Is adhering to justice rules enough? The role of charismatic qualities in perceptions of supervisors' overall fairness

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ABSTRACT

Our study challenges the consensus that perceptions of overall fairness are driven solely by adherence to justice rules—that "what seems fair" depends solely on "what seems just." Building on emerging theorizing on incidental affect and fairness appraisals, we argue that charismatic qualities of supervisors can predict employee perceptions of overall fairness, even when controlling for supervisors' justice rule adherence. We develop theory for how and when charismatic qualities could exert such effects by drawing on existing models of affect and by introducing a new construct—event frequency—that captures how frequently supervisors make resource allocation decisions. The results of a field study suggest that supervisor charismatic qualities predict overall fairness by arousing positive affect that colors fairness perceptions. The effects of charismatic qualities become stronger as decision events become more frequent, presumably because the information processing associated with those events provides additional opportunities for fairness to be infused with affect.

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1. Introduction

"My boss is a fair boss." For three decades, the consensus in the justice literature has been that a sense of fairness is fostered by *justice rule adherence*. Leventhal, Karuza, and Fry (1980: 194) argued, "…judgments of fairness involve contrasting an existing situation to an abstract standard or rule…Perceived fairness exists when the actual distribution or procedure is congruent with the ideal standard." Leventhal et al.'s (1980) analysis focused on procedural justice rules (e.g., consistency, accuracy, bias suppression, correctability, representativeness, ethicality) and distributive justice rules (e.g., equity, equality, need). In the years since, the landscape has expanded to include interpersonal justice rules (e.g., respect, propriety) and informational justice rules (e.g., truthfulness, justification) (Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1993). Thus, supervisors should be viewed as fair if they act consistently, accurately, equitably, respectfully, and truthfully.

That summarizing statement can be seen quite clearly in the burgeoning literature on *overall fairness*. Overall fairness is a Gestalt sense that supervisors have behaved as they should (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Ambrose, Wo, & Griffith, 2015). It is

a global perception of the appropriateness of one's supervisor that is thought to lay downstream from a supervisor's adherence to justice rules (Colquitt & Rodell, 2015; Colquitt & Zipay, 2015; Cropanzano, Fortin, & Kirk, 2015). Scholars have used items such as, "Overall, I'm treated fairly by [my supervisor]" (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009, p. 493) and "All in all, this [supervisor] treats me fairly" (Kim and Leung (2007, p. 94) to capture this overall evaluation. Ambrose et al.'s (2015) review of the overall fairness literature noted that justice rule adherence has tended to serve as the sole predictor of overall fairness (e.g., Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Barclay & Kiefer, 2014; Holtz & Harold, 2009; Jones & Martens, 2009; Kim & Leung, 2007; Konovsky & Folger, 1991; Patel, Budhwar, & Varma, 2012). From this perspective, the assumption is that overall fairness is *justice-laden*.

Although the consensus that overall fairness is driven solely by justice rule adherence is foundational to the literature—going all the way back to Leventhal et al.'s (1980) theorizing—we believe it is incomplete and problematic. Emerging theorizing hints at the role that incidental affect might play in the formation of fairness perceptions (Barsky, Kaplan, & Beal, 2011). Positive feelings that have nothing to do with justice rules could "bleed into" those assessments. Moreover, inductive work hints at the role that supervisor traits might play in assessments of fairness (Hollensbe, Khazanchi, & Masterson, 2008). When employees were interviewed about what they drew on to gauge the fairness of their

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supervisor, one remarked, "Just her overall personality, the way she comes off…" Although not yet empirically tested, such theorizing suggests that assessments of overall fairness might be laden with "something else."

What "something else's" might be worthy of investigation? We drew on Barsky et al.'s (2011) and Hollensbe et al.'s (2008) theorizing to focus on supervisor traits that have affective relevance. Although a number of traits could fit those criteria, including extraversion and trait positive affectivity, we focused on *charismatic qualities*. This focus allowed us to explore one of the most salient traits in the leadership literature—a literature that has been surprisingly disconnected from justice research (Colquitt & Greenberg, 2003). Our study develops theory suggesting that assessments of overall fairness are *charisma-laden*, not merely justice-laden. Following Potts (2009: 2), we define charismatic qualities as "special innate qualities that set individuals apart and draw others to them."

Our theorizing integrates cognitive-motivational-relational theory (Lazarus, 1991) with the affect infusion model (Forgas, 1995). Cognitive-motivational-relational theory explains how and why a given stimulus can wind up having affective consequences. It is therefore ideally suited to explaining why supervisor charismatic qualities could trigger affect on the part of an employee. Rather than explaining how affect arises, the affect infusion model starts with affect and explains how and why it can color judgments and perceptions—like overall fairness. We therefore apply formulations that live, primarily, "upstream" and "downstream" of affect. Importantly, our theorizing argues that charismatic qualities could help shape overall fairness even when controlling for justice rule adherence (see Fig. 1).

We also build theory by introducing a new construct: event frequency. This construct captures how often supervisors make decisions about pay, rewards, evaluations, promotions, and assignments. As shown in Fig. 1, we theorize that event frequency influences when overall fairness should be more justice-laden or charisma-laden. More frequent decision events mean more justice data; less frequent decision events mean less justice data. Our results will show that event frequency shapes the effects of justice rule adherence and charismatic qualities in a counterintuitive way.

Developing theory about when overall fairness is more justice-laden and when it is more charisma-laden is important, empirically, practically, and theoretically. Empirically, justice scholars have begun including only measures of overall fairness in their studies—eschewing the assessment of justice dimensions altogether (e.g., Bobocel, 2013; Jackson, Rossi, Hoover, & Johnson, 2012; Priesemuth, Arnaud, & Schminke, 2013; Whiteside & Barclay, 2013). Such studies assume that overall fairness represents a parsimonious aggregate of the justice dimensions and their effects. If overall fairness is also charisma-laden, however, those studies may draw conclusions that are conceptually incomplete. Indeed, Ambrose et al. (2015) noted that the justice dimensions often explain less than half the variance in overall fairness, suggesting that there are other drivers of fairness perceptions that scholars must begin to understand.

Practically, supervisors may be evaluated on the overall fairness perceived by their employees, either in 360-degree contexts or in formal appraisals by their bosses. One leading 360-degree tool assesses supervisors on a number of items that possess fairness content (Dalal, Lin, Smith, & Zickar, 2008). Such assessments could trigger decisions about justice training—developmental attempts to improve justice rule adherence (Skarlicki & Latham, 2005). If overall fairness is also charisma-laden, such efforts may wind up focusing more on "unmagnetic" supervisors than "unjust" supervisors.

Theoretically, the assumption that fairness is driven solely by justice rule adherence is held by many theories in the literature—including equity theory (Adams, 1965), the relational model (Tyler & Lind, 1992), fairness heuristic theory (Lind, 2001), and uncertainty management theory (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002)—as well as organizing models in narrative reviews (Colquitt, 2012;
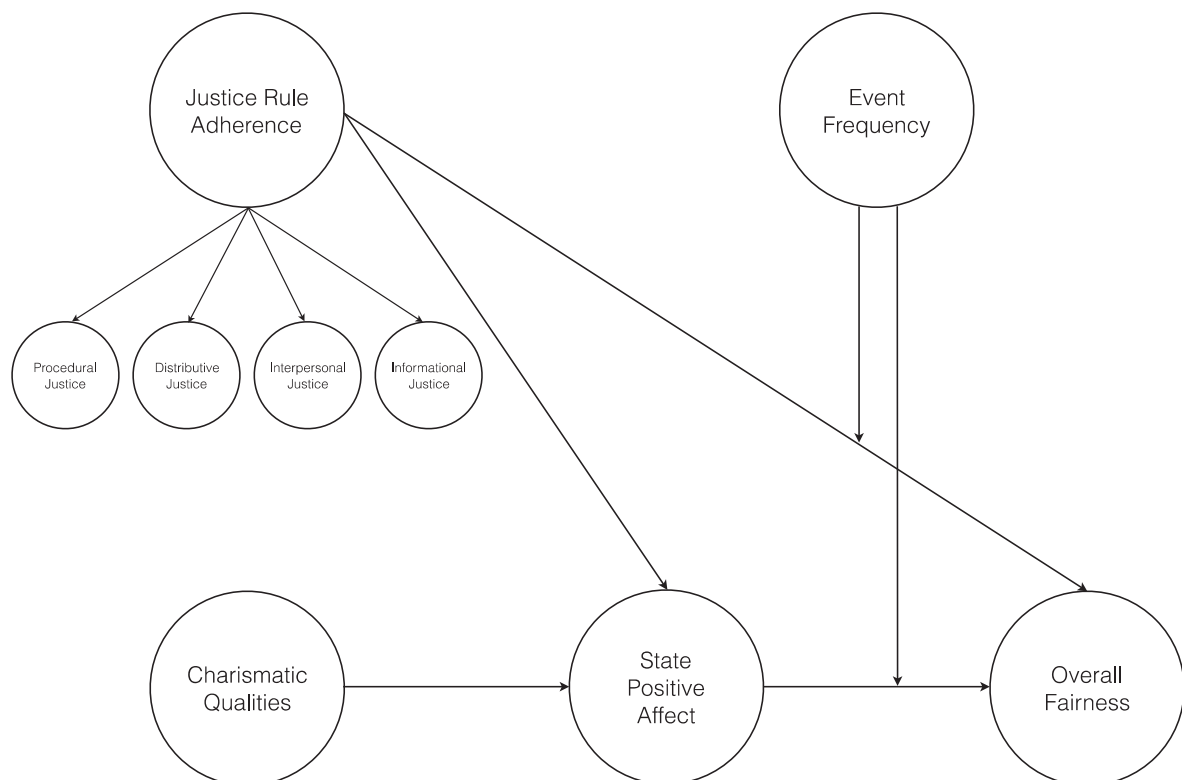

Fig. 1. How and when charismatic qualities predict overall fairness.