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Psychological safety, employee voice, and work engagement

Yuanqin Ge[1]

[1]Chinese Graduate School, Panyapiwat Institute of Management, Thailand

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I examined the relationships among psychological safety, employee voice, and work engagement. Based on a literature review, I hypothesized that psychological safety would directly affect employees' engagement at work, and indirectly affect work engagement via employee voice. A validated survey was used to collect data from 153 employees of a large manufacturing company in China. The results of structural equation modeling offered support for the full mediating role of employee voice in the psychological safety–work engagement relationship. Employees who perceived psychological safety were more likely to exhibit voice behavior; employee voice, in turn, promoted work engagement. These findings extend prior research and shed light on how employees' psychological safety affects their work engagement. Discussion and implications of the results are presented.

Keywords
psychological safety; employee voice; work engagement

Work engagement is defined as an individual's "positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-romá, & Bakker, 2002, p. 74), and it has been one of the most popular topics in the field of human resource management, particularly as it relates to both individual and organizational performance. Initiatives to promote employees' work engagement are widespread all over the world (Fearon, McLaughlin, & Morris, 2013). However, according to Gallup's employee engagement report, only 33% of employees were engaged in their work. In contrast, 51% of employees were disengaged and another 16% were actively disengaged (Gallup, 2017). Employee engagement as a whole increased only 3% from 2012 to 2016. Gallup estimates that in the US, actively disengaged employees cost from $483 billion to $605 billion each year in lost productivity. Given the importance of employee work engagement to organizations, how to enhance employee work engagement is a key issue for managers. The focus in numerous prior studies has been on identifying the antecedents of work engagement, and the results have demonstrated that work engagement is predicted by a host of psychological variables, like psychological capital (Paek, Schuckert, Kim, & Lee, 2015) and psychological empowerment (Ugwu, Onyishi, & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2014).

Recently, one variable that has been receiving attention from scholars as a determinant of work engagement is psychological safety (Lyu, 2016). *Psychological safety* refers to an individual's perception about the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in the workplace. It describes a climate in which people focus on constructive discussion that can prevent problems, and in which they can accomplish a shared goal earlier, because they are less likely than are those in an unsafe climate to engage in self-protection (Edmondson, 1999). Tiwari and Lenka (2016) suggested that in a work environment that employees perceive as being psychologically safe, they are free to share knowledge, learn, and take risks to build their intrapreneurial abilities that will lead to higher levels of engagement. May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) specifically addressed the relationship between psychological conditions and employees' engagement in their research, and

CORRESPONDENCE Yuanqin Ge, Chinese Graduate School, Panyapiwat Institute of Management, 85/1 Moo 2 Chaengwattana, Amphoe, Pak Kret, Nonthaburi, 11120, Thailand. Email: **pimgyq@126.com**

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indicated that all psychological conditions, including safety, were positively related to employees' work engagement.

Voice is viewed as a risky workplace behavior (Burris, 2012). When employees are free of fears and feel comfortable about engaging in expressing their voice, the perceived risk of welfare reduction is minimized (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). In contrast, when employees do not feel free to express their opinions, they will avoid speaking up publicly because of the fear of welfare reduction (Zhao & Olivera, 2006). Thus, it has been suggested that psychological safety facilitates employee voice (Edmondson, 2004). Employee voice is upward-directed and improvement-oriented (Detert & Burris, 2007). Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009) examined the relationship between psychological safety and voice behavior, and found that employees' perceptions of psychological safety led to their voice behavior. Chinese traditional culture mainly involves Confucianism and in Confucian philosophical thought the golden mean of moderation in all things is advocated as the best way. In such a culture, Chinese tend to be less proactive than Westerners (Zhang, Wei, Chen, & Zhang, 2012) and voice is a type of proactive behavior (Tornau & Frese, 2015). Few Chinese employees take the initiative to voice their opinions unless they perceive adequate safety in the organization. Thus, employees' voice behavior is enhanced as they perceive high levels of psychological safety.

Researchers have also reported an association between employees' voice behavior and their work engagement (Kwon, Farndale, & Park, 2016). Rees, Alfes, and Gatenby (2013) demonstrated that employee voice has a direct positive influence on engagement and an indirect positive influence on engagement via employee trust. Some researchers view voice directed toward superiors as a communicative indicator of work engagement. Kassing, Piemonte, Goman, and Mitchell (2012) point out that a good way to foster employee work engagement is to facilitate and hear employee voice. In job demands–resources theory, it is suggested that job resources, including participation in decision making, play both an intrinsic and extrinsic motivational role to drive work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009), and that voice behavior is an important antecedent of work engagement. Voice brings employees perceptions of involvement in organizational decision making, and consequently leads to their engagement at work (Kwon et al., 2016). That is to say, when employees have the opportunity to speak up, or voice their views upwards, this will bolster their engagement at work.

Previous research findings confirm the relationships among psychological safety, employee voice, and work engagement (Kwon et al., 2016; May et al., 2004; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). So far, to my knowledge no study has been conducted to investigate the trivariate relationship among them. The purpose of my study was to replicate recent work in which psychological safety has been linked to work engagement (Lyu, 2016), and to extend the knowledge of this link by examining the potential mediating role of employee voice. I investigated whether employees with perceptions of psychological safety are more likely to display voice behavior in organizations than employees who do not have this perception, so that this affects their work engagement. Building from the theoretical review and preliminary empirical evidence, in this study I expected that psychological safety would indirectly affect employees' work engagement through employee voice. I also expected that psychological safety would have a direct positive effect on work employees' engagement, and predicted that employee voice would serve as a partial mediator of the psychological safety–work engagement relationship.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The paper-based survey was completed by employees of a large manufacturing company in China. After approval of the ethics committee at the employees' company, all employees were asked whether they would be willing to participate in this survey without any incentives. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. I distributed 207 survey forms. After discarding incomplete survey responses, the final sample consisted of 153 employees, for a response rate of 74%. The respondents were 95 men (62%) and 58 women

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(38%), with an average age of 32.57 years (*SD* = 9.48, range 27–51 years). The organizational tenure ranged from less than 2 years to 29 years, with an average of 8.74 years (*SD* = 7.70).

Measures

The original measures were developed in English. Two bilingual Chinese researchers in the areas of organizational behavior helped me to translate the survey items into Chinese and back-translate into English to ensure equivalence of meaning across the two cultures. Responses to these items were rated with a 5-point Likert format ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Psychological safety. Psychological safety was assessed with a reduced version of Edmondson's (1999) seven-item scale. Exploratory factor analysis was carried out, and four items were removed on the basis of item loadings. The remaining three items were adopted to measure individual-level psychological safety in an organization. Items were "Member of this organization are able to bring up problems and tough issues,"; "It is safe to take a risk in this organization," and "It is easy to ask other members of this organization for help." The Cronbach alpha for this measure was .89.

Employee voice. Six items taken from Van Dyne and LePine (1998) were used to measure employee voice. A sample item is "I speak up in this organization with ideas for new projects or change in procedures." The Cronbach alpha for this measure was .82.

Work engagement. Work engagement was assessed in three subdimensions taken from Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova's (2006) scale, made up of vigor (three items; e.g., "At my work, I feel bursting with energy"), dedication (three items; e.g., "I am enthusiastic about my job"), and absorption (three items; e.g., "I get carried away when I am working"). The Cronbach alpha for the three subscales were .84 (vigor), .87 (dedication), and .85 (absorption).

Results

Measurement Model

The convergent and discriminant validity of measures were assessed using confirmatory factor analyses. In the three-factor correlated model, work engagement was indicated by three reliable parcels. The results showed the three-factor model fits the data and the model yielded a satisfactory fit as assessed by the criteria of root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and incremental fit index (IFI) as follows: RMSEA = .065, CFI = .97, IFI = .97. All items loaded significantly on the hypothesized factors. All average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded the recommended value of .50, and the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than the correlations involving the construct. These results collectively provided support for convergent validity and discriminant validity.

Structural Model

The hypothesized structural model was tested using structural equation modeling (see Figure 1). The model exhibited good fit: RMSEA = .053, CFI = .95, IFI = .96. Path coefficient analysis revealed that the path from psychological safety to employee voice and the path from employee voice to work engagement were significant, and the path from psychological safety to work engagement was nonsignificant. A revised model was built by removing the nonsignificant path. The results showed that revised model also had good fit: RMSEA = .050, CFI = .96, IFI = .96.

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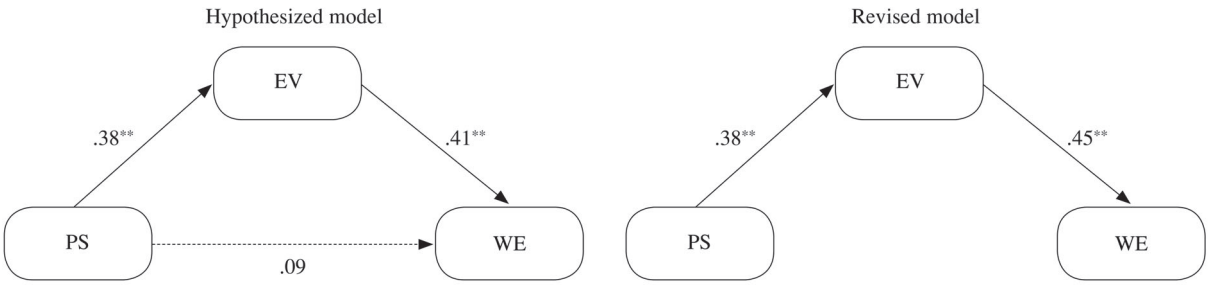

Figure 1. Path coefficients for models. PS = psychological safety, EV = employee voice, WE = work engagement. Dashed line indicates nonsignificant path.
** $p < .01$.

The bias-corrected 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of psychological safety on work engagement via employee voice in the revised model excluded zero [0.07, 0.26]. Thus, this finding supported that employee voice fully mediated the relationship between psychological safety and work engagement, as the paths from psychological safety to employee voice as well as from employee voice to work engagement remained significant.

Discussion

Although studies have previously been conducted to investigate the relationships among psychological safety, employee voice, and work engagement, I have been unable to find any studies on the trivariate relationship among these constructs. The current study is the first in which the effects of psychological safety on work engagement have been examined through employee voice in the context of China. Results support the mediation of the psychological safety–work engagement relationship by employee voice, demonstrating that the employees who took part in the study were more engaged in their work when they felt safe in the organization, and when they could speak up with constructive ideas to their supervisor. In addition, contrary to findings of previous studies, in this study I found that psychological safety did not directly enhance work engagement. These findings have important theoretical and practical implications.

From a theoretical standpoint, my findings add to understanding of the literature on psychological safety and work engagement. Consistent with prior studies (Cheng, Lu, Cheung, & Kuo, 2013), I confirmed that employee voice was an important outcome of psychological safety. I also found that work engagement was influenced by psychological safety, though this association operated through the effect of psychological safety on employee voice. This suggests that the psychological safety–work engagement relationship is more complicated than has been indicated in prior studies. Previously, psychological safety has been viewed as a psychological condition, and results revealed that psychological safety was a significant predictor of work engagement (May et al., 2004). However, the results of my study are contradictory to those previous findings. In this study I did not confirm my expectation of a positive correlation between psychological safety and work engagement, which is in line with the finding in the study of Rothmann and Rothmann (2010). They also did not find such an association. Employee voice is a practice giving employees the opportunity to feed their concerns and opinions upwards to influence decision making (Dundon & Gollan, 2007). When employees have opportunities to voice their views and have input into organizational decision, this drives their engagement (Holland, Cooper, & Sheehan, 2017; Rees et al., 2013). When employees feel safe to express their ideas, they are more likely to exhibit voice behavior (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012). Therefore, psychological safety is thought to motivate employee voice, which, in turn leads to work engagement.

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Practically, my findings in this study bring into focus the mediating role of employee voice in the psychological safety–work engagement relationship. Managers should understand how psychological safety can facilitate employee voice, which, in turn, promotes work engagement. In order to enhance employees' work engagement, managers of organizations should create a work environment in which the employees feel safe. For example, managers may exhibit openness in their behavior as leaders to foster a psychologically safe climate to encourage employees to speak out about work-related issues (Detert & Burris, 2007).

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design may obstruct interpreting any causal conclusions among variables. Researchers should conduct longitudinal studies to allow for the causal inference. Second, employee voice has different forms such as supportive, defensive, and destructive voice (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014). In future research, a richer model may be developed that incorporates these forms.

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