

Dissatisfaction and Voice among Employees in Sweden

Bengt Furåker

Department of Sociology, University of Gothenburg, Box 720, 40530 Gothenburg,
SWEDEN

INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with what employees do when they have complaints about the state of affairs at the workplace. People who are dissatisfied with their situation have some different options to act; they can leave the employer, they can raise their voice against the inadequate conditions or they can be passive. Although both exit and passivity will be touched upon in the paper, its principal focus is voice. The general research questions can be worded in the following way: To what extent and how do people act to obtain improvements by making complaints? Do they, for example, speak with managers, bring up issues at staff meetings or contact union representatives? Do they choose individual rather than collective forms of action? It is also asked whether there are differences across categories of employees (men/women, manual/white-collar workers, unionized/non-unionized workers etc.) in these respects. The empirical basis for the paper is a survey, carried out in Sweden in 2006.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

A main point of departure for the present study is the classic distinction by Albert Hirschman (1970) between exit, voice and loyalty. This distinction stems from an analysis of 'the firm producing saleable outputs for customers', but it may also be 'applicable to organizations (such as voluntary associations, trade unions, or political parties) that provide services to their members without direct monetary counterpart' (Hirschman 1970: 3). The basis for the argument is dissatisfaction. When customers are discontented with a firm's products, they may stop buying them, and when members of an organization are disappointed, they may leave the organization. An alternative way of handling the situation is voice, that is, to make complaints to the firm or the organization. Besides exit and voice, Hirschman introduces a third concept: loyalty. The latter concept is not so well-defined, but it is said to refer to a 'special attachment to an organization'—which apparently implies 'a less rational' but not 'wholly irrational' relation (Hirschman 1970: 77, 38). It seems evident that loyalty makes exit less likely to occur, but the effects on voice are more open. 'As a rule', however, loyalty 'activates voice' and the reason is that individuals who are attached to an organization also want it to do things properly and to do away with failings (Hirschman 1970: 78). Conversely, due to this 'special attachment' people may avoid criticizing the organization, if they believe that criticism does more harm than good.

In this paper, I extend the use of Hirschman's categories to firm-employee relationships. If employees who are dissatisfied with their working conditions want to do something about their situation, they have two 'active' options; they can either leave the employer or they can raise their voice against the failings at the workplace. If people see no failings, they have no motives for exit and nothing to grumble about. Loyalty with the organization may affect how employees conceive of their situation but also what they think is the best way of changing it. Another relevant concept is organizational commitment, typically defined as '(a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; (b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; (c) a definite desire to maintain organizational membership' (Porter *et al.* 1974: 604; see also, e.g., Mowday, Porter & Steers 1979, 1982; Gallie *et al.* 1998: Ch. 9). As I have data on organizational commitment and the concept is more or less synonymous with loyalty, I make use of it here.

Hirschman is interested in what makes people choose exit or voice respectively and in how the two are interrelated. In relation to work organizations, there are certain things to be noted. To begin with, the exit option is crucial for discontented individuals but it is of limited value if they have few alternative job openings or other sources of income. Still, when exit is realistic, employees may use the threat of it as a lever to improve conditions. At least in a small organization, it can be rather devastating for the employer if some individuals leave, particularly if they belong to a key category of personnel with decisive job-specific skills. Moreover, it is usually a much greater step for an employee to exit from a job than it is for a

customer to stop buying products from a firm. Leaving a job often entails a big change in a person's life and it is commonly a definite event. Once an individual has left the organization, it may be difficult for him/her to come back. This speaks for voice as a first-hand option, at least if people see some possibility of accomplishing improvements. Even if voice is not an immediately successful strategy, there may still be a chance of future change for the better—to be weighed against the exit alternative. Yet, passivity is always an option.

Another issue is whether voice is an individual or a collective matter. Norwegian sociologist Sverre Lysgaard (1961) has given an excellent analysis of the preconditions for the formation of a workers' collective. His study is concentrated on the industrial proletariat, but similar developments can possibly occur among subordinate white-collar employees. Lysgaard focuses on the social elements and processes behind the transformation of individual workers into a more or less integrated social agent. In relation to an 'insatiable' technical-economic system—that is, the firm—such a unit represents workers' entrenchment and defense mechanism. The emergence of a strong collective is promoted, first, if workers have about the same position in the technical-economic system, the same type of work tasks, the same wage level, the same working conditions, etc.; second, if they have sufficient physical proximity to each other allowing communication; and, finally, if they have a common problem-situation, that is, face common problems regarding wages, workplace safety, etc.

These three conditions may generate processes that make a workers' collective evolve. Having fundamentally the same position in a hierarchical work organization is likely to create identification, as it is easy to identify with people with whom one shares the basic conditions of life or work. This is not to deny that workers can be divided in other ways (e.g., in terms of religion and ethnicity). Identification, however, in turn promotes interaction, but—according to Lysgaard—the latter activity requires some degree of physical proximity between individuals. The development of the means of communication in recent decades has of course changed the preconditions for interaction very much since he wrote his book, but the basic reasoning may still be valid. Finally, being in the same situation and more or less constantly interacting with one another, workers are likely to develop similar interpretations and feelings regarding the problems they face and what can be done to solve them. On the basis of a common interpretation of the situation they may begin to act collectively. Once established, the collective is held together by many different mechanisms. A whole ideology may emerge, providing a framework for how individual workers define their situation.

Lysgaard does not take much notice of the union as a formal organization, but there are some fragments of an analysis of the relationship between the union and the workers' collective. The two are rightly treated as two separate entities; they are analytically distinct categories and the main focus of the study is the processes behind the formation of a workers' collective. We should not take it for granted that collective action means union activity, but it is generally a reasonable assumption that 'unions matter' (Yates 1998). Often, in order for a workers' collective to become a stable social force that can stand up against a demanding employer, it needs some formal organization. A union is then the most realistic option, as it offers the structure and stability needed to counteract the power of the employer.

A situation in which voice is raised by individual workers directly to management is characterized by Lysgaard as the technical-economic system's 'ideal situation'. The implication is that complaints are not backed up by the power of the collective. Grievances become a matter between management and the individual and no one else has any say with respect to how they are handled. In contrast, when issues are channelled via the collective, following Lysgaard, we may have the 'ideal situation' for the workers' collective. It is then an issue for the collective how complaints are treated and it basically becomes impossible for individuals to elaborate their own settlements with employers.

Today, many sociologists argue that contemporary advanced societies have gone through, or are going through, a process of individualization (e.g., Bauman 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). If this is correct, we should expect the technical-economic system—in Lysgaard's terminology—rather frequently to obtain its 'ideal situation'. Moreover, the class dimension is now often treated as irrelevant. It has, for example, been claimed that the working class no longer differs from the middle class, as it has adopted the same

individualistic values (Pakulski & Waters 1996: 123-4). I do not deny that the individualization thesis has some substance to it, but we should be somewhat cautious with our conclusions (cf. Furåker 2005: Ch.7). One problem is that many authors—for example, those referred to above—provide very little empirical evidence. Without going deeper into this discussion here, I wish to stress that it is an empirical question whether or to what extent employment relations have become individualized. This should not be taken to mean that no data exist in support of the thesis. One important piece of information is the decline in union density in many countries (Phelan 2007). The implication is that increasingly large proportions of employees do not have access to the kind of collective power that unions can represent. Yet, there are still strong unions, not least in Sweden.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, DATA AND VARIABLES

This paper aims at studying to what extent dissatisfied workers make their voice heard and, if so, in which forms they do it and how common various forms are. The purpose is also to find out whether social categories differ from one another in these matters and how such differences might be interpreted. To begin with, it is important to classify the forms in which voice is expressed. Exit from the workplace is obviously—at least normally—an individual action, but what about voice? To what extent is it a kind of collective action or simply an individual protest? The dataset to be used here provides information as to whether employees have brought up their complaints with managers, at staff meetings, with workmates, with union representatives, at union meetings, by writing petitions, making lists of signatures, etc., or by taking other kinds of action. If a discontented worker contacts a manager to complain about things at the workplace, the protest may be just individual, a matter between the employee and his manager. This case is closest to Lysgaard's notion of the technical-economic system's ideal situation. If the employee instead brings up complaints with workmates or at a staff meeting, they may become an issue for the collective.

Now, employees can use more than one channel for complaints. Hence, in order for us to talk about an individual strategy, it is not enough that a respondent reports having spoken to management about inadequate working conditions, as he/she may also have ticked other alternatives in the questionnaire. The only really individual strategy appears when people have done nothing else but contacted managers. Moreover, we must ask whether the other actions mentioned above represent collective approaches. For example, to bring up issues with workmates may, on the one hand, involve everybody at the workplace but, on the other, only one or two other individuals. Still, as soon as a problem is communicated to others, it may (soon) become a collective issue. The empirical data presented in the following will throw some further, although still limited, light on the individual-collective character of the relationship between employers and their employees.

One issue is how various factors affect the outcomes on the voice items. It is then asked whether, or to what extent, dissatisfaction—the underlying factor in Hirschman's analysis—explains voice. We also need to examine the part of organizational commitment or loyalty and, if it is found to have an impact, the direction in which it operates. Voice might be limited as well as driven by organizational commitment or feelings of loyalty. Moreover, no data are available on exits in our questionnaire, but there is an item on people's willingness to leave the organization. We can thus at least find out whether this willingness is linked to voice. Another question is whether employees are afraid of criticizing failings at their workplace. This topic is important not only in a democratic and freedom-of-speech perspective but also in relation to exit and voice. Are people who hesitate to express criticism more likely to refrain from making use of the voice options?

The role of unions will also be considered. To be a union member may imply being supported by a strong organization. This might in turn affect people's propensity to do something in relation to inadequate working conditions; at least it should be easier to call in union representatives. However, the unionization rate is very high in Sweden, which means that union membership is not that discriminatory. It is true that membership rates have declined during recent years; 85% of all employees were unionized in 1993 compared to 77% in 2006 (Kjellberg forthcoming), but, in international comparison, the latter figure is still very high. Non-members are often young people on temporary contracts and/or in part-time jobs. It is possible that these factors are more important than the membership dimension *per se*.

Unions in Sweden are to a large extent class-based. As a general rule, the three large organizations—the LO, TCO and SACO—recruit manual workers, lower/middle-level white collars and higher-level white collars respectively. There are also some smaller unions outside the three main organizations such as the Syndicalists and the Longshoremen's union. If the advocates of the individualization thesis are correct, there should be no differences at all across socioeconomic categories. On the other hand, if Lysgaard's analysis is still relevant, we should expect manual workers to be more apt to use collective strategies and less inclined for individual forms of action. Our data are not really sufficient to test this hypothesis, but they may provide some hints.

Empirically, the paper is based on a Swedish survey, carried out by Statistics Sweden in the fall of 2006. A random sample was drawn among participants in the regular labour force survey (LFS). With this set-up, it was possible to include LFS information in our data set. The individuals selected were asked if they would be willing to fill out a questionnaire dealing with their work and labour market situation. 2,584 individuals answered yes and thus received the questionnaire. 1,851 individuals, or 72% of those who had agreed to participate, actually filled out and returned the questionnaire to Statistics Sweden. It must be added, however, that 1,001 individuals denied participation in the first place. Our controls in regard of the make-up of respondents do not indicate any significant biases.

The main dependent variables are built on answers to the question what respondents have done—during the last two years—in relation to inadequate working conditions. People were asked whether they had brought up issues (a) with managers; (b) at staff meetings; (c) with workmates; (d) with union representatives; (e) at union meetings; and (f) by writing petitions, making lists of signatures and the like; and (g) in other ways. Two other options were also offered; it was possible to reply that one had been passive and that one had nothing to complain about. Respondents could tick all relevant alternatives and were not asked to rank them. Additionally, in a separate question, it was asked whether they felt afraid of openly criticizing inadequate working conditions at their workplace. This variable will above all be used as an independent variable.

A large number of other independent variables have been run. To begin with, there is an index of job satisfaction. It is an additive index based on eleven questions tapping respondents' views regarding various aspects of their work and employment conditions: wage, length of working time, work schedules, work tasks, workload, physical environment, psychosocial environment, opportunities for further education, career opportunities, job security, and influence over decisions at the workplace. Data have been transformed into a scale with seven steps: from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. The survey has no information on exits, but there is a question on willingness to switch to another workplace/employer that might be taken into account. It also provides data on organizational commitment, here considered synonymous with loyalty in Hirschman's terminology. It is an index based on three questions commonly used in other studies (cf. Gallie *et al.* 1998: 237-8). The first question measures whether people are proud of the organization in which they work; the second taps whether they would be willing to work extraordinarily hard to help the employer succeed, and the third asks whether they would prefer to stay with the employer rather than take a much better paid job somewhere else. Finally, several other independent variables are included in the analyses: union membership, socioeconomic category, sex, age, type of employment contract, working hours, size of workplace, industry and sector. To a certain degree, they are run for the purpose of control, but some of the results will be given notice.

RESULTS

In examining the data, a first step is to give a general overview of what respondents have done in relation to inadequate working conditions. Just below 13% did not see anything to complain about at the workplace, about the same proportion answered that they have been passive and about one third of the respondents said that they often or sometimes feel afraid of openly criticizing workplace failings (data not shown). It is rather few of those answering 'no failings' who reported being passive so these two items apparently measure separable aspects. Most people have things to complain about and we shall now concentrate on what

they have done in regard of these. Table 1 provides information on the four most common ways of dealing with discontent.

Table 1. Worker reactions to inadequate working conditions. Percentages

	All (% and n)	Proportions of employees who have also used each of the other options (%)			
		Spoken to manager	Spoken to workmates	Brought up issue at staff meeting	Contacted union re- presentat- ive
Spoken to manager	56.7 (1,050)	-	59.2	50.0	14.7
Spoken to workmates	44.2 (819)	75.9	-	56.0	16.0
Brought up issue at staff meeting	36.9 (683)	77.0	67.2	-	16.0
Contacted union representative	10.0 (186)	82.8	70.4	58.6	-
All (% or n)	100 (1,851)	1,050	819	683	186

As shown in the first column of figures, the alternative ‘spoken to manager’ comes out with the highest proportion; a clear majority of respondents have done this. Somewhat fewer respondents have discussed the problem with workmates and still fewer—but nevertheless more than a third—have raised their voice at staff meetings. One out of ten individuals has brought up grievances with a union representative. In other words it is relatively rare to call in the union. The remaining alternatives (see above) have been ticked by few employees and will therefore not be treated further here.

The rest of Table 1 presents data on whether employees have also done other things in combination with the options on the right-hand side and it should thus be read horizontally. In the first row, we find that 59.2% of those who have spoken to management have also spoken to workmates, half have brought up issues at staff meetings and 14.7% have contacted union representatives. As people could give multiple answers, percentages add up to more than 100%. The second, third and fourth rows should be read analogously. Thus, 75.9% of those who have spoken to workmates have also spoken to management, 56% have brought up issue at staff meeting and 16% have got in touch with union representatives. Evidently, when having complaints, people mostly combine several kinds of action. Among those employees who have spoken to management, only 13 % have done nothing else. The technical-economic system’s ideal situation is hence rather unusual. Voice is to a large extent shared with others, which is a necessary but not sufficient step on the road to collective action.

In order to study the effects of various factors, several binary logistic regressions have been run. As space is limited here, the results will be presented synoptically. It should immediately be mentioned that organizational commitment could not be shown to have any clear impact on whether people have taken the one or other action. The variable is consequently not included in the regressions to be shown. Job satisfaction and organizational commitment are by the way strongly linked to one another, but this is not the reason why organizational commitment is insignificant—it does not help to exclude job satisfaction from the analyses. The explanation is more likely to be that people who are attached to and loyal with their employing organization have an ambiguous attitude. On the one hand, they may want to bring up failings in order to obtain improvements, but, on the other hand, they may wish to avoid revealing negative features. Hirschman’s view that the first aspect would be dominant cannot thus be verified.

Job satisfaction is negatively linked to willingness to switch to another employer/workplace. The association is, however, weaker than between job satisfaction and organizational commitment, most likely because workers have several other reasons for quitting their job: starting an education or a business of their own, retirement, etc. Willingness to change to another workplace/employer has some effects on the dependent variables and will therefore be included in the regressions below. This is also the case with the variable measuring whether or not people are afraid of criticizing failings at the workplace.

Table 2 displays some results regarding the three most common ways of raising voice. For each of these ways two models are run, the first without the two variables willingness to switch to another workplace/employer and fear of criticizing failings and the second including both of them. The other independent variables are union membership, socioeconomic category, sex, age, type of employment contract, working hours, size of workplace, industry, sector and job satisfaction. For some of these, results are exposed in the table.

Table 2. Effects of various factors on worker reactions to failings at the workplace. With control for sex, age, working hours, size of workplace, sector, and industry. Binary logistic regression. Odds ratios.

	Spoken to manager		Spoken to workmates		Brought up issue at staff meeting	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Union membership						
Yes	1.13	1.04	1.11	1.01	1.00	0.96
No (ref.)	1	1	1	1	1	1
Socioeconomic category						
Manual worker (ref.)	1	1	1	1	1	1
Lower/middle-level white collar	1.62***	1.86***	0.93	0.93	1.02	1.08
Higher white collar	1.89***	1.98***	0.85	0.76	1.18	1.16
Type of contract						
Permanent (ref.)	1	1	1	1	1	1
Temporary	0.56**	0.56**	0.65*	0.72	0.50**	0.52**
Work satisfaction scale						
Very dissatisfied	2.65***	1.87*	2.67***	1.59+	1.90**	1.76*
2	2.07**	1.56+	2.17***	1.45	1.39	1.31
3	1.67*	1.31	2.49***	1.82*	1.31	1.18
4	1.68**	1.28	1.85**	1.41+	1.55*	1.42
5	1.27	1.05	1.47*	1.31	1.17	1.11
6	1.42+	1.45	1.14	1.07	0.97	0.97
Very satisfied (ref.)	1	1	1	1	1	1
Willingness to quit workplace/employer						
Yes		0.98		1.59**		0.98
Perhaps		1.33*		1.35*		0.97
No (ref.)		1		1		1
Afraid of criticizing failings						
Yes, often		0.54*		0.83		0.44**
Yes, sometimes		0.56***		0.92		0.62**
Sees no failings		0.01***		0.03***		0.04***
No, seldom		0.80		1.07		0.87
No, never (ref.)		1		1		1
Nagelkerke R²	0.08	0.24	0.09	0.17	0.11	0.18
n	1,678	1,647	1,678	1,647	1,678	1,647

*** = p<.001; ** = p<0.01; * = p<0.05; + = p<0.1.

Starting with the issue whether employees have expressed their complaints to management, we can conclude that dissatisfaction is a highly significant factor. In general, the more discontented workers are, the more likely it is that they have spoken to managers, but the effects are clearly smaller in Model 2, when the two additional variables are included. Those willing to switch to another workplace/employer do not differ from those unwilling to do so, whereas people who have answered 'perhaps' are more apt to speak with managers. A possible interpretation is that these people hesitate about what to do and therefore try the voice option first. Being afraid of criticizing failings is indeed important; the respondents who have reported feeling afraid are less likely to bring up complaints with management.

Union membership generates no significant effect, but socioeconomic category (and union affiliation) does. It is above all white collar workers who have contacted managers about their complaints and this is also reflected in the patterns regarding union affiliation; the TCO and SACO members have been more inclined to answer in the positive on this item (not shown). Actually, we find high coefficients also for those belonging to the category 'other', that is the

smaller organizations mentioned previously. Type of employment contract is another central factor. Employees in temporary jobs are less likely than those in permanent jobs to report having brought up issues with management. The same goes for respondents with the shortest working hours compared to those working 40 hours per week and for public sector employees compared to private sector employees (not shown). With respect to the other factors included in the regressions—sex, age, industry, and size of the workplace—certain significant results appear, but within the limits of this paper they cannot be commented upon.

One thing to be mentioned is, however, that when we single out those who have done nothing else but spoken to managers and run regressions with the same independent variables, we find one key difference (not shown). Job satisfaction is then no longer a significant factor. It seems that those who just speak with managers do so not because of dissatisfaction but of other reasons. The differences regarding socioeconomic categories and union affiliation are still there, but there must be some other, unknown factor in operation. It should perhaps be repeated that only about 13% of the respondents have done no more than contacted managers.

Turning to the issue as to whether employees have spoken with workmates, we once more see that job dissatisfaction is essential and that its impact is lower in Model 2. Willingness to change to another workplace/employer is also important. Both respondents who wish to switch and those who perhaps wish to switch are relatively inclined to bring up complaints with workmates. In contrast, fear of raising criticism does not matter that much; the only significant effect is the expected low odds for people who see no failings. An interesting observation is that no clear differences are found regarding union membership and socioeconomic category (and union affiliation). Model 1 suggests that being on a temporary employment contract is likely to lower the propensity to speak with workmates about failings at the workplace, but in Model 2 this does not meet the statistical requirements.

On the third most common way of raising voice—bringing up issues at staff meetings—we again find some impact of job satisfaction. However, the outcome is this time much more inconclusive. The most dissatisfied are most likely to take inadequate working conditions to staff meetings, but the results regarding the remaining categories are not that clear. Willingness to change to another workplace/employer does not seem to be a relevant factor in this context, whereas being afraid of criticizing failings is important. Those who are afraid are also much less inclined to bring up complaints at staff meetings.

As to the other independent variables, no significant differences appear with respect to socioeconomic category (or union affiliation), but type of employment contract turns out to have a vital role—in the way expected. In passing, employees at workplaces with 10-19 employees seem to be particularly apt to bring up issues at staff meetings (not shown). The reason may be that staff meetings are common at workplaces of this size. In fact, the pattern is similar regarding the item 'spoken to managers' (not previously mentioned).

CONCLUSION

The analysis in this paper has demonstrated what employees in Sweden do when their working conditions are considered inadequate. The most common action is to speak to managers—a result that should not surprise us. It is handy to take up problems with people who have the power to do something about them. A large majority of those who have spoken with managers have, however, also spoken with workmates. Moreover, about half of them have brought up issues at staff meetings and some have contacted union representatives. It is no more than 13% that have done nothing else but been in touch with management. In other words, complaints are rather likely to be spread among the collective of workers. However, this is not the same as—and it does not have to lead to—collective action. Actually we have insufficient information to explore that issue further, but at least we know that people do not very often call in the union. Nevertheless, unions may play a significant role as a background force. Sometimes it may be enough with a hidden threat of action to make managers improve working conditions. Since long, the labour unions in Sweden have been strong both on the national level and at the workplace. Other data in our survey indicate that a large majority of employees consider them very important for obtaining good deals with the employer (Bengtsson & Berglund 2009).

Looking at the determinants behind the various voice options at focus here, we find that discontent is a crucial factor behind basically all of them. As Hirschman has stressed, dissatisfaction creates a wish among employees to do something. They can leave the organization, raise their voice against shortcomings or remain quiet. We have no data on exits from the workplace, but there is some information on willingness to exit. Unsurprisingly, willingness to leave for another workplace/employer is strongly associated with discontent, but it does not have very much impact on the various kinds of voice, except that it often makes people speak with workmates.

Discontented workers are to a large extent prepared to protest against inadequate working conditions. Our analyses show that discontent is related to the most important voice options, above all people's tendency to speak with managers and with workmates. Hirschman's analysis entails the assumption that loyalty can be an intervening factor, making people either bring up complaints or avoid being critical, depending on how they look at the consequences for the organization. I have used organizational commitment as an indicator of loyalty and it is not much linked to the voice options at focus. Instead, another factor comes out as significant: fear of criticizing failings. People who are afraid to show their disapproval tend less often to speak with managers or to bring up complaints at staff meetings. As to speaking with workmates, however, no such difference could be found; this is apparently what individuals always can do.

Another conclusion is that union membership is not very important for the topics under scrutiny. The reason is probably that most workers are unionized. Moreover—with one clear exception—it does not matter that much which one of the three central organizations people belong to. The exception concerns speaking with managers, possibly a more individualistic method; it is more common among white-collar workers to do this and consequently LO members do it to a lesser degree than TCO and SACO members. A factor that also matters is type of employment contract; people on temporary contracts are less likely to speak with managers, to bring up issues at staff meetings and there is some indication that they less often speak with workmates. This category is to a relatively large extent non-unionized.

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