinha, Tangirala, & Awasty, 2018; Liang, Shu, & Farh, 2019). When examining the effect of voice within teams, these studies either focused on the overall volume of voice, assuming that the influence of voice was

exerted within teams as a whole, or focused on the average level of voice, assuming that voice was distributed in an egalitarian fashion among team members. These assumptions have constrained us from developing a more accurate understanding of the pattern of voice that occurs within teams and how the pattern affects team process and effectiveness.

To address the problems above, I adopt a configural approach (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000) to studying voice in a team context. The configural approach has been used to capture how the factors concerned get configured within a team and how the configuration pattern plays a role in predicting team emergent states, processes, and outcomes (e.g., DeRue, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, & Feltz, 2010; DeRue, Nahrgang, & Ashford, 2015; Li & Liao, 2014). This approach has enabled researchers to move beyond the additive model (Chan, 1998), on which prior research on the overall or average volume of voice in teams is built, and consider not only the amount of variance but, more importantly, the pattern of the factors within teams. For example, using the configural approach, scholars identified different types of configuration pattern of team efficacy beliefs and their effects on team processes and effectiveness (DeRue et al., 2010), or examined how leadership structure became configured in self-managing teams (DeRue et al., 2015).

In this dissertation, I apply such configural approach to furthering the investigation on voice behavior in teams. More specifically, I attempt to study how configuration in antecedents may predict occurrence of voice behavior and how configuration of voice influences teams. By conducting empirical studies, this dissertation will examine a) the antecedents of employee voice with a focus on dispersion in leader-member exchange

(LMX) relationship, captured by self-other (dis)similarity in LMX, b) how voice occurs in view of team configuration in expertise and its impact on team process and performance, and c) how voice distribution gets structured within teams over time and how teams proactively navigate this trajectory by placing right persons in central positions. As such, the dissertation aims at enriching the literatures on voice as well as teams and leadership, by incorporating a configural perspective to advance our understanding of how voice can be fueled and how voice exerts influences within teams.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation consists of three independent empirical chapters. As these chapters are product of joint efforts by me, my supervisors and other co-authors, I will use “we” instead of “I” to present their contribution.

In Chapter 2, we examine the influences of leader-follower relationship on employee voice behavior. The quality of the leader-follower relationship captured by leader-member exchange (LMX) has been identified as a major influence on leader-directed voice. An important development is the recognition that leader-follower relationships are embedded in the context of others’ LMX relationships, which puts the issue of self-other (dis)similarity in LMX relationships center-stage. We propose a conceptual development of this analysis in recognizing that LMX (dis)similarity has important social identity implications from which follows that not just LMX positive dissimilarity (having a better LMX relationship than others) may inspire voice, but also LMX similarity, and that the extent to which the former or the latter is the stronger driver of

voice is contingent on leader group prototypicality (the degree to which the leader is perceived to embody the collective identity). Specifically, we predict that LMX similarity is more predictive of voice with a more group prototypical leader, whereas LMX positive dissimilarity is more predictive of voice with a less group prototypical leader, and that the interactive effects are stronger for prohibitive voice (suggestions to discontinue a practice) than for promotive voice (suggestions to improve work practices). To test these predictions, we conducted a field survey study among 321 leader-member dyads nested within 47 teams in three companies in China.

Chapter 3 investigates how and when voice can benefit team performance with a focus on the dissimilarity in expertise among team members. Prior research has recognized that voice from team members could bring about desired team outcomes (Detert et al., 2013; Li et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2019). These studies have focused on the volume of voice, assuming implicitly that influences of voice were exerted on the team as a whole. However, voice might be better understood as being communicated to one or a few instead of all team members. This points to the necessity of studying who voice to whom in teams. Whether voice occurs between similar or dissimilar team members might affect the effectiveness in communicating ideas to others. We thus expect that the degree to which voice flows across a social category boundary within a team could exert an influence above and beyond the volume of voice. When voice flows across team members of dissimilar expertise, this could give rise to the difficulties in communicating ideas to one another. To overcome the difficulties, it is important to create energy or excitement for others when voicing to them and further galvanize them into taking actions and

improving collective performance. We thus predict that cross-expertise voice is likely to enhance team performance through fostering relational energy within the team, and that this effect will be more pronounced when the business environment is less uncertain because environmental uncertainty triggers the intergroup bias and, in turn, prevents individuals from being open-minded to outgroup members. We conducted a field survey study among 60 teams to test our predictions.

In Chapter 4, we examine how teams centralize their voice over time to perform better. Prior research on voice in teams has explicitly or implicitly worked under the assumption that voice is equally distributed among team members. For instance, when examining how voice in teams can help collective outcomes, studies tend to focus on the average voice of members, which assumes uniformity in expression of voice among those members (e.g., Podsakoff, Maynes, Whiting, & Podsakoff, 2015). Recent research has started questioning this assumption and highlighted that voice can be centralized around one or two members within teams, who speak up more than others, rather than distributed in an egalitarian manner across all the members (e.g., Sherf et al., 2018; also see Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, & Malone, 2010). We extend this line of research by proposing that, (a) as teams develop over time, voice within a team does have an increasing tendency to centralize around a few members as the team seeks to defer to most competent members and motivate them to voice more frequently, hence, (b) as time progresses, the likelihood that the members around whom voice centralizes in the team (i.e., those who speak up most frequently) are competent increases, (c) team composition (in openness and conscientiousness) predicts the extent to which the team quickly places

more competent members as central voicers in the team, and (d) teams that ultimately end up centralizing their voice around competent members tend to outperform those who do not. A longitudinal study of 176 student project teams was conducted to test our hypotheses.

Last, in Chapter 5, I summarize the findings of the empirical chapters and discuss their implications for different streams of literature and directions for future research.

Declaration of contributors

I would not have been able to accomplish this line of research had I not received support or advice from my great collaborators. Chapter 1 was written by Jing Wu (JW) and reviewed by Daan van Knippenberg (DvK) and Steffen Giessner (SG). Chapter 2 was designed by JW, DvK, and SG; data was collected and analyzed by JW, and DvK, SG, and Sut I Wong (SIW) provided advice on data analysis; the chapter was written by JW, DvK, and SG. Chapter 3 was designed by JW, Subrahmaniam Tangirala (ST), and DvK; data was collected by Pengcheng Zhang (PZ) and JW, and analyzed by JW; ST, DvK, and SG provided advice on data analysis; the chapter was written by JW, and DvK provided suggestions for revision. Chapter 4 was designed by JW, ST, DvK, and Rui Shu (RS); data was collected by JW with support from Hannes Leroy and Bex Hewett; data was analyzed by JW and RS, ST provided advice on data analysis, and Yiran Guo assisted with data clearing; the chapter was written by JW, ST, and RS, and DvK provided advice for revision. Chapter 5 was written by JW and reviewed by DvK and SG.

CHAPTER 5

General Discussion

It is believed that employee voice behavior would benefit collective functioning. Only in recent years have scholars started to examine if voice behavior actually benefits teams and, if so, how. The extant research on voice in teams, by and large, focused on either the overall amount of voice or the average level of voice that emanated in teams, assuming that the influence of voice was exerted on teams as a whole or voice was equally distributed among team members. Yet, voice might be better understood in a dyadic setting, and team members typically differ in expression of voice. To address these issues, this dissertation took a configural approach to further investigation of voice in teams. Although the three studies compiled in the dissertation can be approached independently of one another, they share the overarching research question: How voice is elicited or exerts influences within teams in the light of team configuration?

Summaries of the Main Findings and Contributions

In Chapter 2, we proposed a social identity perspective on the relationship between LMX (dis)similarity and leader-directed voice behavior and investigated the interactive effect of followers' self-other (dis)similarity in LMX and leader group prototypicality on follower's upward voice. We predicted that LMX positive dissimilarity was more predictive of voice with a less group prototypical leader, whereas LMX similarity was more predictive of voice with a more group prototypical leader, and that the interactive effects would be stronger for prohibitive voice than for promotive voice. The results from the field study largely

supported our predictions. This study enriched the extant literature in two important ways. First, we identified the social identity dimension to the LMX-voice relation by integrating LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) with the social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003) and thus built towards broader-ranging theories of leadership. Specifically, we argued that both similar LMX relationship and a more positive LMX relationship in comparison to the other team members could result in upward voice behavior. The critical contingency factor was the degree to which the leader embodies the team characteristics (i.e., leader group prototypicality) – rendering either similar or more positive LMX relationship a predictor of upward voice behavior. Second, extending prior research that distinguished prohibitive voice from promotive voice (e.g., Liang et al., 2012; Lin & Johnson, 2015; Wei et al., 2015), the study further contributed to the voice literature by testing the differential effect of LMX (dis)similarity and leader group prototypicality on the two forms of voice.

Chapter 3 cast light on cross-expertise voice, or voice that occurred between team members who have different expertise background, so as to better capture who voiced to whom in teams. This matters because whether voice occurs between similar or dissimilar team members would affect the effectiveness in communicating ideas to others, and voice might be better understood when being communicated to one or a few rather than all other team members. We examined how and when cross-expertise voice was likely to facilitate team performance. Building on relational energy theory (Owens et al., 2016) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), we predicted that cross-expertise voice could benefit team performance via

fostering relational energy within teams, and that such indirect effect was more likely to occur when environment was less uncertain as opposed to more uncertain. The results were consistent with our hypotheses. Via this study, we recognized that cross-expertise voice had a unique impact on team performance beyond and above the volume of voice. This contributed to voice literature by adopting the configural approach to voice study. Specifically, we delved into the members around whom voice flew within teams considering the dissimilarity in expertise of dyads. Second, we identified relational energy as a mediation mechanism to further our understanding of how voice could exert positive influence within teams. Relational energy, as a form of motivational mechanism, played a unique role in getting team members to buy into raised ideas and mobilizing them to take actions. Further, we recognized environmental uncertainty as a condition under which cross-expertise voice was more likely to enhance team performance via relational energy, to emphasize the importance of business environment in which teams were embedded.

In Chapter 4, we treated voice centralization as a process that teams can proactively navigate instead of a phenomenon that naturally occurs in teams. Specifically, we unpacked how teams centralized their voice around more competent members to perform well and what kinds of teams tended to more quickly place highly competent members in central voicer positions. An integration of expectation states theory (Bales et al., 1951; Berger et al., 1985) and role theory (Katz & Kahn, 1965) suggests that task-oriented teams tend to strive for centralization, because they are inclined to defer to one or a few members and expect them to contribute more; when teams form such role expectation, they are likely to send the roles to right

persons and convince them to take on the roles. Hence, we predicted that voice would be centralized around more competent members over time in teams. Our predictions were supported: voice in teams became more and more centralized as time progressed, and it was centralized to more competent members ultimately. Furthermore, we found that teams that were open to experience or conscientious tended to more quickly have their competent members take on central voicer roles; and the teams who ended up with competent members occupying central voicer positions tended to perform better than those who did not. This chapter's main contribution lies with the adoption of a longitudinal approach. With this, we demonstrated that teams typically started off with a relatively egalitarian distribution of voice and moved toward centralization by having more competent member taking on central voicer positions. As such, we extended the research on voice distribution by explicating how voice became centralized within teams as well as why they strived for centralization. Also, we identified team openness and conscientiousness as critical factors that distinguished the teams who were better at quickly placing more competent members as central voicers.

Implications for Future Research

The above findings may provide some insights into voice literature as well as research on teams and leadership more broadly. In the following, I will discuss several implications for future research that stem from an integrated consideration of the three studies.

First, a key contribution of this dissertation is bringing a configural perspective to the investigation regarding the occurrence and influence of employee voice behavior in a team context. Taking the configural

approach, we a) examined how voice occurred in view of team configuration in LMX, reflected by the degree of similarity or dissimilarity between one's own LMX and coworkers' LMXs with the same leader (Chapter 2), b) studied the occurrence of voice intertwined with team configuration in expertise background and how cross-expertise voice could benefit team performance (Chapter 3), and c) unpacked how voice distribution became configured by centralizing the speaking turns around right persons so as to achieve good team performance (Chapter 4). As such, we establish a more accurate and nuanced understanding of how voice can be elicited and how voice exerts influences within teams. Follow-up research may further incorporate the configural perspective into voice study. For example, future research can examine how alternative forms of configuration in other predictors of voice, or how different forms of configuration in voice impact team processes and outcomes.

Second, Chapter 2 and 4 both speak to leadership literature. The study in Chapter 2 can be linked to the prior work on LMX differentiation (Li & Liao, 2014) in which the authors used the configural approach to distinguish four types of LMX dispersion that may occur in teams and examined how such LMX dispersion impacted team and individual performance. Future research may further apply the configural approach to a variety of leader behaviors, to advance our understanding of how leader's differentiated treatment could exert influences on teams or followers via leader behaviors. In Chapter 4, the findings on how self-managing teams centralized their voice relate to the extant work on the emergence of informal leadership (DeRue et al., 2015). These scholars highlighted that a centralized distribution of team member competence can result in a

centralized structure of leadership, and that a competent individual is more likely to emerge as a leader. We went beyond these conclusions by highlighting that teams proactively place competent members in critical positions, explicating how competent members take on these roles over time, and distinguishing what kinds of teams are better at placing competent members in these roles quickly. Future research may continue to examine the dynamic interplay between perceived competence and taking of central roles over time.

Third, the studies in Chapter 3 and 4 both contribute to literature on teams. Chapter 3 examined the occurrence of voice intertwined with team configuration in expertise background and studied how cross-expertise voice could benefit team performance. Chapter 4 focused on distribution of voice and how it was shaped over time within teams. As such, we moved beyond the prior research that focused on the overall or average amount of voice that happened within teams, by highlighting the importance of zooming in to investigate who voice to whom and how voice is distributed, in addition to the amount of voice. Future research may consider alternative dimensions of the social category, such as gender or functional background, and further examine how and when these forms of cross-boundary voice would impact team processes and effectiveness. Also, alternative patterns of voice dispersion can be of interest for future research directions.

Last, another critical implication lies with incorporating temporal element into voice study (Chapter 4). Specifically, we investigated how voice distribution became configured or structured within teams over time and its influences for teams, and explicating why teams strived for voice centralization by placing more competent members in central voicer

positions as time went by. The longitudinal perspective together with the configural approach has enabled us to not only examine how the structure of voice distribution evolved, but also to track who occupied central voicer positions from time to time. Our study also echoes the calling for the research that moves beyond a static view to unpack the temporal dynamics in voice processes and effects (e.g., Li & Tangirala, *in press*; Morrison, 2014). Future research may more explicitly theorize about and examine the temporal effect in the evolving process of voice distribution.

Conclusion

Employee voice behavior, or employee expression of ideas aimed at improving collective functioning or preventing harms from occurring, is regarded as a conduit to benefit teams or organizations. Taking a configural approach, this dissertation has attempted to further the investigation on the occurrence and influences of voice in a team context. Via three empirical studies, we found that: a) both having better LMX relationship with leader and having similar LMX could elicit leader-directed voice, and which route was more pronounced depended on leader group prototypicality, b) voice that occurred between the dyads who had different expertise background was likely to benefit team performance via creating relational energy in teams, and c) that teams tended to strive for voice centralization by centralizing voice around more competent members within teams over time, and open or conscientious teams were likely to quickly place competent members in more active speaking roles. We hope that the findings provide new insights into voice as well as other relevant literatures and provoke inspiration for future research endeavor.

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SUMMARY

Employee voice, or expression of ideas or opinions aimed at improving collective functioning, is believed to be conducive to teams and organizations. Though recent research has started to examine whether voice from employees can be turned into improved collective outcomes as defined and how, the extant research has assumed either that the influence of voice was exerted within teams as a whole, or that voice was distributed in an egalitarian fashion among team members. These assumptions have constrained us from developing a more accurate understanding of the pattern of voice that occurs within teams and how the voice pattern affects team process and effectiveness.

To address these issues, I take a configural approach to furthering investigation of voice in a team context in this dissertation. Specifically, I have attempted to unpack how configuration in antecedents may predict occurrence of voice behavior and how configuration of voice influences team process and effectiveness. Three studies of this dissertation examine (a) the antecedents of employee upward voice with a focus on dispersion in leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship, captured by self-other (dis)similarity in LMX, (b) how cross-expertise voice, or voice that occurs between members of different expertise backgrounds, affects team process and performance, and (c) how voice distribution gets structured within teams over time and how teams proactively navigate this process by placing right persons in more active speaking roles.

This dissertation enriches the extant literatures in three important ways. First, incorporating a configural perspective into research on voice in

teams, the dissertation contributes to voice literature by developing a more nuanced and accurate understanding of how voice can be elicited and how voice exerts influences within teams. Second, this dissertation contributes to literature on teams by studying how voice affect teams with team configuration in expertise taken into account and how voice get configured in teams over time. Third, this dissertation also contributes to leadership literature by examining the effect LMX dispersion on follower's leader-directed voice.

SAMENVATTING

Er wordt aangenomen dat de ‘voice’ (stem) van de werknemer, oftewel: het uiten van ideeën of meningen die zijn gericht op de verbetering van het collectieve functioneren, bevorderlijk is voor teams en organisaties. In recent onderzoek is bekeken of de voice van werknemers tot betere collectieve resultaten leidt, zoals hierboven genoemd, en op welke manier. In het bestaande onderzoek wordt echter aangenomen dat de invloed van voice binnen teams als geheel werd uitgeoefend of dat de voice in gelijke mate was verdeeld onder de teamleden. Deze aannames hebben ons weerhouden van het verkrijgen van een duidelijker inzicht in het patroon waarin voice zich binnen teams voordoet en de manier waarop dit patroon het proces en de effectiviteit van een team beïnvloedt.

Om deze reden ga ik in dit proefschrift op een configuratieve manier te werk om voice in teamverband verder te onderzoeken. Ik heb me in het bijzonder gericht op de manier waarop de configuratie van antecedenten een voorspellende waarde heeft voor het optreden van voice-gedrag en de manier waarop de configuratie van de voice van invloed is op teamprocessen en de effectiviteit van teams. De drie studies in dit proefschrift onderzoeken (a) de antecedenten van upward voice van werknemers, waarbij de aandacht ligt op de verdeling in de LMX-relatie (Leader-Member Exchange), bepaald door onderlinge verschillen of overeenkomsten binnen LMX; (b) op welke manier cross-expertise voice, dat wil zeggen: het type voice dat voorkomt tussen medewerkers met verschillende expertise-achtergronden, van invloed is op het teamproces en de prestaties; en (c) hoe de verdeling van voice binnen teams in de loop van

de tijd wordt gestructureerd en hoe teams proactief dit proces navigeren door actievere spreekrollen te geven aan de geschikte personen.

Dit proefschrift verrijkt de bestaande literatuur op drie belangrijke manieren. Ten eerste draagt dit proefschrift bij aan de literatuur over voice door de integratie van een configuratief perspectief in het onderzoek naar voice in teams. Er wordt een genuanceerder en nauwkeuriger begrip ontwikkeld van de manier waarop voice kan worden ontlokt en op welke manier voice invloed uitoefent binnen teams. Ten tweede draagt dit proefschrift bij aan de literatuur over teams door het bestuderen van de manier waarop voice invloed heeft op teams rekening houdend met verschillende expertises in de teamsamenstelling, en hoe voice in teams in de loop van de tijd vorm krijgt. Ten derde draagt dit proefschrift bij aan de literatuur over leiderschap door het onderzoeken van het effect van de verdeling in LMX op de voice van de medewerker die aan de leidinggevende is gericht.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jing Wu was born and raised up in Nanjing, China. She is a doctoral candidate in Organizational Behavior at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University. During her PhD, she was a visiting scholar at the University of Maryland, College Park, in the US in 2017 and 2018. Prior to her PhD study, Jing obtained a Master degree in Business Management from Nanjing University and a Bachelor degree in Economics from Nanjing Xiaozhuang University in China.

Jing is curious to understand why employees remain silent while having opinions or suggestions to share and explore what managers can do to facilitate interpersonal communication at workplace. Her dissertation examines how employee voice behavior, or expression of ideas and opinions for improving collective functioning, is shaped and exerts influences in teams by taking team configuration into account. Specifically, she investigates what motivate followers to express true opinions to leader considering one's own and coworkers' relationships with the leader, how voice that occurs between dyads who have different expertise can be translated into facilitated team performance, and how voice distribution within a team evolves over time and how such voice distribution dynamics affect team performance. Jing has presented her work at international conferences such as Academy of Management Annual Meeting and New Directions in Leadership Research Conference. Her dissertation work is currently under review at the leading journals in management field.

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