

**IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL CLASS ON
WORK ENGAGEMENT, EMPLOYEE VOICE,
WORKPLACE OSTRACISM:
AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION**

A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
PhD PROGRAMME IN MANAGEMENT

by

Bhuvanagiri Sainath Srikant Karthik



सिद्धिमूलं प्रबन्धनम्
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ABSTRACT

In contemporary organizations, employees' ability to engage, speak up, and feel included is considered vital for innovation, cohesion, and performance (Morrison, 2011; van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Yet, while scholarship on diversity has long examined gender, ethnicity, and age, social class remains an underexplored but powerful determinant of workplace outcomes (Bo, Sherman, & Kim, 2022; Bourdieu, 1986; Côté, 2011; Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019). Individuals from lower-class backgrounds often face subtle barriers that limit their visibility, access to resources, and ability to fully participate at work (Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019). Addressing this gap, the present dissertation investigates how employee social class influences work engagement, employee voice, and workplace ostracism, and identifies the mechanisms and boundary conditions that shape these relationships.

Drawing on status characteristics theory (Berger et al., 1972), conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), the job demands–resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), and leader–member exchange theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), the study proposes a dual-mechanism framework. Social class is expected to affect workplace outcomes through status—the respect and recognition employees receive (Anderson et al., 2015)—and leader–member exchange (LMX), the quality of dyadic leader–follower relationships (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Two boundary conditions are also theorized: organizational identification, which can buffer class-based disadvantages (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), and leader social class, which may amplify or weaken leader–follower relational dynamics depending on class congruence (Bo et al., 2022).

To test this framework, two multi-wave field studies were conducted in the Indian Postal Network, a large public-sector organization undergoing technological and structural transformation. Study 1 surveyed 1,609 employees across six states. Data were collected in three waves: Wave 1 measured demographics and social class; Wave 2 captured mediators and moderators (status and organizational identification); and Wave 3 measured dependent variables—work engagement, voice, and ostracism—along with social desirability and affect (PANAS), to mitigate common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Study 2 examined a leader–follower sample of 164 leaders and 547 employees across two states. Here, LMX was introduced as a mediator and leader social class as a moderator, using the same three-wave design.

The findings supported most of the hypotheses. Employee social class was positively related to engagement and voice and negatively related to ostracism. Both status and LMX mediated these effects, showing that class-based resources and relational advantages translate into meaningful workplace outcomes. Moderation analyses revealed nuanced patterns: organizational identification buffered class-based disparities in engagement and voice, but was less effective in reducing ostracism. Likewise, leader–follower social class congruence enhanced LMX quality and, in turn, improved engagement and voice outcomes more strongly than ostracism. These results highlight that class effects are not uniform, but vary depending on relational and organizational contexts.

This dissertation makes three major contributions. First, it elevates social class as a critical but neglected dimension of diversity in organizations, expanding research that has traditionally prioritized other demographic categories. Second, it identifies dual mechanisms—status and LMX—through which class shapes outcomes, enriching theory on workplace inequality by integrating structural and relational perspectives. Third, it clarifies boundary conditions, showing

when organizational identification or leader–follower class congruence can attenuate or amplify class-based effects.

The practical implications are equally significant. Organizations should recognize social class as a relevant diversity dimension and take proactive steps to reduce hidden disadvantages. Leaders can play a central role by building inclusive relationships that transcend background differences. Strengthening organizational identification can also promote belonging and mitigate class disparities. By addressing class-based dynamics, organizations can foster more equitable, engaged, and inclusive workplaces.

In sum, our study demonstrates that social class is not only a nuisance variable (i.e. treated as control variable) but an organizationally consequential factor shaping voice, engagement, and inclusion. By advancing an integrated, multi-level framework and testing it in a large-scale field setting, the study provides both theoretical advancement and actionable guidance for organizations seeking to unlock the full potential of their diverse workforce.

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