Extending Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Managing Dissent in Public Lands Agencies

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This paper examines employee responses to dissatisfaction and dissent in four federal public lands agencies as they react to controversial policies. Guided by data from semi-structured interviews, it suggests new theoretical categories for describing dissenting behaviors along the dimensions of work engagement (e.g., high and low) and intent (e.g., destructive, neutral, or constructive). These dimensions combine to describe the specific behaviors of sabotage, neglect, high engaged duty, low engaged duty, passive helpfulness, and overachievement. This research also confirms and adds nuance to past work on employee dissent.

Keywords: Employee Dissent, Work Engagement, Public Lands Agencies

This paper examines employee dissatisfaction and dissent in four public lands agencies (i.e., U.S. Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service) as they react to controversial policies, taking into account their professional obligations as well as their personal beliefs. Inspired by Herbert Kaufman's (1960) landmark study of administrative behavior in the Forest Service and Rosemary O'Leary's (2006; 2014; 2020) examination of dissent among public administrators in the EPA, the Forest Service, and Nevada State Parks, we had two main research questions: 1) how do employees at federal public lands agencies respond when they disagree with top-down policy decisions?, and 2) how can employee dissent be managed in a positive[1] way?

To answer these questions, we performed 12 semi-structured interviews with employees of four federal public lands agencies. We used a grounded theory approach to build understanding of the range of employee behaviors when they are dissatisfied with top-down decisions. As sensitizing topics, we began with Albert Hirschman's (1970) typology of mechanisms of employee dissatisfaction, which includes: 1) exit—they leave their job, 2) voice—they make their dissatisfaction known, 3) loyalty—they remain loyal until a new regime is in place; and later, Dan Farrell's (1983) fourth response: neglect—employees do the bare minimum in performing job duties, among other strategies. Additional mechanisms emerged through the course of the interviews that provide insights into positive directions for managing employee dissent. With the addition of these new mechanisms, and in order to better understand this dynamic in public lands, we reorganized dissatisfied/dissenting employee behavior into a new framework with three clusters of behavior: 1) Employment/Work Status Changes, 2) Inward and Outward Communication Behaviors, and 3) Work Engagement Behaviors.

In addition to this new framework for describing employee dissent, our interviews provided rich insights into the existing mechanisms. For example, we heard instances of sabotage where dissatisfied and dissenting employees actively thwarted implementation of disagreeable policies. We also heard of positive engagement and overachievement that went beyond the call of duty. This richness and the new mechanisms provide a deeper understanding of the interactions among the mechanisms in the Hirschman/Farrell typology. Another unique finding that we realized through the course of our interviews is that employees who were higher in the hierarchy described more mechanisms of dissent than employees lower in the hierarchy. Finally, this paper also contributes to Hirschman's theory in a unique setting—public lands agencies in the United States. While there is much research on the politics of the environment, sustainability, and natural resources (see Rosenbaum, 2016), there is much less research specifically on those at the ground level implementing policies that directly affect the environment. Thus, a final contribution of this paper is in its focus on federal public lands employees.

Setting

The concept of attraction-selection-bias grounds the setting for this research. Attraction-selection-bias occurs when people with a certain value set are motivated to apply at organizations that also espouse these values. Organizations also understand that hiring people who align with these espoused values will lead to positive benefits (Wright, 2007). This combination of forces results in an organization that both espouses specific values and reinforces those values through the people within and entering the organization. Like many public organizations, people are attracted to working at U.S. federal public lands agencies because of their attraction to the various missions of these agencies. While the missions of the federal public lands agencies differ (more on this later), they all deal in the stewardship of public lands, a core value that attracts many people to these organizations.

This attraction-selection process, along with other tangible and intangible factors such as, a recognized societal need met by these missions, a distinctive reputation based on achievement, agency culture, and a venerable history combine with mission and purpose to create an aura or mystique that is attached to some select public agencies (Goodsell, 2010). In public lands agencies, this mystique is epitomized at the National Park Service where the magnificence, sanctity, romance, and cultural meaning of the lands in national parks adds to the overall aura of this organization. Mystique-laden agencies have been curtailed by elected officials in the past, and the National Park Service has not been immune to these run-ins in its history (Goodsell, 2010).

Recent run-ins between the public lands agencies with the national executive regime and the national policy environment in 2018–2020 contribute to the setting that is highly relevant to our research questions. The federal administration at this time was enacting policies that many (but not all) in the public lands agencies view as opposed to the stewardship of public lands (Popovich et al., 2019). The result of attraction-selection bias, mystique at public lands agencies, and disagreement over policy decisions leads to dissatisfaction and dissent among the rank and file of these organizations. Perhaps the most revealing example of this dissatisfaction and dissent are the underground #ALT Twitter accounts by anonymous employees of these organizations (see Alt National Park Service, n.d.) who resort to using Twitter to air their grievances.

Background on Agency Differences

In addition to the current national policy context at the time of this data collection, each of the four public lands agencies have different histories and missions. We include a brief summary of each agency to provide further background to this study.

The Transfer Act of 1905 established the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) as a bureau of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The mission of the USFS is, "To sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations" (USFS, 2019, p. 1). As of 2019, the agency employed 35,855 full time equivalents (USFS, 2019). These staff members were divided among nine regions, spanning 193 million acres (USFS, 2019). This includes 154 national forests, 20 national grasslands, 277,000 heritage sites, 122 ski areas, and 4,300 campgrounds (USFS, 2019).

Congress established the National Park Service in 1916 (NPS, 2019). The National Park Service mission states, "The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations" (NPS, n.d.). In 2019, this Department of the Interior agency employed over 18,688 full time equivalents in 61 national parks in 7 regions (NPS, 2019). The NPS is regarded as the preservation-oriented public lands agency, as their mission entails leaving land untouched, whereas the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and USFS have missions of multiple use. While the organization is centralized in some ways, the management of parks is more comprehensively broken down into 61 small regions, one for each park. National parks span 85 million acres (NPS, 2019).

In an effort to enhance the mission of the U.S. Department of Interior, Congress created the Fish & Wildlife Services (FWS) on June 30, 1940 (FWS, 2019). The mission is, "Working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people" (FWS, n.d.). In 2019, the agency employed 8,370 full time equivalents in 8 regions (FWS, 2019). These regions encompass more than 560 National Wildlife Refuges, including wetlands and special management areas, covering just over 150 million acres (FWS, 2019).

Finally, The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) positions itself as the most multiple use public lands agency. When the General Land Office and the U.S. Grazing Service merged in 1946, Congress established the BLM. With a mission, "To sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations," the agency manages 245 million surface acres and 700 million acres of mineral rights over 12 regions (BLM, n.d.). The BLM is in a bureau of the Department of the Interior and employed 9,227 full time equivalents in 2019 (BLM, 2019). It is the most directly impacted by high level administration change due to its multiple use policies surrounding energy development, resulting in deep ideological divides that affect the autonomy of this agency (Malay & Fairholm, 2020).

Literature Review

One scholarly influence on this research is Kaufman's (1960) landmark study of the forest service. Kaufman (1960) observed how the Forest Service socialized its employees by developing commitment and shared values among its employees. These shared values enabled this large national organization with widely dispersed and sometimes isolated employees to accept rules and procedures. Kaufman's (1960) work has been revisited across the decades, including: an observation of the increasing complexity of environmental legislation and public involvement (Tipple & Wellman, 1991), the context of women forest rangers (Carroll et al., 1996), and in the context of state forest rangers (Koontz, 2007). Kaufman (1960) was also influential in our understanding of bureaucratic discretion, which has also been expanded over the years (see Lipsky, 1980; Vinzant et al., 1998).

Hirschman's (1970) *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* was an economic analysis of reactions to decline in firms, organizations, and nation-states but has been a useful theoretical lens for other applications, including employee responses to dissatisfaction by suggesting an organization of

behaviors into the categories of exit, voice, and loyalty. Later, Farrell (1983) engaged with neglect as a fourth mechanism and described how more specific behaviors, such as turnover, absenteeism, lateness, and talking to a supervisor fit within one of the four categories. Brehm and Gates (1997) extended and applied this literature to the work of subordinates in bureaucracies, breaking down their differing responses to dissatisfaction into: working, leisure-shirking, dissent-shirking, and sabotage. Brehm and Gates' (1997) work is particularly insightful given our research questions; however, we expand the focus to all employees at public lands agencies, not just subordinates. In a similar vein, Marissa Golden's (1992) article and later book (Golden, 2000) examined bureaucratic resistance and motivation in federal agencies during the Reagan years. Golden (1992) argued that the existing models of the relationship between bureaucrats and elected officials, specifically cooperation and resistance, were not enough and that bureaucratic response depends on context. Five contextual organizational features were then identified that affect bureaucratic behavior in relation to elected officials: ideology, dominant agency profession, agency esprit, agency history, and careerist confidence. Golden (1992) then went on to use exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect to better understand bureaucratic behavior.

More recently in the public administration literature, the Hirschman (1970) typology has been tested in the context of the public work force by examining the effects of loyalty and voice on intention to leave (Lee & Whitford, 2008), and later, how pay interacts with the other mechanisms (Whitford & Lee, 2015). Finally, exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect have also been used to critique public choice theory and neoliberalism's focus on markets that puts too heavy an emphasis on exit as a means for citizens to vote with their feet and move when dissatisfied (Witt, 2011). For example, when states perform crimes against democracy (i.e., expansion of government secrecy during and after the cold war) exit alone is not enough; citizens must also be able to raise their voice (Witt, 2011).

Furthering the examination of dissent in public agencies, O'Leary's (2006; 2014; 2020) case studies provide rich examples of public employees engaged in dissent, or even becoming guerillas that actively and deliberately undermine policy. Perhaps the largest benefit from O'Leary (2006; 2014; 2020) is the discussion of ethical frameworks and managerial techniques that attempt to unleash the creativity implicit in dissent and not just as a problem to be eliminated. These techniques include, cultivating organizational culture, listening, understanding the formal and informal organization, separating people from the problem, creating multiple channels for dissent, and creating dissent boundaries and knowing when to stop. It is in this spirit that this current research is undertaken and many of our findings add texture to these techniques.

Methods and Data

This research is exploratory due to the nature of the main research questions, which are: 1) How do employees at federal public lands agencies respond when they disagree with top-down policy decisions?, and 2) How can employee dissent be managed in a positive way? We use interpretive analysis of interview data and grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) to develop understanding for employees' options of dissent as well as how dissent can be better managed. We are interested in the context in which the policies are implemented and in obtaining a deep, rich understanding of the varied experiences of public lands employees. Semi-structured interviews offer an ideal way to examine how people interpret their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

As mentioned, this research is sensitized and driven by previous theory (Hirschman, 1970) and inspired by previous research (Kaufman, 1960; O'Leary, 2006; 2014; 2020). We seek to build theory and discover new strategies and mechanisms for dealing with disagreement. Interviews allow us to access experiences and insights that may not have been considered or

to unearth information or to challenge assumptions about how employees balance their personal values with their duty to their positions. In-depth interviews allow us to understand morally ambiguous choices and are the ideal method for understanding how individuals navigate policy constraints (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was semi-structured and relatively open with broad questions aimed at understanding how employees respond when they disagree with policy decisions. Semi-structured interviews provide structure while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions if participants offer unique insights. Our plan was to ask the protocol questions and any other relevant questions to the project that arise naturally during the course of the interviews. We found it acceptable if we did not ask every question in the protocol. Our interviewing evolved over the course of the interviews to the point where we would warm up with a question about the participant's position and career, then follow with the first research question: how do you respond when you disagree with policies? Because employees had so much to say in response to this question, it and the relevant follow up questions usually lasted through the entire interview. We allowed for personal experiences from our interviewees but also found early on that interviewees were recounting observations of other employees, which we determined to be relevant for this study especially for unearthing extreme or sensitive responses to dissent. That is, we found that interviewees were more likely to recount instances of rule-breaking or questionable behavior if they were describing the experiences of other people.

While we began with the Hirschman/Ferrell typology we did not give specific categories to the participants but rather encouraged broad context from their responses. We were also hesitant about defining what a controversial or unpopular policy was or what disagreement or dissent meant for the interviewees, but rather generally allowed participants to define those for themselves when responding in order to allow them freedom to remember their most salient experiences but also because we were still learning for ourselves what was possible and what to be looking for. We found that participants understood the general idea of our research, largely because we were clear about our main research question in recruiting participants. In fact, our sample likely includes high levels of selection bias as many who participated told us that they resonated with the research question. Many described the interview as cathartic in giving them the opportunity to voice their experience and have someone listen. During the interviews and when necessary (i.e., a participant asked for clarification), we did prompt a few of the participants with Hirschman/Ferrell examples, which usually encouraged a lot of responses. Responsive interviewing emphasizes rich exploration and deep understanding of the ambiguity of personal experience while also understanding the role of an interviewer's knowledge, personality, and bias (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). With this in mind, we aimed to conduct all interviews in teams to weaken bias. Of the 12 interviews, nine were conducted in teams and three individually.

Our initial target population was employees at federal public lands agencies (Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, and Fish & Wildlife Service) in the Western U.S. with initial emphasis on Wyoming and Colorado, and secondary emphasis on Oregon, Arizona, and Utah. Interview participants were recruited using a two-pronged strategy. The first strategy included referrals from personal and professional networks and snowball sampling. Members of the research team contacted people in their networks who fall within the target population and asked for referrals for others who also fall within the target population and who might be willing to be interviewed.

The second strategy was random sampling. As much as possible, we wanted to have a balanced response from each of the four agencies as well as spread across location, hierarchical position, and demographics. To augment our sample, we randomly selected employees among the agencies with different strategies for each given the different website designs for each. Interview participants were invited by email. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour

Table 1. Clusters of Behavior in Response to Dissatisfaction and Dissent

Cluster 1: Employment/Project Status Changes
Cluster 2: Inward and Outward Communication Behaviors
Cluster 3: Work Engagement Behaviors

and 15 minutes. Two more team members conducted most interviews and interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and recording software.

We emailed invitations to 107 people and interviewed 12 people for a simple response rate of 11%. Of the 12 interviewees, five were from the Fish & Wildlife Service, two were from the Parks Service, one was from the Bureau of Land Management and four were from the Forest Service. Interviews occurred from August 2019 until July of 2020. Six of the participants were men and six were women. Interviewees were spread across hierarchical positions with people having worked at the regional executive level overseeing hundreds of employees, to middle managers, to entry-level field workers. Workers came from the states of Wyoming, Colorado, Oregon, and Utah. Three interviews took place in person, seven on the phone, and two were on Zoom.

Findings

Our interviews confirmed the Hirschman/Ferrell typology as mechanisms for dissatisfaction, confirmed much of the work of O'Leary (2006; 2014; 2020), suggested new mechanisms, and later analysis of this data led us to reorganize the mechanisms to fall within three clusters of behaviors. Table 1 displays these three clusters, which are: Cluster 1) Employment/Project Status Changes: employees choose to leave their job / specific projects, or remain loyal to the organization / project; Cluster 2) Inward and Outward Communication Behaviors: employees actively listen and learn about controversial policies in addition to raising their voice in dissent and teaching others; and Cluster 3) Work Engagement Behaviors: employees offer a range of engagement behaviors in response to dissatisfaction and dissent, sometimes striving to overachieve rather than doing a baseline of duty, or neglecting their duties when dealing with controversial policies.

Finally, the behaviors within and across these spectrums can complement and/or substitute each other depending on the nature of the behavior. For example, within spectrum behaviors like exit and loyalty are more likely to act as substitutes than voice and active listening, which may act as complements to each other. Across spectrum behaviors such as active listening and overachieving mutually may reinforce each other.

Cluster 1: Employment/Project Status Changes

Employees described changes (or lack thereof) to their employment or project status as a means of dealing with dissatisfaction and dissent. In Figure 1, we represent the range of employment / project status changes we found in our interviews. On one end of the spectrum is extreme loyalty to both the organization and the specific project that may be causing dissatisfaction and dissent. Moving to the right, an employee may remain loyal to the organization but request to be moved to a different project or assignment as a means of dealing with their own dissatisfaction and dissent. Continuing to the right, an employee may leave the organization if their dissatisfaction and/or dissent is strong enough. We will also note that one interviewee mentioned that employees may resort to suicide or suicidal thoughts as a means of exiting their dissatisfaction. Suicide is an extreme example of exit and hearing about suicide is revealing of how powerful the dissatisfaction and dissent can be for some employees.

Figure 1. Range of Employment/Project Status Changes in Response to Dissatisfaction
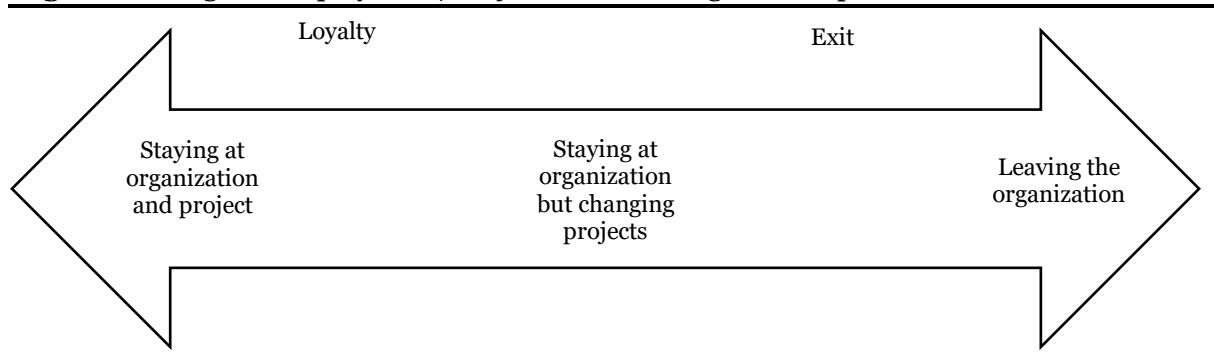
More experienced and tenured employees described loyalty to both the mission of the organization as well as loyalty to the organization when describing how they dealt with dissent. Employees described knowing they could wait out certain policies and regimes as an administrative agency. Because we were mostly talking to current employees, we expected to hear less about the use of exit as a mechanism for dissent, as those who had used exit as a mechanism may have already left employment at these agencies. Nevertheless, participants described knowing coworkers who became so dissatisfied with the prospect of implementing certain policies that they chose to leave the organization to work either in industry or in nonprofit organizations. For environmentally focused workers, nonprofit organizations were a common place to express those values. In addition to leaving their jobs, the mechanism of exit was used when employees asked to be removed from certain projects and moved to another project when faced with disagreement over policy.

Finally, as mentioned, we heard stories of some employees resorting to suicidal thoughts. One interviewee confided:

> *One of my key staff, several months after I moved to the [blank] had been so berated and disrespected that he began drinking and my previous admin assistant called me and told me he was locked up in his house and was going to kill himself—'please help him'. I called and listened to him explain why he was where he was, I explained that I wanted him to open the door and listen to the local interventionist because he was too important to kill himself and there was a whole world out there for him. We managed to talk him through the immediate crisis, then I got him reassigned out of [blank] and he worked through his problems. One on a BLM area we worked committed suicide because of the pressure to get out the cut.[2]*

We only heard about suicide from one interviewee, but the interviewee mentions two suicide attempts (one successful and one unsuccessful). Such a finding raises questions about the existence and extent of suicide and its causes among employees of public lands agencies. We further probe these issues with ideas for future research in the discussion section.

Cluster 2: Inward and Outward Communication Behaviors

Our findings confirm prior literature about the importance of listening and the importance of creating multiple channels for dissent by allowing employee voice through various means (O'Leary, 2006; 2014; 2020). Our research adds nuance to the mechanisms of voice and

Figure 2. Inward and Outward Communication Behaviors for dealing with Dissatisfaction and Dissent
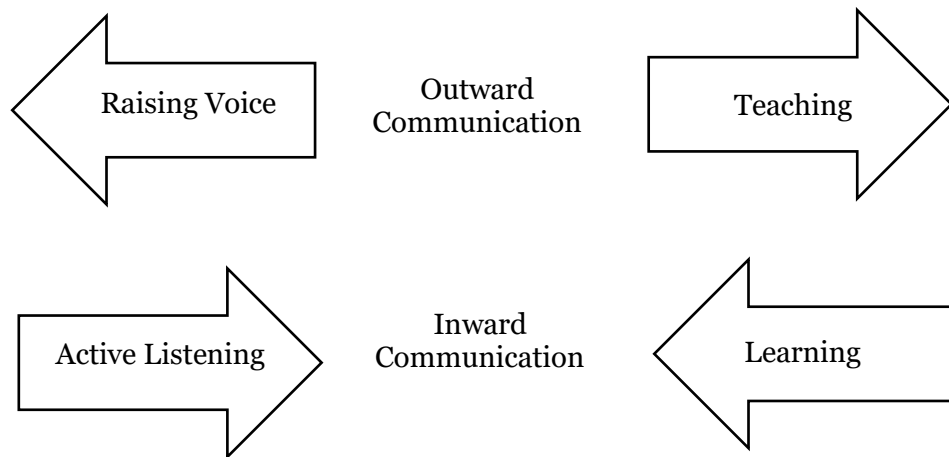
listening in the literature, such as describing voice instead as 'raising voice' and describing listening as 'active listening' both of which we describe in more depth below. In addition, we also use pedagogical terms like 'teaching' and 'learning' to add another element to inward and outward communication behaviors. Figure 2 shows how the communication behaviors of dissenting employees can be characterized as outward *and* inward communication.

Outward Communication. While we did hear accounts of inward communication and learning, voice was still the first response described and first instinct as a mechanism for dissent when we posed the question, confirming the work of O'Leary (2006; 2014; 2020). We add slight nuance to the literature on voice by using the term 'raising voice' because in addition to the definition of raising voice as being to yell, another definition of raising voice means to make one's opinion known as in protest. With this second definition of raising voice in mind, our data took on a different texture as employees at all levels, including regional executives, mid-level managers, and field-level employees described raising their voice to make their opinion known. Respondents also described outward communication in pedagogical terms, describing how they would teach others about the details of policies or the related science. One regional executive described that they spent a lot of their time educating legislators and high-level appointees about what is possible within existing laws. In these cases, the high-level appointees would come to the regional executive with policy ideas for implementation. The regional leader would then compare that policy to existing statute and educate the regime on what was allowable within existing laws. Such a situation may end up in the courts with the court making a ruling on interpretation. This situation was not unique to executive level employees. Another participant, while working in a field-level position, described being asked to implement a policy that contradicted both the science and the laws governing that resource. This participant educated their superiors about the science and laws of the situation (i.e., voice) and recused themselves from that project and asked to be assigned to another project (i.e., exit).

Inward Communication. As mentioned, many respondents described listening to other viewpoints and learning about policies as a means of dealing with their own dissent, which are quite distinct from raising one's voice in dissent. In these cases, employees are learning about policies as means of expressing dissent. Many described that disagreement over policy was often about misunderstanding and that learning more about policies was often successful in assuaging concerns. One mid-level manager said that they spend much of their time in staff

meetings teaching and learning about policies, specifically as a means of dealing with dissent among their team.

Many described the ability to listen as one of the most important factors in working with others to get things done, confirming the work of O'Leary (2006; 2014; 2020). Listening is one piece of 'advice from the pros' that O'Leary (2006; 2014; 2020) suggests as one of the most important ways to manage dissent. One of our respondents used the term 'active listening' when talking about listening. Not only does the adjective 'active' modify how listening should be done when managing dissent, it also hearkens to the literature on active listening and negotiations that provides specific techniques for being a better listener, adding nuance and depth to the discussion of listening in employee dissent. For example, in their widely acclaimed *Getting to Yes,* Fisher and colleagues (1991) described techniques for active listening as paying close attention to what is said, asking the other party to spell out clearly and carefully exactly what they mean, requesting for ideas to be repeated if there is any ambiguity or uncertainty, and making it your task to understand them as they see themselves by taking in their perceptions, needs, and constraints (p. 34). The Harvard Program on Negotiation suggests that in active listening when a listener asks open-ended questions, seeks clarifications, drives for specificity, and demonstrates a grasp of what the other party said, the listener both learns and projects empathy of their counterpart's point of view (Program on Negotiation, 2008). These and other techniques on active listening and negotiation could be helpful to managing dissent.

Cluster 3: Work Engagement Behaviors

A final cluster of behaviors for expressing dissent came in the various forms of work engagement and the intended destructiveness of these efforts. After listening to the interview respondents and reviewing their data and the literature, we realized that the work engagement behaviors described in the interviews fall along two dimensions set against each other. As Figure 3 illustrates, we place low and high work engagement along the x-axis and the intended destructiveness of that work (i.e., destructive, neutral, constructive) along the y-axis. This matrix roughly follows the matrix described in Farrell (1983) that placed dissatisfied employee behaviors into four quadrants along two dimensions: 1) destructive/constructive actions, and 2) passive/active actions. However, our matrix differs in that rather than active/passive behavior we refer specifically to high and low levels of work engagement, and rather than destructive/constructive behaviors we refer to destructive, neutral, and constructive behaviors. Distinguishing among behavior as destructive, neutral, and constructive better reflects our data because the term 'neutral' describes efforts that were intended to be neither constructive nor destructive, but rather had other goals in mind, such as following duty. We see the inclusion of duty in the mix of behaviors as a major contribution of this paper as duty is a significant motivating and ethical force in public service. Our matrix further differs from Farrell (1983) in that we also only describe work engagement behaviors along these dimensions and do not place other behaviors like exit or voice into the matrix. We also acknowledge that work communication behaviors and work status changes could be somehow added to the matrix later.

Put against each other, these two dimensions describe four work engagement behaviors we observed in the data: Neglect (low on engagement and intended to be destructive), Sabotage (high on engagement and intended to be destructive), Low Engaged Duty (low on engagement and intended to be neither destructive nor constructive), and Overachievement (high on engagement and constructive). Two more behaviors are described in Figure 3, theoretically, but were not observed in our data: 1) Passive Helpfulness (low on engagement but constructive in intention), and 2) High Engaged Duty (high on engagement but neutral on intention). We explore both of these and potential future work in the discussion section.

Figure 3. Work Engagement Behaviors Among Public Lands Employees

		Low Engagement	High Engagement
Intended Constructiveness/Destructiveness	Constructive	***Passive Helpfulness***	**Overachievement**
	Neutral	**Low Engaged Duty**	***High Engaged Duty***
	Destructive	**Neglect**	**Sabotage**
		Low Engagement	High Engagement
		Work Engagement	

* These behaviors were not observed in our data but theoretically complete the taxonomy. Future work could explore the possibility of these behaviors.

Neglect. Our findings confirm the work of Farrell (1983), and Brehm and Gates (1997) that neglect is a highly relevant category for describing employee response to dissatisfaction. Unsurprisingly, while none of the interviewees described neglecting their work, many did describe observing others neglecting their work as a form of dissent. Participants described viewing others taking to the last minute to turn in paperwork or unnecessarily complicating processes, confirming findings from O'Leary (2006; 2014; 2020). From one angle, whether neglect is seen as destructive or constructive is in the eye of the beholder and the perspective which one takes. However, we place behaviors along these dimensions according to the *intention* of the employee. So, while certain employees may view their neglect as a positive thing given their differing goals from the policy, they are deliberately not engaging in order to be destructive of top-down policy goals.

Sabotage. In addition to neglect, we heard descriptions of active sabotage in which one takes positive action to thwart a policy, once again confirming findings from O'Leary (2006; 2014; 2020). Farrell (1983) mentioned sabotage in their discussion as a possibility for future consideration but do not test it in their paper. It is obvious why an interview respondent would be hesitant to disclose sabotage, yet we did hear observations of other employees engaged in sabotage. One interviewee described that when disagreement over policy occurs, for many the first instinct is to go outside of the organization for support. This respondent described various types of sabotage in public lands agencies, including:

Sharing information with external entities:

> *I've heard of, you know, issues where people internally share information they are not supposed to share externally, create alliances in weird ways...people can do some pretty nasty stuff internally, in terms of, giving people access, you know, disproportionate and unequal access to information...you like, 'we're not going to share the monitoring results with the permittee but we're*

> *going to send them to [environmental litigants]' like I've seen that happen. They hand the monitoring results to the environmental litigants, you know, and they do not share with the permittee, or vice versa. I've seen stuff get leaked, to groups, in ways they are not supposed to.*

Providing tips on what to FOIA[3]:

> *Or, I've seen people, like I know of many cases in the agencies, where people inside will say to an organization or a person 'go FOIA X, Y, and Z, specifically' so they know exactly what they are supposed to FOIA.*

Data manipulation:

> *I've seen messing with the data. It's hard to prove whether they were doing it on purpose or they just didn't know what they were doing…some people just don't know, right, we have technical specialists—not all of them are equal—and some of them really have no idea.*

Biased data gathering techniques:

> *I've seen other instance, where people have been doing monitoring, again with a pretty, you talk to them and they have a pretty implicit or explicit bias against grazing say, and their monitoring data corroborates that…As a collaborative we had to go back and re-site all these monitoring location using correct monitoring protocols to truly reflect the condition of the ground, vs somebody's personal bias as to where they decided to put the monitoring site…that is systemic, that happens a lot.*

The above quotes echo many of the findings from O'Leary (2006; 2014; 2020) about the various ways in which employees engage in sabotage. So, while we were aware from O'Leary (2006; 2014; 2020) that these behaviors exist, we were still surprised to hear the extent to which some civil servants participated in active sabotage. The fact that organizational sabotage is occurring reveals the levels of disagreement and dissent occurring in these four federal public lands agencies.

Overachievement. Not all stories related to work engagement were about neglect or sabotage. Many employees described going above and beyond the call of duty when faced with disagreeable policies. We describe these behaviors as high on work engagement and intended to be constructive. Overachieving as means for dealing with dissent mostly occurred when respondents found creative solutions to either get around policy constraints or to find mutually beneficial solutions that satisfied the top-down policy as well as local concerns. For example, one interviewee described the tension between conservation and the immediate economics costs of conservation. In this case, the policy reduced available funding for conservation, so the interviewee described how they found collaborative partners (e.g., county government) to share costs to achieve both conservation goals and stay within budgets. In their own words:

> *So the direction that I gave to staff there, was to look at ways, that our partners, whether it was the Forest Service or often we are working with the counties that are doing like county roads and stuff, and find out what is their typical approach...when a road washes out, um, they trundle off to that road with their equipment and then they just plug, you know, plug the same thing in there. So sitting down and meeting with those guys, and talking about projects and how the project initially might cost this, but if they actually adequately size it to the flood plain and the high water marks along the creek and get it engineered so that it is no longer even a culvert...that had been their plan, culvert, culvert, culvert, just you know replace, but instead we replaced it with, think of a U shape, the bottom is the stream bed...and that crossing now not only allows fish passage for a pretty cool species called [blank] but it also means that the likelihood, the frequency of them having to do anything, um, you know to make those continued repairs has been greatly diminished if not eliminated for that crossing.*

Thus, this employee was able to achieve a conservation goal for an endangered fish species while reducing long-term upkeep costs for a road that crosses a river by collaborating with a county government to engineer a more fish friendly and flood resistant road crossing. Other respondents described similar experiences of going above and beyond the call of duty to find unique and creative solutions, often through collaborations.

Low engaged duty. A final work engagement behavior we heard about through the interviews is what we term 'low engaged duty.' In the context of this paper, low engaged duty is neither intended to be constructive nor destructive and is generally low on engagement. Rather, low-engaged duty occurs when a bureaucratic employee makes decisions or behaves in such a way to not draw attention or not make anyone angry in order to increase the longevity of their job or the organization. One employee described it this way:

> *You don't get rewarded for going out there and pushing the envelope and trying to be creative and...but then it didn't work? You get screwed if it didn't work. It's way better...to not push...and safer...for your career...to not push the envelope...really.*

Such behaviors can be successful for bureaucrats that do not want to engage in picking sides, thereby creating enemies. From an organizational perspective such behavior can be helpful for maintaining budgets and/or stability. Low-engaged duty may also be a successful career strategy for those loyalists who would like to remain at the organization for a long time.

Hierarchy and Available Mechanisms for Dissent

We also observed from the interview data that more mechanisms for dissent were available to employees who had more experience and/or sat higher within the hierarchy. One field-level respondent with only a few years of experience was surprised to even hear our research question. This person did not know that you could disagree with policies, their understanding

Figure 4. Available Mechanisms Along the Hierarchy

Available Mechanisms of Dissent

High in the
Hierarchy

Low in the
Hierarchy
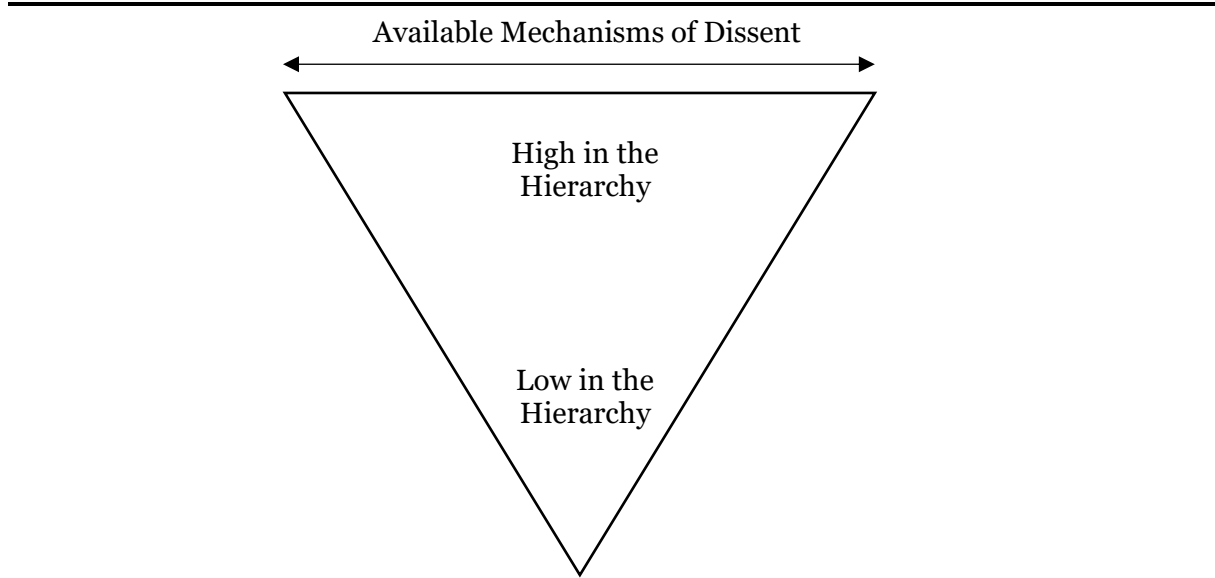
was that they were there to do their duty without disagreement. Other more experienced and upper-level employees described multiple types of responses to dissatisfaction and dissent. This finding is described in Figure 4, as one moves up along the hierarchy within an organization, more mechanisms for dissent become available.

Agency Differences

Differences in size, mission, and culture across the Parks Service, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish & Wildlife Service also affect employee responses to dissatisfaction. As mentioned in the literature review, Golden (1992) suggested five organizational features that affect bureaucratic resistance to political leaders: ideology, dominant agency profession, agency esprit, agency history, and careerist confidence. Our interviews indicate that dominant agency professions have changed over the years. One respondent who worked for more than 30 years in the Forest Service described how disagreements increased and getting stuff done got more difficult in the Forest Service as more '-ologists' were hired into the agency. The respondent continued to explain that employees from different disciplines, like hydrology, ecology, forestry, and various types of biologists, each viewed problems through the lens of their discipline leading to disagreement about how to address issues. One downside of profession diversity in these agencies is the potential for increased disagreements.

This 30-year veteran of the Forest Service inadvertently confirmed Kaufman's (1960) description of the Forest Service's ability to socialize its employees into its 'can-do' culture when they described observing this culture slowly break down throughout their long career as a variety of '-ologists' were brought into the agency, and along with them, disagreements about how things should be done (see also, Manring, 1993). Disputes inevitably come with increasing diversity, raising the importance of communication and collaboration as mechanisms for positively dealing with dissent. The differing missions of these agencies also affect employee disagreements and dissent. In relation to mission, for example, the Fish & Wildlife Service has a very targeted mission to conserve and enhance wildlife and their habitats for the benefit of Americans, the Parks Service has a dual mission to preserve nature and provide access to nature, and the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management have multi-use missions to sustain the health *and* productivity of their public lands.

One interviewee described how this difference in missions affects employees this way: "You have a lot of more like-minded people in the Fish & Wildlife Service than you do in the Forest Service and the BLM because of their multiple-use mandates." What this means for managing employee dissent and dissatisfaction was unclear from our data, but it does point to some possible hypotheses for future research. For example, on one hand it may suggest that dissent and dissatisfaction may be more intense when a policy goes against the mission of agencies with more targeted missions, as the like-minded people at those agencies may become united in their dissent against the policy. And on the other hand, multi-use agencies may have more factions spread across normative perspectives and so regardless of the administration in charge and the policies they make, disagreement could be happening by the opposite group in a multi-use agency. Though, perhaps because it happens more often at multiuse agencies, this disagreement and dissent may also be at a lower intensity.

Discussion, Further Research, and Conclusion

Because this study was exploratory and based on grounded theory, it generated insights that are in need of future research. For example, the work engagement framework we created in Figure 3 proposes two theoretical behaviors that we did not observe in the data, which were: Passive Helpfulness (low on engagement but constructive in intention), and High Engaged Duty (high on engagement but neutral on intention). Future work could explore whether these theoretical behaviors exist as well as further refine them in relation to other concepts from the public administration literature. For example, measurement of public service motivation has had dimensions related to duty at times (see Ritz et al., 2016). Possible research questions that flow from such an observation might be: How does high and low engaged dutiful behavior relate to public service motivation? Or, does job satisfaction interact with public service motivation to explain why someone might be passively helpful?

Our findings that loosely connect dissent and disagreement with suicide among public lands employees generated multiple questions with potential for further research. For example, a systematic review and meta-analysis of suicide by occupation suggests that suicide is more likely among lower skilled workers than among higher skilled workers (Milner et al., 2013). Is this trend similar among employees of public lands agencies? Such a question is interesting in light of the finding in this research about differing options of dissent up and down the hierarchy. Thus, do fewer options for dissent contribute to the possibility of suicide among lower skilled workers at the bottom of the hierarchy?

Other research is examining the links between climate change and suicide (Burke et al., 2018; Dumont et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2015). Do views on and experiences of climate change affect the possibility of suicide among public lands employees? For example, if a public lands employee feels high levels of alert about climate change but also feels policies within the agency are not doing enough to address it, could this dissatisfaction contribute to the possibility of suicide? Or, could public lands employees who experience the devastation and fallout of climate caused extreme weather events and catastrophes on public lands (e.g., wildfires, droughts) be more likely to commit suicide? These are all questions that are ripe for further research on suicide among public lands employees.

Another goal of this research was to find insights for positively managing dissent. However, it should be noted that whether dissent is managed 'positively' is a matter of perspective as some matters of dissent are based on differing political, moral, or ethical theories. Yet, other matters of dissent arise out of miscommunication or misunderstandings, and it is for this possibility that we think adding the modifiers 'active' to listening and 'raising' to voice (as in making one's opinion known) are important for helping to prevent or mitigate dissent based on miscommunication. Furthermore, including pedagogical terms like 'teaching' and 'learning' to the discussion on communication also help to prevent or mitigate dissent based on

misunderstandings. These findings support the previous work of O'Leary (2006; 2014; 2020) that describes listening as a tool for managing dissent but expands it to include teaching/learning about policies as part of that process. Although the term active listening appears in the latest version of O'Leary (2020), the actual term 'active listening' rarely appears in the body of the text nor does the text engage with the literature on active listening, especially in regard to techniques for active listening. We think further research connecting the techniques for active listening could be beneficial for furthering the work on managing dissent.

Another insight for positively managing dissent is an understanding of how the mechanisms we observed interact with each other. For example, Hirschman (1970) spent a lot of space describing the relationships among the mechanisms of exit, voice, and loyalty. In particular, a major theme in the book was that loyalty reduces the potential for voice and exit. When applying this insight into the management of employee dissent we observe that while loyalty may or may not be a positive thing for employees, simply offering it as an alternative to exit and voice provides employees another avenue for dealing with their dissent.

Similarly, by naming and exploring these clusters of behaviors and the numerous possible interactions across the clusters of behavior we offer dissenting employees more avenues for expressing their dissent and more ways for managers to understand the dissenting behaviors of their employees. This observation from our work supports O'Leary's (2006; 2014; 2020) 'advice from the pros' about creating multiple channels of dissent, in that we add to the landscape of potential dissenting behaviors. The behavior clusters we observed in these interviews are not mutually exclusive from one another, but rather can interact to describe different patterns of behavior and different options for dissent. For example, low engaged duty from Cluster 3 is an example of loyalty from Cluster 1 but one may also imagine instances of loyalty where one remains in their position and/or project but are more constructive or engaged than low engaged duty. Or the communication behaviors in Cluster 2 may interact with work engagement behaviors from Cluster 3 in that communications may be intended to be constructive, neutral, or destructive depending on the parties involved.

Our finding that lower-level employees were aware of fewer options for expressing their dissent was revealing. While it was clear from the data that more mechanisms for dissent were available to upper-level employees we did not have enough data to say with confidence which mechanisms were available at different levels of the hierarchy. Protecting employees' voices is important for revealing unethical, immoral, or illegal behaviors and is integral for encouraging whistleblowers. However, as mentioned, many policies are ambiguously ethical, moral, or legal and, as a result of this ambiguity, there are disagreements among workers within public organizations. In ambiguous cases, active listening and learning as strategies are necessary for building understanding, encouraging collaborations, and finding consensus at all levels in the hierarchy. Since field-level employees are working on the front lines of direct implementation of policies, they often have pertinent information about how that policy and the science of what they are doing interact, a common scene we heard play out in multiple interviews. Thus, it is integral for them to know their available options for voicing their knowledge. At the same time, field-level employees may be unaware of information that is affecting upper-level decision making, so once again, voice is better off as a two-way street. Our interviewees described both formal trainings available to them at the national level as well as informal learning opportunities in team meetings to learn communication strategies. In any of these cases, being more educated about policies and top-down decisions may have profound effects on exit, voice, loyalty, neglect, sabotage, overachievement, and dutiful behaviors.

However, there is ample reason to question the finding that lower-level employees were aware of fewer options for expressing their dissent. For example, the use of technology has flattened organizations, making it easier for employees to offer suggestions and feedback to those above them (see O'Leary & Vij, 2012). Similarly, younger generations of employees who are also likely to be lower in the hierarchy are also more likely to use social media in raising their voice.

Finally, even though this finding emerged from multiple interviews of employees in various points in the hierarchies, the sample size of this research is too small to provide confidence in such a causal claim about place in the hierarchy and options for dissent.

As previously implied, the sample size of 12 in this study is indeed an issue for making strong causal claims, but making causal claims is not the primary focus of this research. This research is exploratory in nature and primarily is about asking the question about how employees respond to disagreements over policy while being open to other insights that emerged. This research was generative for these insights, such as the possibility that employees lower in the hierarchy have fewer options of dissent or that organizations with multi-use missions may experience more instances of dissent. These insights need further testing. For example, further research could examine the range and nature of the options of dissent both up and down hierarchies and across situations and organizations. More specifically, future research could examine which of the specific behaviors of dissent from Clusters 1, 2, and 3 differ up and down the hierarchy.

Another possibility for future research relates to Golden's (1992) related work; how do Golden's (1992) five factors (i.e., ideology, dominant agency profession, agency esprit, agency history, and careerist confidence) affect the degree to which dissenting employees do employment or project status change, inward and outward communications, or work engagement behaviors? Another possibility relates to Kaufmann (1960) who described the organization of the Forest Service with a chain of command modeled after the military, which is highly hierarchical and has clear lines of communication and hierarchical discipline. A related hypothesis and research question to this observation could be whether organizations with military roots would have fewer options of dissent among those lower in the hierarchy.

The setting of public lands agencies during the national policy environment when these interviews took place led to dynamic interviews with rich data. However, we believe the insights from this paper extend to other federal organizations that may not deal with public lands, or to state or local governments, much in the same way Hirschman (1970)'s insights extended outside of his original subjects, or how O'Leary (2006; 2014; 2020) observed guerilla behavior in many types of organizations.

Finally, it was heartening to hear stories of highly engaged employees who went above and beyond their basic duties to overachieve and find solutions when there were disagreements about policy, showing that at times there can be productive alternatives to neglect and sabotage or the neutral baseline of duty. A thread among these overachievements was that they often centered around successful collaborations in which costs were shared and in which multiple voices were at the table and heard. This finding lends support to the growing literature on collaborative governance as a more useful means for managing public lands than a command-and-control approach (Emerson et al., 2012; Holling & Meffe, 1996; Rogers & Weber, 2010). Other research could move from theory building to theory testing with larger samples, either through more interviews, surveys, or analysis of internal agency policies and cultures to understand their ability to positively manage dissent and build collaborative capacity.

Notes

1. We should note that whether dissent is managed in a positive way is a matter of perspective in both one's position and one's morals, politics, and ethics. We discuss this issue more in the discussion section.
2. 'Get out the cut' here refers to the conflict between cutting down trees for timber production and maintaining forests for recreation and wildlife habitat conservation.

3. FOIA, i.e., Freedom of Information Act, is a law or related laws that require disclosure of U.S. government information or documents upon request, with some exceptions. When used as a verb, to 'FOIA' something implies making the formal request for access to information.

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Appendix A. Interview Protocol: Public Lands Employee Project

Interviewing Approach: Semi-structured

Notes: Semi-structured interviews provide structure while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions if participants offer unique insights. Our plan is to ask the below questions and any other relevant questions to the project that arise naturally during the course of the interviews. Interviews could last anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour.

Interview Questions

- Baseline-demographic questions
  a. How long have you been working here?
  b. What do you do for the [relevant govt. agency]?
  c. What's the best thing about your job?
  d. Why did you decide to work for this agency?

- Policy-related questions
  e. During your time with [govt. agency], have there been any policies that were especially popular or unpopular among you and your coworkers?
  f. How did employees behave, relative to the popular/unpopular policies?
  g. Thinking about the popular/unpopular policies, do you ever collaborate with other agencies/nonprofits/businesses to deal with these policies?
  h. How did employees talk about the popular/unpopular policies?
       i. With each other?
      ii. With people outside the organization (media, etc.)?
     iii. Social media?
  i. Were there any side-effects to employee talk about support/opposition to policy? Given a similar circumstance in the future, would you recommend that other employees behave in those ways?