

**INVITED REVIEW**

# Conceptualising employee voice in the majority world: Using multiple intellectual traditions inspired by the work of Mick Marchington

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**Abstract**

Conceptualisation of voice in the majority world (developing and emerging economies) should avoid simply using the lens of the minority world (advanced economies). Yet, both can benefit from taking a multidisciplinary approach. Marchington was one of the early pioneers of multidisciplinary work on voice in advanced economies. While being fundamentally an industrial relations (IR) scholar who was alert to the influence of power and context, he took a pluralist approach in applying IR ideas to Human Resource Management, exploring empirically why and how workers use voice. This paper is inspired by Marchington's multidisciplinary approach but considers voice within different institutional contexts. Our key research question is, 'How can majority world conceptions of employee voice enrich our understanding of what voice is for, its outcomes and whom it serves?' Through interrogating how different intellectual traditions have underpinned work in the majority world (exemplified by South Africa and China) we highlight the need for further theoretical development of the concept of lateral voice and argue that voice should be more closely

**Abbreviations:** ACAS, Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service; ACFTU, All-China Federation of Trade Unions; CIPD, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; ER, Employment Relations; HR, Human Resource; HRM, Human Resource Management; IR, Industrial Relations; LPT, Labour Process Theory; NGO, Non-governmental Organisations; OB, Organisational Behaviour.

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linked to forms of resistance. Our concluding section uses this analysis to start the re-imagining of voice in minority and majority world contexts.

**KEYWORDS**

employee, employee voice, indigenous HRM, worker

**Practitioner notes****What is currently known?**

- Mick Marchington provided a wealth of insights on employee voice, generated through over 30 years of collaborative work.
- Although loyal to the industrial relations tradition, Marchington took a pluralist approach, applying IR ideas to HRM while maintaining conceptual and empirical rigour.

**What this paper adds?**

- This paper is inspired by Marchington's multidisciplinary approach to understanding voice in advanced economies (the minority world) but considers voice within the majority world (emerging/developing countries).
- The paper shows how majority world conceptions of employee voice can enrich our understanding of what voice is for, its outcomes and whom it serves.
- In developing theory on voice, our analysis suggests the need to develop a greater understanding of how new flows of voice are used to circumnavigate existing structures.
- Existing evidence from the majority world suggests the need for conceptual development of how voice can be inextricably linked to forms of resistance.

**The implications for practitioners**

- In the majority world, relevant policies and procedures should be developed to facilitate formal mechanisms for direct voice.
- HR practitioners should respond to informal and lateral forms of voice to help them to 'listen' for diverse voices within their organisations.
- Trade unions should engage with NGOs and community organisations to promote collective voice for those in vulnerable employment situations.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The study of formal and informal employee voice requires avoidance of intellectual silos. Marchington's work exemplifies this approach. He was loyal to the industrial relations (IR) tradition, taking a pluralist approach in applying IR ideas to human resource management (HRM). HRM, as a discipline, has itself received criticism. Historically, it has sometimes been seen as similar to employment relations (ER) but in recent years has been moving towards organisational behaviour (OB), and a 'psychologisation' of the area of investigation (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016). In this paper, we will therefore broadly contrast ER approaches to voice (covering Industrial Relations and Labour Process Theory) with OB (including perspectives from work psychology).

Marchington's work covered individual and collective, formal and informal forms of voice (Marchington, 2015a, 2015b). Formal forms of voice included collective mechanisms such as joint consultative committees and individual

forms such as team briefings, town hall meetings, and quality groups. Informal forms of voice included ad hoc interactions and sharing ideas between line managers and staff, resulting in changes to working practices, and therefore supplementing or even substituting for formal forms. Both formal and informal voice could either operate in parallel or sequentially. Informal forms of voice were particularly important in non-unionised firms, and embedded in relationships, and workers could prefer it even though it could be less extensive in terms of the degree, scope and level of influence on wider organisational decision-making (Marchington & Suter, 2013). At the same time, finding examples of informal forms of voice could present methodological challenges since these were less often reported by organisations (Marchington & Kynighou, 2012).

Although alert to nuances in managerial decision-making, strategy and behaviour (see Budd et al., 2022, in this issue), Marchington's work was certainly not just about fulfilling the needs of business. In several papers, Marchington explored the role of institutions and voice, showing how legislation could change the behaviour of employers, allow or prohibit grievances and advance or curtail the power of trade unions (Marchington, 2007). He analysed the role of 'hard' regulation such as financial and economic systems, employment legislation, trade unions and employers' organisations, as well as 'soft' regulation through temporary government funded initiatives or semi-autonomous bodies such as the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) in UK which publishes codes of practice and guidance, and employer organisations and professional bodies including the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (Marchington, 2015a). Taking an industrial relations perspective, he explained how voice could be used by managers to gain cooperation from workers, but he also drew on labour process theory to explore how voice might involve workers in challenging managerial control (Wilkinson et al., 1992). Yet, in contrast to Ramsay's cycles of control thesis which suggested that worker voice was limited to pseudo participation (Ramsay, 1976), he found that management adopted multiple rationales in response to issues such as labour market pressures and quality concerns and developed the idea of overlapping waves of participation (Marchington et al., 1993). Although inspired by Marchington's work, this paper does not seek to summarise the major empirical projects that he led, as these are covered in depth in other papers within this issue (e.g. Budd et al., 2022; Dundon et al., 2022; Grimshaw et al., 2022). Rather, it seeks to explain how future research on voice can take a nuanced approach, which more fully appreciates its complexity in drawing on multiple intellectual traditions, as illustrated by studies from developing and emerging economies (the majority world; Mezzadri, 2019).

Marchington's focus was on organisations within democratic, advanced economies (the minority world). This paper is inspired by Marchington's multidisciplinary approach to voice but seeks to extend it by considering voice within the different institutional contexts of the majority world, and then apply key insights from this analysis to our broader understanding of voice. Our key research question is therefore, 'How can majority world conceptions of employee voice enrich our understanding of what voice is for, its outcomes and whom it serves?' In this paper, voice is taken to cover formal and informal, individual and collective voice, with individual voice including grievances and complaints, and collective forms including both union and non-union indirect forms of participation. We take a wide view of voice in order to better capture its complexity in the majority world. For example, we include strikes as a form of collective voice (Godard, 1992, 1998). This is since, in contrast to only seeing voice as being embedded in sets of rules and assumptions, workers in countries within the majority world have had to struggle or fight to express their voice in ways which, in extreme cases, have led to violence. In South Africa, unions have often failed to provide a voice for the working poor (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004), and in China, they have either been affiliated to the national federation and used as a transmission belt for Party politics, or, as independent unions, faced repression. In our conceptualisation of voice, we also include silence, viewing voice and silence as 'ambiguous, intertwined phenomena' (Creed, 2003, p. 1503) rather than two ends of a continuum (i.e. voice vs. no voice) (McNulty et al., 2018) or distinct areas of investigation (Dyne et al., 2003; Sun et al., 2021). In addition, we include peer-to-peer and sideways voice (Kalfa & Budd, 2020). In taking this broad view of voice, we respond to previous calls for the need to 'push the conceptual boundaries of employee voice in order to further broaden and deepen the theorising on and understanding of employee voice' (Budd, 2014, p. 478).

Marchington's work was inspirational in taking a multidisciplinary approach to voice, and the next section of this paper draws on work from different intellectual traditions to critically interrogate voice through asking what it is for, what are its outcomes, and whom it serves. The following section then examines different disciplinary approaches to voice in the majority world, exemplified by research from South Africa and China. In South Africa, a postcolonial state where unions are independent and proactive and racial inequality has drawn much academic attention, scholars have most often studied voice from an industrial relations perspective. In China, a post-Communist state where there is a strong focus on social harmony, and unions are usually almost inseparable from management, there is not the same industrial relations tradition. Yet, with the widening gap of economic inequality and growing labour discontent (e.g. An & Bramble, 2018; Chan, 2020), scholars have applied insights from UK industrial relations and labour process theories to this context. Each country can provide a fresh understanding of what voice is for, its outcomes and whom it serves. Our concluding section uses the analysis of voice in the majority world to start the re-imagining of voice, highlighting potential areas of further empirical and theoretical development.

## 2 | INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS AND THE CRITICAL INTERROGATION OF VOICE: WHAT IS IT FOR, WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES AND WHOM DOES IT SERVE?

Drawing on recent developments and extensions of Marchington's work, this section critically interrogates what voice is for, its outcomes, and whom it serves through engaging with different intellectual traditions.

Within the broader field of management, a lot of the literature on voice draws on OB. In advanced economies, this literature has often considered voice from an individualist perspective, taking a unitarist stance in that voice is legitimised only when it is used to improve organisational effectiveness. Here, research has been conducted into the factors influencing pro-social voice (Heaphy et al., 2022). Although examining pro-social voice from a psychological or OB perspective might help to provide insights into why people voice, and how individuals might navigate context (Kassing, 2009), such analysis can primarily serve the interests of employers. Moreover, some people may have good (personal) reasons not to voice. These reasons might include previously negative experiences of voicing (Robinson & Shuck, 2019) and stigmatised identities (McNulty et al., 2018). Yet, not voicing can lead to negative consequences for employees (Sluiter et al., 2020) as their silence can be perceived as a lack of conformity (Hewlin, 2003) or organisational delinquency. Moreover, when voice is not deemed to be 'pro-social', it might be discouraged in case it damages the organisation's reputation (Wæraas & Dahle, 2020). Using discursive psychology, there has recently been critical evaluation of pro-social voice, revealing how line managers can manipulate the conversation for their own benefit Wählin-Jacobsen (2020), but such analyses still often fail to capture factors beyond the organisation. More generally, the growing 'psychologisation of voice' has received much criticism in recent years, since it can be conceptualised in a way that primarily serves the interests of managers, focuses on individuals rather than contextual factors and ignores the influence of external stakeholders and institutions (Barry & Wilkinson, 2021; Budd, 2020; Kaufman, 2015). Even from within the field of OB, some scholars have acknowledged that research on voice has not paid sufficient attention to worker voice that does not advance the interests of management, or to the impact of formal and collective voice mechanisms on informal voice behaviour (Morrison, *forthcoming*). Moreover, and as exemplified by Marchington's work, it is important to situate our understanding of voice in its institutional socio-economic and political context (Budd, 2020; Budd et al., 2022; Dundon et al., 2022).

Taking an IR approach to voice can help to address the weaknesses of other disciplines through emphasising the problematic nature of the employment relationship, the influence of political economy, and capturing broader contextual factors related to institutions such as unions and collective bargaining (Kaufman, 2012). The field of IR has also been enhanced by embracing a Marxist analysis of strikes (Hyman, 1975), the macroeconomic forces that influence them (Kelly, 1998), as well as radical studies of other forms of conflict (Edwards, 1986), legal enactment and the influence of labour law, and the influence of HRM. In the latter case, IR scholars have adopted a critical perspective.

Incorporating a labour process theory/perspective (LPT), again, adopts a critical view of voice based on management-worker relations being fundamentally antagonistic. LPT sees participation mechanisms as only paying lip service to worker interests and being largely used as a tool by management to extract further effort and value from the workforce (Ramsay, 1977). LPT's critical path has further led to contributions such as 'responsible autonomy' (Friedman, 1977), and the 'manufacturing of consent' (Burawoy, 1979), and identified the exploitative nature of new management/HRM inspired involvement schemes such as team working (Sewell, 1998). More recently, LPT has been used to identify how direct forms of voice can be a symptom of individualising the employment relationship to marginalise, moderate (through partnership) or remove union representation (Kaufman & Taras, 2010). With the decline of trade unionism in many countries, the field has expanded to include alternative forms of collectivism and sources of resistance (beyond strikes), as well as non-union voice (Marks et al., 2020).

In summary, Marchington took a multidisciplinary approach to the exploration of voice, and extensions of this work have enabled critical evaluation of what voice is for, its outcomes and whom it serves. Employee voice can be viewed from a pro-social perspective, serving employer interests, with the outcomes simply leading to improved organisational performance, or as a vehicle for enabling employees to both individually and collectively raise concerns and grievances and challenge managerial control. The next section explains how voice has been conceptualised within the majority world.

### 3 | CONCEPTUALISING VOICE IN THE MAJORITY WORLD: SOUTH AFRICA AND CHINA

Our understanding of voice can benefit from learning about both the intellectual traditions (OB and IR/LPT) and their relationship to the lived experience of voice in South Africa and China. As indicated above, both countries have diverse institutional contexts, but in each, resistance and voice can be intertwined. South Africa is an example of a post-colonial setting with historical colonial ties, but where continued inequalities have continued to impact on voice. On the other hand, China is an example of a market economy with an authoritarian political system where there are limited opportunities for formal and collective voice, but resistance has surfaced through community protests. The contexts of the two countries have influenced how voice has been conceived as well as what it is for, its outcomes and whom it serves.

Not surprisingly, given their different contexts, there have been differences in the focus of voice scholarship within the two countries. In South Africa, most work has been undertaken from an IR tradition, focussing on collective forms of voice and drawing on concepts such as social movement unionism, while taking account of societal inequalities. In China, there has been a heavy focus on individual forms of voice and fruitful analyses have taken account of how internal/external authority structures influence lateral and indirect voice. However, this is not the whole story: some scholars of South Africa have also considered individual forms of voice, while in China there is important scholarship drawing on industrial relations. Learning from different societal contexts can enrich our understanding of the concept of voice and help to address the significant gap in highly ranked journals in research on employee voice in majority world countries (Jones et al., 2021; Pyman et al., 2017).

#### 3.1 | South Africa

In South Africa, very little research has been carried out into individual forms of voice, except for a small number of case studies, the findings of which indicate that workers are not able to significantly affect decision-making and that benefits have tended to accrue to management rather than workers (Bischoff et al., 2021; Maree, 2000). The absence of research into individualised voice might be due to the lack of formal mechanisms in place at the organisational level. This absence of formal mechanisms within African countries has reportedly led to informal forms of direct voice

being used (Prouska et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2011), but as yet, there is a general lack of evidence in this area in the case of South Africa.

Most research on voice in South Africa has been informed by the discipline of industrial relations and focussed on collective voice through trade unions. Maree (2016) historically traced the exclusion then inclusion of Black workers in collective bargaining institutions, affected by the socio-political situation, employment relations institutions, neo-patrimonialism and corruption. Their ability to voice through trade unions has only been achieved following a prolonged period of struggle. Indeed, research into the related concept of democracy in isiZulu has found that it has been understood as an 'ongoing struggle for a better life' (Brooks et al., 2020, p. 24).

The strongest form of voice is acting through strikes, and in South Africa, these have often been marked by violence (von Holdt, 2010). In recent years, much scholarly attention has been paid to the wildcat strike at Marikana (Botiveau, 2014; Maree, 2016), which has been referred to as the Marikana Mineworkers Massacre. At the Lonmin platinum mine, 34 miners were killed and 78 were seriously injured, with 10 others killed in the days leading up to the strike, including non-striking miners, security guards and police officers. In order to understand the tensions underlying strikes, there have, more recently, been calls to engage with LPT to explore deskilling, racism and racial Fordism in the context of new social movements by unemployed black township residents, the increased casualisation of employment and the informalisation of labour (Kenny & Webster, 2021). To illustrate their suggestion, these authors refer to Chinguno's (2013) analysis of how a contributory factor to the strikes that eventuated in the Marikana Massacre was the fragmentation of labour along lines of skill, gender and race.

Worker voice in South Africa is against the background of a challenging economic context: around 45% of the workforce in South Africa is in casual or informal sector work, and lacking union representation (Webster & Francis, 2019). IR scholars have therefore forcefully drawn attention to the need for unions to represent informal sector workers and tackle inequality (Dibben & Wood, 2018; Mosoetsa & Francis, 2019). Some have suggested that unions in South Africa should engage in social movement unionism. For example, Waterman (2008) emphasised cooperation between unions and broader social movements, while others have similarly argued for the union to forge close linkages with grassroots concerns through formal or informal mechanisms, reaching out to other groups and seeking social justice while also protecting the weakest in society from the worst excesses of capitalism (Dibben et al., 2012). As Holgate (2021) argues, social movement unionism speaks to a union's purpose, derived from its identity (whose interests it represents) and its ideology (the values it espouses), but includes working with communities outside the trade union. Yet, unions have often failed to effectively represent contingent workers, and this has led to alternative forms of representation. For example, Community Health Workers on short term contracts set up their own union and workers forum to voice their demands (Hlatshwayo, 2018), and labour NGOs such as the Casual Workers Advice Office helped to set up the Simunye Workers Forum to represent workers employed through labour brokers (Webster & Englert, 2020). As explained below, in this respect, there are some similarities with China, in that both are characterised by strong relationships between in-work and outside of work politics and voice. However, the political, economic and social context for voice is very different.

### 3.2 | China

There have been calls for more research on voice in countries within Asia (Cooke et al., 2020), although there has been more interest in China following the movement to market socialism with 'western' practices (Nawakitphaitoon & Zhang, 2020). In general terms, these changes have been seen as a double-edged sword for workers' voice. On the one hand, the massive inflow of foreign direct investment and dissemination of western HRM policies and a more democratic management style have reportedly brought with them improved processes for worker voice (Metz & Gunkel, 2018). On the other hand, China's market-oriented economy is accompanied by an authoritarian political system, which is marked by a strong interest in maintaining social harmony and stability and discouraging voice (Smith & Pun, 2018).

Much of the research focus in China has tended to be on individual pro-social voice, drawing on OB and explaining how this form of voice can be influenced by managerial and employee behaviours and characteristics (Aryee et al., 2017; Duan et al., 2021) and how it can improve employee outcomes (Sun et al., 2021). Some studies have also identified ways in which pro-social voice has been used in an indirect way. For example, Jing et al. (2022) found that Chinese hospital staff were reluctant to voice vertically to avoid being seen as 'trouble-makers', and instead they tended to voice laterally to resolve work-related problems and offer emotional support for co-workers. There is also some evidence of Chinese workers using defensive voice, where experiencing job insecurity (Gao et al., 2021). But in drawing from OB such studies have often only partially acknowledged Chinese authoritarian workplace dynamics and the broader political context or briefly mentioned it in their limitations.

Voice flows and channels in China can be different to non-western contexts. Some recent indigenous studies published in Chinese draw on OB to offer useful insights into informal forms of voice, taking account of the social networks within and outside of Chinese workplaces. For example, Zhou (2021) explained how Chinese employees often develop interpersonal relationships with their managers beyond the workplace; through demonstrating loyalty and competence, they establish trust and personal connections with managers, allowing them to provide informal feedback and suggestions. However, those who voice in this way have tended to be educated technical or middle-management staff who can use 'speaking-up' to gain recognition from senior management for career development, and the outcomes of employee voice have mainly been linked to organisational performance and innovation rather than fairness and equity (c.f. Lu et al., 2020). Indeed, the concept of 'voice' is referred to as '*jianyan*' (back-translated as 'constructive speech/opinion') in most Chinese articles. This reflects a paternalistic view, where employers are seen as benevolent fathers who are responsible for workers' wellbeing and workers as children who provide respect, support and suggestions (Zhu et al., 2012). *Jianyan* thus allows employees to provide feedback to some extent, as long as they do not directly challenge the motives or authority of employers.

Work on voice has also identified alternative forms of representation that involve actors beyond the workplace. For example, labour NGOs have (informally) represented and organised workers but have usually focussed on resolving rather than organising collective action (Cooke, 2020). Ties within the community, family and workplace have also been influential. Drawing on social exchange theory from social psychology, as well as the more traditional acquaintance society theory, An et al. (2021) examined how social networks (*guanxi*), exchange of favours (*renqing*), nepotism and saving face (*mianzi*) were used in mobilising and suppressing collective action in domestic enterprises in China. Such studies indicate the need for further study of the permeable boundaries between in work and outside of work, if the raising of concerns to significant, powerful peers (advocates or intermediaries) who have good relationships with senior managers is how things can change. They also point to how OB might provide insights into the collective elements of voice that are more often emphasised within IR.

In China, many studies from the IR tradition have focussed on how voice is channelled through unions. But unions in China are significantly different to those in the minority world: there is no official right to strike and official unions are affiliated to the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) (Budd et al., 2014). The ACFTU has a close association with the Communist Party and its affiliates tend to work as welfarist organisations that are almost inseparable from management (Clarke, 2005; Taylor & Li, 2007), suppressing critical employee voice (Chan, 2020; Nawakitphaitoon & Zhang, 2020). Although they engage in collective bargaining, it is Party-State-led rather than worker-led (Huang et al., 2016), and unions (like Labour NGOs) are primarily involved in resolving conflict rather than organising workers (Horwitz & Cooke, 2021; Howell & Pringle, 2019). Given the official ideology regarding the lack of conflict of interests between employers and employees (Budd et al., 2014), not surprisingly, some studies examining voice through trade unions have therefore emphasised the benefits of mutual gains and a co-operative industrial relations climate (Yang et al., 2019).

While in the minority world, many have regarded voice as separate to forms of resistance such as strikes (c.f. Godard, 1992), in other contexts such as China, voice and resistance are sometimes closely related. Given that official unions affiliated to the ACFTU serve the interests of management and the Party, workers have either had to suppress

voice that is not deemed to be pro-social or express it through forms of resistance. Sometimes this has been through independent unions. Independent unions have been rare and often not legally recognised (Clarke et al., 2004), and as noted above, there is no official right to strike in China. However, there have been wildcat or spontaneous strikes, with worker gains where the firm has had a strategic position within the supply chain (Luo & Yang, 2020). Moreover, there have been other examples of worker resistance. For example, young technical workers ran an online campaign against one of the biggest private employers for sexual harassment (Liu, 2022). Although there is strong government control and internet censorship, this action might indicate that the government may tolerate a moderate form of digital activism when seeking to address individual rights (such as against gender discrimination), insofar as it does not imply wider-scale industrial action.

Further complexities related to voice and resistance can be understood from research undertaken from a LPT perspective that has detailed how Chinese migrants from rural areas are in a particularly vulnerable situation within the labour market, with low wages, job insecurity, and poor legal protection (Smith, 2003; Smith & Pun, 2018). Some migrants have feared retaliation and have therefore remained silent when faced with violation of their workplace rights, with management perpetuating a culture of silence through agenda setting and institutional structures (An & Bramble, 2018). However, others, when lacking formal mechanisms for voice, have engaged in forms of worker resistance such as strikes, protests and riots (Pun & Smith, 2007; Smith, 2003). Although migrant and rural workers in vulnerable employment have engaged in such action, the better educated, salaried, new middle class have tended to remain silent since they fear that engaging in voice may jeopardise their career opportunities (Chan, 2020; Smith & Pun, 2018).

A summary of some of the key differences between the conceptualisation of voice in the two countries is provided in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1 Intellectual traditions on voice in the majority world

	OB	Industrial relations and labour process theory
South Africa	Relatively little research in South Africa draws on OB or covers informal voice or indigenous theories of employee voice	More attention has been paid to collective forms of voice, drawing on sociology and industrial relations to address the political and economic context. Trade unions have a strong presence and organise worker resistance, often through strikes. However, casual workers are often not unionised and their voices not heard. There is a recognition that the protection of workers' rights should be developed alongside broader social movements
China	There has been a focus on individual pro-social forms of voice. Indigenous studies in Chinese show a paternalistic view of employment relations where employees engage in informal forms of voice by managing relationships with managers and through Jianyan. Workers also exercise 'voice' informally through ties within their community through Guanxi	Most trade unions are affiliated to the ACFTU and closely linked to the Party and although they engage in collective bargaining, exist to promote social harmony. Low-skilled, internal migrant workers have engaged in worker resistance, and some independent unions have organised wildcat strikes. Educated, middle class employees have been reluctant to voice vertically or negatively to protect their careers. Young technical workers have used a moderate form of digital activism to address individual rights

Abbreviation: OB, Organisational Behaviour.



## 4 | CONCLUSIONS: RE-IMAGINING VOICE IN MINORITY AND MAJORITY WORLD CONTEXTS

We return to reflect on Marchington's legacy, and on our key research question: 'How can majority world conceptions of employee voice enrich our understanding of what voice is for, its outcomes and whom it serves?' In answering this question, our paper helps to address the calls for studies of HRM to benefit from learning from countries outside of the minority world, and by considering other experiences, 'to see familiar things in unfamiliar ways' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012, p. 114).

The indicative review of existent literature on voice in South Africa and China highlights key research gaps, and some inconsistencies. In terms of research gaps, while much of the cognate work in South Africa and China has been conceptually and empirically rigorous, it has been less concerned with complex theory building. Moreover, a lot of the research in those countries applies 'western' concepts. Yet, there are also inconsistencies in terms of intellectual underpinnings. In common with more general trends in voice research, individual voicing of workers in China has often drawn on OB perspectives, focussing on psychological determinants, micro-level processes, and pro-social voice and/or the role of leaders in promoting it (Kaufman, 2015). In contrast, research in South Africa has focussed on collective (not individual) voice and covered broader contextual factors and power relations, engaging with institutional theory. Why have these differences occurred? To some extent the answer might seem to be obvious, since both have very different political contexts. Yet, in both countries the formal institutional voice mechanisms that seek to engender individual and direct forms of voice appear to be weak. In China, this has resulted in circumvention via informal and lateral voice, but to date this has not appeared in research findings from South Africa. This is either because it does not exist, or perhaps it is due to the lack of research on voice from an OB perspective. To address these gaps, we can draw inspiration from Marchington's work on voice, which used different disciplines in complementary ways. Research in China which draws on OB to focus on individual voice can benefit from a greater understanding of the shaping of contextual and situational influences on voice, how individuals make sense of these contextual influences and their personal experiences to navigate voicing, as well as what the outcomes of voicing are (if any). Moving beyond looking at the process of voice, a more complex perspective may also be useful in unpacking the social structures linked to voice and how they impact and are impacted by individual employees and employers. Research in South Africa from the IR tradition that focuses on collective forms of voice needs to take account not only of formal institutions and procedures, but also consider managerial behaviour and strategy and investigate the informal networks and rationales that underlie different forms of voice.

To probe further on why different forms of voice are used in both countries, we might also need to develop a better understanding of the use of terms that are analogous to voice. For example, in China, the aforementioned concept of 'voice' is referred to as '*jianyan*' (back-translated as 'constructive speech/opinion') in most Chinese articles and linked to a paternalistic view of voice (as in a child voicing to a father) (Zhu et al., 2012). This meaning may either reflect Chinese academics' tendency to view voice as a mechanism for continuous improvement rather than for grievance and complaint and/or their reluctance to challenge those in authority. This might, at least partially, account for the tendency to use lateral forms of voice when wishing to be critical of the status quo. Although the Chinese government has encouraged 'democratic management' within the workplace, this has not been with the aim of invoking criticism. In South Africa, the related term of 'democracy' has generally been understood in isiZulu as an 'ongoing struggle for a better life' (Brooks et al., 2020, p. 24). Perhaps informed by the previous struggles during apartheid, the assumption therefore seems to be that voice is closely linked to resistance and that results will not be achieved without conflict. More generally, the concept of voice needs to be re-imagined to something that takes account of institutional context and is better able to capture how power relations influence formal and informal voice.

In further developing theory on voice, the case of China suggests that we need to develop a greater understanding of how new flows of voice are used to circumnavigate existing structures, building on our limited understanding on lateral (including peer to peer and sideways) voice (Kalfa & Budd, 2020). At the same time, the existing evidence

from both China and South Africa calls for more nuanced conceptual development of how voice is related to conflict and protest. Traditionally, voice might be seen as a way to avoid conflict, but in some contexts, it has inextricable links to forms of resistance. These country examples therefore help to form the building blocks for new theoretical insights.

This paper has contrasted our understanding of voice from an OB and IR/LPT perspective, inspired by Marchington's multidisciplinary approach. Future analyses might broaden this scope to include culturalist explanations for voice, such as how employee voice in China is affected by cultural traditions of patriarchy and guanxi, including affective attachment (qing) and loyalty (yi) (Wu et al., 2020). In South Africa, culturalist explanations have included consideration of how the concept of Ubuntu might impact on HR practice. Ubuntu is taken from a Xhosa (ethnic group in Southern Africa) proverb 'ubuntu ungamntu ngabanye abantu', meaning that people are people through other people (Jackson, 1999, p. 307). This indigenous concept has been positively associated with a humanistic form of human resource management which includes acceptance and social solidarity (Beugré, 2015), but it has also received criticism for being used to sustain prejudiced, repressive and sexist behaviour and suppressing individualism (Newenham-Kahindi, 2009). Although there has also been some attention paid to cross cultural approaches (Horwitz et al., 2021), most work has covered labour regulation and industrial relations (Wood & Bischoff, 2022).

Extending Marchington's multidisciplinary approach to voice to consideration of studies in the majority world may have broader implications not only for future research but also for practice in the minority as well as the majority world. Majority world (Chinese) experiences of challenging the dominant perspective on voice as a source of organisational harmony may serve to bring lessons for countries in the minority world that face continued onslaughts on worker rights. Moreover, the aforementioned examples of worker resistance against sexual harassment might help to inspire challenges against the increase in bullying at work (Ackroyd & Thompson, 2022). In addition, learning how moderate forms of digital activism operate in China can help us to understand the limitations of social media as a form of voice, as well as the boundaries of management's right to police employee activities outside of the workplace. Meanwhile, an understanding of how voice in both China and South Africa has developed in a non-union context, and research on new actors in IR such as autonomous labour organisations highlights how workplace voice, with its focus on economic rights cannot be isolated from campaigns for social justice and political rights.

Viewing voice through the lens of the majority world might challenge trade unions and help HR practitioners to create relevant policies and procedures that enable employee voice and help them to listen for diverse voices in their organisations. In many countries, voice has fractured away from single, formal and unionised channels into informal and lateral forms of voice, with representation by various internal and external parties. Unions may need to reach out to broader community and social movements, while HR practitioners need to build more opportunities for social relationships within the workplace and develop more nuanced responses that reflect divergent interests and perspectives.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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