Culture And Employees’ Voice: Do Cultures Matter?

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Hirschman’s exit-voice model (Hirshman, 1970) is a well-established structure for understanding how employees respond to a decline in satisfaction with their organizations. According to the model, employees can respond in three different ways: 1) exit (leaving or thinking about leaving an organization), 2) voice (any attempt at all to improve conditions such as appeal to a supervisor), and 3) loyalty (passively but optimistically waiting for conditions to improve). Later, Rusbult and colleagues (1982) added 4) ‘neglect’ (allowing conditions to deteriorate through reduced interest or effort, chronic lateness or absences, using company time for personal business, or increased error rate). Research generally supports the validity of Hirschman’s model. (Addison & Belfied, 2004; Batt, et al., 2002; Farrell & Rusbult, 1992; Keith Dowding et al., 2000; Lewin & Mitchell, 1992; Rusbult et al., 1988; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003; Withey & Cooper, 1989).

Most of this work, however, has been done in so-called “Western countries,” such as the United States, which share certain values and assumptions associated with the employment relationship. For instance, in these countries, the calculative view of employment relations, derived from the neoclassical view of so-called “economic man,” assumes that attitudes and cost benefit calculation, rather than cultural norms, are the primary the determinants of an individual’s employment-related behaviors (Block, Berg, & Belman, 2006; Triandis, 1995). The employer-employee relationship is a business relationship and employee behaviors in the organization are determined by the individual’s calculus of the advantages or disadvantages the individual associates with a behavior (Allen, Miller, & Nath, 1988; Redding, Norman, & Schlander, 1994). It is questionable, however, whether this “economic” conception of employment in the western countries can be applied in the countries that do not share this view of employment, especially considering that there is a large volume of previous studies suggesting that various cultural dimensions influence work-related psychological and behavioral phenomena (Bontempo & Rivero, 1992; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Suh, et al., 1998; Triandis, et al., 1995; Wagner, 1995; Wasti, 2003).

Thus, it is reasonable to believe that the exit-voice model may operate differently in Asian countries than in the developed countries of the west. Employment systems in certain Asian countries such as Korea, are heavily influenced by the Confucian principles of loyalty and hierarchical obligation (Kim & Park, 2003). There may be inconsistency between these Confucian principles and the principles of exit-voice-neglect. In these Confucian culture contexts, values such as respect for authority and elders, loyalty, and the importance of education and diligence, are aimed at maintaining social order and harmony. They also formulate certain values in employment relationships as well, such as strong emphasis on loyalty for the company, hard work, paternalistic industrial conditions, and complete subordination to supervisors. These are considered to be key values for fast economic growth in these countries (Kim & Park, 2003). Applying these Confucian contexts to the exit-voice model, exit and neglect may be seen as incompatible with loyalty, while voice may be seen as inconsistent with the obligation of subordination.
Unfortunately, there is very little comparative research that examines the cross-cultural generality of the features of voice and the role of cultural values in predicting voice behaviors in different cultural settings. For instance, Price and colleagues (2001) examined the relationship between the value of voice and the magnitude of voice, that is, voice which spans different phases of the decision-making process, with samples from U.K., Mexico, Netherlands, and the U.S. They found similar shapes across four countries: direct, monotonic, and nonlinear. They, however, used undergraduate students who are 21 years old or younger, rather than ‘real employees. Despite the fact that many of their subjects had some part-time work experience, it is questionable if they are exposed to real cultural context in their workplace, such as unionization or relationship with supervisors. Botero and Van Dyne (2009) examined the effects of Leader Member Exchange (LMX) and culture, defined as individual value orientation of ‘power distance (PD),’ which is belief about the extent to which differences in power and status (Hofstede, 1980) predictor of employees’ voice behavior in the U.S. and Colombia. In this study, Botero and Van Dyne that not all pattern of voice outcomes are similar in two countries: for instance, it showed that both in the U.S. and Colombia, LMX and PD predicted voice but, contrary to the findings in the U.S., in Colombia, the interaction between LMX and PD did not predict voice, implying possible new explanations for voice, especially in the different cultural settings. For future research, they suggested a comparative study using the Asian culture.

The only research on exit-voice using Asian countries, is Lee and Jablin’s study (1992) examining the generalizability of the theory of exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect, using samples from Korea, the US, and Japan. This study supported the applicability of the theory to Korean workers, demonstrating that, with respect to exit-voice, Korea and the U.S. are more similar than Korea and Japan. However, there are several limitations: like Price and his colleagues, their respondents were students staying in the U.S. who were not employed. Thus, it is possible that these respondents were not representative of Korean workers employed in Korean firms in Korea. These students may not be subject to their native culture. Given these gaps, the purpose of this paper is to develop a model to apply to the exit-voice framework to one workers in one Asian country, Korean workers in Korea. Specifically, this paper will examine the relationship between Confucian principles of employment and whether the exit-voice model can be applied an employment system in a developed Asian country.

The proposed study will apply the cultural lens to examine the generality of Hirshman’s EVLN model, focusing on the effects of culture on the individual employees’ voice behaviors. It will: (1) explain the basics of Confucian systems of employment relations; (2) examine the assumptions behind the standard EVLN model; (3) and determine the extent to which the predictions in the EVLN model must be modified in a Confucian employment system. In doing so, it is expected that this study will provide a broad sense of employee voice reflecting real work settings and discover diverse implications of this complexity practically.
References


