Entry

Organizational Justice: Typology, Antecedents and Consequences

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Definition: Organizational Justice is an individual's perception that events, actions, or decisions within an organization adhere to a standard of fairness. Justice researchers have categorized justice into four types, differentiated by how fairness is evaluated by employees: distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice. Organizational justice perceptions have consequences for the employee and the organization: increasing job satisfaction, commitment, and trust; and decreasing turnover, counterproductive work behaviors, and even workplace violence. Contemporary organizational justice research seeks to understand how to restore justice after an injustice has occurred.

Keywords: organizational justice; distributive justice; procedural justice; interactional justice; interpersonal justice; informational justice; deontic justice; fairness; restorative justice

1. Introduction

Justice, as it is broadly defined, is present when a person evaluates something as fair or unfair [1]. Organizational Justice is an individual's perception that events, actions, or decisions within an organization adhere to a standard of fairness [2]. Critically, organizational justice is a subjective perception, evaluated by the employee, the manager/supervisor, and others in the workplace (i.e., third party observers). Researchers refer to such perceptions and evaluations as justice judgements [3]; observers form justice judgements using the information and cues they observe in the organization, together with their emotional responses to these events [2]. Justice researchers have categorized justice into four types, which are differentiated by how fairness is evaluated by employees: distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice [1]. These justice judgements link to employee affect, attitudes, and behavior [4], and aggregate to impact both team- and organization-level outcomes [5]. Unlike moral concerns, fairness considerations tend to be ubiquitous across cultures, and the four key types of justice generally hold cross-culturally [6]. As such, organizational justice is an important consideration for organizations and their stakeholders [7].

It may seem obvious that employees care about justice, but research underscores that justice perceptions are more than short-term, self-interested concerns. Rather, justice perceptions reflect a long-term concern for both the self and others [7–9]. As humans, the desire to be accepted by important others drives us to act in ways that prompt reciprocal acts of fairness [10]. Concern for reciprocity is future focused. Employees consider long-term benefits when they evaluate how an organization treats them, with a desire to reduce future uncertainty by evaluating justice events in the present. Observing (in)justice toward others offers information about how employees themselves can expect to be treated within the organization. Moreover, when employees witness injustice directed at others, they may have negative emotional and cognitive responses and may retaliate against the organization or responsible party [11].

Organizations and managers also care about justice, as its impact goes far beyond the individual employee. Whether or not they were the target, witnessing injustice at work

makes employees more likely to act in retribution, even at personal cost [9,11–13]. When employees agree that the workplace is not just (low justice climate), absenteeism is higher and performance is lower [14,15]. By contrast, employees who perceive workplace justice express greater trust in and commitment to the organization, are more likely to adhere to company policies, and exhibit greater conscientiousness and job effectiveness [7,9,16]. Overall, workplaces that are perceived to be just are viewed as more legitimate organizations [17].

Employee identities, personalities, and values can influence their justice judgements (e.g., [18,19]). For example, Lee and Farh [20] show that women may be more attentive to distributive justice around salary given the history of gendered pay inequity between men and women. Individual differences among managers, such as empathy, personality traits, moral motives, and workload, can also influence employee justice perceptions [21,22]. Mayer and colleagues [23] found employees supervised by neurotic managers tend to have lower perceptions of procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice climate. When researchers measured the daily workload of managers, they observed that managers with higher workloads were less likely to prioritize acting justly over other responsibilities [24]. Encouragingly, when managers included justice tasks on lists of daily duties, they showed greater adherence to justice rules.

2. Types of Organizational Justice

Historically, theorists have categorized organizational justice by the diverse ways that people determine the fairness of events, interactions, and decisions [25,26]. Generally, people formulate justice judgements based on decision outcomes (distributive justice), how the outcome was determined (procedural justice), the information shared related to the outcome (informational justice), and how the worker is treated by the organization and its representatives (interpersonal justice). It is useful to understand justice at work by categorizing justice types, as who we find responsible for justice is often determined more by the type of justice violation than who the actual perpetrator was [25,26]. Organizations and employees should understand that justice, of any type, usually improves any situation [9,27]. For example, most satisfaction at work measures are similarly related to all justice types [7].

2.1. Distributive Justice

What may come most readily to mind when thinking about justice is distributive justice—the judgements employees make about the distribution of resources, or who gets 'what' [9]. First theorized in the mid-1960s, distributive justice describes workers' concern over whether they receive their fair share in organizational decisions [9]. Deutsch [28] delineated three categories under which organizations and managers might hope to achieve justice with an outcome: equity, equality, and need. Equity, as theorized in Adams' Equity Theory [29], predicts that employees are most concerned with an outcome that matches their contribution, compared to relevant others (e.g., hours worked proportionate to pay). Similarly, the need principle calls for unequal distribution of resources driven by, for example, biological or functional needs of the group or individual [28]. By contrast, under a system of equality, everyone in the group gets the same outcome, regardless of relative contribution. Research suggests that justice systems relying on equity vs. equality encourage different group dynamics, with equity inspiring greater individual motivation, and equality facilitating greater group cohesion [30].

Distributive justice impacts employee affect and behavior in ways that are highly consequential for organizations [7,30,31]. Folger and Konovsky [32] found that perceptions of distributive justice are distinctly connected with personal satisfaction concerning an individual's own outcomes, like pay satisfaction. When employees perceive unsatisfactory compensation for their efforts, they experience greater stress, reduced self-esteem, and reduced self-efficacy; express lower supervisor trust, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction; and are more likely to leave the organization [9,32–35]. Research suggests that a lack of distributive justice, such as pay inequity, can promote deception by aggrieved

employees both toward the organization and toward innocent co-workers [36]. Workers who perceive pay inequity are also more likely to steal from the organization to even out the underpayment [37].

2.2. Procedural Justice

Importantly, employees are also concerned with 'how' decisions are made at their organization. Procedural justice—the perception that the decision-making process is fair—is one of the most crucial factors influencing employee evaluations of justice at work [7]. It may surprise some that employees care about the fairness of decision-making processes, even when the decision outcome is favorable [2,9,27,38]. Organizations elicit perceptions of unfairness when the process seems inconsistent, biased, inaccurate, or unethical [38]. Employee fairness perceptions also suffer when decision processes do not allow for correction, and when employee interests are not adequately represented.

Employees form procedural justice judgements beginning before employment, during the hiring process [9]. First interactions inform how the applicant expects justice and trust to unfold as an employee. For example, potential employees use the overall application process, including the appropriateness of screening measures, as justice cues [17,39,40]. Once in the organization, organizational policies—the mechanisms for fair process enactment, are especially influential in shaping employee procedural justice judgements. In addition, factors like self-esteem can influence if an employee feels worthy and deserving of fair treatment [34,41].

When processes are unfair, employees may behave less in the interest of the organization, feel lower trust and commitment to the organization, show negative reactions to and evaluations of supervisors, engage in greater counterproductive work behaviors, and show reduced job performance [7,35,42–44]. By contrast, organizational efforts to enact fair processes have a positive effect on work engagement, stimulating information sharing and innovation [45,46]. A fair process can contribute to a positive organizational climate, job performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, and job satisfaction [34].

2.3. Interactional Justice: Interpersonal and Informational

While some researchers lump interpersonal and informational justice together under the header of interactional justice, others separate them into their own facets [7,16]. Taken together, we can consider interactional justice as the perception of how one person treats another by appropriately sharing information (informational justice) and avoiding rudeness (interpersonal justice) [9,47]. Some scholars understand interactional justice not as a distinct justice type, but rather as an antecedent to and consequence of distributive and procedural justice [17]. Other scholars define interpersonal and informational justice as their own justice types, worthy of their own focused examination. Both approaches have their benefits: studying interactional justice as an antecedent and consequence sheds light on individual cognitions and behavior, while interactional justice as a typology draws clearer connections to organizational practices [17].

Perceptions of informational justice are informed by justifications (or lack thereof) given for organizational decisions [2]. Informational justice is important for organizations because information sharing predicts employee sentiments toward organizational initiatives. For example, Lane and Aplin-Houtz [48] studied organizations implementing a policy change to begin remote work early in the COVID-19 pandemic. When employees perceived organizational communications about the policy as inadequate (i.e., low informational justice), their reactions to working remotely were more negative.

Interpersonal injustice is the most common type of injustice reported at work [49]. Acts of humiliation, wrongful accusations from supervisors, betrayal by coworkers, and other behaviors that violate codes of conduct or social norms are widespread in the workplace [49]. Experiencing or witnessing such injustices predicts increased anger [50], acts of defiance to authorities [51], sabotage [52], and violence [53] (see Mullen and Okimoto, 2015 for a review). By contrast, Rupp and Cropanzano [54] found that managers who treated

employees with interactional justice and avoided these negative behaviors had employees who performed better than average and exhibited higher levels of supervisor citizenship behaviors (e.g., helping a manager when their workload is heavy).

Interpersonal justice does more than just reduce undesirable employee outcomes; it also promotes positive, pro-organizational behaviors among both workers and their managers. Employees who perceive truthfulness and respect from their supervisor and organization engage in more positive behaviors that exceed job expectations [55]. Greenberg [56] found treating employees with social sensitivity helps them to accept unfavorable outcomes. Interpersonal justice also impacts managers: when a supervisor treats their reports with interactional justice, both the employee and the supervisor express more positive evaluations of the relationship's quality, and show greater motivation and job performance [9,54,57].

In addition, interpersonal justice judgements are of supreme importance to job candidates. Perhaps because potential employees have little other justice information, they focus on honest and timely feedback as cues to interactional justice [9,34,58,59]. People also prioritize interactional justice during unanticipated delays, and during interactions with the human resources department [59]. Communication by representatives of the organization is key in such instances, as effective two-way communication predicts positive interactional fairness judgements [59].

3. Additional Justice Theories

Explorations of distributive justice, procedural justice, informational justice, and interpersonal justice comprise the bulk of organizational justice research from the early 1960s to the turn of the century. At the beginning of the 2000s, organizational justice research reached an important moment of synthesis and growth: influential reviews and meta-analyses were published alongside new theories describing elements of justice not captured by the four existing types [7,16]. This new proliferation of justice scholarship included two broad theories that fall outside of, but not out of sync with, the four organizational justice types: Deonance Theory and Fairness Theory. A final broad theory, Scope of Justice, examines the ways in which we fail to include others in justice considerations.

3.1. Deonance Theory

Expanding justice theory beyond direct stakeholders, Folger's Deonance Theory [60] explains the discomfort felt by observers of injustice towards others, even when the observer has no stake in the outcome. Deontic justice describes our own expectations that others act morally and fairly. In other words, deontic justice is concerned with justice for the sake of justice. Employees develop self-determined moral standards and justice rules that guide their expectations for moral treatment of others. People prefer outcomes that validate these moral rules [60]. For example, when a person witnesses a justice rule transgression committed upon another person, they may feel anger akin to the anger they would feel as a victim. When we empathize out of a sense of moral duty, "our brains can be recruited for another person's justice" [61,62]. Recent brain activity research has illuminated how our brains work when we experience empathy. In functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) brain research, areas of the brain associated with emotional experiences activate when subjects take part in moral judgement activities [63]. This suggests that empathy is a vicarious emotional experience, even at the neurological level.

3.2. Fairness Theory

Categorizing justice helps us understand the origins of fairness perceptions but has left room for broader research of the essential components of fairness. The role of accountability, or who is responsible for the harm done, is largely absent in the models detailed above. Folger and Cropanzano's Fairness Theory [64] posed that responsibility attributions play a vital role in justice perceptions. When an individual perceives an injustice, they will attempt to make sense of what happened, in part by considering who is responsible. For an event, action, or decision to prompt fairness evaluations, individuals must perceive

harm (e.g., feel injured or observe injury), that someone is to blame (e.g., not a supernatural act or weather), and that the act violated a social norm or moral belief. Thus, accountability is a necessary component of injustice in Folger and Cropanzano's model.

Fairness Theory argues that accountability assessments involve counterfactual thinking: could the event, organizational decision, or action have gone differently; should the offender have acted differently, and would the outcome be different if leaders had made different decisions? For example, Gilliland and colleagues [65] compared rejected job applicants who received excuses for not being hired (e.g., explanations of a hiring freeze), to those who did not receive an excuse. Excuses resulted in greater perceptions of fairness. When rejected applicants received more than one excuse, nullifying more than one counterfactual, the positive effects on fairness were even greater [66].

3.3. Scope of Justice

The Deonance and Fairness Theories expanded the range of people involved in justice judgements to include others witnessing injustice and those accountable for injustice [67]. The Scope of Justice Theory helps us to understand why, despite deontic and fairness motivations, we often exclude other people and groups from our justice concerns. The Scope of Justice Theory argues that each person has a psychologically bounded sense of justice that includes some people but disregards others [30,67]. When we morally include a target within our scope of justice, we employ fairness rules, acknowledge their right to resources (distributive justice), and are more likely to help the individual attain justice. By contrast, moral exclusion suggests that those out of our scope of justice are not entitled to resources or help and are more likely to find their inequitable experiences tolerable. Moral inclusion is connected to the perceiver's personal feelings toward the injured party, suggesting that compatibility and liking heavily influence who is included in our scope of justice [67]. People's preference for homophily—the liking of those similar to ourselves—carries over into their scope of justice: similar others are more likely to be morally included. Homophilic boundaries of justice can be exacerbated during times of conflict or in conditions where resources are low. Individuals who are perceived as threatening are less likely to be seen as deserving of fair process. Not only are targets outside one' scope of justice viewed as less deserving of fairness, their actual distress elicits less of a response [67].

4. Retributive and Restorative Theories of Justice

Most justice research, including the theories developed during the early 2000s, has focused on the consequences of (in)justice at work. Late in the 2000s, qualitative research revealed the need to understand additional justice decision types (i.e., justice as giving fair recognition, justice as expectations in line with work role), as many of the workers interviewed did not rely on the big four types to explain justice at their jobs [4]. This work expanded the construct of justice beyond supervisor–employee interactions, to include peer-to-peer, employee–organization, and team-level interactions and relationships [14,15,26,68].

Today's research efforts are moving away from depersonalized and abstract models. Researchers are exploring the influence of identity in justice perceptions, how people may distort their perceptions to satisfy a need for justice (motivated justice), and who is excluded from justice considerations and why (scope of justice). Importantly, justice research is refocusing on improving the lives of employees [49,69–71].

Other recent research has focused on strategies for resolving injustice that mitigate negative organizational outcomes. Organizations that aim to abate injustice commonly resort to punishing the transgressor (i.e., retributive justice) [72], but these methods can have unintended consequences. Punishment often evokes negative emotional responses, including anger and withdrawal [73], and the harshness of a punishment is predictive of later lower job performance by the sanctioned employee [74]. Retributive justice can also undermine the agency of the victim by forcing them through a punitive process focused

on the offender [49]. Though time efficient, retributive justice can further diminish justice perceptions when punishments are misaligned with the original harm [49].

Restorative justice, which seeks to repair harm done and restore damaged relationships resulting from the harm, offers an alternative model [71]. Restorative justice considers the victim, the offender, and third-party observers impacted by the act of injustice. This method involves an interaction among victims and offenders, transparency through candid dialogue, and a forward-looking orientation. Engaging those wronged in the resolution frames the violation in terms of harm to people and relationships, rather than as merely unlawful. This relationship orientation sets restorative justice apart from other methods, supporting rather than further undermining the agency of the victim. Restorative efforts encourage flexibility in determining case-by-case outcomes, considering exceptional circumstances and mutual accountability in the creation of a plan to restore relationships and reintegrate the offender within the community or organization [71]. Though research on restorative justice's benefits for organizations is still new, emerging work suggests this approach improves work relationships and rebuilds trust, increasing perceptions of organizational justice [75].

5. Conclusions

Organizational justice scholarship explores the connections between organizational stakeholders' perceptions of fairness and their attitudes and actions [76]. Workplace organizational justice perceptions focus on the fairness of outcomes, processes, and/or interpersonal interactions. When an event or decision is important, we give thought and pass judgement, measuring what happened against what could, should, or would have happened. Current research aims to understand how practitioners might restore fairness, prevent injustice, and consider individual differences in the face of an unfavorable outcome. Future pathways might explore justice interventions, like restorative justice, to empower stakeholders in contemporary work environments.

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