

Motivated by Mutability: The Role of Status Mutability in Voicing Behaviors

Abstract

For employees, expressing their voice may be a tactic for gaining status (i.e., respect or admiration) as doing so demonstrates their *instrumental organizational value* (i.e., their ability to contribute to their team's goals). Yet, previous research suggests that employees will oftentimes remain silent, impeding their ascension in the organization's status hierarchy – and preventing their group from accessing the benefits of their voice expression. We propose that this may occur when employees believe that demonstrating their *potential* value by expressing voice will not translate into *realizing* that value. Integrating existing research in status attainment and voice, we build on the implications of previous work to develop an undertheorized account for employees' decision to remain silent: the extent to which they see the organization's status hierarchy as mutable. Across an archival study and two experiments, we find that in immutable hierarchies (relative to mutable hierarchies), employees feel reduced confidence in their ability to gain status, and that their voice expressions are more futile. In turn, this reduces their subsequent propensity to express voice. Exploratory analyses reveal that this effect is stronger for low- (versus high-) status people. This research advances a novel antecedent to voicing behaviors – the status hierarchy's mutability.

INTRODUCTION

Expressing organizational voice allows voicers to demonstrate their *perceived instrumental social value*, or their ability to contribute to their organization's – or workgroup's – goals (Leary, Jongman-Sereno, & Diebels, 2014). Demonstrating perceived instrumental social value is important, as doing so is a key antecedent to gaining status (Bunderson, 2003; Howell, Harrison, Burris, & Detert, 2015; McClean, Martin, Emich, & Woodruff, 2018; Weiss & Morrison, 2019). Having status is associated with a host of positive outcomes, such as high compensation (Belliveau, O'Reilly, & Wade, 1996) and favorable resource allocations (Bunderson, 2003). Consequently, existing work has sought to not only understand the consequences of having high status, but also what leads people to act in ways to gain status (Anderson, Hildreth, & Sharps, 2020; Bendersky & Shah, 2012).

One way that employees can gain status is by expressing organizational voice, which is providing “informal and discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, problems, or opinions about work-related issues, with the intent to bring about improvement or change” (Morrison, 2023; p. 80). This work identifies that expressing voice shapes perceptions of the voicer's competence (McClean et al., 2018), agency (Weiss & Morrison, 2019) and commitment to the group's goals (Bain, Kreps, Meikle, & Tenney, 2021). In turn, expressing voice can lead the voicer to gain status (Weiss & Morrison, 2019).

However, an employee may not express voice if they think that their demonstrated social value will not match their realized social value: i.e., they expect that their voice expression (their “demonstrated” social value) will not lead them to gain status (their “realized” social value). When that is the case, they are likely to believe that expressing voice is a futile status-attainment strategy. In the current research, we explore an undertheorized context which may spark these

beliefs: when the status hierarchy is immutable, and it is difficult for an employee's status rank in the group to change (Hays & Bendersky, 2015). In other words, before employees even consider how much their voice may influence their perceived instrumental social value, employees must believe that the amount of social value they have in the group (i.e., status), is malleable (i.e., hierarchy mutability). We propose that, in more mutable hierarchies, people will think that their *demonstrated* instrumental social value will be realized; in other words, they will feel more confident in their ability to gain status. In contrast, in less mutable hierarchies, people will think that their *demonstrated* instrumental social value will *not* be realized; in other words, they will feel less confident in their ability to gain status. We anticipate, then, that mutability perceptions will impact voicing behavior through participants' confidence that their voice will grant them status.

Thus, in the current research, we develop a *mutability account for status attainment*. In doing so, we advance the research on status attainment and organizational voice in important ways. In terms of status attainment, previous work on status hierarchies has pointed to the role of mutability in shaping status pursuits (Anderson et al., 2020; Hays & Bendersky, 2015). However, this research has not focused on how perceived mutability may be a particularly powerful signal of the possibility of reaching higher status.

In terms of organizational voice, we highlight an undertheorized context in which voice is considered to be effective: the desire for the voicer to elevate their status. This account advances our understanding of how to encourage voice expression, which has individual-level (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Whiting, Podsakoff, & Pierce, 2008) and group-level (e.g., Argote & Ingram, 2000; Detert, Burris, Harrison, & Martin, 2013) benefits. Additionally, we depart from previous research integrating status and voice. Previous voice research has discussed how a voicer's status

may influence their propensity to voice (Morrison, 2014) or how voicing may lead voice recipients to *confer* status. In contrast, we develop an account for how the desire to gain status can impact voicing decisions.

STATUS PURSUITS IN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANIZATIONAL VOICE

An employee's "informal and discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, problems, or opinions about work-related issues, with the intent to bring about improvement or change" (Morrison, 2023; p. 80); i.e., their "organizational voice" – is a coveted organizational resource. For instance, voice has been demonstrated to help teams correct problems (Detert et al., 2013; Nemeth et al., 2001) and improve organizational performance (Mackenzie et al., 2011; Perlow & Williams, 2003). Moreover, expressing voice can lead employees to feel more vigor (Röllman et al. 2021), increase pride (Welsh et al., 2021), and elevate job satisfaction (Frieder et al., 2015).

However, expressing voice has important implications for the voicer, too: namely, that voice expression can lead the voicer to gain status (Bain et al., 2021; McClean et al., 2018; Weiss & Morrison, 2019). Voicers gain status because they are seen as contributing to the group's goals (e.g., Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015; Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006), thereby increasing the likelihood that their colleagues will view them as knowledgeable and group-oriented (Ridgeway, 1978). Expressing voice attracts attention to one's ideas or contributions (Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003), thus shaping coworker's perceptions of the focal employee's competence ((McClean, Kim, & Martinez, 2022; Ng, Hsu, & Parker, 2021), influence (Morrison, 2014), agency (Weiss & Morrison, 2018), and commitment to improving the team's functioning (Burriss, 2012). Therefore, expressing voice can increase a voicer's

perceived instrumental social value to the group (Leary et al., 2014) – a focal determinant of how much status their colleagues confer upon them (Anderson et al., 2015).

Employees are likely conscious that their voice expressions could have status implications. Indeed, employees will refrain from speaking out when they believe that doing so will lead to reduced respect or support, garner negative feedback, impair them from receiving valued resources, or even getting punished (Detert & Treviño, 2010; Grant, 2013; Morrison, 2014; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Moreover, past work identifies that voicers will weigh the costs and benefits of voicing, thereby engaging in a mental “calculus” to determine whether or not to speak up (Detert & Burris, 2007), and will do so when the benefits outweigh the costs (e.g., Detert & Edmondson, 2011).

An undertheorized factor in this calculus, however, is the voicer’s understanding of local status dynamics. While past research has hinted that voicer’s beliefs about other people’s perceptions play a key role in their decision-making, this research has not explicitly interrogated potential voicer’s decision-making through the lens of the status-attainment process. We propose that a key antecedent to the voicer’s decision to voice is their belief that their voice can elevate their status. We focus on a specific signal of this possibility: the perceived mutability of the hierarchy.

In *mutable* status hierarchies, there are opportunities for upward mobility in the hierarchy (Hays & Bendersky, 2015). In contrast, opportunities for upward mobility do not exist in *immutable* status hierarchies. Given the voluntary nature of status conferral, employees who perceive that the status hierarchy is mutable are optimistic about the extent to which their contributions – which are attempted demonstrations of their instrumental social value – translate into recognized instrumental social value (e.g., see: Wright, 1997; Wright, Taylor, &

Moghaddam, 1990). On the other hand, in immutable status hierarchies, employees are likely to believe that their demonstrated instrumental social value will not translate into their recognized instrumental social value. To that end, whether or not a status hierarchy seems mutable is likely an instrumental factor in people's decision to engage (or not engage) in status-seeking behaviors (Pai & Bendersky, 2020), as it will influence their expectations about the extent to which their status-pursuing behaviors will improve their status (a possibility which is present in mutable, but not immutable, status hierarchies). Therefore, we propose that employees who perceive more mutable status hierarchies will express more voice than employees who perceive more immutable status hierarchies.

This proposition is consistent with past research on status, which has demonstrated that the decision to pursue status is oftentimes based on one's expectations about the ability to successfully obtain status. For instance: research on status pursuits has identified that people will contribute to the group (which is analogous to voicing) when they believe that doing so could help them gain status (e.g., Bendersky & Shah, 2012; Kilduff, Galinsky, Gallo, & Reade, 2016). Additional research has shown that, after successfully gaining status, people will continue to try to maintain their status (or even gain more status) because they have elevated confidence in gaining future status, relative to those who were unsuccessful in gaining status (Anderson et al., 2020). This process of gaining status, and then expecting status, suggests that there is a "cycle" by which high-status people continue to get high status because they have positive expectations about the extent to which their attempts to gain status will be rewarded (see research on the "Pygmalion effect"; (Eden & Shani, 1982; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), because of self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g., the "Galatea effect"; McNatt & Judge, 2004; Rosenthal, 2002) or simply because they already have high status (e.g., the "Matthew effect"; Merton, 1968). Similar

work has shown an analogous cycle with low-status people: because of their inability to access the resources associated with having high-status, low-status people decide to disengage from status pursuits (Anderson et al., 2020). In sum, this research suggests that people's perceptions of the match between their *realized* and *demonstrated* instrumental social value will influence their decision to pursue status in the future. If they believe that their attempts to gain status will be recognized with status (as in mutable hierarchies), they will continue to engage in status-pursuing behaviors. If they believe that their attempts to gain status will not be recognized with status (as in immutable hierarchies), they will refrain from engaging in status-pursuing behaviors.

Similar phenomena – whereby people's expectations that exerting effort will fall below their expected gain, thus shaping their decision to exert effort – abound in social psychology. For instance: expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) proposes that employee behavior is a function of the expected outcomes of their behaviors. If their behaviors can affect change or achieve desired outcomes (as in a mutable hierarchy), they will act on these behaviors (i.e., they will voice). Yet, if employees do not think that they can change their outcomes, they will be passive. In the case of the current work, they can do this by remaining silent (i.e., not speaking up; Ng et al., 2021). Moreover, obtaining success and achievement in a context increases individuals' confidence in their ability in that context (Bandura, 1977, 1982; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Gecas, 1989; Iso-Ahola & Dotson, 2014) – whereas not achieving success will lead them to disengage from trying to achieve success (Carver & Scheier, 1990, 2001; Deci, Cascio, & Krusell, 1973; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991).

To describe this process in terms of organizational voice: voicers in mutable hierarchies will be more inclined to believe that their voice expression will receive status-relevant

recognition. In contrast, voicers in immutable hierarchies will be more inclined to believe that their voice expression will not receive status-relevant recognition. Together, this research suggests that people's decisions to express voice are contingent, in part, on their belief that expressing voice will cause them to gain status. If they do not think that they will gain status, then they will refrain from voicing. This leads to our first two hypotheses:

HYPOTHESIS 1: Higher hierarchical mutability predicts more organizational voice.

HYPOTHESIS 2A: People in mutable (vs. immutable) status hierarchies will have more confidence in their ability to gain status.

HYPOTHESIS 2B: People in mutable (vs. immutable) status hierarchies will express more voice because they will have more confidence in their ability to gain status.

The role of mutability in promoting futility

This experience – of someone's *demonstrated* social value not matching their *recognized* instrumental social value – also shapes an employee's *futility perceptions*. In the voice literature, futility perceptions have been negatively associated with reduced psychological safety, perceptions of distributive justice, leader-member exchange, and voice; conversely, futility is also associated with increased detachment and abusive supervision (Burriss, Detert, & Chiaburu, 2008). Indeed, an important factor in shaping futility beliefs is whether the voicer will receive recognition for speaking up (Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Detert & Burriss, 2007). Expressing voice that is subsequently not acted upon leads voicers to feel frustrated (Folger, Rosenfield, Grove, & Corkran, 1979; Pinder & Harlos, 2001), emotionally exhausted (Frieder, Hochwarter, & DeOrtentiis, 2015), and prone to withdrawal (Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Sherf, Parke, & Isaakyan, 2021), thereby causing them to remain silent (Detert & Treviño, 2010; Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). Additionally, (Sherf et al., 2021) note that when an environment is not amenable to change from employees, and employees are not able to achieve gains or rewards, they will feel a sense of futility, while Farh & Chen (2014) argue that futility perceptions are activated by

beliefs that one's voice will not improve team dynamics. An employee's beliefs about the futility of expressing voice are ultimately consequential, as they will shape their decision to express voice. For instance: Pinder & Harlos (2001) found that, if a voicer feels that their voice is being ignored, then they will refrain from voicing again. Similarly, Hunton, Hall, & Price (1998) demonstrated that when a voicer felt that their voice was ignored, there was a 41% drop in subsequent voice. Increased perceptions of voice futility, then, will reduce an employee's voicing decision.

We propose that an important factor shaping futility perceptions is the extent to which people will see their voice as leading them to gain status. If people believe that their voice expressions will not improve their status, they will believe that expressing their voice is futile. If, however, they believe that their voice expressions will lead them to have status, they will not think that expressing their voice is futile. We predict that these perceptions of futility in gaining status are shaped by the hierarchy's mutability. In mutable hierarchies, people will express more voice (and, therefore, seek to obtain status) if they believe that their voice expression will be worthwhile in their status pursuits – i.e., they will not consider expressing their voice to be *futile*. However, in immutable hierarchies, people will express less voice (and, therefore, not try to obtain status) because they believe that doing so will be futile. This leads to our final two hypotheses.

HYPOTHESIS 3A: People in mutable (vs. immutable) status hierarchies will believe that expressing voice will be futile.

HYPOTHESIS 3B: People in mutable (vs. immutable) status hierarchies will express more voice because they believe it will be less futile in gaining status.

Empirical Overview

We conducted three studies to test our hypotheses. Study 1a is a pilot study, and Study 1b is an archival study. Both of these studies present correlational evidence in support of our hypotheses. Study 2 is a within-subjects experiment that builds on the results of Study 1 by examining how mutability perceptions vary across teams. Study 3 orthogonally manipulates hierarchical status and mutability. All studies (including the pilot and archival studies) were pre-registered. Pre-registrations, data, code, and materials are available at the following Open Science Framework page:

https://osf.io/bgx8p/?view_only=64cf4625f93448848b96af1d3da4279e.

STUDY 1

Sample

The Office of Personnel Management is a government subagency that serves as the chief human resources agency for the United States federal government. Broadly, they set and enforce the background-check processes determining individuals' fitness to work for the federal government, provide human resource policies, services, and oversight to federal agencies, and develop (as well as administer) cost-effective employee benefits programs. They release an annual climate survey assessing how federal employees experience the policies, practices, and procedures within their agency. The survey has been administered annually since 2006 (with exceptions in 2007 and 2009) to employees of federal agencies¹. We elected to use items that appeared in consecutive waves from 2010-2023. In total, we retained 6,563,252 observations (41.66% Female, 10.37% unreported).

Study 1A: Pilot Study (Item Validation Study)

¹ More information about the survey can be found here: <https://www.opm.gov/fevs/about/>.

As an author team, we reviewed all of the items in the Office of Personnel Management dataset across all waves of data collection. Given that some items were represented in some waves, and others were not, we included data from all of the waves for our review. We retained the items that theoretically mapped onto the voice and hierarchical mutability constructs. This selection process led us to retain three items for voice and three items for hierarchical mutability from the Office of Personnel Management's dataset. We include analyses with the items that were only represented in some (but not all waves) in the supplement.

We then conducted a pre-registered pilot study to determine the extent to which items from pre-existing scales for voice and hierarchical mutability corresponded with the items in the Office of Personnel Management's dataset. Initially, we opened the pilot survey to all 410 Prolific participants who identified as full- or part-time federal employees. We selected this sample so that respondents' experiences in our validation study would be as similar as possible to respondents in the archival data. However, after two business days, only 98 responses had been collected. We added an amendment to our pre-registration specifying that we would keep the survey open for one more business day. When this period expired, we had a total of 126 responses. After applying our pre-registered exclusion criteria, our final sample consisted of 108 participants. The average age of our sample was 36.3 years, and 46.4% of the sample were women.

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all items were measured using 5-point Likert scales (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree"; $\alpha = .93$). Participants were presented with a six-item hierarchical mutability scale that has been validated through past research (Hays & Bendersky, 2015; e.g., "People's relative positions in the hierarchy can be altered," "The hierarchy can be

changed if group members desire,” “Moving up in the group’s hierarchy is possible for those who try”; $\alpha = .93$), as well as an established three-item voice scale (adapted from Fast, Burris, and Bartel, 2014; e.g., “At work, I give suggestions about how to make this work unit better, even if others disagree”; “At work, I challenge my group to deal with problems around here”; “At work, I speak up with ideas to address employees’ needs and concerns”; $\alpha = .90$). We will refer to these measures as the “baseline mutability” and “baseline voice” scales, respectively.

Participants were presented with the items we selected from the Office of Personnel Management’s Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. We determined which items were best suited for our hypotheses by first identifying the items that we thought theoretically mapped onto the constructs for voice and hierarchical mutability (see the full list of items in the supplement). We focused on the waves released between 2010 and 2023. Each wave consisted of approximately 84 items. We went through each wave and selected the items that mapped onto hierarchical mutability and organizational voice. However, many of the items were dropped or revised from the 2019 to 2020 waves (with minor subsequent changes after 2020). Therefore, we divided our items into three separate groups: the items that are represented only in the 2010-2019 waves, the items that are represented only in the 2020-2023 waves, and the items that were represented in all three waves. Initially, we decided to run our analyses using items from all three groups.

First, we ran an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Three factors emerged from the six scales that were tested. A majority of the items from the OPM dataset loaded most highly onto the first factor (0.32-0.89). However, our baseline mutability items loaded most highly onto the second factor (0.69-0.94), and our baseline voice items loaded most highly onto our third factor (0.74-0.86). We therefore examined which items from the OPM dataset loaded most highly onto

those factors. Eleven OPM items' second-highest loading was on Factor 2 (.30-.90), and fifteen of the OPM items' second-highest loading was on Factor 3 (.81-.88).

We ran a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) based on the findings of the EFA. We ran the EFA with the items from both waves of the OPM dataset with the baseline measures ($\chi^2(11) = 16.05$, RMSEA = .065, CFI = .98), indicating both our mutability and voice items from the archival data corresponded well to the baseline items for hierarchical mutability and voice.

However, after conferral amongst the author team, we elected to keep items that appeared in all fourteen waves to use in subsequent analyses. Consequently, the status mutability scale consisted of 2-items ("In my work unit, differences in performance are recognized in a meaningful way"; "How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for doing a good job?"). The voice scale consists of 3-items ("I can disclose a suspected violation of any law, rule, or regulation without fear of reprisal"; "I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things"; "How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work?").

The Office of Personnel Management's hierarchical mutability items were highly correlated with each other ($r(106) = .76$, $p < .001$), and the Office of Personnel Management's voice scale was reliable at traditional thresholds ($\alpha = .77$). We then ran a correlation analysis between the OPM scales and the baseline scales. We found a significant correlation between the two hierarchical mutability scales ($r(106) = .479$, $p < .001$) and the two voice scales ($r(126) = .479$, $p < .001$; see Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and correlations amongst all variables).

Insert Table 1 about here.

Study 1b

We then turned our attention to the archival dataset, using the items identified in Study 1a.

Measurement

Mutability. We assessed hierarchical mutability using the two items we identified in our validations study: “In my work unit, differences in performance are recognized in a meaningful way” and “How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for doing a good job?” (1 = Very dissatisfied, 5 = Very satisfied; $r = 0.65$, $p < .001$).

Voice. We assessed organizational voice using the three items we identified in our validation study: “I can disclose a suspected violation of any law, rule, or regulation without fear of reprisal,” “I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things,” and “How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work?” (1 = Very dissatisfied, 5 = Very satisfied; $\alpha = .80$)

Control variables. We report all analyses with our pre-registered control variables: the participant’s sex, ethnicity, tenure in the federal government, supervisory status, and intentions of leaving the agency.

Analytic methods. We used hierarchical linear modeling with observation-level perceptions of hierarchical mutability modeled as a fixed effect and random intercepts for agency and year. We incorporated the weights that the Office of Personnel Management supplied to account for nonresponse biases.

Results and Discussion

Pre-registered analyses. Perceptions of hierarchical mutability were positively associated with expressing voice, supporting Hypothesis 1: ($B = 0.66$, $SE = .0003$, $p < .001$). These results remained significant when including our control variables ($B = 0.62$, $SE = 0.0002$, $p < .001$).

Study 2

While Study 1b demonstrated that heightened perceptions of status mutability increase organizational voice, it did not allow us to understand how mutability varies within participants. In other words, participants' perceptions of mutability likely vary across contexts. We, therefore, sought to compare participants' mutability perceptions across different work teams and see if the relationship between mutability and voice was consistent across these different contexts. We hypothesized that participants would engage in more voicing behaviors in teams that they perceived as having more hierarchical mutability and engage in fewer voicing behaviors in teams that they perceived as having less hierarchical mutability. Additionally, we tested our mediation hypotheses (Hypotheses 2a-3b).

Methods

Participants. Study 2 utilized a two-stage recruiting process. First, we recruited 1,000 participants and asked whether they had been part of at least three different work teams in the past five years (84.85% indicated “yes”, 15.15% indicated “no”). We opened the survey to all participants who answered “yes”, at Time 1. We pre-registered that we would accept only 350 responses at Time 2. We chose 350 because we intended to power this study to detect a correlation of $r = 0.2$ at 90% power. The WebPower package in R (Zhang, Mai, Yang, & Zhang, 2018) revealed that we would need to retain 258 participants in our final sample. A total of 350 participants (44.70% women, 1.1% nonbinary; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.40$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.64$) were therefore

recruited from Prolific. After applying our pre-registered exclusion criteria, we retained 320 participants (44.06% women, 54.69% men, 1.25% non-binary, $M_{\text{age}} = 38.68$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.60$).

Procedure. At Time 2, Participants first had to list at least three, and up to six, names of their work teams. To reduce selection bias in participants' responses (e.g., participants only evaluated their most favorably viewed teams), we randomly selected three of the teams from the list of teams the participants provided. Participants then rated each of those three teams on the measures below.

Materials (Survey)

Alpha reliabilities are computed across all teams for each participant.

Hierarchical mutability. Participants rated each of their teams on the extent to which they perceived the team as having hierarchical mutability on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much so). We adapted the same 7-item measure of hierarchical mutability from (Hays & Bendersky, 2015; $\alpha = .96$) that we used in Study 1a. Example items include: "People's relative positions in the hierarchy can be altered"; "The hierarchy can be changed if team members desire", and "People in the team can move up and down in the hierarchy if they want".

Voicing Behaviors. Participants then reported the frequency of expressing their voice in each team on a scale from 1 (Never) to 4 (Sometimes) to 7 (Very frequently). We adapted the same three-item measure of organizational voice (Fast, Burriss, & Bartel, 2014; $\alpha = .94$) that we used in Study 1a. Items included: "I give suggestions about how to make this work unit better, even if others disagree"; "I challenge this team to deal with problems"; "I speak up with ideas to address employees' needs and concerns".

Confidence in gaining status. Participants indicated their confidence in gaining status in each of their teams on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much so). We adapted a three-item

measure from (Anderson et al., 2020; $\alpha = .89$): “I am confident that I will achieve high status”, “I believe I will be held in high esteem in this context”, and “I doubt that I will gain people’s respect” (reverse coded).

Perceptions that expressing voice is futile. Participants how futile they perceived expressing voice was for each team on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much so). We adapted a three-item measure from Fast et al. (2014); $\alpha = .95$): “Generally, on this team...”: “speaking up is a waste of time”, “it is useless for me to suggest new ways of doing things here”, and “nothing changes even if I speak up to my supervisor”.

Status. Participants provided self-reports of their status in each of these teams using a five-item measure adapted from (Djurdjevic et al., 2017; $\alpha = .97$). Example items include: “I have a great deal of prestige on this team”, “I possess high status on this team”, and “I occupy a respected position on this team”.

Results and Discussion

Ratings of teams were nested within participants, so we analyzed our data using mixed-effects modeling that included random intercepts for participant and team. As predicted, there was a positive relationship between perceived hierarchical mutability and organizational voice ($B = .25$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Next, we found evidence supporting a positive relationship between hierarchical mutability and participant’s confidence in their ability to gain status ($B = .30$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2a. Then, we identified a negative relationship between perceived hierarchical mutability and voice futility perceptions ($B = -.33$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$), therefore supporting Hypothesis 3a.

We then reran our analyses with control variables. We controlled for participants’ self-reported status in each team, as well as the participant’s gender, age, and months spent on

the team. The effect of mutability on voice reached marginal levels of significance ($B = .42$, $SE = .02$, $p = .077$). Still, the effect of mutability on confidence remained significant ($B = .69$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$), as did the effect of mutability on perceptions of voicing futility ($B = -0.14$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$).

Then, we tested our mediation hypotheses using the Lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) in R. The confidence interval for the indirect effect of hierarchical mutability on organizational voice through the participant's confidence in gaining status did not cross zero (95% CI = [.119, .199]), therefore supporting Hypothesis 2b. Additionally, the confidence interval for the indirect effect of hierarchical mutability on organizational voice through the participant's perceptions that expressing voice was futile did not cross zero (95% CI = [.067, .148]), therefore supporting Hypothesis 3b.

Exploratory analyses

In an exploratory sense, we also tested if participants' status interacted with hierarchical mutability on both confidence in gaining status, perceptions of futility in expressing voice, and organizational voice. We found evidence that mutability interacted with hierarchical status on confidence in gaining status (without controls: $B = -0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = 0.024$; with controls: $B = -0.02$, $SE = .01$, $p = .029$), and significant evidence that mutability interacted with status on futility in expressing voice (without controls: $B = 0.07$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$; with controls: $B = .06$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$). However, we did not find evidence that status interacted with voice ($B = .001$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.887$; with controls: $B = -0.0005$, $SE = .01$, $p = 0.962$). We encourage readers to interpret these results with caution, though, as our pre-determined sample size calculations were not powered to detect interactions. However, we will explore the implications of these results in Study 3.

We probed each significant interaction at different levels of organizational status: one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and one standard deviation above the mean. For both confidence in gaining status, and futility of expressing voice, the simple slope has a significant positive coefficient at one standard deviation below the mean (confidence in gaining status: $B = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$; futility of expressing voice: $B = -0.27$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$), and at the mean (confidence in gaining status: $B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$; futility of expressing voice: $B = -0.27$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). However, at one standard deviation above the mean, this was no longer a significant relationship for either measure (confidence in gaining status: $B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.30$; futility of expressing voice: $B = -0.05$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = 0.26$).

These results support our hypotheses that hierarchical mutability is associated with voice. However, when we included participant's self-reported status in our regression, the effect of mutability on expressing organizational voice weakened, suggesting that the participant's status may influence the effect of mutability on expressing voice. Additionally, we found that organizational status interacts with hierarchical mutability on our mediators: specifically, the relationships between mutability and both confidence in gaining status perceptions, as well as perceptions that expressing voice is futile, attenuate at high levels of self-reported status. In Study 3, we explicitly manipulate participant's status to understand how having high (or low) status influences the relationship between mutability and voice.

Study 3

In Study 3, we experimentally manipulated hierarchical mutability and participants' organizational status. In addition to interrogating the implications of the marginal results we found in Study 2, previous research on status attainment suggested that participants' high (or

low) status shapes their decision to engage in status-pursuing behavior; which, in the workplace, could be expressing voice. Anderson et al. (2020) find that being assigned high (vs. low) status increases participants' confidence in their ability to gain status, thus driving their status-seeking behaviors. Therefore, in this study, we orthogonally manipulated participants' assigned status (high vs. low) and mutability (high-, control, and immutability).

Methods

Participants. We recruited a total of 670 participants (46.55% Women, 1.20% non-binary; $M_{\text{age}} = 39.74$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.31$). The study had a 3 (hierarchy mutability: high mutability, immutability, no information) x 2 (participant's status: high, low) between-subjects factorial design. After applying our pre-registered exclusions, we retained a final sample of 625 participants (46.08% women, 1.28% non-binary; $M_{\text{age}} = 39.69$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.17$).

Procedure. We adapted a paradigm used in previous research (Anderson et al., 2020), where participants were asked to imagine that they had joined a new team, and read about the new team's characteristics. We began by telling participants that we were pilot testing materials for a few different studies we hope to run shortly. Similarly to Anderson et al. (2020), we first presented a short 10-item personality questionnaire.

We then asked for participants to imagine that they were recently hired as a team member at Acme Co., where there are differences in status among team members. We specified that some team members will have high status: they are highly respected and admired, and they have more influence over their work group's activities and decisions. In contrast, other team members have low status: they will be less respected and have little influence in the work group, and their opinions and ideas will have little impact.

We then presented our mutability manipulation. Participants in the “high mutability” condition were informed that “the amount of respect and admiration people have can be changed if they try, so people in the workgroup can move up and down the status hierarchy if they want.” Participants in the immutable condition were instructed that “the amount of respect and admiration people have CANNOT be changed if they try, people in the workgroup CANNOT move up and down the status hierarchy if they want.” We adapted the language in both of these conditions from the Bendersky & Hays (2015) hierarchical mutability measure. Participants in the control condition were not presented with any information about the status hierarchy’s mutability.

Finally, we assigned participants to one of the two status conditions. In the “high status” condition, participants were told that: “You were able to contribute quite a bit to the first meeting. So your status is high.” In the “low status” condition, participants were informed that: “You were NOT able to contribute much to the first meeting. So your status is low.” We then directed participants to the measures.

Measures

Hierarchical Mutability. We measured mutability using the same six items from Study 1a and Study 2 ($\alpha = .97$).

Voicing Behaviors. We measured participants’ organizational voice using the same three items from Study 1a and Study 2 ($\alpha = .93$).

Confidence in gaining status. We measured confidence in gaining status using the same three items from Study 1a and Study 2 ($\alpha = .85$).

Perceptions that expressing voice is futile. We measured perceptions that expressing voice is futile using the same three items from Study 2 ($\alpha = .93$).

Results

First, we examined the effect of “mutability” and “status” on perceptions of mutability. The results of a two-way between-subjects ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of the mutability manipulation ($F(2, 619) = 533.299, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .63$) and the status manipulation ($F(1, 619) = 4.18, p = .041$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$). There was a marginal interaction between the two factors ($F(2, 619) = 2.71, p = .067$, partial $\eta^2 = .008$). Post-hoc analyses revealed that, in the high-status condition – regardless of the mutability level they were assigned to – participants similar levels of mutability (p 's $> .197$). However, in the low-status condition, there was a positive relationship between increasing levels of mutability: low-status participants in the high mutability condition reported significantly higher mutability ($M = 5.75, SD = 1.22$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 4.90, SD = 1.28; p < .001$), and participants in the immutability condition ($M = 2.20, SD = 1.50; p < .001$).

Next, we examined the effect of “mutability” and “status” on intentions to express voice. The results of a two-way between-subjects ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of the mutability manipulation ($F(2, 619) = 36.08, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$) and the status manipulation, $F(1, 619) = 91.12, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$), as well as a significant interaction between the two factors $F(2, 619) = 15.47, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$). Post-hoc analyses revealed that, within the high-status condition, there were not significant differences between the mutability conditions and participant’s voicing intentions (all p 's $> .19$). However, within the low-status condition, participants’ voicing intentions increased with mutability: low-status participants in the high-mutability condition reported intending to express significantly more voice ($M = 5.51, SD = 1.39$) than low-status participants in the control condition ($M = 5.05, SD = 1.51; p < .001$), and low-status participants in the control condition were significantly more

likely to express voice than participants in the immutable condition ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.73$; $p < .001$). Additionally, participants in the high-status condition all reported intending to express significantly more voice than their low-status counterparts (p 's $< .04$).

Next, we examined the effect of “mutability” and “status” on participant’s confidence in their ability to gain status. The results of a two-way between-subjects ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of the mutability manipulation ($F(2, 619) = 16.29$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$) and the status manipulation, $F(1, 619) = 561.97$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .48$), and a significant interaction between the two factors: $F(2, 619) = 33.32$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$). Post-hoc analyses revealed that, within the high-status condition, there were not significant differences between participant’s feelings of mutability and their confidence in gaining status (all p 's $> .05$). However, in the low-status condition, participant’s confidence in their ability to gain status increased with mutability: low-status participants in the high-mutability condition were significantly more confident in their ability to gain status ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.30$) than low-status participants in the control condition ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.37$; $p < .001$), and participants in the control condition were significantly more confident in their ability to gain status than low-status participants in the immutable condition ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.37$; $p < .001$). Additionally, participants in the high-status condition all reported feeling more confident in their ability to gain status than their low-status counterparts (p 's $< .001$).

Then, we examined the effect of “mutability” and “status” on perceptions that expressing voice is futile. The results of a two-way between-subjects ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of the mutability manipulation ($F(2, 619) = 71.63$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .19$) and the status manipulation, $F(1, 619) = 74.56$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$), and a significant interaction between the two factors: $F(2, 619) = 8.33$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$) on perceptions of futility in

expressing voice. Post-hoc analyses revealed that, within the high-mutability condition, there were significant differences between participants with high ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.12$) and low-status ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.58$; $p = 0.016$). We found a similar pattern of results within the control ($M_{high\ status} = 2.28$, $SD_{high\ status} = 1.31$; $M_{low\ status} = 3.01$, $SD_{low\ status} = 1.71$; $p < .001$), and low mutability conditions ($M_{high\ status} = 3.09$, $SD_{high\ status} = 1.71$; $M_{low\ status} = 4.87$, $SD_{low\ status} = 1.73$; $p = .011$). Additionally, within the status conditions, there were significant differences between levels of mutability when comparing participants in the low-mutability and control conditions ($p_{high-status} = .002$; $p_{low-status} < .001$), and participants in the low- and high-mutability conditions ($p_{high-status} < .001$; $p_{low-status} < .001$). However, there were no significant differences between the control and high-mutability conditions ($p_{high-status} = .586$; $p_{low-status} = .459$).

Mediation analyses

We tested if the effect of mutability on voice was mediated by participants' feelings of confidence in gaining status, controlling for their status assignment. The confidence interval for the indirect effect did not cross zero, providing support for Hypothesis 2a: 95% C.I. [.129, .283]. Next, we tested if the effect of mutability on voice was mediated by participants' perceptions that expressing voice was futile, controlling for their status assignment. The confidence interval for the indirect effect did not cross zero, providing support for Hypothesis 3b: 95% C.I. [.330, .534].

Exploratory analyses

Moderated mediation

We then tested for moderated mediation, specifying the status manipulation as a first-stage moderator, and our mutability manipulation as the independent variable. First, we specified confidence in gaining status as the mediator. We found that the confidence interval of the indirect effect for the moderated mediation model did not cross zero (95% C.I.[-0.62, -0.34]).

Decomposing the model revealed that the confidence interval of the indirect effect crossed zero when the participant was assigned high status (95% C.I.: (-0.138, 0.011)); therefore, suggesting that the effect of hierarchical mutability on organizational voice for high-status people was not driven by their confidence in their ability to gain status. However, the confidence interval for the indirect effect did not cross zero when the participant was assigned low status (95% C.I.: (0.307, 0.522)), suggesting that – for low-status people – the effect of mutability on expressing voice was mediated (at least, in part) by their confidence in their ability to gain status.

Second, we specified futility in expressing voice as the mediator. We found that the confidence interval of the indirect effect for the moderated mediation model did not cross zero (95% C.I.[-0.468, -0.130]). Decomposing the model revealed that the confidence interval of the indirect effect did not cross zero when the participant was assigned high status (95% C.I.: (.204, .435) or low status (95% C.I.: (0.460, 0.772)). The estimate for the indirect effect was qualitatively larger for participants in the low-status condition (*indirect effect estimate* = 0.610) than for participants in the high-status condition (*indirect effect estimate* = 0.317) suggesting that – for low-status people – the effect of mutability on expressing voice was mediated (at least, in part) by their perceptions of futility in expressing voice.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our findings integrate insights from research on status hierarchies and organizational voice to demonstrate that people’s perceptions of the hierarchy’s mutability shape their voicing intentions. We find evidence supporting this effect across three studies. Our first study utilizes a multi-wave archival dataset to test our hypotheses. Our second study builds on Study 1 by showing that, across contexts, when people experience high mutability, they feel more confident in their ability to gain status, therefore leading them to voice; but, when they experience low

mutability, their confidence in their ability to gain status is reduced, therefore inhibiting their voice. In Study 3, we show that this effect is bound by the participant's level of status: specifically, mutability is a predictor of low-status people's (but not high-status people's) confidence in their ability to gain status, and therefore their ability to speak up.

Theoretical implications

Voicing offers a host of benefits for the voicer (Morrison, 2023) including elevated status (Weiss & Morrison, 2019). To gain status, then, employees may believe that they should express their voice and demonstrate their instrumental social value. This is consistent with research on status, which has argued that attaining high status is a fundamental human motive (Anderson et al., 2015). Yet, past research has demonstrated that people stop pursuing status when they believe that their pursuits will not merit rewards (Anderson et al., 2020); which, in the context of organizational voice, means that they remain silent. We develop an undertheorized reason for what could trigger this psychology: the status hierarchy's mutability. In this way, we differ from past work on voice by pointing to an alternative mechanism undergirding the calculus that potential voicers undertake: the extent to which they believe that their voice will advance their status pursuits. This question addresses longstanding (and similar) questions in the voice (what encourages employees to voice?) and status attainment (what influences people's status pursuits?) literatures by integrating their insights to illuminate how expectations about the efficacy of pursuing status can impact people's decision to express voice. This integration offers important contributions to both literatures.

Regarding the research on status attainment, we develop the *mutability account for status attainment*. Previous work on status hierarchies has pointed to the role of mutability in shaping status pursuits (Anderson et al., 2020; Hays & Bendersky, 2015), yet this research has not

examined how perceived mutability may be a potent signal in deciding to engage (or disengage) from status pursuits. We focus on the promise that mutable hierarchies provide, as a hierarchy's mutability signals the potential futility of pursuing status. We argue that these mutability perceptions influence how much people *anticipate* the amount of value their voice will garner, further driving their decision to speak up or remain silent. In more mutable hierarchies, people will anticipate a smaller disconnect between their demonstrated and recognized instrumental social value. This smaller disconnect is generated from the understanding that their position in the status hierarchy is not permanent, and their voice will lead them to receive social rewards. However, when the status hierarchy is immutable, employees will believe that their voice will not receive recognition, making them less likely to speak up. In a supplemental study, we further distinguish two perceptions that mutability beliefs may trigger for low-status people: the possibility of a status gain, or a status loss. We thus identify how these distinct beliefs similarly shape status pursuits in mutable (vs. immutable) hierarchies.

Additionally, the current research offers a divergent perspective from past research on the psychology of status pursuits. Past research has focused primarily on highlighting how one's confidence in pursuing status shapes these pursuits (Anderson et al., 2020). The current work, alternatively, suggests that it may also be because they believe that the status hierarchy is mutable. When people are led to believe that the status hierarchy is immutable, they are more likely to disengage from status competition. Low-status people's reduced motivation to pursue status may be driven, in part, by their beliefs that their efforts to rise in the status hierarchy will be successful.

Moreover, our research speaks to an alternative reason for why low-status people may disengage from status competition: the difference between their *demonstrated* and *instrumental*

social value. Past research has suggested that low-status people disengage from status competition simply because they are not confident in their ability to gain status. We increase the precision of this proposal by articulating that this reduced confidence arises because of low-status people's understanding of how much their ability to demonstrate their value will be well-received. This has important implications for our understanding of low-status people's status pursuits: namely, it establishes a theoretical context wherein low-status people will pursue status.

In terms of organizational voice, this research advances a potential solution to a persistent obstacle: employees' reticence in expressing voice. Demonstrating the power of mutability perceptions in reducing this reticence provides two additional contributions to the research on organizational voice. First, we integrate existing work on social status with organizational voice to determine how people's understanding of the social dynamics in their environment shapes their decisions to voice. Existing research on voice has demonstrated that a consequence of voicing can be elevated status (e.g., McClean et al., 2022; Weiss & Morrison, 2019). In contrast, we develop an account for how expectations of one's status pursuits can impact voicing decisions.

Second, we identify an under-theorized antecedent of futility beliefs: someone's ability to ascend the status hierarchy. Futility beliefs have been considered to be a powerful deterrent to voicing (Morrison, 2014). We find that futility beliefs can also derive from people's understanding that their voice can garner their status. These findings suggest that status dynamics play an important role in shaping voicer's beliefs about the efficacy of expressing voice.

Future directions/limitations

An important limitation of this work is that we do not directly compare people's beliefs of their demonstrated instrumental social value to their recognized instrumental social value. We attempt to capture this by measuring participant's beliefs in their ability to gain status and their confidence in their ability to gain status. However, both of these measures offer a relatively coarse measure of participant's understanding of how much their *demonstrated* value matches what they believe should be their recognized value. The tension between someone's demonstrated and perceived value is worth exploring further, as we anticipate that there is some variance in people's ability to anticipate how much their voice will be well-received.

Another limitation is that this work is relatively limited in what it can say about how voice content plays a role. Factors like focus (e.g., Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012), quality (Ng, Wang, Hsu, & Su, 2022), and content (Burriss, Rockmann, & Kimmons, 2017) may impact employees' responses. For example, past work has identified how speaking out about wrongdoing (such as expressing prohibitive voice) increases feelings of anxiety (Welsh, Outlaw, Newton, & Baer, 2022), fatigue (Lin & Johnson, 2015), and heightened avoidance orientation (Kakkar, Tangirala, Srivastava, & Kamdar, 2016). This suggests that, while employees may think that speaking up will merit them status, what they speak up about may play a central role in their voice calculus.

Additionally, we offer limited insight into what may lead voicers to not feel as though their voice is (or is not) being heeded. Specifically, while we only look at one dimension of futility (the futility of gaining status), future research should explore other dimensions of futility, such as the extent to which voice could lead to a change in behaviors. Future research should also examine what, precisely, triggers mutability perceptions. Existing work has demonstrated

that people generate mental representations of their groups' status hierarchies to help navigate status dynamics (Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006; Yu, Greer, Halevy, & Van Bunderen, 2019; Yu & Kilduff, 2020). To that end, they are certain to generate judgments about the extent to which a status hierarchy is (or is not) mutable. In our research, we primarily rely on self-reported perceptions (Studies 1-2) and explicit language (Study 3) to signal the hierarchy's mutability. Yet, we anticipate that these beliefs can be triggered by other stimuli, such as latent voice opportunities (Detert & Edmondson, 2011), leader behaviors (Detert & Burris, 2007), or even "jolts" to the structural hierarchy (Pai & Bendersky, 2020).

Finally, we encourage further work on the outcomes of low-status people expressing voice in mutable hierarchies. We are cautious that low-status people may feel more confident in their ability to gain status in mutable hierarchies but acknowledge that they may be the target of other low-status or high-status people. Further, we recommend future work examine how these mutability perceptions shape one-to-one competition.

Practical Implications

Expressing organizational voice offers a host of outcomes for organizations. We identify a factor that may hamper organization's ability to access those outcomes: the structure of their status hierarchy. We make the case that employees will be more inclined to speak up if they believe that their perceptions of the extent to which their voice is recognized matches the effort they put into expressing their voice. For organizations, encouraging employee voice is important: employee voice contributes to organizational performance and team effectiveness. Therefore, understanding how mutable employees perceive the status hierarchy to be, and ensuring that employees do not believe that expressing voice in the status hierarchy is futile, will influence the amount of voice employees express.

Some employees, however, may already believe that expressing voice is futile – and have since disengaged from attempting to gain status. This is consequential, as this research suggests that they are less likely to offer input. We suggest that a way to re-engage these employees is by ensuring that the status hierarchy is mutable.

Conclusion

Voice is an important tool for improving and changing organizations. We argue that status pursuits play a vital role in understanding what can lead people to speak up or remain silent. We show that employees' belief that they can gain status shape their decisions to voice or remain silent and that these beliefs are contingent on their understanding of the hierarchy's mutability. We, therefore, develop prescriptions for how organizations can encourage their employees to express more voice and identify a context where low-status employees may engage in behaviors that will help them reap status-relevant rewards.

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