Advancing interests through informal voice: a study of professional workers in Sri Lanka's knowledge outsourcing sector

Drawing on a rhetorical approach, this article examines how early career professional workers challenge 'ideal worker expectations' through informal voice. Informal 'voice' is shown as a powerful way of advancing workers' interests, leading to incremental changes that improve their conditions of work. Striking are the power dynamics underpinning informal voice. Highlighting how ideal worker expectations are continuously legitimised and de-legitimised as employees and their managers rhetorically engage with each other, ideal worker expectations are theorised as a process while illuminating a pluralistic, contextualised view of organisational culture shaped by the past, present and anticipated future.

Key words: informal voice, ideal workers, rhetoric, organisational culture

Introduction

The employment relations literature draws on 'voice' to talk about how workers bring attention to their discontent and attempt to advance their interests (Wilkinson et al. 2014). Voice refers to having 'a say' over matters that affect one's working life (Dundon and Rollinson, 2011). However, in professional work, voicing grievances in a *formal* way is uncommon (Brown and Coupland, 2005). Professional employees are most likely to discuss a grievance informally with a colleague or line manager (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell, 2002). However, we know very little about the *effectiveness* of informal voice in advancing these workers' interests. Given that, workers have less positional power than managers (Behtoui et al. 2016), we might expect informal voice alone to be ineffective to solve their problems.

This article is based on a study of early career professional workers in Sri Lanka's global knowledge outsourcing industry. Following Friedson, professionals are defined as individuals who have the ability to do

their work as they see fit, on the basis of their own sense of knowing how to do it (1994:73). In other words, professionals have autonomy to determine how they do their jobs because they possess specialised knowledge to solve complex problems (Russell et al. 2016). This article addresses how professional workers challenge ideal worker expectations through informal voice. An 'ideal worker' is defined as a desirable employee who is totally committed to work and always available (Reid, 2015). Ideal worker expectations have been identified as a significant organisational constraint to employees around the word (Gambles et al. 2006). Many scholars have examined how individuals struggle to negotiate these expectations with their personal lives (Trefalt, 2013; Humberd et al. 2014). However, we know little about how they are justified and contested in organisational contexts, especially in the global south. Given that knowledge work in most parts of south Asia is non-unionised and collective representation is associated with blue collar work (D'Cruz, 2013), Sri Lanka becomes a particularly revealing context to examine the effectiveness of informal voice in advancing professional workers' interests. This article will first review literatures on voice and ideal worker norms highlighting gaps in extant understandings, and then explain the use of rhetorical analysis as a theoretical framework. Next it will provide details of the empirical setting and explain the methodology. The findings highlight early career employees' accounts of arguments and counter-arguments (Symon, 2005) for ideal worker expectations. Striking are the action oriented outcomes of rhetoric (Fairclough, 1992). The findings culminate in three contributions. First informal 'voice' is shown as a powerful way of advancing workers' interests, leading to incremental changes that improve their conditions of work. Workers' ability to negotiate changes through informal voice is underpinned by their expert power (French and Raven, 1959) and symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1989). Second, ideal worker expectations are theorised as a process that is continuously negotiated through legitimising and de-legitimising arguments, while illuminating a pluralistic, contextualised view of organisational culture shaped by the past, present and anticipated future. Third, the findings of this study provides empirical evidence of three key changes in organisational misbehaviour in high performance work cultures. The article concludes by discussing the HRM implications of these findings.

Voice

Voice emerges from Hirschman's (1970) work of consumers in the nationalised African railway. He defines voice as 'any attempt at all to change rather than to escape from an objectionable state of affairs' (1970: 30). According to Hirschman, dissatisfied individuals in any organisation have two potential responses to their grievance. They can exit or withdraw from the relationship or they can use voice to communicate their grievance. A precondition for voice is belief that management will listen and take appropriate action (Milliken et al., 2003). If people think that their voice would not amount to anything, they resort to exit. However, loyalty to the organisation, can influence one to stay and voice rather than exit. Hirschman's argument was based on dissatisfied consumers. Indeed, employees are less likely than consumers to see exit as a ready option (Wilkinson et al. 2014). If employees are unable to voice the discontent they experience at work, they may resort to acting in a 'neglectful' way (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009; Taylor, 2010), attempting to hinder organisational goals (Farrell, 1983). Silence or resignation to the feeling that voice will not accomplish anything (Morrisson et al. 2015) is another option. According to Donaghey et al. (2011: 56), silence is often a 'survival strategy' where employees 'mentally withdraw' from the organisation as a way of coping with its unpleasantness. The choice between voice and silence is mediated by power, defined in terms of the position of individuals or groups within social settings (Behtoui et al. 2016). From this perspective, workers have less power than managers. According to Morrisson et al. (2015), if an employee believes that she lacks power in relation to others at work, she is likely to be silent. However, if message recipients (e.g. supervisors) are approachable, employees may speak up even if they do not feel very powerful. Traditionally employment relations scholars have been interested in indirect forms of voice such as collective representation. However, collective representation has since recently been declining and instead we have witnessed a rise in more direct individualised channels such as suggestion schemes and attitude surveys (see Wilkinson and Fay, 2007; Mowbray et al. 2014). Because voice is associated with organisational commitment, giving workers voice is seen as providing a 'win-win' solution to the organisation (Strauss, 1998). Barry and Wilkinson (2015) distinguish between pro-management and pro-social views of voice. They argue that the

organisational behaviour literature presents a largely pro-management view of voice, focusing on direct channels such as quality circles which encourage workers to communicate information that is beneficial to the organisation (Morrisson, 2011). However, from a pro-social view, the purpose of voice is to challenge management, and/or to highlight matters that affect individuals' working lives (Dundon and Rollinson, 2011; Wilkinson et al. 2014).

Considering voice as a means of representing employees' interests, the distinction between formal and informal voice becomes significant. Informal voice refers to "day to day relations between supervisors and subordinates which allow workers to exert some influence over their conditions of work (Strauss, 1998: 15), outside formal processes. Large organisations with high levels of structure often have formal established methods for voicing grievances lead by the HRM function. However, in professional work, voicing grievances in a formal way is uncommon. In a study of a retail organisation, Brown and Coupland (2005) talk about how professionalism disciplines people to be silent. Their participants explained how important it is to construct themselves as able to cope with their work because complaining breaches norms of professionalism. From this perspective, we might expect a discontented professional worker to voice grievances informally to other colleagues or line managers (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell, 2002). However, there is an absence of industrial relations research on the way in which employees' voice their concerns to managers when they are outside formal meetings or structures (Marchington and Suter, 2012). A notable exception is Townsend et al.'s (2013) work on voice structures within a luxury hotel in Australia. They argue that informal voice is concentrated at the local level, with workers engaging with supervisory staff to influence work processes and their individual circumstances. Individuals' propensity to voice depends on good relationships with managers (see also Loudon and Townsend, 2015). Informal voice is depicted as a useful way to fill the gaps of formal channels; however, it can also lead to managers dealing with matters 'outside the formal' leading to sub optimal results. The scholars note that 'power' is likely to impact on effectiveness of informal voice, and urges future studies to pay greater consideration to power dynamics underpinning the concept

(Townsend et al. 2013). While studies like this usefully recognise the significance of informal voice in the workplace and its interplay with formal mechanisms, we still know very little about the effectiveness of informal voice alone in advancing professional workers' interests. The power dynamics shaping informal voice is also an under researched area, notwithstanding some notable exceptions (see Morrison et al. 2015).

Ideal worker norms: the story so far

Contemporary organisations expect employees to be wholly devoted to work, such that they prioritise their jobs over everything else in their lives. Professional workers in particular are often required to work long hours and travel as requested (Bailyn, 2004). These expectations are personified in the notion of the 'ideal worker', defining the most desirable worker as one who is totally committed to work, always available (Reid, 2015) and visible within the organisation (Gambles et al. 2006). Those who fail to conform risk their professional credibility (Watts, 2009). Indeed, part-time workers are often marginalised because they are not always visible (Tsouroufli et al. 2011). Performance appraisal systems often rely on working hours and presenteeism as a proxy for measuring organisational commitment or leadership potential (Perlow, 1998). Long hours and visibility yield status and rewards, commensurate of an environment that requires workers to prioritise work over everything else in life (Blair-Loy, 2003). Notably ideal worker expectations significantly conflict with flexible-working policies in organisations (Gambles et al. 2006). Employees are often reluctant to utilise flexible-work policies because utilisation is associated with lacking commitment to work and having little desire to progress (Kirby and Krone, 2002). Male workers in particular are affected by such assumptions because hegemonic masculinity involves publicly privileging an ideal worker identity (Connell and Wood, 2005). Berdahl and Moon (2013) found that men who act outside of the role of an ideal worker are mistreated at work via criticisms of their masculinity. However, given that cultural expectations make it difficult for women with children to wholly devote themselves to work (Blair-Loy, 2003), ideal worker expectations are seen as increasing men's chances of career progression (Humberd et al. 2014).

There are two significant problems with extant understandings of ideal workers. First we know little about how ideal worker expectations are contested in organisational settings. Indeed, the dominant view in the literature suggests that they are socially reinforced through narratives that express how individuals understand the workplace (see Ely and Meyerson, 2000). Second, we have little understanding of how ideal worker expectations operate in non-western contexts. In what follows, this article introduces the rhetorical approach and explains why it is a particularly useful theoretical framework to analyse individuals' accounts of ideal worker expectations.

A rhetorical approach

Rhetoric is discourse targeted at influencing a particular audience (Gill and Whedbee, 1997) through argument and persuasion. Rhetoric is dialogical (Billig, 1996); arguments are produced in the context of potential counter-arguments (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004) and therefore may be oriented to their reification and/or undermining (Shotter, 1993; Billig, 1996). A rhetorical approach has the potential to appreciate the political nature of organisations where different versions of reality may be constructed and/or contested to support particular interests (Brown, 1998). Potter identifies two forms of rhetorical talk: 'reifying', which seeks to convince others that accounts are facts; and 'ironizing' which seeks to expose those 'facts' as a social construction (1996: 107). Strategies of argumentation construct certain versions of reality as legitimate, undermining other versions (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Rhetoricians draw on grand or mega-discourses to legitimate arguments, presenting these within particular constructions of the local context of the organisation (Symon, 2005). The rhetorical analyst is charged with identifying *how* constructions of 'the real' are made persuasive' (Potter 1996: 106). Organisational actors construct discourses aimed at moving others' beliefs and behaviour (Hamilton, 2001: 445). Thus rhetoric is action-oriented, having the potential to lead to actions which advance workers' interests.

Rhetorical constructions serve as mechanisms of organisational control (Foucault, 1977) through processes of normalization (Collinson, 2003), while also serving as a means for resistance and subversion (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009). From this perspective, what counts as 'normal and acceptable' is produced through rhetoric (Meriläinen et al. 2004). However, the creative capacity to resist and subvert norms should not be underestimated. Through rhetoric, underlying normative constructions can be challenged and/or re-worked to construct new organisational realities. The rhetorical approach is a particularly useful lens to examine ideal worker expectations in the global south. It can provide insights into the arguments and counter-arguments for these expectations and the extent to which counter-arguments are successful in undermining dominant forms of thought and action and/or creating alternative realities (Symon, 2005, p. 1658). Theorising the dynamics of power and resistance as intertwined in the form of argument and counter-argument, a rhetorical analysis can show how particular interpretations of reality are established and challenged (Symon, 2005). This article draws on the rhetorical approach to answer the following research questions:

What are the arguments and counter arguments for ideal worker expectations in Sri Lanka's global knowledge outsourcing sector?

To what extent are counter-arguments successful in leading to actions that advance workers' interests?

Empirical context

Sri Lanka is an economically developing island in the South of Asia with a population of about 20m people. The country was ruled by the Portuguese, Dutch and British, gaining its independence in 1948. Despite a three decade long civil war which was brought to an end in the year 2009, economic growth has averaged around 4.5%. However, Sri Lanka is still characterised by significant socio-economic divisions. Sri Lanka

opened up its economy in 1977 attracting foreign investors into the labour-intensive garments sector. This led to the establishment of a dynamic export industry linked to international supply networks (Athukorala and Jayasuriya, 2012). As in India, there is also a newly emerging business process outsourcing industry, where financial services and information technology companies proliferate. Supportive investment policies low real estate costs and sophisticated telecommunication services have contributed to attracting foreign investors (SLASSCOM, 2013). Foreign investors are particularly enticed by high skill sets and good command of English Language. Sri Lanka boasts high literacy rates of 93% for men and 92% for women (Labour Force Survey, 2013) and over 50% of students with higher education qualifications are trained in technical and business disciplines (BOI, 2013). Outside the UK, Sri Lanka boasts the highest number individuals qualified in the Chartered Institute of Management Accounting (CIMA) qualification. The BPO sector generates more than $400m in exports and the government of Sri Lanka plans to further expand this industry (SLASSCOM, 2014).

There is very little scholarship on the Sri Lankan outsourcing sector. But studies of the BPO industry in India (which can be taken as a proxy of Sri Lanka) suggest that organisational constraints are more austere than in the West. Research into the BPO industry in India highlight strict managerial control and demanding targets (Taylor and Bain, 2005). Evidence exists of authoritarian management practices (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2013) and hierarchical relationships between workers and managers (Poster and Prasad, 2005). Significantly, professional identity precludes engagement with collectivisation attempts. In most parts of South Asia, unions are associated with blue collar workers and are therefore seen as unsuitable for intellectuals. While studies in the Indian context provide insights into how discontented workers engage in 'neglect' (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009; Taylor, 2010), a notable study of professional workers in Sri Lankan IT sector suggests that some workers tend to leave because they are unwilling to cope with the stresses of work. According to Jayasuriya et al. (2012) high turnover rates are extremely problematic for Sri Lankan IT organisations. Although there are no obvious shortages of skills in the Sri Lankan labour market, exit is a ready option for

highly skilled workers. Given that workers are able to readily exit; we might expect them to be empowered to voice. However, we know very little about informal voice in the global south. A notable exception is Gunawardana's (2014) work on export processing zones in Sri Lanka. She highlights how blue collar workers engage in informal voice on a day-to-day basis, illuminating how sociocultural elements such as kinship and age shape informal interactions. However, in her view, workers' articulated voice was often unheard. She argues that informal voice enables workers to prevent further deterioration of existing conditions. but is unsuccessful in leading to changes which advance their interests. Nevertheless, in contrast to the blue collar workers, we might expect professional workers to be better able to advance their interests in their organisations. However, we know very little about voice in professional work. Given the austere organisational constraints and high sense of professionalism (D' Crusz, 2013) characterising the BPO industry in the global south, Sri Lanka becomes an interesting context to examine informal voice in professional organisations.

Research design

This study is based on 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 executives and 18 graduate management trainees in 2 leading organisations operating in the emerging IT and financial services sector. One firm was an information technology solutions provider which also offered IT infrastructure and consulting services to foreign clients. It was a branch of a renowned multinational company. The second organisation was a global financial services firm based in Colombo serving high-profile, foreign clients. Both firms boasted highly desirable work environments with flexible working options and an abundance of opportunities for career development. Twenty respondents were men, while 10 were women. Twelve were from the financial services firm, while 18 were from the IT firm. All participants were qualified to graduate level or above.

Respondents were recruited through a snowballing sampling method. In one-to-one interviews, they were asked to describe how an 'ideal worker' would look like in their organisation, how prevailing criteria was justified and their responses to prevailing expectations. People were also asked about their working hours, expectations of availability, working patterns (e.g. do they work from home or work flexibly), out of work lives, formal and informal criteria to progress in their organisation, channels of communication to management and other colleagues and future plans. All interviews were digitally recorded. The key themes were identified during the data collection itself since data collection and analysis were undertaken in parallel (Silverman, 2009). The main technique used to analyse the data was template analysis (King, 2004). A list of first-order codes (or template) representing the key empirical themes (e.g. long hours, availability, being seen within the organisation, requirements to succeed in the organisation, coalitions, westernisation, commitment) were developed. To ensure reliability, codes were cross-referenced for internal consistency between transcripts. Once the initial template was constructed, sections of data texts from the transcripts were assigned to one or more appropriate codes. The contents of each code were re-read to develop understanding of each at an individual level, as well as the relationships and associations between them. Hammersley and Atkinson's (1997) notion of 'progressive focusing' describes the process where empirical codes were loosely described in the beginning but became specific as the analysis progressed. First-order themes were grouped into second-order conceptual codes. For instance, the themes 'availability', 'undertaking heavy workloads' and 'being seen within the organisation' were amalgamated to form 'ideal worker expectations'. Likewise, 'pre-organising communication with clients' and 'exceptional personal competence' was amalgamated to form 'fulfilling performance demands while working standard hours'. Similarly, 'work-life balance in the West' and 'exposure to the West' were amalgamated to form 'highlighting freedom and choice in the westernisation discourse'. Considering people's broad responses to ideal worker expectations and their implications, second order conceptual codes were used to develop third order aggregate themes which are reported in the findings as counter-argument strategies. Relationships between themes were considered to identify contradictions or associations. For example, the theme 'fulfilling

performance demands while working standard hours' was related to the theme 'coalitions'. Individuals who highlighted how they satisfied clients without extending their availability to nonstandard hours, inspired others to form mutually beneficial coalitions where teams collectively agreed to not respond to clients outside standard hours. When relationships were spotted, they were examined across all the transcripts.

Ideal worker expectations in the Sri Lankan knowledge outsourcing industry

Echoing the literature, respondents from both organisations identified three key expectations from 'ideal workers': long hours, unlimited availability to clients and visibility within the organisation (Gambles et al. 2006). Interviewees talked about how senior personnel explicitly indicated these expectations. Madura from Financial services explains 'long hours':

> They say that we are expected to put in more than 40 hours a week, especially at the start. My manager's view is that you need that amount of hours to complete your targets, ideally to exceed them.

Managers assumed that long hours are necessary to fulfil performance targets. The reference to 'they' and 'we' in Madura's statement constructs the presence of two parties with conflicting interests. In stating 'my manager's view', Madura disassociates himself from the argument and the rationale underlying it. Other respondents accounted for ideal worker expectations in a similar manner. Sahan, from IT, explains the requirement to be constantly available:

> As I said, you are supposed to be contactable out of regular working hours – for clients I mean, our managers don't call home – thank god. We tend to deal directly with clients, so we are told to provide them an 'excellent service' by being contactable even during weekends.

Significantly, it was also crucial to be visible within the organisation (Poster and Prasad, 2005), because visibility was taken as a proxy of dedication and commitment to work: i*f you are seen at office all the time, then they think that you are very dedicated* (Prabath)

Sri Lankan managers justified these expectations in two key ways. First, in particularly the financial services firm, visibility, availability and long hours were positioned as a 'meritocratic' assessment of one's worth to progress, commensurate of a 'westernised' organisation. Hansa explains:

> *When I came here, my boss told me about his own story - how he got to where he is. So his advice was to be around, be seen, show your face, prove your commitment and show us that we need to reward you. They see this as a supposedly fair way - part and parcel of a westernised organisation – you are apparently rewarded for effort rather than who you are or who you know like typical Sri Lankan organisations. That's what my boss always says.*

Although firms had formal performance appraisal systems where people were assessed against set targets, managers positioned effort and dedication (assessed through visibility, availability and long hours) as informal progression criteria. Hansa's manager drew on typical 'Sri Lankan organisations' which award promotions on the basis of one's social connections to powerful people (Saher, 2011), to convince his audience that ideal worker expectations in the 'westernised' outsourcing sector is 'meritocratic'. Hansa's reference to '*they see this as a supposedly fair way*' and '*that's what my boss says'* highlights that he is conveying his manager's view as opposed to his own.

The second way employers attempted to legitimise long hours and constant availability was by reference to the exceptionally high demands of superior 'western' clients. This discourse was particularly dominant in the IT firm. Warna explains:

This is never-ending at office. We serve western clients who apparently have higher expectations. So we have to do our best and more – they imply that we need to devote our entire lives to our work.

So organisations justified 'ideal worker' expectations through (1) positioning them as a 'meritocratic' way of assessing one's worth to progress, commensurate of a 'westernised' organisation (2) portraying them as necessary to fulfil the demands of superior 'western' clients. Respondents experienced prevailing expectations as cumbersome. However they did not lodge formal complaints to the management because it was seen as extremely unprofessional. Collective resistance was not even seen as an option in this context (Noronha, 2006). Therefore these individuals chose to challenge informally, through argument, voicing their opinions to line managers and fellow colleagues. The following sections consider the counter-argument strategies people adopted and their action oriented outcomes.

Undermining prevailing arguments

This was a dominant counter-argument strategy in both organisations. Here respondents talked about 'being seen in the organisation', in a cynical manner (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), highlighting how people are idle and inefficient although they are visible in the workplace:

I have said this before to him (his manager) *and in front of everyone. Nobody works after 5 they just kill time, and they are idle, talking, waiting because they think that they should wait. If the company wants people to be more efficient they might send them home early so that they can shower, rest, do whatever they want to do and come back to work next morning well rested. Staying an extra hour or so at work means that you are tired although you are not really doing anything. So it is actually counter-productive to efficiency especially because people don't work after 5. I explained this to our*

manager who keeps on telling people that they have to work longer. He looked like a fool. He had nothing to say in defence and people were smirking (Sisil)

Sisil challenged the notion of 'dedication to work', that bosses associated with visibility. Instead he convincingly argued that presenteeism afterhours is counter-productive to efficiency. People like Sisil who openly challenged line managers through rational argument made the point that (a) managers are not always right and (b) it is acceptable to challenge them. This had the effect of inspiring more people to challenge their managers. Radha who works for the same team as Sisil explains:

I think the culture has become really democratic in our team – I haven't been here for long but I have noticed that people are standing up to their managers more which is a good thing. A couple of guys started this and I think the rest of us followed the cue.

Highlighting how a couple of people inspired others in the team to challenge the line manager, leading to what he saw as democratisation of the culture, Radha provides insights into the action oriented outcomes of rhetoric where the hierarchical distance between superiors and subordinates (Poster and Prasad, 2005) was reducing.

Challenging underlying assumptions of prevailing arguments

Twelve respondents adopted this position. They challenged the assumptions underlying arguments for ideal worker expectations, by reifying an alternative construction of reality. This was done in two ways. First female respondents in particular argued that people do not need to be constantly available to keep clients happy. Instead they explained how they took a proactive approach to organise communication plans with clients at the very start of the project. In their view, such organisation ensured that communication does not happen out of work hours:

I have never worked on weekends or taken client calls late in the night. But my clients have always been very happy. You need to agree on a mutually beneficial communication plan with the client at the very beginning, which doesn't eat into non-working hours. So you can still be available to them, but you can make sure that you keep it to working hours (Pasi)

Pasi recognises the need to keep clients happy, but makes the point that unlimited availability is not necessary to do this. She thus challenged the underlying assumptions of the availability discourse; showing that that one can still be available to clients, without corresponding with them outside working hours.

With respect to the sphere of action, several respondents talked about how people like Pasi inspired them to informally collude with other members of their teams to *not* offer availability to clients outside standard hours. Bakthi explains:

We have an agreement in our team – none of us take calls from clients during the weekend or in the night. If one person does it, the others will inevitably look bad so none of us does it. We do a plan in the beginning of the project where we schedule the meetings well in advance for the next couple of months. This works very well for everybody. We came to hear that this is very common in the restructuring department. Several people were doing it and talking about it. It made a lot of sense to us.

Bakthi makes the point that her team was inspired to form an informal coalition upon coming to hear about how people in other departments managed their availability. She felt that her team members benefited from this coalition because it improved their conditions of work. Because they all managed availability in a similar

way, no one person risked 'looking bad'. Bakthi provides insights into how informal voice leads into mutually beneficial action outcomes in the workplace.

Respondents also attempted to challenge the idea that individuals *need* to work long hours to fulfil performance demands. Drawing on their own experiences, they made the point that good performance is a matter of competence rather than hours worked. Kalinga explains:

> *I have always performed very well – I have been consistently ranked over target and I have never needed to work very long hours to do this. Smart people don't need time. Nobody has demanded that I work longer than I do. They just can't do that because I am an over performer. They don't have a case. I have told them that I can always go somewhere else and it will be a big loss to them.*

Joining as a trainee two years ago, Kalinga progressed to an assistant manager post, without working long hours. He not only challenged the assumption that people need to work more than 40 hours a week to fulfil performance demands, but also invalidates the argument that long hours are required to progress (Potter, 1996). Highlighting that exit is not a difficult option for him (Hirschman, 1970) due his skill sets, Kalinga makes the point that he has 'expert power' to negotiate his working hours.

Several other respondents who identified themselves as 'exceptionally competent', similarly made the point that they are able to negotiate their working times due to exceptional skill sets:

> *With all modesty I am a strong analyst and that itself is enough. There are a lot of qualified people in this country. But the nature of this work we do means that you need very intelligent people. Not everybody can design that perfect system. If you lose that person to another company, it is your loss. I have made this clear to my manager and I more or less have control*

over what I do and how I do it. This industry is booming – in Sri Lanka itself there are so many companies which have come up and so many more scheduled to come –this means that people like us have an abundance of other options and with this experience we can go anywhere. In fact, competitors themselves approach us at times. You know who said this – our managing director. He himself acknowledged that it is going to be very difficult to retain staff in the future and that companies will have to work very hard to keep them, so I think this is why they don't mess with good people too much (Daniel)

Daniel makes the point that individuals with exceptionally strong analytical skills are invaluable for knowledge work. Although there were no obvious skill shortages in the Sri Lankan labour market, he argued that competitors attempt to poach highly talented workers. In his view, firms could not afford to lose talented workers to competitors (Jayasuriya et al. 2012). Therefore, exceptionally skilled individuals like Daniel had 'expert power' to negotiate their working times. Daniel also highlights that the Sri Lankan knowledge work industry is expanding rapidly. He felt that senior managers are well aware that talented workers would have numerous opportunities for employment elsewhere. Thus the perceived future of the knowledge work industry shaped the way his organisation managed its workforce, inducing them to allow exceptionally talented workers leverage over their working times.

Making their expert power visible to others, individuals like Daniel convinced exceptionally talented new recruits to follow their approach. In Sahan's words:

From what I hear, people who are exceptional, have special privileges. I haven't been here for donkey's years like some people but this is what I have gathered. A couple my own colleagues are very open about this with our manager. After some time – I just got here yet, I plan to talk about

my hours. Might probably wait till the next performance appraisal so that they know my worth.

At my level, I think I am the best – and I am not boasting.

Upon coming to learn about the power of 'exceptional people', Sahan who identified himself as a strong performer planned to negotiate his working times with his line manager. More people negotiating with line managers can contribute to reducing the hierarchical distance between superiors and subordinates.

Providing alternative interpretations of a 'westernised' organisation

This approach was adopted by twelve respondents. Mayantha, a trainee IT consultant argued that a 'westernised organisation' *should* pay more attention to work-life balance (a leading HRM trend in the West), rejecting expectations of long-hours and unlimited availability:

> *Life for me is not all about work – I have a life out of work. As part of a 'westernised' organisation they should think about work-life balance – a key aspect of contemporary HRM. I have travelled the world, I studied in the UK – I did a work placement in the UK and work-life balance is very big.*

Mayantha identified himself as a person who has worked in the West and learned about HRM in the UK, and drew on these factors to legitimise his argument for work-life balance in an organisation which claimed to be 'westernised'. He defined work-life balance in terms of *not* working more than 40 hours a week and having spatial and temporal flexibility (Lewis et al. 2007). While bosses drew on the 'westernised' organisation to legitimise long hours, individuals like Mayantha drew on the very same discourse to argue for freedom and work-life balance. According to Mayantha, his manager agreed with his view:

> *He actually said to me that he didn't think about it in that angle before, but when you put it like that your point makes sense.*

It is significant that people who were able to claim exposure to the West, by virtue of having lived and/or studied there, were in a particularly powerful position to legitimise their arguments. In Tasha's words:

> *I told him (her line manager), look, I studied in the UK, I have travelled the world, I did an internship in British gas. I have experience in both the UK and here so I know about HRM in the developed world. It is silly that we are expected to work longer hours because the organisation is westernised. On the contrary we should be encouraged to work smart and enjoy work life balance. This is not sour grapes. I am not stupid. I am just pointing out how ridiculous this sounds. He was like 'I am not going to argue with you – you have worked for British gas'*

Tasha explicitly highlighted the incompatibility she saw between a 'westernised' organisation and presenteeism expectations to her boss. He was compelled to agree with her view because she had worked for a renowned organisation in the UK. In other words, by virtue of her exposure to the West, she was able to legitimise her argument and make it persuasive (Potter, 1996). Tasha's and Mayantha's excerpts suggest that managers were beginning to change the way they think. Through logical argument backed by substantial legitimating efforts, respondents were able to convince line managers to consider alternative interpretations of a 'westernised' organisation.

Discussion

This study adopted a rhetorical approach (Symon, 2005) to examine how early career employees' in Sri Lanka's global knowledge outsourcing sector challenge ideal worker expectations through informal voice. The findings culminate in three contributions. First, informal 'voice' is shown as a powerful way of advancing workers' interests, leading to incremental changes that improve their conditions of work. Respondents adopted three counter-arguments strategies to challenge ideal worker expectations. They undermined presenteeism requirements by explaining how it is counter-productive to organisational efficiency. In the

process, individuals made point that managers do not always make sense and it is acceptable to challenge them. This had the effect of inspiring more people to challenge managers reducing the hierarchical distance between superiors and subordinates in work teams (Poster and Prasad, 2005). Likewise, individuals challenged the assumptions underpinning ideal worker expectations, explaining that good performance is a matter of competence rather than long hours. Highlighting the power they had due to exceptional skill sets, individuals inspired exceptionally talented new recruits to bargain with line managers, arguably contributing to democratising superior-subordinate relations. Similarly, people who argued that one does not need to be constantly available to keep clients happy, inspired other workers to form informal coalitions which collectively agreed to restrict availability to clients to standard hours. Finally, respondents who offered alternative interpretations of the regulatory 'westernisation' discourse were successful in changing managers' views.

Previous research into the South Asian context has noted tightly monitored work regimes in organisations (Taylor and Bain, 2005; Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009), leading to workers internalising organisational norms (Pal and Buzzanell, 2008) or engaging in 'neglect' (D'Cruz, 2013). Cultures of compliance, job insecurity (Noronha, 2006) and hierarchical relationships with managers (Poster and Prasad, 2005) are seen as discouraging employees from exercising Hirshman's (1970) voice option. In stark contrast to these findings, *professional* employees in the Sri Lankan outsourcing sector engaged in argumentative resistance, challenging expectations through rational argument. Although respondents were early career workers lacking positional power (Behtoui et al. 2016), possession of knowledge seen as instrumental to solve complex problems (Russell et al. 2016) empowered them to voice. Those who identified themselves as *exceptional* performers felt entitled to significant autonomy over their work. Although there was no obvious shortage of skills in the Sri Lankan labour market, the competitive nature of the knowledge work industry meant that competitors were ever willing to poach highly talented workers, and losing an exceptionally talented employee to a competitor was a significant loss to the organisation (Jayasuriya et al. 2012).

Employees were acutely aware of workers' ability to exit (Hirschman, 1970) and the cost of it to the organisation. This increased workers' propensity to voice. Providing insights into professional labour (KPO) in the global outsourcing industry, the findings of this study makes a significant contribution to existing understandings of outsourcing work which has examined mainly non-professional clerical type labour that is subjected to considerable control by external agents such as managers (Russell et al. 2016).

Notably, socially privileged individuals who had studied or worked in the West had significant symbolic power to delegitimise the regulatory 'westernisation' discourse evoked by the organisation, and offer their views of how a 'westernised' organisation should operate. Highlighting the influence of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1989) and expert power (French and Raven, 1959) on individuals' propensity to voice, these findings make a significant contribution to extant understandings of informal voice which has been slow to recognise the effects of power dynamics (Townsend et al. 2013). Scholars have argued that informal voice alone is unable to lead to changes that will advance workers interests (Gunawardana, 2014), representing it as a way of fulfilling the gaps of formal voice mechanisms (Townsend et al. 2013). The findings of this study indicates that informal voice *can* lead to changes which improve employees' conditions work: specifically, (a) reduction in the hierarchical distance between superiors and subordinates (b) formation of mutually beneficial coalitions and (c) changes in the way managers think. Illuminating how discourse moves individuals' beliefs and behaviour (Hamilton, 2001: 445) leading to reduction in overt markers of power asymmetry between people of unequal institutional power (in this case managers and workers), these findings highlight the contribution of discourse analysis to understand social action. Although we seem to be witnessing what has been described as 'democratisation of discourse' (Fairclough, 1992) it is important to note that power asymmetries in this organisation were not disappearing altogether as a result of the new ways of interacting. Employees' ability to negotiate beneficial work arrangements through informal voice was significantly shaped by their symbolic resources such as foreign exposure. Thus while overt markers of power asymmetry was becoming less pronounced, covert markers were still present (Fairclough, 1992).

Second, ideal worker expectations are theorised as a process while illuminating a pluralistic, contextualised view of organisational culture shaped by the past, present and anticipated future. By taking a rhetorical perspective, we observed that expectations of visibility, unlimited availability and long hours are discursively constructed within an argumentative context. The counter-arguments showed that ideal worker expectations are controversial and constantly negotiated in a dialogical way as employees and their superiors rhetorically engage with each other. Placing ideal worker expectations at the centre of legitimising and de-legitimising arguments, a dynamic view of ideal workers is presented to the work-life balance literature which tends to represent a static and unchanging picture (see Gambles et al. 2006). The state of flux in ideal worker expectations illuminates a pluralistic view of organisational culture. The competing interests of employers and employees and the ongoing conflict and negotiation between them reveal the processual, ambiguous and inconsistent nature of organisational culture which often is obscured in empirical work. Although processual views of culture have increased in popularity (Alvesson, 2002; Weick, 1999), empirical studies tend to reflect on one point in time and fail to capture the process of cultural negotiation, notwithstanding a few notable exceptions (Bryson, 2008; Riad, 2005; Sachmann, 2001).

 Also striking in these findings is the influence of the wider sociocultural context on organisational culture. For example, the meritocracy discourse that employers used to justify ideal worker expectations is tied to the country's colonial past. British colonial administrators advocated for promoting employees based on meritocracy in South Asia to prevent favouritism in local companies (Kazin and Rothman, 2012). Likewise, the symbolic power possessed by individuals who had 'western' exposure, reflects the power of native Lankans who adopted the values of colonial administrators during British rule and went on to secure prestigious positions (Jayawardena, 2002). Thus organisational culture significantly reflected the 'residue' (Williams, 1980) of the country's historical past. The state of the knowledge work industry is another contextual influence. Employees' propensity to continuously challenge 'dominant' ways and introduce alternatives (Williams, 1980), was significantly shaped by the high industry demand for talented workers

which enabled them to readily exit their organisations. Employers were aware that the industry was expanding at a rapid rate and acknowledged that they might have to work hard to retain talented workers in the future. Thus the current status and perceived future of the industry significantly influenced the way managers treated exceptionally talented workers. Scholars have called out for empirical studies that show how the history and the future of the wider system shape the present state of the organisation (Bryson, 2008). Drawing on empirical findings to provide a pluralistic, contextualised view of organisational culture shaped by the past, present and perceived future, this study responds to this call.

The third contribution is to understandings of organisational misbehaviour, broadly defined in terms of oppositional practices (Ackroyd and Thomas, 2016). Scholars have argued that the shape of observable misbehaviour in the workplace is changing due to shifts in managerial regimes and organisational structures. The findings of this study provides empirical evidence of three key *changes* in organisational misbehaviour in high performance work cultures: (a) explicit articulation of disagreement through oppositional voice as opposed to passive resistance (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), (b) *informal* organisation and action rather than self-centred agential practices (Contu, 2008) and (c) cooperation with one's own occupational community despite detachment from corporate culture initiatives (Richards and Kosmala 2013). It is notable that employers in the global knowledge outsourcing sector were extremely tolerant of organisational misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thomas, 1999). Competitive market pressures provided a great degree of bargaining power to skilled employees, paving the way for an increase in the scale of organisational misbehaviour. Given that misbehaviour is increasing, the most sophisticated HRM practices can fail to produce the outcomes for which they were designed. From this perspective, perhaps organisations should commit themselves to long-term labour relations policies which enable workers to participate in decision-making (Scott, 1994).

HRM Implications

These findings have significant HRM implications for organisations in the global south and more widely. First, it shows that employees *can* advance their interests through rational counter argument. Employees in a variety of occupational sectors with labour market power can draw on these findings to consider the use of argument to challenge exploitation in the workplace and negotiate changes to their conditions of work. Indeed, people can do much more than neglect. Through counter argument, they have the potential to undermine the entire credibility of the organisation and its management, leading to changes that improve their conditions of work. Counter arguments should be formulated in the context of arguments, aiming to challenge the fundamental assumptions underlying these. Second, these findings highlight that *some* people are better able than others to negotiate changes through informal voice. From an equality point of view, organisations should be reflexive of the power dynamics underpinning informal voice and its outcomes, ensuring that there are no disparities between employees. Third, these findings, which draw attention to the competing interests and ever-increasing bargaining power of highly skilled professional workers, highlight the importance of formulating HR policies based on pluralistic assumptions. Given that the potential for oppositional practices (or misbehaviour) is increasing, organisational stakeholders might consider long-term labour relations policies that enable workers to participate in management decision-making (Andrews, 1994).

The limitations of the study are also noted. From a theoretical point of view, it is recognised that there might be non-discursive aspects of social structure such as social class and ethnicity that facilitate or hinder individuals' efforts to ensure that their preferred interpretation becomes accepted. On the empirical side of things, it might be the case that counter-argument plays out quite differently in an industry like manufacturing which may not employ such a highly skilled, socially privileged workforce. Scholars are invited to further develop the findings of this study by exploring how informal voice plays out in other occupational sectors in South Asia.

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