



Justice, Fairness, and Employee Reactions

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Abstract

Of all the issues that employees consider in organizational life, justice and fairness are among the most salient. Justice reflects the perceived adherence to rules that represent appropriateness in decision contexts (e.g., equity, consistency, respect, truthfulness). Fairness reflects a more global perception of appropriateness that lies downstream of justice. Our review integrates justice theories (fairness heuristic theory, the relational model, the group engagement model, fairness theory, deonance theory, uncertainty management theory) and broader theories (social exchange theory, affective events theory) to examine three questions: (a) Why do employees think about justice issues in the first place? (b) how do employees form fairness perceptions? and (c) how do employees react to those perceptions? We close by describing how justice and fairness can be managed in organizations, especially given new technological trends in how people work.

INTRODUCTION

Justice and fairness are issues that resonate in many realms of life. Children consider the fairness of rewards and punishments. Students ponder the justice of grades. Citizens debate the fairness of national elections and governmental policies. Employees focus on the justice of key decisions and events in the workplace. It is this latter thread that interests scholars in organizational psychology and organizational behavior. Indeed, it was 30 years ago that Folger & Greenberg (1985, p. 176) drew a bridge between “pure science” and “applied science” by describing the relevance of justice and fairness to performance appraisal, compensation, participative decision making, and conflict resolution.

Although the literature has tended to treat justice and fairness as interchangeable construct labels, our review will distinguish them. Following Colquitt & Rodell (2015), we define justice as the perceived adherence to rules that reflect appropriateness in decision contexts. Distributive justice rules reflect appropriateness in decision outcomes and include equity, equality, and need (Adams 1965, Leventhal 1976). Procedural justice rules reflect appropriateness in decision-making procedures and include voice, consistency, accuracy, bias suppression, and correctability (Leventhal 1980, Thibaut & Walker 1975). Interpersonal justice rules reflect appropriateness as procedures are enacted and include respect and propriety (Bies & Moag 1986, Greenberg 1993). Informational justice rules reflect the appropriateness of the explanations offered for procedures and include truthfulness and justification (Bies & Moag 1986, Greenberg 1993).

We define fairness as a global perception of appropriateness—a perception that tends to lie theoretically downstream of justice (Colquitt & Rodell 2015). Consider an employee who is struck by the accuracy of a boss’s data gathering during a performance appraisal and thinks highly of her boss as a result. That scenario represents (procedural) justice shaping fairness. Note that past reviews tended to treat the justice–fairness distinction as one of measurement style, with assessments of justice rules described as indirect measures and assessments that used the word fair described as direct measures (Colquitt & Shaw 2005, Lind & Tyler 1988). We believe it is time to use distinct terms for justice and fairness because more and more scholars are operationalizing both in their studies, often with fairness mediating the effects of justice (Ambrose & Schminke 2009, Kim & Leung 2007).

Our performance appraisal example highlights additional points needed to understand justice and fairness. As shown in **Figure 1**, justice and fairness are focused on some target—typically a supervisor or an organization (Rupp & Cropanzano 2002). Our example focuses on a supervisor, but scholars could just as easily study the accuracy of an organization’s appraisal system or the fairness of the firm. Regardless of the focus, measuring justice and fairness involves bracketing an employee’s experiences in some way (Cropanzano et al. 2001). The justice in our example was bracketed around a single appraisal event—an approach that is fairly common in the literature. Other times justice will be measured by focusing employees on a collection of multiple events. For example, Colquitt’s (2001) measure is often tailored to focus on decisions about pay, rewards, evaluations, promotions, etc. (Colquitt & Rodell 2015). The fairness in our example referenced the supervisor as a complete entity—presumably representing an aggregate of all relevant events. **Figure 1** also illustrates that justice and fairness can be referenced to any or all of the distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational dimensions. Those dimensions have been made translucent for fairness in the figure because it has become more common to eschew those dimensional distinctions in favor of a focus on overall fairness (Ambrose & Schminke 2009, Kim & Leung 2007).

Scholars draw on a number of models and theories to understand the antecedents and consequences of justice and fairness. Indeed, the literature has become one of the more theory-rich

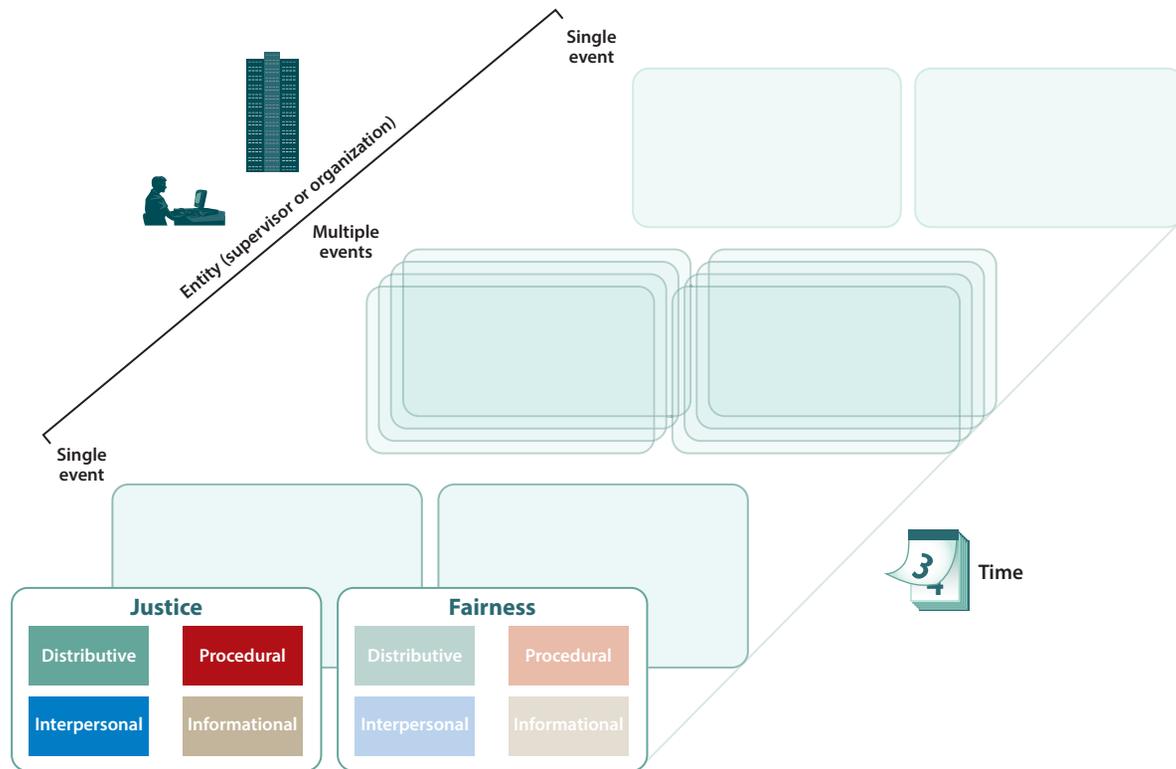


Figure 1

Measurement decisions when assessing justice and fairness.

content areas in organizational psychology and organizational behavior. Many of those models and theories were introduced by justice scholars to explain phenomena in the justice literature. Those include fairness heuristic theory (Lind 2001a, Van den Bos 2001a), the relational model and group engagement model (Tyler & Blader 2003, Tyler & Lind 1992), fairness theory and deonance theory (Folger 2001, Folger & Cropanzano 2001), and uncertainty management theory (Lind & Van den Bos 2002, Van den Bos & Lind 2002). Although these lenses have been instrumental for examining a number of research questions, justice scholars also draw on theories in other realms of organizational psychology and organizational behavior. The most notable examples are social exchange theory and affective events theory (Blau 1964, Weiss & Cropanzano 1996).

The purpose of our review is to integrate all of these theoretical lenses to examine three questions. First, why do employees think about justice issues in the first place—what causes them to ponder issues of equity, accuracy, respect, truthfulness, and the like? Second, how do employees form fairness perceptions—how do they aggregate specific justice experiences into an overall perception? Third, how do employees react to fairness perceptions—what behaviors result, and why do they result? As our review shows, the justice-specific theories and the two broader theories are all needed to attempt to answer these questions. Our review then explores how these insights can be used to manage justice and fairness in organizations, especially given new technological trends in how people work.

WHY DO EMPLOYEES THINK ABOUT JUSTICE ISSUES?

Before employees can judge how just or fair their supervisors or organizations are, they have to attend to such issues in the first place. How do the theories described in our review explain that attention to justice issues? As shown in **Figure 2**, most of the theories involve uncertainty—a condition under which something is not known or something is doubted. Employees feel a sense of uncertainty about something and—as a result—devote more focused attention to justice issues. The theories vary in how explicit a role they devote to uncertainty and what exactly it is that employees are uncertain about.

Uncertainty About Trustworthiness

In explaining why employees think about justice issues, two of the theories shown in **Figure 2** emphasize uncertainty about trustworthiness. We begin with social exchange theory because it is the oldest theory in our set, it was the first to be applied to justice phenomena, and it remains the most oft-evoked lens in the literature. Blau (1964) contrasted two kinds of exchange relationships. Economic exchanges are contractual in character and are governed by a clearly specified schedule of benefits and reciprocations. For example, an employee completes required tasks in exchange for a regular paycheck. Social exchanges, by contrast, are marked by a deeper level of investment in which unspecified benefits and reciprocations are exchanged over a long-term, open-ended time frame. For example, an employee “goes the extra mile” to help a newcomer while believing that—at

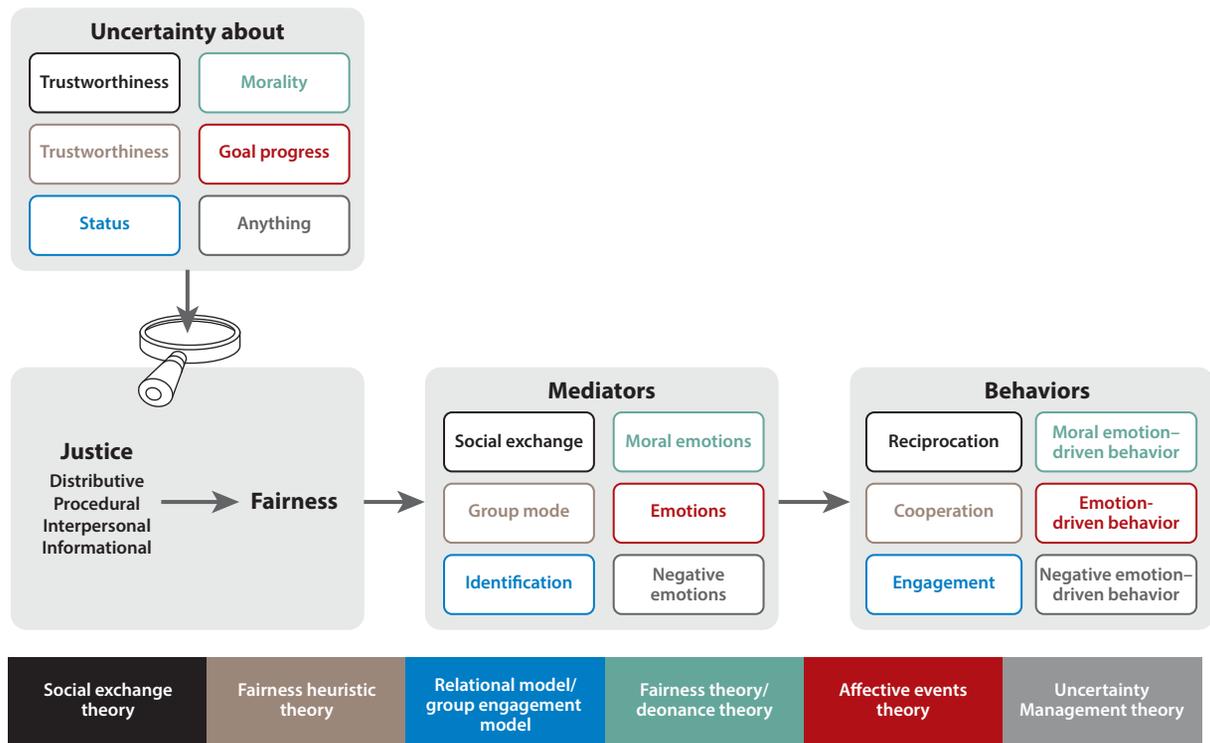


Figure 2

Different theoretical perspectives on the experience of justice and fairness.

some point and in some way—he will get “repaid” by his supervisor for those efforts. Because of their inherent flexibility and depth of investment, social exchanges are viewed as more effective in the long term than economic exchanges.

What if an employee doubts that “extra mile” efforts will be repaid in time? Blau (1964, p. 98) addresses such concerns in describing how social exchanges take root: “Since social exchange requires trusting others to reciprocate, the initial problem is to prove oneself trustworthy. . . . As individuals regularly discharge their obligations, they prove themselves trustworthy of further credit.” Thus, if faced with an opportunity to do something “extra,” an employee should stop to consider whether his supervisor is trustworthy. If she is, then his behaviors will likely be rewarded somewhere down the line. Although Blau (1964) did not discuss justice issues in this context, Organ (1990) did so in a subsequent articulation of social exchange principles. He argued that justice could serve a similar exchange-deepening function over time, noting, “If the person feels that the overall exchange, over some relevant interval, is ‘fair,’ he or she will not feel the need to provide any precise accounting of marginal benefit for marginal contribution” (p. 64). Thus, at least implicitly, social exchange theorizing views uncertainty about trustworthiness as a reason for focusing on justice issues.

The linkage between uncertainty about trustworthiness and a focus on justice is much more explicit in fairness heuristic theory—the first justice-centric theory covered in our review (see Lind 2001a, Van den Bos 2001a). This theory is inspired by what Lind (2001a) termed the fundamental social dilemma—that employees must repeatedly decide whether to embrace cooperation or avoid cooperation. Embracing cooperation opens up avenues for greater gains but brings with it the risk of exploitation and rejection. Avoiding cooperation encourages self-sufficiency but forgoes the chance at the outcomes that can be achieved only with collective action. Trustworthiness becomes relevant to that fundamental social dilemma because the risks of exploitation seem lower if authorities are trustworthy. That dynamic is not unlike one exchange partner deciding that another is worthy of some benefit—even though repayment cannot be guaranteed (Blau 1964).

Importantly, fairness heuristic theory argues that trustworthiness is difficult to ascertain, as it is dependent upon qualities and characteristics that are difficult to observe and evaluate. Here is where the connection to justice becomes more explicit than in social exchange theory. Van den Bos (2001a, p. 73) writes, “Do people often have direct information about an authority’s trustworthiness? We suggested that they frequently do not. . . . We suggested that in such situations—in which information about the authority’s trustworthiness is missing—people refer to the fairness of the authority’s procedures to decide how to react to the outcome.” The argument is that adherence to rules like equity, consistency, respect, and justification is more observable than qualities like competence, integrity, and benevolence. Many of the theory’s propositions have been supported in laboratory research. For example, Van den Bos et al. (1998) showed that the effects of justice on reactions were stronger when information on authority trustworthiness was lacking than when it was present.

Uncertainty About Status

Lind’s (2001a) discussion of the fundamental social dilemma also describes how being rejected by an authority can harm one’s identity. That observation echoes earlier theorizing on the relational model (Tyler & Lind 1992). That model argues that employees are social creatures who are especially attentive to signals that convey their status in relevant groups. Status is a key consideration because group memberships validate people’s identities and comprise a large part of their esteem. The relational model argues that justice is one of the most potent signals of status (Tyler & Lind 1992). When a supervisor treats an employee with respect, that act signals that the

employee is valued by the workgroup—that the employee has a certain standing. By contrast, when a supervisor treats an employee in a biased manner, it signals that the employee is at the fringe of the group and is someone of questionable status.

Although applications of the relational model have tended to focus more on the effects of justice than on the conditions that increase the focus on it, some tests do support the arguments described above. For example, a laboratory study by Smith et al. (1998) showed that the relationship between favorable treatment by an authority and participant self-esteem was stronger when the experimenter was from the same university as the participants. Presumably the existence of the shared affiliation aroused concerns about status, making treatment more salient. The relational model's focus on status and group memberships has since been folded into Tyler & Blader's (2003) group engagement model. That model focuses more explicitly on the outcomes of justice, so it is described in a subsequent section.

Uncertainty About Morality

An outsider to the literature would likely assume that morality concepts were tightly woven into discussions of justice. After all, justice plays a salient role in philosophical treatments of ethics (Kant 1795, Rawls 1971), and Leventhal (1980) argued that ethicality is an important procedural justice rule. Surprisingly, morality concepts stayed at the fringes of the justice literature for its first few decades, largely due to its roots in social psychology rather than philosophy. That separation began to change with the introduction of fairness theory (Folger & Cropanzano 2001). Fairness theory focuses on when authorities are held accountable for their conduct, with that accountability dependent on three counterfactuals. Specifically, authorities are held accountable when some event could have played out differently, when authorities should have acted differently, and when well-being would have been better if those alternatives had transpired. Consider a case in which an employee receives a smaller than expected raise from her boss. That employee will blame the boss when the raise could have been higher (e.g., the merit pool was big enough to allocate more funds), when the raise should have been higher (e.g., a bigger raise would have been more equitable and deserved), and when well-being would have been better given alternative events (e.g., a larger raise would have significantly affected well-being).

Issues of morality are wrapped up in the “should” portion of fairness theory. In deciding whether authorities should have acted differently, employees compare authority actions to prevailing ethical and moral standards (Folger & Cropanzano 2001). Deciding that an authority should have acted differently means the authority violated some norm of conduct—a decision that should trigger a sense of unfairness and blame. In practice, most studies employing fairness theory have either manipulated the should counterfactual or left it as an unmeasured aspect of their theorizing (Colquitt & Chertkoff 2002, Gilliland et al. 2001). An exception was a study by Nicklin et al. (2011). Using a policy-capturing design, the authors gave participants a chance to react to an event by describing their thoughts in an open-ended fashion. The results revealed that authorities who failed to act appropriately in an adverse situation triggered more counterfactual thoughts, with those counterfactual thoughts being associated with lower fairness perceptions.

Whereas concerns about morality are wrapped up in one of fairness theory's three mechanisms, they stand front and center in a subsequent offshoot of it. Deonance theory argues that employees think about justice issues because virtue is its own reward (Folger 2001 et al. 2005). That is, individuals care about adherence to norms of morality in and of itself, whether in the evaluation of their own behavior, the behavior of their authority figures, or even the behavior of some unconnected third party. Because justice represents the way people ought to behave—indeed, the *deon* in the theory's moniker comes from the Greek word for obligation—it is of central interest in

daily life. Some support for deonance theory's propositions comes from experimental research showing that individuals who are high on trait morality responded more positively to justice (Colquitt et al. 2006). Other support comes from work showing that individuals care about the justice that authorities intend to offer—not merely the justice that is actually perceived to be offered (Umphress et al. 2013).

Uncertainty About Goal Progress

In their discussion of deonance theory, Folger et al. (2005) note that stimuli can often be quickly and unconsciously classified as unjust or immoral. That rapid and not-quite-conscious process is similar to writings on affect, which brings us to the second theory in our review that is not confined to the justice literature. Like social exchange theory, affective events theory originated in a different domain of organizational psychology and organizational behavior (Weiss & Cropanzano 1996) before being applied to justice phenomena by justice scholars. The theory argues that events are a key determinant of affect at work, and that affect explains how and why events shape attitudes and behavior.

Like other treatments of the topic (e.g., Lazarus 1991), affective events theory argues that events are initially appraised in terms of whether they are helpful or harmful toward progress on relevant goals (Weiss & Cropanzano 1996). If events benefit goal progress, positive emotions will result. If events hinder goal progress, negative emotions will result. That coarse good versus bad evaluation is then followed by a secondary appraisal that considers additional details about the event. Is someone responsible for it? How easily can it be coped with? Will the situation worsen or improve? Is this secondary appraisal that results in more specific emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, joy, love, and the like. For example, an event might trigger sadness if it seems harmful to goal progress and if it seems difficult to cope with and likely to worsen.

Thus, affective events theory would argue that employees think about justice issues because just and unjust events are relevant to goal progress. Of course, the theory's insights into this question differ from the ideas encapsulated in the other theories, in two primary ways. First, considerations of goal progress and relevant event details often happen in an automatic, unconscious, and involuntary fashion. Considerations of issues like trustworthiness and status may be governed by more complex cognitive activity. Second, affective events theory—and appraisal models in general—tend to be agnostic about what precisely the goals are. Affect need not be triggered by trustworthiness goals, status goals, morality goals, or any goals that are elevated in significance a priori. That generality is shared by the next theory described in our review.

Uncertainty About Anything

We began this section by discussing uncertainty about trustworthiness, with fairness heuristic theory arguing that employees focus on justice as indirect evidence of trustworthiness (Lind 2001a, Van den Bos 2001a). An offshoot of that theory broadens the treatment of uncertainty. Uncertainty management theory argues that employees think about justice because it helps them manage any kind of uncertainty—even uncertainty that has no logical connection to justice rules (Lind & Van den Bos 2002, Van den Bos & Lind 2002). Consider an employee who was experiencing a significant health issue. The theory argues that justice on the part of a supervisor would help the employee maintain positive affect and feel favorably about at least some life domain—which would aid in coping with the health uncertainty. Lind & Van den Bos (2002, p. 216) summarized that proposition when writing, “What appears to be happening is that people use fairness to manage their reactions to uncertainty, finding comfort in related or even unrelated fair experiences and finding additional distress in unfair experiences.”

Two articles offer compelling support for uncertainty management theory's predictions. Experiments by Van den Bos (2001b) manipulated uncertainty by asking some participants to write about the thoughts, emotions, and physical symptoms that they experience when they are uncertain. The results showed that justice had a stronger effect on reactions for the participants who were primed on uncertainty. Van den Bos & Miedema (2000) complemented Van den Bos's (2001b) manipulation with one that stretched the conceptual distance between justice and uncertainty. Those experiments manipulated uncertainty by asking some participants to write about the emotions triggered by pondering their own death. Again, the results showed that justice had a stronger effect on reactions for the participants who were primed on uncertainty.

HOW DO EMPLOYEES FORM FAIRNESS PERCEPTIONS?

Once employees decide to hold a magnifying glass up to justice issues—for whatever uncertainty-based reasons—a new question comes to the fore. How do employees take all of their justice data—the events, the experiences, and so forth—and form an overall fairness perception? Although this question is not tackled by all of the theories in **Figure 2**, it is relevant to many of them. As the sections to follow show, many of the theories suggest that fairness perceptions are formed deliberately and consciously, whereas others propose that perceptions are formed quickly, efficiently, and unconsciously.

Using Deliberate Cognitive Processing

In his seminal writings on justice, Leventhal argued that fairness perceptions are formed through a cognitively rich process in which employees decide what justice rules to consider and how much to weigh them (e.g., Leventhal 1980, Leventhal et al. 1980). The weight of each rule was described as varying across people and events (Leventhal 1976). Employees could assign weights based on self-interested motives, outcome favorability, available information, event importance, and rule legitimacy in order to arrive at an overall fairness perception (Leventhal 1976, 1980; Leventhal et al. 1980). Often, more weight would be given to rules that maximize employee interests. For example, employees who valued performance-based allocations would give greater weight to equity rules, whereas employees who valued cooperation would give greater weight to equality rules.

Fairness theory also suggests that employees make conscious assessments of fairness. However, rather than weighting particular justice rules, individuals engage in counterfactual thinking (Folger & Cropanzano 2001). As with judgments of accountability, fairness perceptions should depend on how much the counterfactuals—the would, could, and should questions—diverge from the experienced situation. The more divergence, the less likely employees will be to perceive events as fair. Of course, the discrepancy between the counterfactual scenarios and the actual events depends on what outcome- and process-based referents employees use as their standards. Depending on the standards, employees could perceive the same situation as fair or unfair.

Fairness theory also suggests that employee fairness perceptions depend on the feasibility of the counterfactuals. Nicklin et al. (2011) found that counterfactual thinking is influenced not just by the severity of outcomes and the type of wrongdoing, but also by the knowledge and expertise of the target. For example, positive alternatives are more easily conjured when the target person has committed a wrongdoing rather than simply withholding action or when the target knowingly puts the employee at risk (Folger & Cropanzano 2001). Thus, as in Leventhal's seminal work, employees who believe, "that's not fair!" are basing that belief on a thorough and reasoned analysis of decision events.

Using Heuristic Cognitive Processing

Other theories challenge the belief that fairness perceptions are based on deliberate processing. After all, fairness perceptions can often be formed and recalled quickly, without any reflection on particular rules or specific counterfactuals. For their part, Folger & Cropanzano (2001) acknowledged that the formation of fairness perceptions could lay on a continuum from very deliberate thinking to very heuristic thinking. They further argued that employees would employ deliberate processing when the necessary information and time permitted, and automatic processing when information was unavailable or time constraints restricted deliberate processing.

The more heuristic end of the fairness perceptions continuum is encapsulated by fairness heuristic theory—a theory that focuses on mental shortcuts over specific counterfactuals (Lind 2001b). According to the theory, employees create a heuristic conception of fairness based on accessible and understandable information during early justice experiences (Lind 2001a, Van den Bos 2001a). The process of forming fairness perceptions begins with a judgmental phase followed by a use phase. The judgmental phase is brief in order for employees to use fairness perceptions to guide behaviors with supervisors and colleagues. The brevity of the judgmental phase means that employees cannot take the requisite time to deliberately consider all available information. Therefore the information employees do consider is especially salient in shaping fairness perceptions. The use phase begins once the heuristic has been formed and serves as a proxy for trustworthiness. The use phase continues until an unexpected or important event triggers a shift back to the judgmental phase and a revision of fairness perceptions.

Fairness heuristic theory further argues that not all justice-relevant information is treated equally. Specifically, fairness perceptions are more sensitive to earlier rather than later information and more interpretable rather than complex information (Lind 2001a). In a lab experiment conducted by Van den Bos et al. (1997b), the researchers manipulated the order of the information provided (procedural information first and then outcome, and vice versa) and found that what participants judged as fair was more strongly influenced by whatever information came first. In a similar study conducted by Van den Bos et al. (1997a), the researchers found that participants prioritized interpretability in assessing fairness. In addition, they found that procedure-based information is often more interpretable and thus more salient in shaping fairness perceptions.

As Folger and Cropanzano's writings transitioned from fairness theory to deonance theory, they too began to describe fairness perceptions as more quick and instinctive. Folger et al. (2005) argued that employees form fairness perceptions based on unconscious comparisons between a justice event and an employee's internal moral code to determine whether the code has been violated. They argued that code violations are immediately salient and do not require effortful analysis. Moreover, employees are motivated to consider fairness even when their own self-interests are not at stake, so long as an incident evokes some moral consideration. Employees automatically detect violations of justice in order to react to situations that require immediate action.

Several researchers have explored deonance theory's take on justice and fairness perceptions. For example Aquino et al. (2006) found that employees were concerned with pursuing justice and ensuring offenders received the punishment they deserved just for the sake of justice. Although not at all costs, employees were willing to pay a price to see that justice had been served. Similarly, Skarlicki & Rupp (2010) tested third-party employees' responses to another employee's mistreatment and found that employees high in moral identity experienced high retributive responses even when they were in no way affected by the event. These studies support the notion that employees have a quick and automatic response to injustice. Thus, consistent with fairness heuristic theory, when employees think, "that's not fair!" they are relying on quick and unconscious judgments.

Using Affect as Information

Whereas the previous two sections debated how intently employees think about fairness, this section questions whether they need to think at all. Fairness perceptions are based not only on cold cognitive functions, but also on hot emotion-laden responses to events. Put simply, employees don't just think a situation is unfair, they feel it is unfair. As shown in **Figure 1**, affect can color responses to specific events, to series of multiple events, and to entities as a whole (Barsky et al. 2011). Further, emotions precede, coincide with, and follow justice-related events. Emotional reactions impact how employees perceive a situation and interpret information, and thus are central to the formation of fairness perceptions.

Affective events theory discusses the influence of affect on judgments through emotional appraisals. Weiss & Cropanzano (1996) suggest that events automatically trigger an appraisal of the situation, which includes an emotional reaction that independently influences associated judgments. They propose not only that affective reactions influence how people cognitively assess a situation, but also that affect directly influences attitudes about an event (Weiss & Cropanzano 1996). Specifically, attitudes can be unstable and thus significantly influenced by contextual factors, such as affective states. If an attitude or judgment is abstract, employees are even more likely to base their judgment on affective states. So, fairness, as an abstract concept, is likely to be influenced by employees' affective states.

Further, Weiss & Cropanzano (1996) discuss the various avenues by which affect influences judgments. In addition to the emotional reaction to an event, employee mood before a triggering event may also influence judgments. Employee mood colors the information related to the situation as well as which aspects of the situation are considered in constructing judgments. Simply put, bad moods can make situations feel worse; good moods can make situations feel better. Moods also influence which information employees consider in appraising an event, with good moods making positive information more salient.

Affect can even fill in the gaps when employees are missing justice-relevant data. Van den Bos (2003) conducted two lab experiments to explore how affect and justice information interact to form fairness perceptions. In the first experiment, participants were randomly assigned to either negative or positive affective states and to cases where they either did or did not know a comparison other's outcome. The findings demonstrated that the more unclear participants were about the other's outcome, the more affect influenced fairness perceptions. The second experiment explored how ambiguity about procedures (i.e., opportunities for voice) and affect shape fairness perceptions. The results showed that affect influenced fairness perceptions more when procedures were not explicit. These findings reinforce the significant impact emotions have on the formation of fairness perceptions. Thus, when employees respond with "that's not fair," they may be reporting something that is more feeling than thought.

HOW DO EMPLOYEES REACT TO FAIRNESS PERCEPTIONS?

Once employees decide to attend to justice issues, and once they use justice data (and their affect) to form a fairness perception, a third question comes to the fore. How do employees react to those perceptions? That is, how do those perceptions shape attitudes, beliefs, intentions, and behaviors in the workplace? Almost all of the theories shown in **Figure 2** tackle this question explicitly. Most of those theories highlight central mediators that explain how and why fairness drives important employee reactions. Most of the theories also highlight categories or umbrellas of outcomes that are especially sensitive to those mediators. In that regard, the boxes under "Behaviors" in **Figure 2** tend to be collections of constructs rather than constructs themselves, as is apparent in the sections

below. Some of those collections are driven by cognitions—often about relevant authorities and groups—whereas others are driven by affect.

Cognition-Driven Behaviors

Social exchange theory has become perhaps the dominant framework for understanding how justice and fairness impact attitudes and behaviors in the workplace (Colquitt et al. 2013). Blau (1964) described relationships in *quid pro quo* terms, with one party offering some benefit in exchange for some reciprocation from the other party. In social exchanges, those benefits tend to be more unspecified and intangible, with relevant examples including assistance, advice, appreciation, compliance, social acceptance, and instrumental services. Organ (1990) brought these concepts into the organizational behavior realm by arguing that justice and fairness on the part of a supervisor or organization could constitute one of those intangible benefits. “Extra mile” efforts on the part of an employee could, in turn, constitute a reciprocation for such benefits.

Organ’s (1990) theorizing became the foundation of one of the most venerable arguments in the literature: Justice and fairness are benefits that cause a deepening of exchange relationships, taking them from more economic exchanges to more social exchanges. Once that deepening occurs, employees are more likely to engage in beneficial behaviors as a means of reciprocation. Of course, a key issue involved in testing such an argument is figuring out how to operationalize Blau’s (1964) social exchange relationship dynamic. As reviewed by Cropanzano & Byrne (2000), justice scholars, to capture that dynamic, have turned to a number of existing constructs, including trust (Mayer et al. 1995, McAllister 1995), commitment (Meyer et al. 1993, Mowday et al. 1982), psychological contract fulfillment (Robinson & Rousseau 1994), and perceived support (Eisenberger et al. 1986).

The use of trust as an indicator of social exchange relationships is consistent with Blau’s (1964) acknowledgment that trustworthiness must be demonstrated in order for relationships to deepen into social exchanges. It is also consistent with the argument that employees think about justice issues because they are uncertain about trustworthiness. The use of commitment as an indicator of social exchange relationships is also consistent with Blau’s (1964, p. 98) theorizing, as he described exchange relationships as “commitments to the other party.” For its part, the contract component of psychological contract fulfillment captures the *quid pro quo* nature of exchanges, with the fulfillment aspect conveying the same sort of favorable relationship data as trustworthiness or commitment. It is less clear whether perceived support fits well as an indicator of social exchange relationships. Perceived support reflects the sense that an authority values employees and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al. 1986). As such, it is conceptually similar to some of the benefits that Blau (1964) described, such as assistance, advice, and appreciation. Taken together, the constructs reviewed by Cropanzano & Byrne (2000) have been used by a number of scholars to capture the presumed exchange-deepening effects of justice and fairness (Colquitt et al. 2012, Konovsky & Pugh 1994, Lavelle et al. 2009, Masterson et al. 2000, Moorman et al. 1998, Tekleab et al. 2005).

A recent study examined the construct validity of the various social exchange operationalizations. Colquitt et al. (2014) gave participants the definitions of Blau’s (1964) benefit and social exchange relationship concepts. They then asked participants to read measures of trust, commitment, psychological contract fulfillment, and perceived support and indicate the degree to which the items matched the benefit definition and the social exchange relationship definition. Their results showed that McAllister’s (1995) affect-based trust was the most content-valid operationalization of the social exchange dynamic. Other forms of trust and commitment were valid in some tests but not in others. For their part, both psychological contract fulfillment

and perceived support were more valid operationalizations of benefits than the social exchange dynamic itself. Other than affect-based trust, the only valid indicators of the social exchange relationship dynamic were a measure of leader–member exchange that was tailored to social exchange concepts (Bernerth et al. 2007) and a four-item measure created by the authors that asked whether work relationships were characterized by mutual obligation, trust, commitment, and significance (Colquitt et al. 2014).

A recent meta-analytic review summarized the relationships between justice and a number of social exchange and reciprocity constructs (Colquitt et al. 2013). In terms of the former, justice was strongly and positively correlated with trust, commitment, perceived support, and leader–member exchange. In terms of the latter, justice was moderately and positively correlated with citizenship behavior and task performance, having moderate negative correlations with counterproductive behavior. Importantly, Colquitt et al. (2013) used meta-analytic structural equation modeling to create a higher-order social exchange variable with trust, commitment, perceived support, and leader–member exchange as indicators. Their results showed that the social exchange variable mediated the relationships between justice and both task performance and citizenship behavior, but not counterproductive behavior. On one hand, doing one’s job and “being a good soldier” seemed to represent ways of “giving back” for justice. On the other hand, “not being a bad apple” did not seem to possess that reciprocative quality.

Much of the rationale that social exchange theory offers for the effects of justice and fairness on work behaviors is shared by fairness heuristic theory. In his discussion of the fundamental social dilemma, Lind (2001a) notes that fairness perceptions shift employees from an individual mode—in which concerns about self-interest are overriding—to a group mode—in which collective well-being is paramount. He writes, “In group mode there is far less concern with, and far less attention paid to, the individual material payoffs associated with any given behavior. . . . Instead of monitoring and responding to individual material outcomes, people in group mode are primarily concerned with what is good for the group and what they can do to reach group goals” (p. 67). That pivot from caring about individual payoffs to attending more to the collective is reminiscent of the evolution from an economic exchange relationship to a social exchange relationship. Self-interested bookkeeping gives way to a longer and more expansive consideration of ways to contribute to the group.

Lind (2001a) goes on to describe a number of reactions associated with the group mode triggered by fairness perceptions. Among those is cooperation—behaving in a prosocial or progroup manner by working toward the achievement of collective goals. Indeed, such cooperation becomes the resolution of the fundamental social dilemma, with employees choosing to risk exploitation by accepting vulnerability to authorities. Conceptually speaking, cooperation is functionally equivalent to reciprocity in social exchange formulations, with citizenship behavior becoming an exemplar of that umbrella heading. Indeed, Lind (2001a) refers to studies linking justice with citizenship behavior when describing the conceptual roots of fairness heuristic theory.

Empirically speaking, tests of fairness heuristic theory’s propositions have tended to focus on the questions covered earlier in our review—why employees think about justice issues and how they form fairness perceptions. One exception was a field study by Jones & Martens (2009) that examined the perceived fairness of senior management in an international transportation organization. Consistent with the notion that fairness can pivot employees into a group mode, perceived fairness was strongly related to trust in senior management. Consistent with the notion that fairness is used to fill in the gaps when uncertainty about trustworthiness is present, that relationship was especially strong when participants indicated some ambiguity in their trust levels. Although Jones & Martens (2009) did not measure a cooperative behavior per se, they did assess turnover intentions. Within the context of the fundamental social dilemma, turnover intentions

would reflect opting out rather than risking exploitation through cooperation. Their results showed that perceived fairness and trust in senior management were both negatively related to turnover intentions. Thus, fairness led to attitudes and behavioral intentions that were indicative of a progroup, cooperative mindset.

A complementary rationale for the effects of justice and fairness on work behaviors is offered by the group engagement model (Tyler & Blader 2003)—the successor to the relational model (Tyler & Lind 1992). Whereas the relational model explained that employees think about justice because it provides data on how much the group values them, the group engagement model focuses on the attitudes and behaviors that result from justice. Once employees determine that they have been treated in a just or fair manner, the group engagement model argues that employees will feel both respected and proud (Tyler & Blader 2003). The sense of respect derives from the realization that the employee evidently does have status in the group. The sense of pride comes from the observation that the employee belongs to a group that possesses status itself—one that “does the right thing.”

The group engagement model further argues that respect and pride have two important consequences. First, they trigger identification with the group, as employees base their own esteem and sense of self on the success and well-being of the group. That psychological state is very reminiscent of fairness heuristic theory’s group mode—perhaps not surprising given that Lind’s (2001a) theorizing was also rooted in the relational model (Tyler & Lind 1992). That sense of identification then triggers what Tyler & Blader (2003) termed behavioral engagement. Once again reminiscent of fairness heuristic theory, behavioral engagement is described as cooperative behavior that assumes two forms: mandatory cooperation stipulated by the group and discretionary cooperation of the employee’s own volition. Thus, the group engagement model offers a complementary explanation for why justice and fairness can impact task performance and citizenship behavior—this time with the relevant mediator being identification (Tyler & Blader 2003).

The group engagement model’s propositions have been supported in a number of contexts. Tyler et al. (1996) tested the model in reference to a number of different groups, including participants’ immediate family, their work department, their college faculty, and their country’s court system. The results showed that the justice of the authorities predicted a sense of being respected and a feeling of pride in the group. Moreover, those perceptions predicted both mandatory cooperation (e.g., complying with group rules) and discretionary cooperation (e.g., citizenship behavior). A subsequent study by Blader & Tyler (2009) added identification to the mix. A study of an international financial services company and a national research panel showed that the relationship between justice and discretionary cooperation was mediated by a higher-order construct reflecting respect, pride, and identification. Employees identified with their organizations when they were treated in a just manner, and they were more behaviorally engaged as a result.

Affect-Driven Behaviors

The above sections argued that justice and fairness impact work behavior because they cause employees to think that they have a social exchange relationship, that they are in a sort of group mode, or that they identify with their collective. Of course, justice and fairness may impact work behaviors for reasons that go beyond thoughts—reasons having to do with affect. Bies (1987, p. 289) argued that studies of justice were sometimes guilty of a “psychologizing bias,” with scholars focusing more on cognition than emotion. He argued that justice and fairness matter most because their absence can trigger moral outrage—a sense of anger or resentment directed at an authority (see also Bies & Tripp 2002).

Bies's (1987) discussion of moral outrage resonates with subsequent writings on fairness theory and deonance theory (Folger 2001, 2012; Folger & Cropanzano 2001). Fairness theory has its roots in experimental studies showing that individuals reacted with anger and resentment when authorities did not treat them as they should be treated (e.g., Folger & Martin 1986, Folger et al. 1983). The transition to deonance theory has maintained that emotional focus, with individuals reacting to injustice or unfairness with anger because moral duties have not been upheld (Folger et al. 2005). Indeed, deonance theory has even been applied to understand reactions to an authority's own behavior and to understand how third parties react to someone else's treatment. Those sorts of applications have made relevant other moral emotions, such as guilt, shame, indignation, and sympathy (Folger, 2001, 2012; Folger et al. 2005; Folger & Cropanzano 2001).

As is explored more fully in the next section, behaviors can often be affectively spontaneous rather than cognitively premeditated (Weiss & Cropanzano 1996). Neither fairness theory nor deonance theory is explicit about the behaviors that might be spontaneously triggered by moral emotions. However, research in related corners of the justice and behavioral ethics literatures have identified a number of relevant examples. For example, Goldman (2003) surveyed employees at an unemployment office who had recently been laid off. His study revealed that injustice predicted anger, with anger going on to predict legal claiming—filing a charge with a relevant body or suing a former employer. Work by Aquino and colleagues has centered on a number of other moral emotion-driven behaviors (Aquino et al. 2006, Tripp et al. 2007). Those include revenge—a variant of counterproductive behavior that is motivated by getting even—and reconciliation—actions intended to make amends.

As a more general formulation that is not focused on the justice literature, affective events theory is relevant to several types of emotions—not merely moral ones (Weiss & Cropanzano 1996). Those emotions can be incorporated into the formation of fairness perceptions, as noted above, but can also result from fairness perceptions (Barsky et al. 2011). Weiss & Cropanzano (1996) reviewed a number of emotion families that could function in such roles, including anger, fear, sadness, joy, and surprise. For example, it may be that violations of justice rules trigger a number of feelings in the anger family, including disgust, envy, irritation, and exasperation. Alternatively, violations of justice rules may trigger feelings in the sadness family, such as disappointment and sympathy. For its part, adhering to justice rules could trigger a number of feelings in the joy family, such as cheerfulness, contentment, optimism, and zest.

Empirical studies have supported several such linkages. For example, a laboratory study by Weiss et al. (1999) varied whether participants received a positive outcome or a negative outcome using either a just procedure, a favorably biased one, or an unfavorably biased one. Their results showed that a positive outcome was associated with more joy than a negative outcome was. Moreover, anger was highest when a negative outcome was the product of an unfavorably biased procedure. Krehbiel & Cropanzano (2000) replicated many of those findings in another laboratory study while also showing that unfavorable outcomes resulted in sadness. Rupp & Spencer (2006) explored similar issues in a laboratory study that mimicked a call center. Undergraduates played the role of customer service agents who took calls from confederates who either adhered to or violated interpersonal justice rules. The results showed that justice was positively associated with joy and negatively associated with anger.

Field studies linking justice to emotions present unique challenges given that emotions are short lived and may not be recalled correctly at later points in time (Weiss & Cropanzano 1996). Some studies have therefore utilized an experience-sampling methodology in which employees complete surveys every day for a period of one or more weeks. For example, Judge et al. (2006) surveyed hospital and high school employees regarding their daily perceptions of justice and their daily reports of anger. Perceptions of injustice were associated with more anger, even when dispositional

or trait anger was controlled for. Similar findings were shown in an experience-sampling study by Yang & Diefendorff (2009). Studies that do not use experience sampling wind up assessing something that lies between emotions and job attitudes. For example, Fox et al. (2001) linked justice to negative affective well-being—an index that asked participants how often they had experienced negative emotions over the previous month. Other studies have combined justice with sentiments, which originate when positive or negative emotions become attached to some object, such as a supervisor, coworker, or organization (Scott et al. 2007).

Affective events theory argues that emotions can impact behavior in two ways (Weiss & Cropanzano 1996). First, emotions may color relevant work attitudes, which go on to affect cognition-driven behaviors. For example, anger could reduce trust in a manager, lowering citizenship behavior that aids that manager as a result. The second way concerns affect-driven behaviors—actions that are a direct function of the feeling states experienced by an employee. For example, anger could trigger a spontaneous lashing out at a supervisor, even in the absence of any change in relevant job attitudes. Each of the studies reviewed above wound up linking emotions to relevant work behaviors, with all of them connecting negative emotions to counterproductive behaviors (Fox et al. 2001, Judge et al. 2006, Yang & Diefendorff 2009). Examinations of positive emotions are more rare, but studies have linked positive feeling states to citizenship behavior (George 1991, Lee & Allen 2002), presumably because of spontaneous prosocial urges.

Colquitt et al.'s (2013) meta-analytic review also included emotions, which were grouped into broad positive and negative affect categories. Justice was moderately related to both positive affect and negative affect in the expected directions. Moreover, their meta-analytic structural equation modeling showed that the affective variables mediated the relationships between justice and task performance, citizenship behavior, and counterproductive behavior. Unlike the social exchange constructs, affect seemed able to explain both “being a good soldier” and “being a bad apple.” Notably, however, the number of studies examining affect-based mediators paled in comparison to the number of studies examining social exchange-based mediators. Given that, Colquitt et al. (2013) called for more research that integrates the two kinds of mediators.

The last theory covered in **Figure 2** focuses on one specific emotion valence. The focus of uncertainty management theory is the argument that justice and fairness matter more when employees are uncertain about something (Lind & Van den Bos 2002, Van den Bos & Lind 2002). Because it focuses on a moderator that should impact virtually any justice or fairness effect, the theory devotes less attention to specific mediating or outcome variables. However, one particular brand of mediator seems evident in this passage from Lind & Van den Bos (2002, pp. 195–96): “Fair treatment helps people manage their uncertainty, we have suggested, both because it gives them confidence that they will ultimately receive good outcomes and because it makes the possibility of loss less anxiety-provoking or even, as in fair gambles, enjoyable. Conversely, unfair treatment under conditions of uncertainty gives the uncertainty a particularly sinister complexion, and makes people even more uneasy.” The authors seem to hone in on negative emotions as a mediator—emotions such as fear or anxiety.

To this point, tests and applications of uncertainty management theory have focused more on the core interactions proposed by the theory than on factors mediating the effects of justice or fairness on work behaviors. Tests of those core interactions have indeed used negative emotions as outcome variables (Van den Bos 2001b, Van den Bos & Miedema 2000). By contrast, studies that have focused on mediating effects have tended to use self-report measures of uncertainty as the mediator, rather than particular negative emotions. For example, Desai et al. (2011) examined perceptions of uncertainty as a mediator of the justice–performance relationship. Colquitt et al. (2012) examined the same linkage, showing that uncertainty mediated the justice–performance relationship even when the mediating effects of commitment were also considered. What remains

to be seen is whether uncertainty perceptions are an effective mediator because of the negative emotions that orbit them, or because of some more cognitive mechanism.

What About Issues of Focus and Target?

In sum, **Figure 2** illustrates that employees may react to justice and fairness with a number of cognitions and emotions and that those cognitions and emotions can shape several kinds of work behavior. Before leaving this section, we should address a question that has occupied a great deal of theoretical and empirical attention in the justice literature: Will the relationships in **Figure 2** be stronger if the focus of the justice or fairness matches the target of the cognition, emotion, or behavior? For example, will organization-focused justice be a better predictor of trust targeted at the organization than trust targeted at the supervisor? Will supervisor-focused justice be a better predictor of anger targeted at the supervisor than anger targeted at the organization? Will organization-focused justice be a better predictor of citizenship behavior targeted at the organization than citizenship behavior targeted at the supervisor?

On one hand, the notion that effects will be stronger when focus and target match is consistent with some of the theories in **Figure 2**. Social exchange theory would suggest that the benefits received by one exchange partner should be reciprocated back to that same exchange partner (Blau 1964). Affective events theory would suggest that a stimulus should trigger an emotion directed at that stimulus, with relevant action tendencies also impacting that stimulus (Weiss & Cropanzano 1996). On the other hand, empirical studies that have included multiple foci for justice and multiple targets for mediators and outcomes do not consistently yield stronger relationships in cases in which focus and target match (Horvath & Andrews 2007, Karriker & Williams 2009, Liao & Rupp 2005, Rupp & Cropanzano 2002). Of course, any given empirical study is limited with respect to sample size, making comparisons across relationships difficult.

Fortunately, two different meta-analyses have tackled this issue. Colquitt et al. (2013) did so by comparing matching correlations with mismatching correlations within the four justice dimensions. For example, they compared the correlation between supervisor-focused interpersonal justice and trust targeted at the supervisor (.55) with the correlation between organization-focused interpersonal justice and trust targeted at the supervisor (.47). As another example, they compared the correlation between organization-focused procedural justice and citizenship behavior targeted at the organization (.23) with the correlation between supervisor-focused procedural justice and citizenship behavior targeted at the organization (.34). Their review included 36 such comparisons; only 3 revealed a case in which a matching focus-target correlation was statistically significantly stronger than a mismatching focus-target correlation. The authors noted that the predicted effects for matching versus mismatching did not emerge because supervisor-focused justice seemed more predictive in general, regardless of whether it was predicting supervisor- or organization-targeted criteria. Colquitt et al. (2013) speculated that supervisor-focused justice may be more salient to employees, and more observable and interpretable, than organization-focused justice.

A similar pattern emerged in a meta-analysis by Rupp et al. (2014). Rather than making comparisons within justice dimensions, the authors created aggregate supervisor- and organization-focused justice variables. Those aggregates wound up having something of an “apples and oranges” problem, however, given that the supervisor-focused justice aggregate was disproportionately composed of interpersonal justice and the organization-focused justice aggregate was disproportionately composed of procedural and distributive justice (see their figure 1). Nonetheless, their table 2 included nine comparisons of matching and mismatching focus–target correlations with organization-targeted outcomes. None of those comparisons yielded a matching correlation

that was statistically significantly stronger than its mismatching counterpart. Their table 3 included nine comparisons of matching and mismatching focus–target correlations, this time with supervisor-targeted outcomes. Six of those comparisons yielded a matching correlation that was statistically significantly stronger than its mismatching counterpart. Thus, the benefits of matching focus to target emerged only with supervisor-targeted outcomes, likely because supervisor-focused justice is more predictive in general.

We should note that Rupp et al. (2014) presented regression analyses in their tables 5 and 6 that seem indicative of matching effects being stronger than mismatching ones. However, those regression analyses were based on a meta-analytic correlation between supervisor-focused justice and organization-focused justice that could have been reduced by the “apples and oranges” issue noted above. Moreover, many of those regressions examined supervisor-focused justice and organization-focused justice alongside distributive, procedural, and interpersonal justice. Those regressions therefore seemed to be using part–whole correlations given that the aggregate variables were coded from the specific dimensions. Regardless, such regressions would rarely occur in a primary study, where either an aggregate approach would be taken or a dimensional approach would be taken.

In sum, the notion that effects will be stronger when the focus of the justice matches the target of the outcome is consistent with some of the theories in **Figure 2** and may seem conceptually cleaner. However, that conceptual cleanliness is not supported by the results patterns in primary studies (Horvath & Andrews 2007, Karriker & Williams 2009, Liao & Rupp 2005, Rupp & Cropanzano 2002) or the correlational results of meta-analyses (Colquitt et al. 2014, Rupp et al. 2014). Even when results do yield stronger relationships for focus–target matching, the advantage is not large enough to be statistically significant in primary studies or many meta-analytic comparisons. It may be that the distinctions between justice foci are clearer to scholars than they are to participants, especially when supervisors come to embody their organizations (Eisenberger et al. 2010).

MANAGING JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS IN ORGANIZATIONS

How do the questions pursued in our review shed light on managing justice and fairness in organizations? How can these principles be leveraged to improve employee effectiveness and well-being, and organizational profitability and success? We would argue that two issues are critical: (a) Justice and fairness must come to pervade organizational functioning, and (b) justice and fairness must be considered whenever new technological or business trends begin to change the nature of work. See the sidebar, Practical Implications, for a summary.

In terms of the first point, we would argue that little is gained when justice characterizes an event here or an event there. In terms of **Figure 1**, entities must become more just and more fair. One way to accomplish this is to consider justice with respect to every human resource decision that occurs in organizations. That systemic view would seek to ensure that recruitment and selection experiences are handled in a just manner (e.g., Bauer et al. 2001). The assignment and structuring of training would also be done fairly (e.g., Quinones 1995). Justice rules would be used to structure and manage performance appraisals (e.g., Greenberg 1986) and to choose among the options for designing compensation systems (e.g., Dulebohn & Martocchio 1998). Finally, justice principles would be front and center in any communications regarding separation, to benefit both the victims and the survivors (e.g., Brockner et al. 2004).

Another way to accomplish justice and fairness on an entity basis is for organizations and supervisors to commit to creating a justice culture. Schein (2010) describes culture as having three levels to it: (a) basic underlying assumptions that serve as the foundation for beliefs and values; (b) the espoused values that serve as spoken ideals, goals, and priorities; and (c) the observable

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Consider justice with respect to every human resource decision that occurs in organizations.
 - Ensure that recruitment and selection experiences are handled in a just manner.
 - Structure and assign training with justice rules in mind.
 - Use justice rules to develop and manage performance appraisals and design compensation.
 - Make justice principles central to any communication regarding separation.
- Commit to creating a justice culture by integrating fairness into organizational beliefs, values, and artifacts.
 - Emphasize fairness in published documents and signage about company priorities.
 - Celebrate and ritualize instances of especially fair treatment.
 - Include fairness as a central dimension of supervisor evaluations.
- Foster justice and fairness by keeping step with key changes in the workplace.
 - Maintain quality interactions by encouraging timely, polite, and candid electronic communications.
 - Consider employee fairness reactions when developing policies regarding electronic monitoring practices.
 - Understand the impact of boundary-crossing technologies on the frequency of justice-relevant information and experiences.

artifacts that are visible, feelable, and touchable by employees themselves. Those artifacts may include published documents and signage, rituals and ceremonies, language, technology, products, practices, manners of address, and the physical environment. Assuming the founders or top management of an organization believe that justice matters and that fairness serves as an espoused value, how could such artifacts be used to create a justice culture? Justice could be emphasized in published documents and signage about company priorities, instances of especially fair treatment could be celebrated in ceremonies or rituals, language and manners of address could be shaped in accordance with justice rules, and justice could take on especially salient roles in key practices. For example, interview questions could focus on justice rules when hiring employees or when promoting supervisors, and justice could become a more central dimension of supervisor evaluations 360-degree feedback interventions. Taken together, such artifacts could foster a shared perception of justice, or justice climate (Naumann & Bennett 2000).

In terms of the second point, whatever system is created to foster justice and fairness on an entity level will need to keep step with key changes in the workplace. For example, many organizations no longer follow traditional work arrangements with full-time employees working 9–5 in the same office. Instead, they are made up of full-time, part-time, and contracted employees working not only from their organization’s headquarters but also at home and in satellite offices. A recent report by the Economist Intelligence Unit and SHRM Foundation identified emerging changes in the workplace, including demographic shifts, globalization efforts, workplace diversity, an emphasis on service over manufacturing industries, and the proliferation of communication technology in the workplace (Econ. Intell. Unit 2014). It is beyond our scope to discuss all of these changes; thus, it is the last change—the proliferation of communication technology—that we focus on for our discussion. Technology introduces new avenues for communications and interactions, connecting employees to their coworkers and organization 24 hours a day. As such, technology presents interesting new issues related to justice and fairness.

Teleworking

Through technological advancements, more employees are taking part in teleworking—defined as working outside the traditional workplace and communicating with coworkers through computer-based technology (Bailey & Kurland 2002). How leaders allocate and manage teleworking likely impacts employee fairness perceptions. These supervisor decisions impact both teleworkers and nonteleworkers alike, presenting a “grass is greener” problem between teleworkers and nonteleworkers. Teleworking also changes the primary mode of communication between employees and their supervisors (Gajendran & Harrison 2007). Electronic communications create potential interpersonal and informational justice concerns, with interactions potentially becoming less polite, timely, candid, and adequate.

When supervisors implement teleworking policies, their allocation process may tap into all three distributive justice rules. Depending on the organization, teleworking may be afforded equally across employees, based on equity, or on an as needed basis (Thatcher & Bagger 2011). Furthermore, teleworking may impact how supervisors allocate workloads, with absent coworkers being asked to do fewer emergent or impromptu tasks. Such inequities would have their own impacts on distributive justice. Indeed, Thatcher & Bagger (2011) suggest that the most significant justice issues arise not between supervisors and their employees, but rather between teleworkers and nonteleworkers. Finally, the spatial distance between a teleworker and their home office may infuse more uncertainty in their relationships and work expectations. In terms of **Figure 2**, such uncertainty could amplify the importance of other justice issues.

A recent meta-analysis found that teleworking does not have a significant negative impact on the quality of a teleworker’s relationships with coworkers and supervisors (Gajendran & Harrison 2007). However, most teleworking studies focus on relationships between supervisors and employees in which the employees are teleworking. Golden & Fromen (2011) discuss the potential justice issues in situations in which supervisors—rather than employees—are themselves teleworking. They suggest that employees will perceive teleworking supervisors as less fair than on-site supervisors. Investigating these various relationships will contribute to our understanding of how teleworking influences justice and fairness.

Electronic Monitoring

Technology allows employees to access their work and communicate with coworkers from anywhere via laptops and smartphones. Accessibility is a double-edged sword, however. Employees have the ability to access their work from anywhere, but they also have the ability to access nonwork websites from work. Of course, organizations can monitor employee online activity to ensure productivity and monitor cyberloafing—employees using their organization’s internet for personal use during work (Lim 2002). Some organizations also monitor employee behavior on social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) regardless of whether the use occurred during business hours. These practices, regardless of whether they are outlined in policy handbooks, are likely to incite reactions related to justice and fairness.

Specifically, electronic monitoring may create uncertainty about morality. Opponents of electronic monitoring claim it is an invasion of privacy and breeds mistrust in organizations (Alder & Ambrose 2005). Moreover, employees are likely to ask themselves what should be done in regard to monitoring their online behaviors. If employees believe that supervisors should not monitor their behaviors—perhaps because they think monitoring is unnecessary or too invasive—they will perceive electronic monitoring as unfair. Indeed, deonance theory speaks to the visceral

“that’s not fair” reactions that may accompany invasions of privacy (Folger 2001). Such concerns may arise regardless of whether electronic monitoring is permissible based on organizational policies.

In a recent empirical study, Alder & Ambrose (2005) conducted a laboratory experiment to examine how feedback constructiveness and medium of communication influenced the perceived fairness of monitoring. They found that participants perceived monitoring to be more fair when the feedback given was constructive rather than destructive and given face-to-face rather than computer-generated. Constructive face-to-face feedback demonstrates sensitivity and respect and provides more adequate justifications—rules relevant to interpersonal and informational justice (Alder & Ambrose 2005). These findings suggest that the way monitoring is handled may have its own impact, regardless of what employees think of monitoring itself.

Coworker Connectedness

Technology also allows employees to be more connected to their organization, their coworkers, and other members of their field. Through boundary-crossing technologies—personal blogs, social media profiles, tweets, and other media forum—employees are inundated with information about what happens in their organizations, in their coworkers’ personal and professional lives, and in competing organizations (Sánchez Abril et al. 2012). This connectedness may increase the frequency with which employees experience, witness, and share justice-relevant events. That connectedness may also bring noise, however, perhaps providing conflicting and unreliable information that increases uncertainty more than the information decreases it.

Coworker connectedness could initiate more justice events, resulting in more data relevant to **Figure 1**. Interpersonal justice issues may be especially salient as employees utilize electronic communications to voice their opinions about their organization to coworkers and outsiders. The sharing of such opinions may create uncertainty about status and trustworthiness, as employees attempt to sort out which coworkers share valuable information, what information is reliable, what the information says about their status, and what information might be spread about themselves. That connectedness could also allow employees to make equity comparisons that go beyond close referent others to include employees in other areas of their organizations or even in other organizations altogether (Scholl et al. 1987).

Researchers have recently begun to discuss how boundary-crossing technologies impact employee connectedness. Sánchez Abril et al. (2012) suggest that the entrance of electronically connected “millennials” into the workplace may require employees to find new ways to set privacy boundaries and revise workplace norms related to connectedness. Similarly, Mainiero & Jones (2013) discuss how texting and instant messaging present new challenges regarding electronic communications when coworkers utilize boundary-crossing technologies to communicate with each other outside of work. They suggest that organizations should establish procedures to manage social media usage between coworkers and intervene when inappropriate communications occur. Similar to potential reactions to electronic monitoring, some employees may interpret policies related to nonwork activities as a violation of privacy and see them as unfair.

CONCLUSION

Justice and fairness are issues that resonate throughout employees’ working lives. Employees think about justice-relevant events and entities when they feel uncertain. They think about (and feel) justice and fairness as they consider their relationship with their employer and how much of their

identity to devote to it. Those thoughts and feelings go on to impact a number of important behaviors, from cooperation to engagement to spontaneous positive and negative actions. Managing justice and fairness therefore becomes a critical task for supervisors and the organization as a whole. Doing so requires a systemic and cultural commitment while also attending to technological changes that raise new justice issues while changing how fairness information is shared and communicated.

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