Organization Studies: Selected Doctoral Theses

"Speaking Up, Speaking Out, and Making Movements: How Employee Activists Raise Social, Political, and Moral Concerns at Work"
Author: Raquel Kessinger (2024)
Committee: Katherine Kellogg (chair), Erin Kelly, Mary McDonnell
Abstract:

This dissertation explores how employee activists raise social, political, and moral concerns at work. To do this, I draw on interviews with employee activists, an archival database of white-collar employee activism events between 2018-2022, a three-day participant observation in employee activism training, and employee activist documents. In the first chapter, I examine how employee activists experienced the voice processes inside of their organizations as they attempted to raise social, political, and moral concerns. Despite describing companies that valued openness and leaders that encouraged employee voice, employee activists believed internal, individual voice channels were insufficient in addressing their concerns, prompting them to instead engage in collective action and public protests. I explore how internal voice processes broke down when activist raised social, political, and moral concerns as well as the types of social, political, and moral issues activists felt compelled to express. Finally, I examine how societal factors, including political polarization and pressure for companies to grow, fueled this phenomenon. In the second chapter, I explore how employee activists used internal communications tools to mobilize for collective action and to amplify their noisy exits from firms. Here, I describe how employee activists mobilized large-scale collective action quickly, often shortening the time leaders had to respond to their movements. I also examine how employee activists used internal communications tools and external social media to amplify their noisy exit messages, creating artifacts of dissent within their organizations, attracting mainstream media attention, and at times, laying the groundwork for future movements. Finally, I consider how organizational leaders responded to employee activists' use of internal communication tools by placing new restrictions on these platforms. In the third chapter, I consider the direct effects and secondary consequences of employee activism by exploring how employee activists framed leaders' responses to their contentious activism in ways that either constrained or fueled their movement's momentum. Here, I examine three categories of outcomes: big wins—when organizational leaders acquiesced to all activist demands, partial wins—when organizational leaders offered some concessions or made meaningful gestures to acknowledge activists' concerns, and losses—when leaders rejected activists' demands and doubled down on the business practice in question. Finally, I show that regardless of a movement's outcome, employee activists sought to build lasting capacity across movements and organizations by using internet technologies to improve resource mobilization for future employee activists.

"Essays on Culture and Coordination"
Author: James Mellody (2024)
Committee: Susan Silbey (chair), Ray Reagans, Ezra Zuckerman-Sivan
Abstract:

Culture is both mechanism and outcome of coordinated social action. First, culture enables people to come together and act in a collective fashion—enabling coordination both within and across teams in organizational settings. Second, coordinated action produces, shifts, and reinforces culture over time. In this dissertation, I examine the relationship between culture and coordination through three studies. In Chapter 1, I examine how employees from different areas of functional expertise can work together to create a shared culture enabling further coordination. Leveraging ethnographic data from an academic research setting, I find that safety professionals enacted a shared culture of safe and sustainable research by teaching researchers how to integrate safety and sustainability into their research, rather than handling compliance tasks for them. In

Chapter 2, co-authored with Ray Reagans, we examine how managers and firms can foster cultures that enable individuals from various underrepresented groups to succeed. Organizations face a tradeoff in managing diversity: individuals from different stigmatized groups prefer different diversity cultures because they are represented at different levels within organizations. We find that organizations can align individuals from different groups to perform better under the same culture by focusing on a general sense of individuation, allowing them to move beyond the tradeoff grounded in representation. Specifically, we find that organizations can do this by creating a culture that frames each person as an individual rather than a member of a group and in turn valuing equality of all individuals regardless of background. Finally, in Chapter 3, I examine how individuals online allocate their attention to various cultural tastes. I find that, in the online world, freedom of exploration allowing individuals to participate across multiple communities enables connections to form between generic and specialty communities, which would otherwise rely on separate audiences in the offline world. While the internet may not shift the overall distribution of attention away from generic communities toward a greater variety of specialty communities, it enables cross-cutting discussion and engagement across these communities, increasing exposure to diverse tastes.

"Essays on Professionals' Temporal Autonomy"
Author: Vanessa Conzon (2021)
Committee: Erin Kelly (co-chair), Susan Silbey (co-chair), Katherine Kellogg, Ezra Zuckerman-Sivan
Abstract:
Professionals struggle to control their work time, despite often (1) having relatively greater control over their work tasks, and (2) wanting to control their work time. My dissertation addresses this empirical and theoretical puzzle by refining our understanding of why professionals face difficulties expanding their temporal autonomy, and identifying mechanisms and processes that can address these barriers. I draw upon data from four separate ethnographic studies of STEM professionals. In my first essay, I identify conditions under which managers either support or limit employees' use of flexible work policies, and in turn, facilitate increases in professionals' temporal autonomy. In my second essay, I show how professionals—independent of managers—collaborate to expand control over their work hours. In my third essay, I show how professionals' temporal autonomy is shaped by family responsibilities. Overall, I contribute to the literature on professions, as well as related literatures on temporality and time in organizations, flexible work schedules, and the work-life interface. This dissertation also contributes to our understanding of gender inequality by showing how gendered experiences of time subtly disadvantage women.

"How Technology Vendors Incorporate Frontline Worker Interests During the Cyclical Lifecycle of Intelligent Technologies"
Author: Jenna Myers (2021)
Committee: Kate Kellogg (chair), Tom Kochan, Wanda Orlikowski
Abstract:
This dissertation analyzes how frontline worker interests can be both included and affected throughout the lifecycle of intelligent technologies (e.g., AI-enabled sensors, robotics, and analytics), with a particular focus on the role of third-party technology vendors. By drawing on a 31-month ethnographic study of a digital production monitoring technology used by manufacturing firms, I examine the barriers, facilitators, and processes that guide how frontline workers are considered during technology design, development, and deployment.

In Chapter 1, I focus on technology use inside one small manufacturing firm to study when and how worker input is included in the configuration and use of advanced technologies in the workplace. My findings highlight how a change in the vendor's product development strategy (i.e., from top-down to user-centered) reconfigured role relations between workers, managers, and vendor representatives and subsequently influenced worker voice and involvement in technology design.

In Chapter 2, I directly study the vendor's design and development processes, and I address why and how vendors may establish a pro-worker focus during development. I advance the concept of technology design ideologies—which I define as developers' beliefs about the functions and broader purpose of their technologies—and I show how developers used institutional work practices to influence their company's existing design ideology in ways that made it more centrally concerned with the effects of the technology on machine operators' jobs.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the vendor's efforts to develop users' skills, behaviors, and routines around the technology through the creation and delivery of self-directed online learning tools. I find that the vendor's training efforts—which were co-produced with the users themselves—did not equally serve all user types and encountered particular barriers when directed towards frontline workers, rather than managers. As a whole, this dissertation contributes to research on employee involvement in workplace technologies, social constructivist theories of technologies and organizing, and information systems research on vendors of digital, intelligent technologies.

"Press '1' to speak to a machine: An examination of the psychological factors influencing preference for interaction with artificially intelligent actors"
Author: Heather Yang (2021)
Committee: John Carroll (chair), Jared Curhan, Renée Gosline, Jackson Lu, Basima Tewfik
Abstract:

What psychological factors influence the preference for interaction with a human versus an artificially intelligent actor? How can these factors be used to increase adoption of novel technologies, and what are their broader societal impacts? In this dissertation, I answer these questions through two streams of research: Firstly, by examining what kinds of people seek out algorithmic advice; and secondly, how the implicit application of social information to algorithmic agents impacts their interpretability and evaluation.

In Chapter 1, I examine the individual level differences of users of artificially intelligent advisors. Across eleven studies, users' cognitive style predicted advice-seeking behavior from algorithmic advisors, even after controlling for a host of consequential factors, such as prior experience with artificial intelligence, comfort with technology, social anxiety, and educational background. Building on the Dual Process theory literature, I show that increased cognitive reflection is related to increased perceptions of accuracy for algorithmic (vs. human) advisors, with accuracy perceptions mediating the relationship between cognitive style and advisor preference. I find that individuals who rely on their intuition perceive algorithmic advisors as being less accurate than human advisors, in comparison to their deliberative counterparts who rate algorithmic advisors as more accurate.

In Chapter 2, I investigate how individuals apply social stereotypes to digital voiced assistants (DVAs) and how this facilitates understanding of novel personified devices. Through experimentally pairing participants with fake artificially intelligent voiced agents, I demonstrate that individuals implicitly apply social stereotypes to the agent in the same way as they do to other humans. Consistent with traditional gender stereotypes and in contrast to current academic justifications reliant on the generalized preference for female voices, I find that individuals prefer female (vs. male) voiced artificial intelligent agents when occupying roles that are female-typed, but not male-typed, demonstrating a stereotype congruence effect. I extend this finding to show how gender stereotype congruent features of a novel device facilitate understanding of its capabilities for inexperienced users.

Finally, I discuss the implications of this research for managers, policy makers, developers and users of artificially intelligent agents.