

Dissent

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Early studies of organizational dissent were subsumed under the larger construct of employee resistance. Accordingly, dissent was seen as behavior that contributed to how employees engaged with systems of control within organizations. It still remains a key part of employee resistance but over the past two decades has more sharply focused on verbal expressions of dissent and dissent messages. Accordingly, the focus here is on the more recent phase in the progression of dissent research.

While early examinations of dissent expression in organizations stemmed from rhetorical and critical/cultural perspectives, later work has been grounded in a message-centered approach. From this standpoint, dissent refers to “expressing disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational practices, policies and operations” (Kassing, 1998, p. 183). In his book *Dissent in Organizations*, Kassing (2011) noted several implications of this conceptualization. For example, the reason for dissent should be anchored in the organization, but not necessarily the audience, as dissent can be shared with audiences outside of formal workplaces. Moreover, dissent can be expressed about a range of issues and need not be tied specifically to ethical issues alone (i.e., whistle-blowing).

Historically, scholars have conflated dissent with related yet distinct concepts – primarily conflict, upward influence, resistance, voice, and whistle-blowing. Kassing (2011) provided a comparison of these concepts to dissent, differentiating each in particular and specific ways. Conflict by definition involves the contestation over resources and stems from interdependence and interaction. Dissent can contribute to this tug-of-war, but need not. Rather, conflict can unfold without dissent. Likewise, upward influence or attempts to gain favor with management and supervisors can be achieved with or without dissent. Dissent often gets mobilized in upward influence attempts, but those same attempts can occur without disagreement – consider the employee who offers suggestions for improvement or innovation. Thus, conflict and upward influence can engage dissent, but also occur without it. There is correspondence with these concepts but not enough to suggest that they are synonymous. In contrast, dissent appears to be a form of employee resistance and voice.

As behavior that combats organizational constraints, dissent shares its genesis with employee resistance. However, this common grounding does not dictate that all resistance is dissent. To the contrary, there are forms of resistance that do not include the open and explicit expression of disagreement. These are subtly deployed through behavioral practices that make resistance clear to employees but are obscured from management (e.g., rate setting). Similarly, dissent is a form of employee voice

as both dissent and resistance stem from an innate desire to have some say in how organizations operate and how work life unfolds. Yet employee voice can be achieved without clear disagreement: making suggestions, providing advice, and participating in corporate governance practices are examples of where the two diverge.

Conceptually, the greatest overlap exists between whistle-blowing and dissent. Traditionally, whistle-blowing refers to the expression of dissent to audiences outside the organization, mainly industry governing bodies or media outlets, with a particular focus on ethical issues and organizational wrongdoing. Whistle-blowing is dissent, but a very specific form. Dissent expression encompasses whistle-blowing but is much broader as it can occur for reasons unrelated to ethical concerns and because it can be directed to audiences other than those prescribed by whistle-blowing.

Benefits of attending to organizational dissent

Redding (1985) first argued for attending to employee dissent – noting that it was imperative for organizational communication as a discipline to move toward and learn from the messages that contradicted the status quo. A chorus of other scholars has elaborated on this theme, providing a wealth of reasons why dissent deserves greater attention. In particular, they have argued that how organizations deal with dissenting voices is a key test for organizational communication systems and that dissent serves to regulate the quality of organizational performance, head off crises, reduce risk, identify difficulties in organizational change, and expose corporate and employee wrongdoing. Moreover, dissent functions as a barometer for employee satisfaction, commitment, involvement, burnout, and turnover. In essence, dissent is valuable corrective feedback that opens up opportunities to address a host of organizational issues.

Dissent stands as a means by which employees can question and challenge organizational constraints that prove burdensome. Dissent also draws attention to overlooked issues that would otherwise remain unaddressed. And dissent can be a definitive and effective means for confronting unethical behavior and organizational wrongdoing. Finally, dissent provides a mechanism by which employees can address their dissatisfaction with organizational practices and policies. Instead of unswervingly remaining loyal to organizations that ferment employee dissatisfaction or exiting such organizations out of frustration, employees can engage those organizations through dissent with an eye toward improving workplaces.

Models of employee dissent

There have been several significant models of employee dissent forwarded (Garner, 2013; Graham, 1986; Kassing 1997). Graham (1986) offered a model designed to explain how *principled dissent* (i.e., dissent expressed in response to violations of justice and honesty) occurred in organizations. The process of dissent begins with the observation of wrongdoing. Then employees must work through several considerations before determining whether or not to express dissent. They must consider how serious

the issue is, how much personal responsibility they hold in relation to the issue, and how feasible it is to expect a response to the issue. Graham identified a set of determinants that contribute to each part of the model. For example, the possession of strong normative standards along with tenure and position in the organization shape how likely employees will be to spot organizational wrongdoing. The number of observers of a given issue and the frequency of its occurrence contribute to assessments of how serious it is. Personal assumed responsibility and assigned responsibilities converge to influence felt responsibility for reporting wrongdoing. Also, the risk of reprisal, self-confidence as a change agent, and estimation of protection afforded dissenters inform assessments of how feasible a response to dissent expression will be. After considering these factors employees decide on an appropriate response. This may involve reporting to a supervisor, choosing another formal reporting channel like an oversight office, externally sharing one's dissent as a whistle-blower, or resorting to some form of direct action like quitting.

In another model, Kassing (1997) expanded the examination of dissent beyond merely principled dissent. This model allowed for dissent expressed to multiple audiences and in response to a range of influences. Here dissent arises when "a triggering agent exceeds an individual's tolerance for dissent" (p. 322), which in turn forces employees to recognize incongruence between what they expect to happen and what actually does happen. When this incongruence becomes apparent employees begin to identify and look past organizational decision premises or what the organization has deemed is best for the company and toward individual decision premises (those that prioritize the individual).

Kassing's model emphasizes verbal expressions of dissent to particular audiences other than governing bodies and the media used by whistle-blowers. Once determined to express dissent, employees work through a set of overlapping individual, relational, and organizational influences that coalesce to guide their decisions about expressing dissent. Individual influences include the predispositions people bring to the organization (e.g., personality and communication traits) and how they orient to their places of work (e.g., commitment, satisfaction, engagement). Relational influences concern the quality and nature of relationships employees hold with supervisors and fellow coworkers. Organizational influences entail communication climates of workplaces and the organizational culture of companies – particularly with regard to how tolerant organizations are of dissent and how employees are socialized into more or less tolerant places of work.

Kassing reasoned that these varied influences are distilled into an employee's assessment of two key questions: (1) Will dissent be perceived as adversarial or constructive? (2) And will it lead to retaliation? A sort of these various influences and a response to the two overarching questions leads employees to choose between different possible dissent audiences. Employees can direct dissent to supervisors and management – what Kassing originally called *articulated dissent*. In later work this term was adjusted and relabeled *upward dissent* to maintain a focus on its hierarchical directionality while addressing the criticism and implicit bias that only dissent directed to management

could be considered “articulated.” This form of dissent expression occurs when organizational members believe that dissent is likely to be construed as constructive and there is little risk of retaliation associated with sharing it.

In contrast, when the likelihood of being perceived as adversarial and experiencing retaliation are high, employees express *displaced dissent* and direct their disagreement to audiences that are external to organizations, such as family members and nonwork friends. Doing so insulates employees from retribution but allows them to still vent their frustrations. When employees conclude that they are likely to be construed as adversarial but are intent on sharing their concerns within the organization, they may turn to coworkers. This allows them to take and maintain an adversarial posture but do so in interactions that are much less likely to lead to retaliation. *Antagonistic or latent dissent* refers to dissent that is expressed to coworkers, referring to dissent that is knowingly adversarial (antagonistic) but also not heard directly by management, thereby remaining latent to the managerial/supervisory audience. In order to more accurately reflect the directionality of the behavior more than the implied nature of it, this form of dissent expression has been referred to as *lateral dissent* in subsequent work.

In the most recent model, Garner (2013) proposes that dissent needs to be considered as an interactional process whereby coworkers and supervisors enable and constrain dissent expression. Accordingly, dissent becomes a co-constructed process that unfolds across three possible dissent moments. The first moment involves *precipitation* of the dissent interaction. Here the dissenter determines in concert with coworkers and managers if and what constitutes dissent and attempts to predict the possible consequences of expressing dissent in particular circumstances. The history of how organizations have handled dissent comes into play during the precipitation process. The second moment is the *initial dissent conversation*. This is the first time dissent gets expressed publicly. The audience of dissent and the actual dissent message are key points in this phase of the process. The dissent conversation necessitates labeling by coworkers and managers and these labels consequently work to socially construct either positive or negative valences of dissent expression. *Residual communication* about the dissent event follows as the third and final moment. At this point those involved in the dissent event attempt to determine the relative success or failure of dissent and what should happen next. This occurs over time, with the attributions of success being shaped through ensuing interactions. Dissent stories may then become lodged in the fabric of organizations. Such tales, whether recounting successful or unsuccessful dissent interactions, remain to inform subsequent dissent efforts. In this way the model becomes cyclical, with dissent interactions shaping those that follow and being shaped by those that came before.

Dissent triggering events

A dissent trigger is an event that moves employees to feel as if they need to speak out and express dissent (Kassing, 1997; Redding, 1985). An event becomes a dissent trigger when it exceeds an individual’s tolerance for dissent – that is, when someone determines that speaking out about the issue is worth the risk of retaliation associated with dissent expression. Employees consider the risk of retaliation, the seriousness of the issue, and

the likelihood that the issue will be addressed when determining whether or not to express dissent. Accordingly, if the risk of retaliation is high, issues need to be quite serious to move employees to express dissent. Similarly, if the likelihood of a favorable outcome is uncertain, more serious issues will need to serve as motives for dissent. Contrastingly, less serious issues can trigger dissent when the risk of retaliation is lower and the likelihood of a favorable outcome comparatively certain.

Many dissent triggering events have surfaced in past research. These fall into a few key areas: organizational processes, personnel matters, ethics, and supervisory behavior. Organizational processes that have been identified as dissent triggering events include decision making, organizational change, resource distribution, and inefficiency. Personnel matters involve employee treatment, preventing harm, role responsibilities, and performance evaluations. Ethics encompasses wrongdoing, preventing harm (to employees and customers), and unethical behavior. Supervisory behavior can trigger dissent in response to supervisor indiscretion, supervisor performance, and supervisor inactivity. Employees dissent when supervisors engage in unethical behavior or practice poor judgment, when they perform poorly or abuse their power, and when they fail to address concerns raised routinely.

It is worth noting that while dissent triggering events can be separated and differentiated from one another, in reality they co-occur and collaborate to infuse dissent expression with a greater complexity than the typologies would suggest. Furthermore, the motive for dissent can emerge from a perspective of personal advantage or principle. *Personal advantage* motives are underpinned by one's desire to gain some personal advantage via dissent (e.g., a change in schedule, an increase in pay), whereas motives that drive *principled* dissent are anchored in perceived violations of the standards of justice and honesty. Here, too, clear distinctiveness exists, but research shows that both motives can be activated simultaneously and combine as dissent plays out. In fact, employees can and do construct personal advantage dissent with the tenets of principled dissent in mind (e.g., appealing to matters of general fairness rather than their own isolated case). By doing so employees draw upon the powerful and implicit bond between dissent and ethics.

Related research has considered dissent goals. These are other goals, in addition to addressing a specific concern, that motivate dissent expression. For example, employees may hope to provide guidance, get advice, obtain information, gain assistance, seek emotional support, or change the target's opinion or behavior. Of these, obtaining information appears to be the most important, followed by getting advice, changing the opinion of others, and soliciting emotional support. Interestingly, the goal of advancing personal resources remains secondary and relatively less important by comparison.

Factors influencing dissent expression

With regard to individual influences on dissent expression, research demonstrates that senses of powerlessness and preferences for avoiding conflict can influence how readily employees express dissent. In terms of directing dissent to particular audiences, we have discovered that people who possess an internal locus of control express more upward

dissent, while those influenced more by an external locus of control opt for expressing lateral dissent. Similarly, employees who score higher on measures of argumentative behavior are more likely to share dissent with management than those who tend toward verbal aggression. Indeed, verbally aggressive individuals tend to express latent dissent to coworkers. The type of communication in one's family may also have an influence on expressions of upward dissent, with those who grow up in families that emphasize conformity refraining from dissenting to managers and supervisors.

Organizational standing plays a role in dissent expression as well. For example, younger employees who are newer to their respective organizations appear to favor displacing dissent to family and friends outside of work. This affords them the time to learn the norms governing dissent expression within organizations. Similarly, latent dissent occurs more often when employees have worked in fewer organizations for comparatively less time – the implication being that it takes time and exposure to multiple workplace settings to develop and explore other means of expressing dissent. Latent dissent in these circumstances provides a default position for expressing dissent that remains safe but affords one the opportunity to be vocal. The fact that those occupying the managerial ranks, not surprisingly, engage in comparatively more upward dissent is a common theme uncovered in dissent studies. In contrast, we have learned that nonmanagers tend to rely on lateral dissent to coworkers and displaced dissent to friends and family outside of work.

Another consideration at the individual level is the connection employees feel and make with their respective workplaces. The expression of dissent to specific audiences seems to be an accurate barometer of employee well-being. When employees are more satisfied, committed, and identified they share dissent with management; when they experience less of these attributes they direct dissent to coworkers or to folks outside their organization. In addition, dissent expression toggles between upward and lateral audiences as employees' degrees of personal influence in organizations shift up or down. The same is true for employee engagement and employee turnover – with employees being more engaged and less likely to leave when they are expressing upward compared to lateral dissent. Employee burnout also seems to affect dissent, reducing the amount of lateral dissent expressed when burnout symptoms accumulate. Thus, dissent expression connects closely to how we orient to our organizations. In fact, higher levels of organization-based self-esteem account for greater amounts of upward dissent expression, whereas lower levels of the same parallel latent dissent use.

Research exploring how relational influences affect dissent expression is quite predictable. Employees are confident and more likely to share dissent with their supervisors and management when they have higher quality relationships with their supervisors and when they trust them. When those same relationships are low quality and lacking trust, dissent gets directed to coworkers instead. The quality of coworker relationships also exerts some influence on dissent expression. Apparently, lateral dissent occurs more readily in personal coworker relationships compared to those characterized by lower levels of intimacy. Moreover, preventing harm to coworkers appears to be a key dissent trigger. Thus, both supervisory and peer relationships influence dissent expression.

Organizational influences on dissent expression include the structural aspects of organizations, the communication and psychological climates management creates, and the organizational cultures members enact. With regard to size, early work indicated that dissent might occur more readily in smaller organizations. Subsequent work has demonstrated that dissent, particularly upward dissent, flows more readily in organizations that foster climates that are tolerant of dissent. Employees recognize and adjust their recurring dissent expression based upon how organizations have handled earlier dissent episodes. Thus, the current organizational climate of a workplace combines with the cultural history of how dissent has been handled historically. Studies have shown that employees only opt to express dissent about the most egregious concerns when they perceive that their organizations operate with a climate that is intolerant of employee dissent. However, upward dissent occurs more readily when employees have greater trust in top management and when they see that their organizational climate affords workplace freedom of speech. The reporting of organizational wrongdoing also increases in participatory cultures. Finally, organizational socialization also has an impact on dissent expression, with those more highly assimilated into their organizations being more likely to express upward dissent.

There are many factors that dictate the expression of dissent. In an effort to determine which of these exerted greater influence, Kassing (2008) asked employees to judge the relative importance of a predetermined set of possible influences. The findings suggested that organizational climate is a strong determinant alongside an individual's attachment to their organization (a combination of identification, loyalty, and commitment). These factors outweighed people's concerns about being seen as adversarial and experiencing retaliation.

Upward dissent

Expressing upward dissent to management has received specific attention as it merits significant impression management and puts employees at considerable risk (Kassing, 2002, 2007, 2009, 2011). Kassing (2002) identified five upward dissent strategies. Employees may use a *direct factual appeal* and call upon evidence to support a dissent claim. Or they may choose to engage in *solution presentation*, providing a solution to the issue raised. These are comparatively favorable approaches. Other options include *circumvention* or going around one's direct supervisor to someone higher in the chain of command and *threatening resignation*. Another possibility is to raise the concern multiple times over the course of a given period (i.e., *repetition*).

A direct factual appeal entails "supporting one's dissent claim with factual information derived from some combination of physical evidence, knowledge of organizational policies and practices, and personal work experience" (Kassing, 2002, p. 195). When employees use this strategy they rely on their own firsthand knowledge of the issue and ways to generate evidence to show it is a serious concern. Employees using this strategy position themselves as cooperative by backing their claim with evidence that they have accumulated, rather than simply raising concerns that are difficult to validate or confirm. Direct factual appeals move away from personal advantage and emotional

appeals, and instead seek to manage interactions through the presentation of facts and evidence. Addressing dissent with issue-focused evidence directs attention away from the dissenter and toward the concern at hand. Therefore employees see the strategy as competent and report using it early in the dissent process.

Solution presentation is an equally if not more effective strategy for expressing upward dissent. Solution presentation allows dissenters to be potential problem solvers in addition simply to sounding the alarm or raising the complaint. Engaging in problem solving signals that employees seek to be change agents and proactive in addressing their workplace concerns. Guided by goals to provide guidance and change opinions, balanced with a desire to get advice and obtain information, employees mobilize solution presentation in an effort to exercise influence while also being conciliatory and open to additional information. It is a strategy that management appears to appreciate and that employees rate as highly effective, able to be deployed across situations and in response to very serious issues. It is also the strategy employees report that they would be most likely to use before other options.

Circumvention or going around one's direct supervisor can be quite risky, and often leads to serious repercussions for dissenters because it runs the risk of directly damaging the superior-subordinate relationship. This can take the form of relational strain, hard feelings, and hostile work environments (Kassing, 2007). However, circumvention can provide considerable rewards. Thus, it is a strategy that is used infrequently but one that employees realize is appropriate and effective in particular circumstances. These include when employees find that their supervisors are unsympathetic to their concerns (or assume that they will be), or when supervisors behave in unethical ways. Gaining assistance is the primary motive that drives circumvention. This is not surprising given that employees report using it after trying other strategies repeatedly and finding their supervisors' responses wanting – either because supervisors are ineffective in addressing employees' concerns, unwilling to address those concerns, unable to address them, or are implicated in organizational or personal wrongdoing. Circumvention affords employees access to a network of influence that would otherwise remain restricted, but at the risk of being criticized for not addressing the issue fully or well with their immediate supervisor.

While circumvention often leads to *relational deterioration* between subordinates and supervisors, there are other additional possible outcomes. For example, *compromise* or *neutrality* may emerge when supervisors and subordinates recognize and move past the relational breach. And in particular instances so too may *relational development*, when supervisors recognize that circumvention benefits them by correcting issues they are unable to address, and *understanding*, when supervisors acknowledge that circumvention may be necessary. When successful, dissenters who practice circumvention achieve outcomes that are favorable and organizations benefit as well. Organizations profit when circumvention leads to policy revisions, remediation of particular workplace practices, and reprimands of organizational wrongdoers. Yet those practicing circumvention also run the risk of experiencing reprimands, demotions, and terminations or they may face the reality that their organizations have failed to offer any meaningful corrective action.

Threatening resignation is another risky way to express upward dissent. In these instances the threat of resignation is used as a form of leverage to provoke a response

from management. Acting as an ultimatum, threatening resignation demands action and creates a sense of urgency. This is clearly a risky proposition and one that employees do not deploy often or without consideration. In fact it tends to be used after other strategies have failed to gain traction. Research indicates that employees threaten resignation in very specific and limited circumstances. Employees have reported threatening resignation when they believe they have reached an impasse with their immediate supervisor – a situation that can no longer be tolerated nor repaired; or when they perceive that there has been a serious personal affront to their identity; or when they feel that they have been put in harm's way. In these situations employees suspend concerns about appropriateness in an effort to achieve personal goals.

Repetition, as the name suggests, involves the “repeated attempts to express dissent about a given topic at multiple points across time with the intention of eventually attaining receptivity to the dissent issue” (Kassing, 2002, pp. 197–198). Repetition involves the organization and placement of dissent strategies relative to one another and the intentions one hopes to achieve. It is thought to be less competent than direct factual appeals and solution presentation, but more competent than circumvention and threatening resignation. When practicing repetition employees have to weigh the need to continue raising an issue against the possibility of overstating it. Therefore employees consider how best to order their use of other dissent strategies, with particular attention devoted to which should come before others and which should be used later as repetition continues. They also need to give some thought to varying their approach. In addition to these considerations, dissenters also have to contemplate how temporal factors will be addressed. This might include the frequency with which or how often employees raise the issue, how much time elapses between dissent episodes, and the overall duration of repetition. It is quite different, for example, for an employee to raise an issue every day or once every few months (shorter versus long intervals) and for only one week versus six months straight (shorter versus longer overall duration).

Research reveals that employees use direct factual appeals most often during repetition, followed by solution presentation and circumvention; and that over time the use of direct factual appeals and solution presentation level off, while the adoption of circumvention and threatening resignation increase. This pattern suggests that employees move away from competent approaches to more challenging forms of dissent expression as issues linger and dissent efforts elongate across time. Supervisors play an important role in how repetition transpires as well. Findings demonstrate that dissenters stretch repetition out over time when supervisors respond with delaying tactics (i.e., when supervisors ignore or wait to address issues, fail to confront issues, or make excuses for not responding to issues). Dissenters truncate repetition when supervisors respond unfavorably (i.e., when supervisors become irritated, aggravated, or annoyed).

Dissent and communication technology

As communication technologies have evolved, so too have the opportunities for employees to express dissent. For example, employees have begun to use Internet locations to vent their frustrations – this despite the fact that doing so is actionable in many companies and that organizations now readily engage in surveillance of

employees' use of electronic communication. An early examination of employees' use of Internet communication to express dissent via counterinstitutional or "gripe" websites found that users were drawn to the site out of a general sense of futility regarding the company's ability to respond considerately or effectively to employee voice and dissent. User comments revealed that the content was not only griping from disgruntled employees but also commentary about how poorly the organization's communication systems performed. Interestingly, employees posting wrote as if they expected management to be monitoring the site and reading specific comments (Gossett & Kilker, 2006). In this way dissent displaced outside the organization via communication technology also doubled as upward dissent directed to management.

Researchers have also considered the communication rules that employees believe govern dissent expression via email. Employees understand that they should be cautious using email to share dissent because it is not a private medium and is one over which they have little control. And when choosing to use email, they should be professional. This relates to the tone and content of messages as well as whom to include on them. Employees reported that email helped to introduce dissent concerns that could then be addressed in face-to-face conversations and that email afforded them time to craft initial messages and subsequent responses to their initial dissent expression (Hastings & Payne, 2013).

Dissent in organized contexts

While researchers have conducted organizational dissent research predominantly in traditional for-profit organizations, it occurs in other organized settings as well. Research has explored dissent in sports, religious, and educational contexts. In these varying locations, much of what we know about dissent – but not all – translates. Indicating that context does have some influence on the expression of dissent.

In the sport context, National Basketball Association (NBA) franchise owner of the Dallas Mavericks, Mark Cuban, used a blog to dissent about officiating and league policies, which in turn mobilized dissent from supportive fans. Via regular blog posts that criticized league officiating, Cuban hoped to be a change agent to bring about higher quality officiating. Researchers have also considered dissent within the coach–athlete relationship, finding that the dissent patterns of college and high school athletes resemble those of employees. Athletes appear to share dissent with coaches who are open to hearing athletes' feedback and to express dissent to teammates when coaches disregard such feedback.

Religious organizations offer another organizational structure that dissent scholars have examined. Formal religious organizations have clear hierarchical positions, but responsibility and direction often advance from the interpretation of directives bestowed from a divine source. In some cases, like that of the American Catholic Church calling for reform, church leaders have clearly positioned dissent as outside the boundaries of church doctrine. That is, doctrine remains immune to dissent from reformist members. Within local churches from across denominations, research indicates that members favor indirect forms of dissent and fail to offer solutions to

their specific concerns. Akin to threatening resignation, dissenting church members warn that they will withhold financial support for the church or actually leave the congregation. Additionally, the perceptions of church leaders and members of the congregation appear incongruent. Leaders claim that members of their congregations use more latent and displaced dissent, whereas members feel that they engage in more upward dissent. Similarly, churchgoers identify more and different dissent triggers than church leaders do. Interestingly, religiosity proves to be an influential factor, tempering dissent, as more religious people report expressing less dissent.

Perhaps the most prolific appropriation of organizational dissent research can be seen in the recent efforts to examine dissent within the instructional context. Goodboy (2011) identified three types of student dissent expressed to instructors. *Rhetorical* dissent occurs when students raise concerns in the hope that their instructors will address those issues and remedy the problem raised; *expressive* dissent transpires when students want to improve their emotional state by venting frustrations; and *vengeful* dissent involves personal attacks on instructors with the intention of inflicting occupational and professional harm. Rhetorical dissent appears to be positively related to cognitive learning and is linked to instructor clarity and a learning (versus grade) orientation. Expressive and vengeful dissent relate negatively to students' motivation, affective learning, and perceptions of classroom justice. Teacher injustice, unfair grading and testing, teacher indolence, teacher offensiveness, lack of accommodation, grading mistakes, favoritism, and failure to challenge students have been identified as triggers of student dissent. Students most often withhold dissent because they believe that expressing it will make little difference. They also resist dissenting because they feel instructors are unapproachable; students believe their dissent will be seen as inappropriate and that they will possibly experience retaliation as a result. As in workplace research, there is evidence to indicate that student-to-student communication influences instructional dissent, and that student dissent reflects the type and degree of burnout instructors experience.

Gaps in organizational dissent research

While the study of dissent in organizations has flourished in the past two decades, there are still some notable knowledge gaps with regard to how dissent functions, such as variation in dissent expression produced as a result of national or other cultural differences. This is because examination of dissent as a message strategy has occurred predominantly in the United States, with this body of work drawing almost exclusively on US-based samples. The lack of diversity in samples obscures the role that national and regional cultures may play in influencing how organizations manage and tolerate dissent, as well as how employees express it. There have been a few exceptions to this imbalanced approach. Findings suggest that within Europe, for example, Germans express comparatively more dissent and Spaniards comparatively less when contrasted with workers in France, Finland, and the United Kingdom. In other work, there is evidence that employees from India are less likely to express displaced dissent to people

outside the organization when compared to US workers. Clearly, more work on the influence culture exerts on dissent expression is warranted.

As noted earlier, organizational scholars have extolled the virtues of attending to dissent. Yet how much dissent routinely occurs within organizations remains unknown, leaving scholars to ponder what amount of dissent an organization can tolerate before it becomes dysfunctional. Too much dissent can work against organizations, monopolizing lines of communication and impeding critical processes. Research on organizational democracy and the dissent orientations fostered therein suggests that these communication practices take time and energy to enact well. And other work indicates that employees recognize that sharing dissent carries an emotional toll. In short, expressing and managing dissent draws upon organizational resources. It would be worthwhile to determine when and how dissent can contribute to organizational effectiveness without overstressing organizational systems. This would entail systematic examinations of dissent expression within organizations and across industries with the intention of identifying optimal levels of dissent expression.

A related and also underdeveloped area of organizational dissent research concerns the tools and techniques organizations use to invite, control, limit, and engage dissent. There are excellent treatments on the systematic differentiations in organizational systems that afford more or less democratic operations and the relative efficacy of voice mechanisms in organizations. These efforts have implications for how organizations respond to dissent expression, but a more focused approach would be beneficial – one that looks specifically at mechanisms used in organizations to solicit and foster dissent. Organizations deploy a host of voice mechanisms, which can include grievance procedures, appeal boards, ombudspersons, suggestion boxes, ethics hotlines, question-and-answer programs, employee–management meetings, and open-door policies. Dissent will filter through many of these structures. Yet we know very little about what specific devices have been used in contemporary workplaces. Anecdotes of managers asking specifically for dissenting opinions at staff meetings abound, but there has been little formal documentation of these practices and the benefits and trade-offs they may hold for organizations. Thus, more work is needed to determine what dissent-soliciting mechanisms exist within organizations, how readily available those mechanisms are, and how effective they prove to be.

SEE ALSO: Conflict, Organizational; Empowerment; Ethics; Influence; Participation; Power; Resistance; Silence; Voice; Whistle-Blowing

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