Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 131 (2015) 132–148

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp

Ingratiation and popularity as antecedents of justice: A social exchange and social capital perspective

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 26 September 2013
Revised 30 June 2015
Accepted 3 September 2015
Available online 9 November 2015

Keywords:
Organizational justice
Popularity
Social exchange theory
Social capital
LMX
Ingratiation

ABSTRACT

We contribute to an emerging literature viewing organizational justice as an endogenous outcome that employees may attempt to proactively influence instead of an exogenous event to which employees react. Drawing on social capital and social exchange theory, we test a model whereby employees' ingratiation toward their supervisor leads to higher levels of justice as a result of higher leader–member exchange (LMX) quality. We further identify employee's popularity as a boundary condition, such that popular employees do not benefit from ingratiation in terms of LMX quality. Across three studies utilizing a variety of methodological designs, assessing constructs from different sources, and taking place in both controlled experimental settings as well as field settings, we largely find consistent results for our hypotheses. Overall, our findings extend theory on organizational justice by illuminating the role that employees' volitional behavior, as well as the social context surrounding that behavior, play in influencing justice.

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1. Introduction

Scholarly interest in organizational justice has never been higher. In a recent meta-analysis, Colquitt et al. (2013) identified 1155 published manuscripts on the topic of justice from just the previous decade, of which 413 were ultimately included in the analysis. Though sometimes conceptualized in an overall sense (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Colquitt, 2012), organizational justice is often better known through its constituent dimensions: distributive, procedural, informational, and interpersonal (Colquitt, 2008). Distributive justice refers to rules governing the distribution of outcomes and is typically fostered by adherence to a norm of equity (Adams, 1965). Procedural justice captures adherence to rules about decision-making procedures, specifically whether those decisions provide employees with voice and are made in an unbiased, consistent, accurate, correctable, ethical, and representative fashion (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Informational justice reflects rules about whether employees are provided with truthful explanations for decisions, and interpersonal justice reflects rules about whether employees are treated with dignity and respect (Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1993).

For years, scholars have largely directed their research efforts toward understanding employee reactions to their perceptions of justice (Scott, Colquitt, & Paddock, 2009). Theoretical models associated with this approach place justice as an exogenous factor that affects employee attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Arguably, the intense focus on this perspective has solidified the importance of organizational justice to the management literature by linking it with outcomes such as commitment, performance, and health (e.g., Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2013; Robbins, Ford, & Tetrick, 2012). Indeed, Colquitt (2012, p. 537) recently asserted that, without this focus, "it is difficult to conceive of how the literature could have grown as fast as it did in the past two decades."

Given the general consensus that perceptions of justice are associated with important outcomes, scholars have recently begun to investigate the antecedents of justice (Colquitt, 2012; Scott et al., 2009). This "justice as a dependent variable" approach (Brockner, Wiesenfeld, Siegel, Bobocel, & Liu, in press; Folger & Skarlicki, 2001; Scott, Colquitt, & Zapata-Phelan, 2007) changes how justice is conceptualized by treating it as an endogenous construct that may be driven by factors related to organizations, supervisors, or employees themselves (see: Gilliland, Steiner, Skarlicki, & Van Den Bos, 2005). By modeling justice as an outcome, the supervisor's role as a lynchpin in the process of treating employees with justice becomes clear, as adhering to justice rules

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2015.09.001
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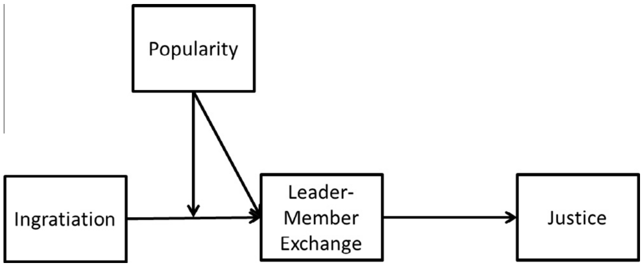

Fig. 1. Hypothesized model. *Notes:* Ingratiation, popularity, and justice were operationalized in a number of different ways across three studies to demonstrate the robustness of this model. In study 1, we operationalize ingratiation as a self-report and justice as an employee perception of overall justice. In study 2, we operationalize ingratiation and popularity as experimental manipulations, and justice as an actor's intention to treat an employee with overall justice, informational justice, and interpersonal justice. In study 3, we operationalize ingratiation as a self-report, popularity as an aggregated coworker report of a focal employee, and justice as an employee perception of informational and interpersonal justice.

is generally at the supervisor's discretion (particularly for informational and interpersonal justice rules; Scott, Garza, Conlon, & Kim, 2014).

Because employees value justice (Blader & Tyler, 2005), and because justice can be transacted to employees at the supervisor's discretion, it may be seen as a resource that supervisors can provide to employees as part of an ongoing social exchange relationship (Blau, 1964; Foa & Foa, 1974). As such, we propose a theoretical model (Fig. 1) that identifies the supervisor's assessment of leader–member exchange (LMX) quality with an employee as a key antecedent of the level of justice received by that employee. This then raises an interesting question: If justice represents a resource provided in a social exchange relationship, then what might employees contribute that leads to higher levels of justice from the supervisor?

To answer this question, we incorporate a social capital lens (see: Adler & Kwon, 2002) to examine how an employee's social capital may serve as such a contribution. Specifically, we suggest two ways in which employees can use social capital to contribute to their LMX relationship: by developing social capital directly with the supervisor through ingratiation (i.e., Westphal & Clement, 2008), or by drawing on the social capital they possess as a result of their social position within their work group (i.e., their popularity; Scott, 2013; Scott & Judge, 2009). In addition, drawing from Adler and Kwon (2002), we propose that these two sources of social capital are substitutable (e.g., Howell, Dorfman, & Kerr, 1986), such that a high level of either form of capital is sufficient to achieve a strong LMX relationship.

By illuminating LMX as a mediator of the relationships between ingratiation and justice, and popularity as a moderator of those relationships (i.e., moderated mediation; Edwards & Lambert, 2007), we extend theory and research on the justice as a dependent variable approach to organizational justice by providing answers to both *why* and *for whom*, respectively (Whetten, 1989). In so doing, we add to the growing literature that specifically investigates employee characteristics as antecedents of justice, and we extend this research by incorporating social capital and social exchange perspectives to provide a broader theoretical picture of why certain employees receive higher levels of justice in the workplace. We test our model in a multi-method series of three studies (a within-individual field study, an experimental study, and a multi-source [employees, supervisors, and coworkers], cross-sectional field study) that build upon each other and provide constructive replications of our results (Leavitt, Mitchell, & Peterson, 2010).

2. Employee characteristics affecting the receipt of justice

As noted at the outset, research on justice as a dependent variable is growing, with studies examining organizational (Gilliland & Schepers, 2003; Schminke, Ambrose, & Cropanzano, 2000), managerial (Ambrose, Schminke, & Mayer, 2013; Scott et al., 2014) and employee (Cornelis, Van Hiel, De Cremer, & Mayer, 2013; Zapata, Olsen, & Martins, 2013) factors as antecedents of justice. Although investigating characteristics of organizations and managers is undoubtedly important, we focus our attention on employee characteristics as we believe it is important to highlight the ultimate recipients of justice. In contrast to organizational and managerial characteristics, which imply that levels of justice experienced by employees will be similar for a given factor (e.g., employees in smaller organizations perceive higher levels of interactional justice; Schminke et al., 2000), a focus on the employee can uncover whether *certain employees* are more likely to receive higher levels of justice, regardless of the particular managerial or organizational factors that are present. This has important practical implications, as the relationship between employee characteristics and higher levels of justice suggests that employees may be capable of shaping the justice they receive from their supervisors.

To date, a small number of studies have investigated the role of employee characteristics. Korsgaard, Roberson, and Rymph (1998) found in a lab study (but failed to replicate in a field quasi-experiment) that students who communicated assertively influenced others' adherence to informational rules of justice. Scott et al. (2007) found that charismatic subordinates elicited more positive sentiments and fewer negative sentiments from their supervisor, sentiments which were in turn related to adherence to interpersonal (but not informational) rules of justice. Zapata et al. (2013) linked employee trustworthiness indirectly to adherence to interpersonal and informational rules of justice through felt obligation and trust. Finally, two other studies (Cornelis et al., 2013; Hoogervorst, De Cremer, & Van Dijke, 2013) found that employees with higher belongingness needs were likely to receive higher levels of procedural justice.

These studies have laid a strong foundation for the notion that some employees are likely to receive higher levels of justice than others, and our focus on social capital builds upon this foundation in two ways. Regarding social capital developed through ingratiation, we suggest that employees may be able to influence the level of justice they receive through their own volitional behavior. This extends the scope of prior research described above as charisma is generally regarded as a stable individual difference and, though an employee may certainly be in control of their actions that lead others to make assessments trustworthiness, ultimately that judgment lies with the observer (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Zapata et al., 2013). Although findings from Korsgaard et al. (1998) are suggestive, their results are somewhat equivocal as they could not demonstrate this effect outside of a laboratory setting. Finally, a study by Dulebohn and Ferris (1999) provides indirect evidence in support of our position by showing that employees who used influence tactics as a form of voice during performance evaluations perceived more procedural justice. Regarding social capital arising from an employee's popularity, here we address calls to more broadly incorporate the social context into justice models (Masterson & Tong, 2015). Our focus here illuminates a way in which an employee's social position among coworkers can affect the level of justice received from the supervisor.

Before proceeding further however, there is an important (and implicit) assumption underlying our model specifically, and justice as a dependent variable research that focuses on employee characteristics more generally, that should be made explicit. This assumption is that supervisors may enact differential levels of

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