



Organizational justice and conflict: Do perceptions of fairness influence disagreement?



Shannon Kerwin^{a,1}, Jeremy S. Jordan^{b,*}, Brian A. Turner^{c,2}

^aDepartment of Sport Management, Brock University, 500 Glenridge Ave., St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S3A1

^bSchool of Tourism & Hospitality Management, Temple University, 371 Speakman Hall, 1810N. 13th St., Philadelphia, PA 19122, United States

^cSport Management, The Ohio State University, A264 PAES Building, 305W. 17th Ave, Columbus, OH 43210, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 April 2014

Received in revised form 22 October 2014

Accepted 24 October 2014

Available online 28 November 2014

Keywords:

Distributive justice

Procedural justice

Interactional justice

Informational justice

Intragroup conflict

ABSTRACT

Organizational justice may be a vital factor in the development of conflict between personnel within sport organizations. Specifically, perceptions of injustice may increase the potential for disagreement regarding codes of conduct and organizational procedures. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of multiple dimensions of organizational justice (i.e., distributive, procedural, interactional, and informational) on the perception of intragroup conflict. Paid staff from 262 regional sport commissions and convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) across the United States responded to an online study to measure perceptions of justice and conflict. Results indicating procedural, interactional, and informational justice predicted the perception of intragroup conflict in this setting. The unique impact of each type of justice may be explained by instrumental and relational models, which has implications for sport management theory and practice.

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1. Introduction

The formalization of relatively small non-profit, public sector sport organizations has taken place over the last decade; however, many voluntary sport associations operate on a fairly informal basis (see Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). Kerwin, Doherty, and Harman (2011) found that formalized policies and procedures influence the perceived intensity of intragroup conflict within sport organizations. More specifically, when formalization is present sport board members perceive less intense disagreements about tasks and processes, which results in increased positive (i.e., satisfaction, motivation) and decreased negative (e.g., stress, withdrawal) individual outcomes.

Interestingly, formalized policies, regulations, and codes of conduct are also associated with perceptions of fairness in the context of sport organizations (see Hums & Chelladurai, 1994a, 1994b). The examination of workplace fairness, labeled organizational justice, measures perceptions of fairness experienced by organizational personnel (Greenberg, 1990). Given the shift to formalization, it is increasingly relevant for formalized procedures and policies to be communicated and understood for perceptions of fairness to emerge. As such, organizational justice may be a vital component in the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 011 215 204 3811; fax: +1 011 215 204 8705.

E-mail addresses: skerwin@brocku.ca (S. Kerwin), jsjordan@temple.edu (J.S. Jordan), turner.409@osu.edu (B.A. Turner).

¹ Tel.: +1 11 905 688 5550.

² Tel.: +1 011 614 247 8374.

development of conflict between personnel within sport organizations in that perceptions of injustice with regard to policies, and regulations may increase the potential for disagreement regarding codes of conduct (e.g., tasks) and procedures (e.g., processes). Despite this conceptual argument, examination of the association between perceptions of justice and conflict has received scant empirical attention. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of multiple dimensions of organizational justice on the perception of intragroup conflict. The context for the study was regional sport commissions and convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) across the United States of America, where the concepts of justice and conflict may be quite prevalent. The mission of sport commissions and CVBs is to facilitate tourism and economic development within local communities through the bidding and hosting of sport events of all sizes (GSC, 2014). As such, these organizations operate in contexts that are characterized by competition for budget allocation and the consistent interaction of diverse stakeholders with potentially different needs. Both characteristics may result in conflict over scarce resources, as well as increased potential for competing agendas and political disagreements (Bradshaw, Murray, & Wolpin, 1992).

Previous research has suggested that perceptions of organizational justice are relevant in that perceived inequity may result in greater amounts of perceived conflict, which lowers the quality of outcomes (see Cropanzano, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007). Despite sporadic empirical support for this association, it may be an oversimplified model given the need to examine a multi-dimensional framework of organizational justice has been suggested (Colquitt, 2001). This suggestion adds complexity regarding the influence of fairness on important group and individual outcomes.

Given that conflict among personnel can impede organizational functioning (Kerwin & Doherty, 2012), dissecting the antecedents of conflict in non-profit sport organizations becomes increasingly relevant as these organizations tend to operate with limited paid staff and volunteer boards, which may extrapolate the negative effects of dysfunction (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). Further, Amis, Slack, and Berrett (1995) suggested that voluntary based sport organizations (e.g., local clubs and commissions, provincial and national sport organizations) are more susceptible to internal conflict as a result of the dual leadership that occurs between paid staff and volunteer boards of directors. As such, conflict between personnel regarding decision-making and internal processes is often ripe in this context (Amis et al., 1995; Auld, 1997; Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1995).

A relatively weak association between the facets of organizational justice and outcomes (e.g., satisfaction) has been noted in the literature (Colquitt, 2001), suggesting that perhaps mediating interactive processes should be acknowledged (Choi & Sy, 2010). To that end, intragroup conflict has been suggested as contributing to decision quality (a measure of performance), satisfaction, and commitment in non-profit sport boards (Hamm-Kerwin & Doherty, 2010) where continued examination of the factors involved in the conflict triggering process was recommended. According to fairness theory (cf., Folger & Cropanzano, 1998, 2001) perceptions of what is just or unjust may lead to affective reactions (i.e., potential for conflict), which may in turn impact performance outcomes. This theory suggests that individuals will act to ensure equitable results (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998), a situation that may promote conflict “events” in contexts where perceptions of inequity may exist. As noted by Amis et al. (1995) and Hoye and Cuskelly (2007), attempts to correct perceptions of inequity in decisions may be prominent in non-profit sport organizations given the tensions between increased professionalization and dual leadership functions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Organizational justice

As noted above, organizational justice is concerned with perceptions of fairness in the workplace. This line of research examines how and why employees make judgments of fairness and how these determinations impact work-related behaviors and attitudes. Previous research has found that employees are more likely to demonstrate positive work attitudes and behaviors when they perceive the organization and authority figures as fair (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Conversely, when employees feel they have not been treated fairly in work-related matters, they are more likely to respond with anger, resentment and retaliatory behaviors (Nabatchi, Bingham, & Good, 2007; Priesemuth, Arnaud, & Schminke, 2013). Given the importance of fairness in the work environment, there has been vast discussion regarding the dimensionality of organizational justice over the last 50 years. Initially viewed as a unidimensional construct (Adams, 1965), scholars have since recognized that organizational justice is comprised of multiple dimensions that individually, as well as collectively, impact perceptions of fairness (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, 2001). Extant research supports the position of Greenberg (1993), who proposed a four dimension model of organizational justice which includes distributive justice, procedural justice, and two factors of interactional justice: interpersonal justice and informational justice (Colquitt, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001; Crawshaw, Cropanzano, Bell, & Nadisic, 2013; Goldman et al., 2007). Research on the dimensionality of organizational justice has shown that these four factors are empirically distinct and therefore should be differentiated from one another (Colquitt, 2001).

Distributive justice is determined by the perceived fairness of outcomes experienced by an employee. Adams (1965) found that employees were more likely to view organizational outcomes as fair when they were consistent with expectations based on perceived effort or “inputs”. Procedural justice is based on judgments of fairness regarding the policies and procedures used in the decision making process of organizations (Ambrose, 2002; Cropanzano & Schminke, 2001). Initial research on this construct was conducted by Thibault and Walker (1975) who explored litigant perceptions of fairness with the legal process. Their work, specifically the importance of process influence and control, was first applied to an

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