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ARTICULATING, ANTAGONIZING, AND DISPLACING: A MODEL OF EMPLOYEE DISSENT

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In this paper, I reconceptualize organizational dissent as the expression of disagreements and contradictory opinions that result from the experience of feeling apart from one’s organization. Employees experience dissent when they recognize incongruence between actual and desired states of affairs. The theory of unobtrusive control (Tompson & Cheney, 1985), the theory of independent-mindedness (Gorden & Infante, 1987; Infante & Gorden, 1987), and the Exit–Voice–Loyalty model of employee responses to dissatisfaction (Hirschman, 1970) provide the framework for a model of employee dissent. The proposed model incorporates four elements: (a) triggering agent; (b) strategy selection influences; (c) strategy selection; and (d) expressed dissent. Examining variations in employees’ expressions of dissent may contribute to our understanding of employee involvement practices, democratic organizational structures, and employee empowerment efforts.

Organizational leaders have used various tactics to control people within organizations, and they often do so in very subtle ways (Tompson & Cheney, 1985). In contrast, employees have demonstrated preferences for freedom of expression within organizations (Gorden & Infante, 1987). The juxtaposition of organizational leaders’ inclinations to control employees and employees’ desires for workplace autonomy suggests that dissent will readily occur in modern organizations. Because hierarchy is still the fundamental building block for numerous organizations, employees remain inherently subjected to subordinate roles (Redding, 1985). Employees, though, appear predisposed to voice (Gorden & Infante, 1987). They have increased desires to voice as those opportunities become available (Gorden, Holmberg, & Heisey, 1994), and have found that voicing their opinions leads to senses of accomplishment (Sprague & Ruud, 1988), greater satisfaction in the workplace, and more commitment to organizations (Gorden & Infante, 1991). This combination of factors contributes to an environment ripe for dissent.

In this essay, I propose a model of employee dissent that incorporates nuances of dissent that previous researchers have not recognized. Organizational scholars have provided several definitions of dissent (Graham, 1986; Hegstrom, 1995; Redding, 1985; Stewart, 1980; Westin, 1986). Collectively, these definitions reflect several elements. First, dissent results from dissatisfaction with current conditions. Second, dissent entails advocating a position that differs from the organizational status quo. Third, dissent requires open protest and voicing objection. Fourth, dissent becomes inherently adversarial. Fifth, dissent predominantly involves issues of principle.

Further research on and theorizing about organizational dissent illustrated several nuances that did not resonate with more traditional conceptualizations of organizational dissent. Organizational scholars have suggested that organizational dissent encompasses both personal and principled issues (Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Graham, 1986; Sprague & Ruud, 1988), may not always entail vigorous protest or objection (Redding, 1985; Sprague & Ruud, 1988), or openly adversarial behavior (Graham,
1986; Redding, 1985), can be offered in the spirit of helpfulness (Redding, 1985) and as a means of enhancing work environments (Sprague & Ruud, 1988), and can vary in intensity and enactment (Gorden, 1988). These suggestions highlight discrepancies that have plagued both conceptualizations and operationalizations of employee dissent.

A reconceptualization of dissent is necessary to clarify previous confusion and contradictions surrounding organizational dissent. In the following paragraphs, I argue for reconceptualizing organizational dissent as a multi-step process that involves: (a) feeling apart from one’s organization (i.e., the experience of dissent), and (b) expressing disagreement or contradictory opinions about one’s organization (i.e., the expression of dissent). Differentiating between how people experience and express dissent is necessary for exploring the entire spectrum of employee dissent behaviors.

The word “dissent” derives from the Latin dissensio, dis meaning apart and sentio meaning to feel (Morris, 1969). Thus, dissent references “feeling apart.” In the organizational context, dissent refers to feeling apart from one’s organization. Attention to the root of the word demonstrates that dissent does not necessarily imply conflict. Rather, dissent can be limited to the experience of feeling apart; it can remain nonadversarial. This distinction raises the obligation to consider variations in strategies employees select when expressing their dissent.

An employee may feel apart from his or her organization without expressing or displaying this experience openly within the organization. Recognition of this possibility derives from Stohl and Redding’s (1987) suggestion that researchers consider: (a) what communicators would really like to say, in the absence of all constraints; (b) what they decide they should say; and (c) what they actually do say. Thus, I argue that employees may experience dissent, but choose not to express their dissent within organizations or to express dissent to audiences that can effectively address their concerns. Rather, employees may express their dissent to external audiences or to ineffectual-internal audiences.

Dissent is always present to some degree within organizations; employee dissent cannot be completely absent. The strategies employees use to express dissent can however create the perception that dissent is relatively absent. That is, dissent can be muted when expressed in channels where organizations will not hear employees’ contradictory opinions. Understanding how employees express their disagreements and contradictory opinions should involve assessing the condition or status of employee dissent, not merely the amount of dissent organizations receive.

Whereas speculation about how employees express dissent abounds (Graham, 1986; Hegstrom, 1995; Redding, 1985), actual examination of the types of employee dissent remains rare (Hegstrom, 1991; Sprague & Ruud, 1988). Hegstrom (1995) noted that researchers considering the status of organizational dissent have not assessed the actual types of dissent messages that are exchanged. He stated, “messages and audiences tend to be ignored” (p. 89). In a similar vein, Redding (1985) noted whistle-blowing and boat-rocking are merely two of many possible means of expressing dissent. Therefore, efforts to explain communicative variations in expression of dissent are necessary. I have designed the model in this work to reflect various forms of employee dissent. A broader, fuller understanding of organizational dissent should illuminate how and why instances or episodes of dissent occur.

Modern organizations have attempted to involve employees in workplace decisions (Derber & Schwartz, 1983; Pacanowsky, 1988; Westin, 1986). Organizational members have become more involved with their respective organizations as a result of organizational democracy (Cheney, 1995; Derber & Schwartz, 1983; Harrison, 1994; Vredenburg & Brender, 1993; Westin, 1986), employee empowerment (Chiles & Zorn, 1995;
Marshall & Stohl, 1993; Pacanowsky, 1988), and employee participation practices (Dachler & Wilpert, 1978; Derber & Schwartz, 1983; Strauss, 1982). The main tenet of these practices emphasizes the nature and importance of employee involvement. The general contention is that the more involved employees become, the more satisfied and committed to the organization they will be (Lawler, 1988; Levering & Moskowitz, 1993; Miller & Monge, 1986). An important link in this chain of reasoning that researchers have omitted, though, is employee dissent.

When employees become more invested in their organizational functions and are provided with more say as to how those functions will and should be realized, they may also begin expressing more disagreement and contradictory opinions. This may occur for three reasons. First, employees desire opportunities to express their opinions at work (Gorden & Infante, 1987, 1991), and some organizations incorporate dissent as an instrumental form of participation (Pacanowsky, 1988). In such instances employees recognize that dissent is an organizationally sanctioned form of participation (Hegstrom, 1990, 1995). When employees are invited to become more involved in organizational operations, the realm of policies and practices they can disagree with or about increases. Thus, as employees become more involved they may engage in more dissent simply because they are exposed to a broader range of organizational issues. Thus, we should expect employee dissent to increase as employee domains of organizational involvement enlarge.

Second, employee dissent may occur when employees recognize the limitations apparent in managerial invitations to become involved. Employees may encounter limitations in several forms. They may discover that organizational leaders provide mechanisms for encouraging employee involvement and receiving employee feedback (e.g., open-door policies, town meetings, suggestion boxes), but do so with no intention of actually responding to employee feedback. Employees may be invited to share opinions as part of an organizational exercise in participation. Similarly, employees may find that immediate level supervisors encourage involvement, but fail to communicate employee concerns or efforts upward. Furthermore, organizational members may perceive that organizational leaders sanction participation more for some employees than for other employees, and that organizational leaders acknowledge, embrace, and foster some, but not all, employees’ efforts. These preferences may be linked to organizational status, roles, or positions and represent another means by which managerial invitations for employee participation may be limited. Thus, employee dissent may result when workers recognize the potential limitations that govern their input and involvement.

Researchers have suggested that working in a participative environment impacts worker satisfaction and productivity more positively than being involved merely in particular decisions (Miller & Monge, 1986). Derber and Schwartz (1983) warned that participation will lead to inherent conflicts over domains of autonomy. They cautioned that workers may become frustrated when they begin to engage in empowering activities and recognize the limitations to such behavior. Furthermore, organizational leaders may manipulate or coopt employee participation efforts. Stohl and Coombs (1988) found evidence of such a trend in their examination of quality circle training manuals. They found that manuals reflected predominantly management values and concluded that they represented a powerful hegemonic device. Thus, soliciting employee involvement without employee opinion may lead to dissent.

Third, employee dissent may occur due to the frustration employees experience when they navigate organizational terrain where they are either permitted to or restricted from dissenting. The various shapes and forms employee participation takes
will influence its expression. Strauss (1982) recognized that participation is not a unitary concept. Participation can refer to: (a) organizational level, (b) degree of control, (c) spectrum of issues, and (d) ownership. Forms of participation can range from directly relinquishing some degree of control to workers to approaches that center upon stock ownership and employee representation (Derber & Schwartz, 1983). Perceptions and enactment of participation can vary tremendously. When various forms of participation exist within organizations, members may not know the parameters or expectations of participation. They may be expected to offer opinions at certain times and not at other times. The lack of clarity and definition surrounding employee participation expectations places multiple, complicated, and often confusing demands on organizational members that also may lead to dissent.

Thus, involvement may lead to dissent for several reasons. Involvement may lead to dissent simply because increasing the domain of issues about which employees can dissent increases. Involvement also may lead to dissent when employees recognize the limitations of their involvement or when they become frustrated with assessing the parameters of their involvement. Dissent will occur in these instances for fundamentally different reasons. Examining variations in dissent may clarify its differing occurrences.

The occurrence of dissent should be more pronounced in certain organizational structures. Employee dissent appears to be an integral part of enacting organizational democracy (Cheney, 1995; Hunt, 1992). Researchers have suggested that organizational democracy emerges from both structural elements (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Vredenburgh & Brender, 1993) and members' communicative acts (Brown, 1989; Cheney, 1995; Hunt, 1992). Scholars have suggested that organizational members consistently redefine and renegotiate the respective meaning of organizational democracy within their firms (Cheney, 1995; Hunt, 1992). Cheney (1995) argued that organizational democracy exists within the day-to-day interactions of organizational members who regularly contest the terms of democracy, participation, and equality. Other scholars have argued that organizational democracy is realized communicatively through the open dialogue of members (Eisenberg, 1994) and the creation of a dialectic environment where dissent is valued (Gorden, 1994). These recommendations illuminate the possibility that employee dissent will be an integral part of the negotiation and dialogue necessary for formulating and reaching democratic ends.

Being able to disagree openly without fear of retaliation is a basic democratic ideal. Organizational scholars have suggested that organizational democracy exists when employees can freely disagree with management without fear of reprisal (Gorden, 1988; Hegstrom, 1995; Perry, Hegstrom, & Stull, 1994). However, empirical efforts suggest that democratic communication (i.e., dissent, encouraging feedback, listening) does not necessarily accompany democratic forms of organizing (Gorden et al., 1994; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). For example, Rothschild-Whitt (1979) found members of collective-democratic cooperatives softened criticism and minimized differences of opinion. Similarly, Gorden et al. (1994) found that communication patterns in a democratically rich work environment tended toward seeking consensus and avoiding confrontation, avoiding difficult and embarrassing situations, providing ambiguous feedback, and rarely providing corrective feedback. Thus, democratic organizational structures alone do not necessarily encourage or promote employee dissent. Dissent may or may not be present in democratic work environments. Enhancing the current conceptualization of organizational dissent should lend some clarity to the reason for such discrepancies.
Dissent should occur more readily in organizations that value employee involvement and find ways to empower their workers. According to Pacanowsky (1988), empowerment occurs when employees are imbued with the ability to practice challenge in an environment of trust and self-responsibility. Empowered employees do not feel traditional organizational pressures to salute ideas (Pacanowsky, 1988) and they are more communicatively involved in organizational networks (Marshall & Stohl, 1993). These findings suggest that empowered employees would be more likely to dissent. However, macro-level organizational culture norms were also found to influence empowered employees (Chiles & Zorn, 1995), and not all organizational cultures encourage dissent (Hegstrom, 1990). Thus, the expected link between empowerment and dissent may be convoluted by organizational culture. Empowerment may entail contributing to organizational operations, but not disagreeing with organizational practices. Empowered employees may have some say when their voices resonate with existing organizational practices and policies, but not when their suggestions contradict established practices and policies. Reexamining employee dissent may clarify the intricate relationships between organizational culture, employee empowerment, and employee dissent.

The relationship between employee involvement and dissent appears complex. As employees become more involved they may dissent for various reasons. The organizational structures they work within and the amount of empowerment they feel do not clarify, and perhaps even complicate, this relationship. Exploring variations in how and why employees express dissent may help to decipher some of the complexities of the relationship between employee involvement and dissent.

Whatever the scheme for employee involvement (i.e., democracy, empowerment, participation), organizational theorists and practitioners alike must recognize the possibility that dissent will accompany employee involvement. If organizational scholars and practitioners continue to espouse benefits and values derived from involving employees, they must also begin considering the role of employee dissent in the employee involvement process. Equations for organizational success, then, should incorporate both employee involvement and employee dissent.

To address this concern, I propose a theoretical model designed to explain variations in employee dissent. I base the model upon a theoretical foundation anchored in the theory of unobtrusive control (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), the theory of independent-mindedness (Gorden & Infante, 1987), and the Exit-Voice-Loyalty (EVL) model of employee dissatisfaction (Hirschman, 1970). In the next section, I briefly review three theories that provide the foundation for a revised definition and conceptual model of organizational dissent. The theory of unobtrusive control helps define what causes dissent by providing a means of understanding why employees may experience dissent. The theory of independent-mindedness explains why American employees feel a need to express their dissent, and provides the impetus for assuming employees will act and express their dissent. The Exit-Voice-Loyalty (EVL) model of dissatisfaction provides variations in employee responses to dissatisfaction and serves as a framework for describing variations in employee dissent. The EVL model provides the framework for explaining how employees actually express their dissent.

THEORETICAL BASIS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL DISSENT

Theory of Unobtrusive Control

The theory of unobtrusive control (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) provides a means for explaining the employee dissent process. Tompkins and Cheney (1985) traced the
evolution of control mechanisms in organizations from simple control (i.e., exercise of power openly, arbitrarily, and personally), through technical control (i.e., control embedded in the physical technology of the firm, designed into machines and the physical apparatus of the workplace), to bureaucratic control (i.e., control embedded in the social organization of the enterprise). They suggested that a new form of control has emerged. This form of control is characterized by teamwork and coordination, flat hierarchies, blurred distinctions between line and staff, intense face-to-face interaction, replacement of explicit written rules and regulations with a common understanding of values, objectives, and means of achievement, and a deep appreciation for the organization’s mission. They called this phenomenon “unobtrusive” or “concertive control” and stated that “members can be depended upon to act within a range of alternatives tied to implicit but highly motivating core values” (p. 184). Moreover, they speculated that these social arrangements actually increase the total amount of control in the system. They conceded all forms of control still currently exist in organizations today and most commonly in combination rather than in pure forms, but stated the trend is “towards unobtrusive control of workers by shared premises—both explicit and implicit” (p. 185).

According to Tompkins and Cheney (1985), the process of unobtrusive control occurs through systematic and subtle control of individuals’ decision premises. Individuals will choose organizational decision premises over their own because members inherently sacrifice a degree of autonomy when entering an organization, because members often accept incentives—typically wages and salaries—in exchange for adhering to organizational premises, and because they are simply responding to the “aura” of authority (i.e., the perception of significant authority). In contrast, employee disobedience, whistle-blowing, unionizing, striking, and sabotage are behaviors indicative of employees exercising their own decision premises.

Tompkins and Cheney (1985) summoned the rhetorical concept of the enthymeme to describe how organizations control employees by providing decision premises, which are “inculcated in the decision maker[s] by the controlling members of the organization” (p. 188). That is, organizations suppress or express persuasive elements in the environment that lead employees to accept organizational premises. Employees, in turn, use inculcated, preferred organizational decision premises in their own decision-making efforts.

Organizational identification is the final component of the theory. Tompkins and Cheney (1985) argued that decisional premises result from individuals’ levels of identification with their organizations. They stated, “the act of identification leads the decision maker to select a particular alternative, to choose one course of action over another” (p. 190). Thus, identification reduces the range of decisions by confining choices to alternatives associated with one’s targets of identification. People, therefore, become biased towards alternatives tied to their targets of identification, and organizations become concerned with enticing organizational decision makers to choose alternatives that are consonant with organizational values and goals.

Thus, “a decision maker identifies with an organization when he or she desires to choose the alternative that best promotes the perceived interests of that organization” (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985, p. 194). Organizational identification guides behavior by influencing which problems and alternatives are seen and by biasing choices that appear most salient to organizational success. In this manner, control “becomes invisible, submerged in the structure of the firm” (p. 196), tacit, and “inherently communicative” (p. 195).
The theory of unobtrusive control lends to the conceptualization of dissent by providing a means of framing dissent. Although Tompkins and Cheney (1985) only briefly alluded to dissent, their theory implies that dissent occurs when individuals fail to adopt organizational decisional premises and opt not to go along with the corporate mentality or expectations, but rather rely on and use their own decision premises instead. They posited this occurs when employees experience a discrepancy between the current and desired state of affairs. The theory of unobtrusive control provides the rationale for reframing organizational dissent as behavior that is not grounded exclusively in open disagreement, but rather in not accepting organizational premises. Conceptualizing dissent as choosing to adhere to individual decision premises produces the possibility of considering variations other than the open expression of disagreement.

The theory of unobtrusive control provides a means of punctuating the employee dissent process. Employee dissent begins when people experience incongruence between the expected and desired state of affairs. The experience of dissent, then, occurs when employees either use or consider using their own decision premises. Consideration of individual decision premises leads employees to question or challenge organizational decision premises, and begins the dissent process. Employees experience dissent when they find incongruence with organizational decision premises and subsequently reflect on their own decision premises. The theory of independent-mindedness provides the theoretical bridge necessary to understanding how the experience of dissent leads to the expression of dissent. According to the theory of independent-mindedness, employees will find it necessary to express their dissent. Once employees experience incongruence and question or challenge organizational decision premises (i.e., experience organizational dissent) they must assess their desires to express dissent. This assessment leads them to select a means of expressing dissent. The EVL model of dissatisfaction provides a framework for interpreting the different variations in employees' expressed dissent. Thus, in the upcoming section I examine the theory of independent-mindedness and the EVL model of employee responses to dissatisfaction.

Theory of Independent-Mindedness

Once employees have experienced dissent they must decide how to express it. The theory of independent-mindedness provides the impetus for suspecting that employees will be predisposed to express their dissent. This predisposition may not lead employees to open and explicit expression, but it will move them toward some form of expression. I review the theory of independent-mindedness in the following section.

Working together and with a variety of associates (Gorden & Infante, 1987, 1991; Infante & Gorden, 1987, 1989, 1991; Infante, Anderson, Martin, Herington, & Kim, 1993), Gorden and Infante (1987) developed and tested tenets of the theory of independent-mindedness. Simply stated, they predicted that employees prefer supervisors who afford subordinates freedom of expression and affirm subordinates' self-concepts, and that such treatment entices subordinates to be more productive, satisfied, and committed to the organization. They also posited that values held by society at large should be affirmed within organizations. That is, U.S. organizations should foster independent-mindedness by encouraging individualism through the communicative act of argumentation. Argumentation entails disagreeing and expressing contradictory opinions (i.e., expressing dissent).

In their programmatic line of research, they posited that argumentativeness (Infante
& Rancer, 1982), which refers to one's willingness to argue over issues of concern, was the primary means of assessing individualism within the organizational context. Infante and Gorden (1987) contended that organizational microstructures within the macrostructure of U.S. society must strive to reduce frustrations created by incongruence between micro and macrostructures. They suggested that the autocratic management style prevalent in U.S. corporations blocked rather than facilitated individualism and its expression through free speech. Gorden and Infante (1987) introduced the concept of "management by argument" (p. 150) and suggested that a U.S. culture steeped in a tradition of free speech would "find a corporate dialectic more satisfying and realizable than either a management by consensus or fiat" (p. 150). Such a dialectic would entail weaving communication practices like dissent, argumentation, and dialogue, which are inherent components of the U.S. macrostructure, into managerial practices that constitute American organizational microstructures.

Gorden and Infante (1987) argued that subordinates should not be locked into subordinate roles, but rather should be free to engage in the give and take of criticism in a joint effort to realize positive outcomes. Such criticism would certainly involve disagreements and contradictory opinions. They also argued for creating climates that provide opportunities for dialectic exchange, "a process that is more psychological and social than contractual" (p. 154) or structural. Infante and Gorden (1987) reasoned that, within the microcosm of the superior-subordinate dyad, employees voice, to varying degrees, concerns about their jobs, how they are managed, their right to be treated equitably and with respect, and social and ethical issues within their organizations. They found empirical support for these positions by examining actual and preferred communication behaviors within the superior-subordinate dyad (Gorden & Infante, 1987, 1991; Infante & Gorden, 1987, 1989, 1991; Infante et al., 1993). The type of dialectic, superior-subordinate exchange they described certainly would be laden with dissent.

Although the theory of independent-mindedness appears to possess heuristic merit, possible flaws exist. Empirical tests have provided mixed results (Gorden & Infante, 1991; Infante & Gorden, 1991). Arguementativeness only moderately related to satisfaction and commitment, and subordinates reported preferences for affirming rather than argumentative behavior in supervisors (Infante & Gorden, 1991). These findings raise questions about the perception of argumentation in the organization (Infante & Gorden, 1991) and about operationalizing the theory through a narrow set of variables (i.e., argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and affirming style), which oversimplify the core components of the theory (Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 1993).

Efforts to operationalize the construct of free speech have provided more promising and theoretically sound results (Gorden & Infante, 1991). For example, employees who believed their organizations afforded them more freedom of speech also perceived their organizations to be more participative in decision making, more committed to work-life and product quality, and more committed to employee rights. Furthermore, employees perceived these organizations to be more economically stable and reported higher levels of organizational commitment and satisfaction with their supervisors, pay, and coworkers (Gorden & Infante, 1991).

The theory of independent-mindedness lends credence to the contention that employees desire opportunities to share their opinions about organizational operations even when those opinions may be contradictory or challenging. The limitations of the theory allude to the need to revisit the construct of employee voice, and to move beyond trait approaches and begin considering the truly complex nature of employee
voice and in particular employee dissent. The EVL model of employee dissatisfaction provides a framework for describing potential variations in employee dissent.

*Exit-Voice-Loyalty Model of Dissatisfaction*

Once employees experience dissent and assess how they will express their dissent, they must consider actual dissent strategies. The EVL model of employee dissatisfaction describes several ways in which employees react to dissatisfaction in organizations. The model provides a framework for interpreting possible variations in employee dissent.

Dissatisfaction and dissent are related, but not synonymous. Dissent is a communicative reaction to the dissatisfaction employees experience when they feel apart or distanced from their organizations. Dissatisfaction accompanies the incongruence employees experience that initiates dissent experiences. However, dissatisfaction is ephemeral in such instances, because incongruence leads to temporary dissatisfaction and reflection on individual decision premises. This progression of feelings may be experienced by either relatively satisfied or dissatisfied employees. Therefore, it is important to differentiate between temporary dissatisfaction that fuels the dissent process, and dissatisfaction of a more enduring nature. The variations Hirschman (1970) described for explaining how employees deal with dissatisfaction provide a springboard for assessing variations in how employees express dissent.

Hirschman (1970) posited that customers and employees respond to organizational dissatisfaction in different ways, and that employee reactions can serve as a means for organizations to monitor their decline. When employees face declining conditions in the organization, they can either exit or voice. Employee exit involves escaping dissatisfactory conditions by leaving the organization, whereas voice involves attempting to change dissatisfactory conditions from within the organization. Hirschman (1970) considered loyalty to be a moderating variable that influenced which behavior employees and customers would choose, reasoning that more loyal employees would be more likely to stay and voice, whereas less loyal employees would be more likely to exit.

*Model revisions.* Graham and Keeley (1992) argued employees make two choices about exit and voice. They reasoned exit and voice are conceptually distinct, but not mutually exclusive. Thus, employees, customers, and citizens must choose whether or not to exit, as well as whether or not to voice. Furthermore, they recognized that exit is a rather dichotomous choice, but that decisions to voice encompass greater gradations of enactment. Graham and Keeley stated, “In contrast to exit, the voice response can vary in level, from relatively quiet murmurings to pointed questions or complaints, threats, and collective action” (p. 194).

Farrell (1983) expanded the model to include the construct of neglect, arguing that employee responses to dissatisfaction are not only indicators of organizational failure, but also may serve as “additional forms of decline” (p. 597). He posited that neglect, which entails lateness, absenteeism, and increased errors, could be characterized as an additional form of decline. Through multidimensional scaling, he established support for the four-dimensional model of employee dissatisfaction (EVLN) and found respondents perceived voice to be the only constructive response of the four. He concluded, “job dissatisfaction responses are diverse and complex” (p. 605). Recognizing that the model did not exhaust all possible responses to employee dissatisfaction, Farrell (1983) recommended that future researchers continue to investigate various forms of employee responses to dissatisfaction.
Farrell and Rusbult (1992) further expanded the EVLN model by suggesting that employee responses to dissatisfaction vary along two primary dimensions: constructiveness/destructiveness and activity/passivity. Within this conceptual framework they characterized voice and loyalty as constructive, exit and neglect as destructive, exit and voice as active, and loyalty and neglect as passive.

Thus, voice can be defined as active-constructive attempts to alter dissatisfactory conditions within organizations. Previous research on and theorizing about dissent frames the behavior as primarily an act of voice (Graham, 1986; Hegstrom, 1991; Redding, 1985; Sprague & Ruud, 1988). However, in the forthcoming revised model of employee dissent, I argue that dissent also may incorporate exit and neglect tendencies. Exit can be defined as active-destructive behavior enacted to avoid or escape from dissatisfactory conditions within organizations, whereas neglect can be defined as passive-destructive behavior that contributes to further declining conditions. In light of the complex nature of employee dissent, I contend that these behaviors do not occur in isolation. Rather, employees will enact combinations of voice, exit, and neglect behaviors concurrently at times. This point will be expanded in the forthcoming model.

**Model applications.** Researchers have considered a variety of influences that impact employee responses to dissatisfaction (Farrell & Rusbult, 1992; Rusbult & Lowery, 1985). Rusbult and Lowery (1985) found that various situational factors (e.g., employee satisfaction, individuals' investments in their organizations, access to superior job alternatives) influenced employee responses to dissatisfaction. Employees were more likely to exercise voice when they were satisfied, had more invested in their jobs, and possessed higher quality alternatives (Rusbult & Lowery, 1985). Farrell and Rusbult (1992) found that satisfied employees tended to rely upon more constructive responses, whereas employees possessing superior job alternatives were more likely to adopt active responses to dissatisfaction. Moreover, greater levels of both direct and indirect employee investment promoted use of constructive tendencies toward voice and loyalty, and inhibited destructive, neglectful tendencies.

The EVL (Hirschman, 1970) and subsequent EVLN (Farrell, 1983) models of employee responses to dissatisfaction provide theoretical grounding for considering employee dissent. Minton (1992) admonished researchers for not clearly differentiating whether they were testing the model or using it as a point of departure. In this research, the EVL(N) model of dissatisfaction (Hirschman, 1970) served as a point of departure. In particular, I fashion a model of organizational dissent that employs Hirschman's (1970) constructs of exit, neglect, and voice, but does so through a communicative lens. That is, I believe voice can exhibit neglect and exit tendencies. Therefore I devote the next section to a more in-depth examination of employee voice.

**Voice.** Gorden (1988) argued that voice is the only two-way communication option in the EVLN model (Farrell, 1983). He contended that neglect and exit are not inherently communicative. Gorden (1988) conceptualized voice existing along two dimensions, active-passive and constructive-destructive. Accordingly, active-constructive voice entails making suggestions, bolsterism, argument, dialectic, codetermination, union bargaining, and principled dissent. Passive-constructive voice includes listening, quiet support, and unobtrusive compliance and cooperation. Active-destructive voice entails complaining to coworkers, ingratiating, duplicity, verbal aggression, bad-mouthing, and antagonistic exit. Passive-destructive voice involves murmurings, apathy, calcu-
lated silence, and withdrawal. He noted that whistle-blowing and union activity overlap in active-destructive/constructive space.

Researchers have speculated about the factors facilitating voice (Cannings, 1992; Gorden, Infante, & Graham, 1988) and have found voice to be predicted by work satisfaction, supervisory satisfaction, and loyalty (Leck & Saunders, 1992). Cannings (1992) argued that promotion processes, combined with long-term employment security, provide the institutional mechanisms for exercising voice. She claimed, “investments in human resources give employees the ability to exercise voice while structures of promotion within the organization give them the incentive to do so” (p. 265). Gorden, Infante, and Graham (1988) found that subordinate satisfaction was explained by not only supervisors’ upward influence and superior-subordinate relationship quality, but also by perceptions that the organization was committed to employees, employee rights, and quality in general. Spencer (1986) found that employee turnover was negatively related to the number of voice mechanisms available to organizational members. This relationship held when controlling for known influences upon employee turnover (e.g., wage rate, fringe benefits, and unionization).

Although organizations generally tend to mute employee voice (Sanders, 1983) researchers have suggested that even when subordinates report being hesitant to argue points, they still prefer supervisors who are more receptive to subordinates’ argumentativeness (Gorden, Infante, & Graham, 1988). Similarly, when more opportunities for voice existed, employees were more likely to perceive voicing concerns as effective and were more likely to expect responses to voiced concerns (Spencer, 1986). Thus, employees maintain a desire to voice concerns along with the expectations that their voice will be effective and their organizations will listen and attend to their concerns. Organizations, in turn, stand to learn from the critical information provided by employees who remain and voice concerns when dissatisfied, rather than forfeiting such feedback when employees exit silently.

Thus, the theory of unobtrusive control provides a means of designating when and why employees experience dissent. The theory of independent-mindedness explains why employees will be predisposed to find a means for expressing their dissent. The EVL model of employee dissatisfaction provides a framework for interpreting variations in employee dissent. These three theories form the basis for the forthcoming model of employee dissent.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL DISSENT

The model of dissent I propose here marks a departure from more traditional approaches to investigating employee voice for three reasons. First, I believe that dissent functions as a response to dissatisfying conditions, which resembles employee voice, but also reflects behaviors associated with exit and neglect. Therefore, framing dissent as behavior associated exclusively with employee voice does not resonate with the true complexity of the construct. Second, I assert that employee voice is not always directed inwardly towards the organization. Research on whistle-blowing (Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Near & Jensen, 1983; Stewart, 1980) and systems theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978) provides the impetus for this position. Organizations have permeable boundaries, and employees have voiced (Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Near & Jensen, 1983; Stewart, 1980) ethical concerns publicly indicating the possibility that employees will express dissent readily to multiple audiences both within and outside of organizational confines. Third, I recognize that employee voice relates to a wide array of topics beyond merely effecting organizational change (Gorden, 1988). Definitions of organiza-
tional dissent have focused upon issues of principle (Graham, 1986; Westin, 1986; Stewart, 1980), but more recent empirical research demonstrates that employees dissented about personal, organizational, and technical issues (Sprague & Ruud, 1988), along with role responsibilities and role privileges (Hegstrom, 1991).

The model incorporates elements of dissent previously recognized (Graham, 1986; Redding, 1985; Hegstrom, 1990), but builds upon former conceptualizations by depicting variations in employee dissent. Previous researchers have constructed models that explain when employees express dissent (Graham, 1986; Near & Miceli, 1995). The model proposed here moves beyond explaining when employees express dissent to the manner in which employees express dissent. Four components constitute the model (see Figure 1): triggering agent, strategy selection influences, strategy selection, and expressed dissent. I detail these elements and their relationships to one another directly.

**Triggering Agent**

The dissent process begins with a triggering agent. Dissent occurs when a triggering agent exceeds an individual's tolerance for dissent (Redding, 1985). Redding (1985) introduced the concept of individual tolerance for dissent to refer to the kinds of evils students would regard as grave enough to consider whistle-blowing in light of possible risks. He also contended that the concept should apply to lesser forms of dissent such as boat-rocking. When incongruence between what employees expect and the actual state of affairs exists, employees will reflect upon or actually use their own individual decision premises (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). A triggering agent sets this process in motion. Thus, an employee's tolerance for dissent is exceeded when the triggering agent moves an employee to recognize incongruence and assess individual decision premises.

Triggering agents may concern a variety of issues. Triggering agents of dissent may hinge upon ethical concerns, issue import, or harm/risk to self and others. Redding (1985) suggested that dissent could result from numerous causes, but that one certain cause would be poor decision making. He provided a rough scaling of bad decisions that would precipitate dissent that included: the clearly illegal, the clearly immoral or unethical (e.g., violating human rights), the psychopathic, the insane, the incredibly stupid, the insensitive (to human needs and feelings), the inefficient or impractical, and the irritating or annoying.

Research suggests that employees considered the perceived quality of their arguments (Hegstrom, 1991), their desire to start doing things or to resist change, harms to customers, the organization, the employee him- or herself, and coworkers, and the affect they felt towards their organizations when deciding whether or not to dissent (Sprague & Ruud, 1988). Furthermore, employees dissented about role responsibilities, role privileges, organizational viability, and questions of right and wrong (Hegstrom, 1991). Thus, multiple issues can constitute triggering agents for dissent.

**Strategy Selection Influences**

Once an employee's tolerance for dissent is exceeded, he or she must select a particular strategy for expressing dissent. This process occurs within a complex environment. Dissent strategy selection occurs in light of individual, relational, and organizational influences. These various influences collectively represent strategy selection influences.
Triggering Agent

Organizational Influences

Relational Influences

Individual Influences

Dissent Strategy Selection
- Likelihood of being perceived as Constructive or Adversarial
- Risk of Retaliation

Articulated Dissent
Voice
Constructive/
Low Retaliation

Antagonistic Dissent
Voice/Neglect
Adversarial/
Low Retaliation

Displaced Dissent
Neglect/Exit
Adversarial/
High Retaliation

FIGURE 1.
MODEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL DISSENT
**Individual influences.** Individual influences entail predispositions and expectations people import from outside of their respective organizations, as well as how they behave within organizations. Individual influences include individual communication behaviors (Hegstrom, 1991), behaviors enacted within organizations (Sprague & Ruud, 1988), and behaviors or values imported from outside organizations (Hegstrom, 1991). Research suggests that individuals' senses of powerlessness, preferences for avoiding conflict (Sprague & Ruud, 1988), and senses of right and wrong (Hegstrom, 1991) influenced employees' willingness to dissent. These findings suggest that individual behaviors enacted within and values imported from outside organizations affect employee dissent.

**Relational influences.** Relational influences concern the types and quality of relationships people maintain within organizations. Employees chose to express dissent most readily in face-to-face interactions with their supervisors, but also chose to dissent in meetings, via letters, and over the telephone (Sprague & Ruud, 1988). Moreover, employees dissented about the concern and well-being of fellow coworkers (Sprague & Ruud, 1988). Researchers have suggested that immediate workgroup climate often tends to be stronger than organization-wide climate (Goldhaber, Yates, Porter, & Lesniak, 1978). These findings suggest that relational factors will influence employee dissent.

**Organizational influences.** Organizational influences concern how people relate to and perceive organizations. Researchers have suggested that employees vary in terms of how they relate to their organizations (Eisenberg, Monge, & Miller, 1983). Participation in the communication network of an organization influenced employees' perceptions of organizational climate (Albrecht, 1979), as well as how they perceived themselves in relation to their organization (Albrecht, 1984). This set of influences incorporates how employees identify with organizations, how tolerant of dissent they perceive their respective organizations to be, and how they learn normative behavior through socialization (Jablin, 1987).

People who identified strongly with organizations tended to use organizational decision premises (Bullis & Tompkins, 1989; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Framing the use of personal determinants as dissent indicates that an employee's level of identification will be related to dissenting behavior. This relationship will be moderated by the degree to which organizations sanction dissent as acceptable or preferred behavior. That is, the degree to which organizations foster or suppress dissent (Hegstrom, 1990) will indicate to employees whether or not dissent is permissible, inherently valued by the organization, and an important part of organizational decision premises.

Organizational determinants also include employees' perceptions of organizational tolerance for dissent. Research suggests that organizational members communicatively maintained dominant cultures within organizations (Trujillo, 1992) and that organizational culture impacts how employees viewed engaging management in negotiations (Putnam, Van Hoeven, & Bullis, 1991). Organizational scholars have also suggested that organizations foster cultures and climates that are either conducive or restrictive of organizational dissent (Graham, 1986; Hegstrom, 1990; Sprague & Ruud, 1988). Empirical research indicates these influences affect how people enacted dissent (Graham, 1986; Hegstrom, 1990, 1991), and that employees were well aware of such conditions (Sprague & Ruud, 1988). For example, Hegstrom (1991) found that when organizations suppressed dissent, people tended to remain silent and only dissented.
about clearly unethical issues, whereas Perry et al. (1994) found that management efforts to encourage dissent promoted unity by inviting dialogue.

Employees will learn of organizational decision premises and dissent tolerance levels through socialization (Jablin, 1987). The socialization process provides behavioral standards for employees. This may occur in phases of assimilation (Jablin, 1987), through the exchange of memorable messages (Stohl, 1986), the experience of various turning points (Bullis & Bach, 1989), or the passage through organizational boundaries (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Certainly, employees will come to understand preferred organizational decision premises. Furthermore, employees will develop a sense of how tolerant or intolerant their organizations are of dissent.

**Strategy Selection**

In any given instance and in light of various influences at the individual, relational, and organizational levels, employees must select a particular strategy for expressing dissent. Individual, relational, and organizational influences coalesce in the selection process and provide employees with a means of answering two critical questions. Individual, relational, and organizational influences provide the background for dissent strategy selection. Employee assessments of how their expression of dissent will be perceived and how likely retaliation will be constitute the foreground in the selection process.

Scholars have noted that employees have a relatively clear sense of how dissent will be characterized in their organizations in general (Sprague & Ruud, 1988) and in their own workgroups in particular (Hegstrom, 1991). Sprague and Ruud (1988) concluded, "The expression of dissent in an organization can be conceptualized as a moral obligation, a political right, an enlightened management practice, a minor inconvenience, or a punishable violation of loyalty" (p. 190). Thus, employees must assess the degree to which their dissent will be characterized as constructive or adversarial. However, researchers have suggested that communication of intentions has little influence upon cooperative outcomes (Putnam & Jones, 1982b). Thus, employees also must consider the risk of retaliation.

Research suggests that, whereas the public may frown upon suppression and retaliation against legitimate dissenters (Finet, 1994), organizational leaders often retaliate against dissenters (Near & Jensen, 1983; Stewart, 1980). Organizational leaders may respond to dissent issues or to people dissenting, indicating that dissenters regularly risk retaliation. Not all dissent results in retaliation; organizational dissenters may be rewarded or ignored as well (Graham, 1986). There is evidence suggesting that employee dissent diminishes when potential risks (e.g., impending layoffs) become more pronounced (Perry et al., 1994) and when the fear of retaliation exists (Sprague & Ruud, 1988). Sprague and Ruud (1988) found that most employees are "well aware of the organizations' receptiveness to boat-rockers" (p. 181) and that the majority of workers choose to dissent based upon perceived consequences. How likely people believe retaliation for dissenting will be contributes to their selection of dissent strategies.

Thus, employees consider how dissent will be received and responded to when making their actual selection of a dissent strategy. This choice is informed, though, by the backdrop of individual, relational, and organizational influences. I contend that employees will choose one of three strategies for the expression of dissent: articulated, antagonistic, or displaced.
Expressed dissent. The decision to express dissent is a complex one. Employees may choose to express their dissent directly, aggressively, or passively. The choices individuals make concerning the expression of dissent can be framed by the employee responses to dissatisfaction that Hirschman (1970) provided.

How people framed experiences influenced how they saw causes of and solutions to organizational problems (Friedman & Lipshitz, 1994) and how they made sense of behaviors and episodes (Clair, 1993). Employees have reported using varying influence tactics (Krone, 1992; Yukl & Fable, 1990), relationship maintenance strategies (Waldron, 1991; Waldron & Hunt, 1992), conflict strategies (Martin & Cusella, 1986), disagreement styles (Gorden, Infante, & Izzo, 1988), and power bases (Richmond, McCroskey, & Davis, 1986) within organizations. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that people will vary in the ways they express dissent.

Weick and Browning (1991) called for recasting organizational phenomena, whereas Harrison (1994) suggested a new democratic discourse would be necessary to recast the administrative, managerial, and technical practices within democratic organizations. In light of these suggestions, I recast the expression of organizational dissent in terms of three forms of dissent: articulated, antagonistic, and displaced.

Articulated dissent. Articulated dissent occurs when employees express their dissent within organizations to audiences that can effectively influence organizational adjustment. Employees articulate their dissent when they believe they will be perceived as constructive and their dissent will not lead to retaliation. Thus, articulated dissent occurs in the constructive/low-retaliation condition. Articulated dissent involves expressing dissent directly and openly to management, supervisors, and corporate officers.

This type of dissent includes boat-rocking (Redding, 1985; Sprague & Ruud, 1988) and early stages of whistle-blowing (Stewart, 1980). Articulated dissent generates from the perspective that dissent serves a corrective feedback function (Hegstrom, 1995) within organizations. The model does not specifically treat whistle-blowing (Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Near & Jensen, 1983; Near & Miceli, 1995; Stewart, 1980) as a type of dissent because the behavior appears to be an advanced form of articulated dissent (Stewart, 1980).

Articulated dissent most closely resembles Hirschman’s (1970) connotation of voice, because articulated dissent involves active efforts to clearly change organizations from within through the most appropriate and effective channels. Employees may, however, attempt to change organizations through more adversarial means (i.e., antagonistic dissent).

Antagonistic dissent. Antagonistic dissent occurs when employees believe they will be perceived as adversarial, but also feel they have some safeguard against retaliation. Antagonistic dissenters possess some form of organizational leverage (e.g., familial relationships, minority status, seniority, expertise) that provides them with a sense of immunity against retaliation. For this reason antagonistic dissenters will dissent primarily about personal-advantage issues. They choose to express their dissent wherever they believe a captive or influential audience exists. Antagonistic dissenters do not hesitate to confront or challenge their organizations directly. A zeal to pursue and ensure personal priorities replaces the desire to effect organizational change. Thus, antagonistic dissent entails primarily personal-advantage issues (Graham, 1986; Hegstrom, 1991) directed toward captive audiences and occurs in the adversarial/low-retaliation condition.

Antagonistic dissent resembles what Gorden (1988) described as active-destructive
voice. Antagonistic dissent is a reaction that incorporates elements of voice and neglect. Employees engaging in antagonistic dissent want to change their organizations from within but do so for very selfish reasons and in rather ineffectual ways. Therefore, their efforts to bring about change can be considered neglectful.

**Displaced dissent.** Displaced dissent occurs when employees believe their dissent will be perceived as adversarial and will likely lead to some form of retaliation. Thus, displaced dissent occurs in the adversarial/high-retaliation condition. Displaced dissent occurs when employees choose to express their dissent to external audiences, to ineffectual internal audiences, and in concert with other employees. External audiences include nonwork friends, spouses/partners, strangers, and family members. Employees will dissent to these audiences because the risk of retaliation is diminished. Ineffectual internal audiences include fellow coworkers who have no ability to address the dissent concern directly. Rather, internally displaced dissent occurs in gripe or bitch sessions with fellow coworkers. Displaced dissent does not directly reach effective audiences (i.e., supervisors, management) that can properly respond to disagreements or concerns. Finally, displaced dissent occurs when employees express their dissent in concert with other employees. For example, employees may sign petitions or participate in strikes or walk-outs. In these instances individual dissent becomes displaced because it occurs as part of a larger collective action. Collective actions provide some degree of anonymity and reduce the likelihood of retaliation against individual employees.

Displaced dissent entails disagreeing without confronting or challenging. Researchers have suggested that communication within organizations does not necessarily foster cooperation (Putnam & Jones, 1982b) and that representatives advocating employee concerns tend to be characterized as offensive (Putnam & Jones, 1982a). Furthermore, researchers have indicated that high-ranking people communicate more often and usually initiate communication (Monge, Edwards, & Kristee, 1978) and that lower-level employees perceive less openness in communication (Jablin, 1982). It is reasonable, then, to believe that organizational members experience dissent, but do not always voice their dissent directly within organizations to the most effective audiences.

Displaced dissent can be conceptualized as behavior indicative of neglect and exit. Displaced dissent resembles neglect because employees do not attempt to address their dissent towards the most effective audiences for influencing organizational adjustment. Displaced dissent resembles exit because employees may choose to dissent to external audiences rather than effective internal audiences. Such behavior can be conceptualized as a form of psychological exit. Employees may not feel they can actually physically leave their organizations, but they can exercise some degree of psychological exit by expressing dissent outside of organizational boundaries.

**CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper, I redefined dissent as a complex multi-step process that involves both the experience and expression of dissent. The experience of dissent can be understood according to the theory of unobtrusive control (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Accordingly, employees experience incongruence within their organizational environment that moves them to consider their own decision premises, rather than those that bias organizations. Dissent begins at this point, and can be construed as reflection on individual decision premises and questioning of organizational decision premises. I argued further that once employees experience dissent, they must find some means for expressing it. The drive to express dissent can be explained according to the theory of
independent-mindedness (Infante & Gorden, 1987; Gorden & Infante, 1987), which suggests that employees desire to express dissent because they are members of a macroculture that cherishes freedom of speech and because they seek opportunities to enact these values within their respective organizations. The expression of opinions, even when they are contradictory, is a byproduct of staunch American values concerning freedom of expression. Finally, I argued that employees use various strategies for expressing their dissent. The EVL model of employee dissatisfaction (Hirschman, 1970) served as a framework for describing how variations in dissent might occur.

The model of dissent proposed here extends our theoretical understanding in several ways. First, the model directs researchers to explore how employees behave when unobtrusive control falters. Dissent may occur when control mechanisms, even those intended to be unobtrusive, become obtrusive, noticeable, and problematic. Employee dissent behaviors represent unexplored territory that merits empirical attention. Mapping occurrences of dissent and strategies employees use to dissent provides researchers with another means of assessing how and why unobtrusive control falters or succeeds.

Second, the model provides another means for operationalizing the theory of independent-mindedness. Criticism of the theory (Infante et al., 1993) centers on assessing the complex theory with a narrow set of research tools. Variations in dissent provide another means of assessing when, how, and why employees choose to exercise freedom of expression in the workplace. Occurrences of certain types of dissent (e.g., articulated dissent) should be more prevalent in organizations that embrace dialectic exchanges with employees. Conversely, certain types of dissent (e.g., displaced) should be present in organizations that neglect employee voice.

Finally, dissent strategies provide a more specific means of assessing the ephemeral nature of employee voice. Employees may voice their opinions in some instances, in some settings, in front of certain coworkers, and in some organizations. We can enhance our understanding of the parameters that influence expressions of employees' opinions by examining variations in the ways employees express their disagreements and contradictory opinions. The model of dissent described here expands on the EVL model of employee dissatisfaction (Hirschman, 1970) by providing an alternative means for assessing dissatisfaction. The model of employee dissent incorporates unique, localized, and more immediate responses to dissatisfaction than the EVL model of employee responses to dissatisfaction.

Assessing variations in employee dissent will also assist in clarifying the confusion surrounding the ways employees respond to employee involvement efforts. For example, as organizational members' domains of involvement expand, they may begin sharing their opinions more regularly with management and begin engaging in articulated dissent. If employees recognize that managerial efforts to involve them are more form than substance they may discontinue offering their opinions and begin engaging in displaced dissent. Employees may become frustrated when they attempt to assess constantly changing participatory parameters and may resort to more aggressive forms of expression, or antagonistic dissent. Examining variations in dissent could clarify employees' responses to managerial efforts to involve organizational members.

Similarly, assessing variations in the strategies employees use to express dissent may answer some of the questions surrounding communication practices within democratic organizations. Democracies that exist for functional reasons (Cheney, 1995) may produce more occurrences of articulated dissent because organizational leaders invite employees' opinions openly and stress the connection of employee involvement to
organizational success. In contrast, democracies that evolve from democratic belief systems (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979) or legal mandates (Gorden et al., 1994) may produce more occurrences of displaced dissent because employees recognize that too much opinionated interaction complicates existing communication-rich work environments. Acknowledging that employees use varying strategies for expressing dissent may explain why democratic organizational structures do not necessarily entail open, opinionated communication.

Finally, assessing variations in the strategies employees use to express dissent may clarify the complex relationship between employee empowerment and organizational culture. Organizations can either foster or suppress dissent (Hegstrom, 1991; 1995) through culture mores, which influence employees’ perceptions of empowerment (Chiles & Zorn, 1995). Empowered employees may engage in more dissent, but the type of organizational culture they work within probably determines the strategies employees use to express dissent. Organizations that empower their employees by providing opportunities for them to express their opinions may receive more articulated dissent. Organizations that empower their employees by increasing the amount and number of tasks with which employees are involved, but do little to solicit employees’ opinion concerning their involvement, may witness more antagonistic or displaced dissent. Perhaps researchers can clarify the degree and nature of employee empowerment, as well as the influence organizational culture can and does have on employees’ feelings of empowerment, by attending to various types of dissent occurring within organizations.

The model of organizational dissent I describe here reflects the complex nature of organizational dissent. It also incorporates a multiplicity of influences upon organizational dissent and a much-needed emphasis on dissent messages and audiences. Moreover, the model provides a typology for characterizing organizational dissent messages. Hegstrom (1995) offered four research directions that would enhance our understanding of organizational dissent within organizations: (a) describing the status of dissent in organizations; (b) studying messages and audiences of dissent; (c) analyzing organizational programs designed to facilitate dissent; and (d) investigating means by which dissent continues to be encouraged in organizations. This model of organizational dissent addresses these concerns. The model provides a typology for describing the status of organizational dissent by attempting to explain organizational dissent messages. Conceptualizing various dissent strategies will afford researchers opportunities to assess organizational programs designed to facilitate dissent, influences of organizational audiences upon dissent, and means by which organizations continue to encourage dissent.

Thus, the model provides a heuristic foundation for further investigation into the timely topic of employee dissent. The recast conceptualization of dissent provided here advances the study of organizational communication by responding to a host of issues raised by organizational communication scholars. The model incorporates the premise that both organizations and individuals impact one another (Jablin, 1987), reflects the multiple and diverse perspectives of organizational actors (Goldhaber et al., 1978), and treats “circuits of resistance alongside the circuits of dominance” (Eisenberg, 1994, p. 278).

Moreover, the model occupies the system-wide framework that Gorden, Infante, and Graham (1988) advocated for framing employee voice by incorporating situational, dispositional, relational, institutional, and cultural variables. The model incorporates ideas from the psychological and interpretive-symbolic traditions described by Krone,
Jablin, and Putnam (1987). The model incorporates the interpretive symbolic premise that people shape and create their own social realities, but clearly reflects the basic premise of the psychological perspective, which casts the individual as the locus of communication and emphasizes how people make sense of their environments. The three dissent variations explicated in the model result from socially constructed influences (e.g., organizational and relational influences) coupled with individual behaviors and dispositions. The dissent variations reflect the dual influences of socially constructed realities and people's interpretations of such realities. Thus, the model represents the true complexity of employee dissent, and provides a heuristic foundation upon which future research can be conducted.

REFERENCES


