Summary

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the role of context in voice behaviour as one of the most controversial type of proactivity. In today’s world of a fast pace of change and increased need for innovation, organisations rely on employees for improving and changing things and therefore proactivity is more and more mentioned in job specifications. Existing research shows that organisations perform better and are more efficient when they take on board the input of their employees. Therefore, employee voice of suggestions for improvement and alarming about potential or existing harm plays an important role. However, managers are not always open and receptive to these behaviors. These behaviors challenge the status quo, might be perceived as criticism of the voice target and can lead to extra workload. This controversy makes voice a very interesting topic of research in organizational psychology. The context where voice behaviors occur has a big influence on whether those behaviors occur, when, why, and how they occur, which is the main focus of this dissertation.

The three studies presented in this dissertation operationalized context each from a different angle: national context, target openness and leader reactions to these employee behaviors. The first study serves as inspiration to further work out the identified themes of proactive behaviour in the follow up studies of voice behaviour. The themes that can be followed across all the studies of proactive and voice behaviour are 1) proactivity and voice are threatening for the target, 2) those behaviors can be disruptive, and 3) undesirable, leading to extra work as well as 4) fear of negative consequences is a barrier for employees to be proactive and voice.

The goal of the first study is to explore the meaning as well as the social acceptance of proactivity in the Eastern European context (the Ukraine). I examine the following research question: What are the perceptions and acceptance of proactive work behavior in the Ukraine as
an example of an Eastern country in a postcommunist world? ‘Western’ research and theorizing on proactivity is compared to the Russian literature and then the results of a qualitative study among 20 employees and managers in the Ukraine are presented. The findings suggest that some forms of proactivity exist both in the ‘Western’ context and the Ukraine. However, the Western findings on proactivity only seem applicable in the Ukraine to a certain extent. In the Ukraine, particularly pro-self-oriented proactivity with the goal of working around the system or sustaining one’s job is socially accepted. More challenging forms of proactivity such as speaking up are far less common as these are seen as supervisor-threatening, disruptive and leading to extra work and are less desirable. Employees report a strong fear of negative consequences of showing such forms of proactivity.

The second study aims to explore the influence of the voice content challenging the leader of the team on the employee decision to speak up, and out or remain silent while moderated by leader openness and psychological safety. The research question that this study addresses is: How does the challenging nature of voice content influence speaking up, speaking out or staying silent when moderated by the context openness (leader openness and psychological safety)? While voice is critical to organizational functioning and performance, employees are often afraid to speak up and rather remain silent. The decision of whether to voice or not is influenced by employees’ anticipation of voice targets’ (leader, team) reactions to their suggestions. Such reactions depend on the voice content (degree of challenge or threat for others) and the openness of the voice target (openness to suggestions for change). This is a quantitative multi-source survey study with the sample of 157 triads (employee-colleague-leader) from the Faculty of Business and Economics of teaching and support staff from the largest university of applied sciences in the Netherlands. It is found that the nature of the voice content is less crucial for the decision whether to speak up, when
leader openness is high than when it is low. In the latter case, employees are more likely not to speak up but to speak out only to their colleagues or stay silent. For team openness (psychological safety), it is found that when psychological safety is high, people are more silent about the voice content with low degree of challenge than with high degree of challenge. This is also the case for low psychological safety, which is surprising. This finding suggests that the importance of the message to be voiced seems to overcome the fear of negative reactions from these colleagues and the message urgency and importance might overshadow low psychological safety.

The goal of the third study (a multi-study, consisting of Study1a, 1b and Study 2) is to test a fit/congruence of voice type (promotive or prohibitive) with emotional framing (enthusiasm or anxiety) on supervisor reactions to employee voice. The study explores which potential mediating factors contribute to those reactions and tests a congruence model including the mediating factors. The research questions of this study are the following: Is there a congruence fit of a voice type and emotional framing used in order to make employee voice behavior more effective? and Which mediating factors contribute to supervisor reactions to employee voice? The third study is divided into several studies. In Study 1a, which is a scenario experiment, I test the fit idea between the voice type and the emotional framing on the sample of 159 employed part-time students, supplemented with a number of qualitative interviews with leaders (Study 1b) in order to explore possible mechanisms that influence leader reactions to employee voice. Study 2 is a second scenario experiment of 117 employed respondents replicating the first experiment while adding perceived confidence of the voicer and perceived threat to decision-making as potential mechanisms of how the voice type x emotional framing interaction affects leader reactions to voice. The findings suggest that prohibitive voice results in less positive leader reactions than promotive voice and there is an interaction effect of voice type and emotional framing, such that
promotive voice with enthusiasm results in much more positive leader reactions than promotive voice with anxiety. However, while there is congruence of the message and the emotional framing, this seems to be more the case for promotive voice and positive emotions. The findings confirm that leaders tend to react more favorably to voice when they perceive an employee as confident and show that the congruence idea of promotive voice with positive emotions does lead to more perceived confidence. This is not the case for negative emotions, which seem to overrule the prohibitive voice message. Perceived threat to decision-making has a negative impact on leader reactions and prohibitive voice increases the perceived threat to decision-making due to its challenging and more threatening nature. Emotional framing on its own does not influence perceived threat to decision-making, which suggests that the message type (voice type) is more important for the perceived threat to decision-making. Alarming the leader about a current or potential harm (prohibitive voice) without providing a solution might signal lack of confidence of the voicer as well as increase the perceived threat to decision-making, so an employee who voices should voice not only the problem but also a solution to it whenever possible.

This dissertation aims to provide more understanding for both employees and managers on proactivity and voice behavior processes given the influence of the context of such behaviors. While employees are the ones who engage in these behaviors, managers continue to perform a crucial role in the reception of such behaviors. Based on the findings of this research, this dissertation provides a few practical recommendations of how to engage in proactive and voice behaviors in a more effective manner.