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## Green with envy and nerves of steel: Moderated mediation between distributive justice and theft<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The relationship between distributive justice and theft is well established, but the underlying mechanism for this relationship is not yet well understood. We expect that the discrete emotions that individuals experience when they have been paid unfairly may influence how they behave and their personality traits help them cope with unfair pay. In the present study, we therefore use the appraisal model to examine which discrete emotion (i.e., anger, disappointment, and envy) mediates the relationship between distributive justice and theft and conservation of resources theory to examine how emotionality is a personal resource that varies among individuals to help them cope with unfair pay. Participants were randomly assigned to an experimental condition where we manipulated the fairness of the pay that they received, measured the discrete emotions that they felt after being informed of their pay, and objectively measured how much they stole. The results indicate that envy mediates the relationship between distributive justice and theft and there is a moderating effect of emotionality on distributive justice and envy; and envy and theft. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Workplace theft is particularly problematic in today's economic climate because some organizations are temporarily reducing their labor costs through salary cuts, freezes, and reduced variable pay (Kennedy, 2003). Depending on how they are conducted, these cost-cutting approaches may elicit perceptions of an unfair distribution of resources or low levels of distributive justice, which may lead employees to steal or to take organizational property without authorization (Greenberg, 1993). Scholars have long acknowledged that emotions have an important role in how individuals respond to low levels of justice (Barclay, Skarlicki, & Pugh, 2005). Emotions are also an important mechanism in predicting unethical behavior because individuals often seek to relieve emotional distress from inequity by engaging in dishonesty (Gino

& Pierce, 2009). Although justice theories often discuss emotions, the mediating role of discrete emotions is largely underresearched (Barclay et al., 2005; De Cremer & van den Bos, 2007). Discrete emotions are unique emotional states that include specific emotions such as envy and anger (Barrett, 1998; Izard, 2007).

There has been some debate about which emotions arise from low distributive justice (e.g., Bembeneke, Beike, & Schroeder, 2007). Some authors suggest that anger is a typical response (e.g., Homans, 1961), but other authors disagree and suggest that low levels of distributive justice lead to disappointment (e.g., Bembeneke et al., 2007). It has also been proposed that individuals experience envy when they make social comparisons with others about fairness (Cohen-Charash & Byrne, 2008; Smith, Parrott, Ozer, & Moniz, 1994). Researchers have also called for more studies that investigate how different individuals respond to and recover from violations to their perceptions of justice (e.g., Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009), which may indicate that there are personality differences that help individuals cope with low distributive justice. The purpose of our study is to therefore examine the role of discrete emotions and personality traits in predicting why people steal, which was disguised by informing participants that the study was about how personality traits affect user performance on websites. The participants first completed a survey on their personality and demographic variables before performing a computer task that involved browsing through websites with various layouts.

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Following the computer task, the research assistant manipulated the amount of compensation given. Participants in the high distributive justice condition were paid the advertised amount of \$20 whereas those in the low distributive justice group were originally told that they would be paid \$20, but then later told that they would only receive \$2.

### 1.1. The mediating role of discrete emotions

The appraisal model refers to a cognitive process that individuals use to interpret or appraise events by evaluating their goals and coping resources (Frijda, 1987; Lazarus, 1991). Based on these appraisals, there are unique consequences to each discrete emotion depending on how individuals cope with their emotions (e.g., Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 1987). Theft may be motivated by both the desire to retaliate against organizations and the desire to restore equity (Greenberg, 1996). However, an important determinant of whether individuals steal to retaliate or to restore equity depends on the justice conditions. Low levels of distributive justice have been shown to predict equity restoration behaviors, whereas retaliation behaviors occur as a result of other types of injustice (Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002).

Consequently, individuals in our study will be more likely to steal because of the desire to restore equity because we are examining the relationships in the context of low distributive justice. The discrete emotion of envy will predict theft because the goal of envious individuals is to restore equity or reduce their gap with envied others (Ben-Ze'ev, 1992; Heider, 1958). As such, envy may elicit theft because engaging in this behavior can help individuals by regulating their emotions, equalizing the outcomes between the envious and the envied, and protecting the self-esteem of envious individuals (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007).

At first glance, a similar discrete emotion of anger may seem related to theft but studies have shown that the relationship is weak. Anger tends to elicit aggressive behaviors to regain threatened outcomes and creates a desire to retaliate (Ganem, 2010; Levine, 1996; Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 1987). Indeed, empirical studies show that anger is weakly related to theft ( $r = .12$ ; Chen & Spector, 1992). As such, we need to more closely examine the assumption that anger predicts counterproductive workplace behavior (Grandey, 2008).

Disappointment will also be unlikely to predict theft. When individuals experience disappointment, they typically forfeit unattainable goals or withdraw (Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 1987). As a result, disappointed individuals are more likely to quit or withdraw because although they expected a positive outcome, they have unmet expectations and feel powerless. This response suggests that disappointed individuals are unlikely to cope with this emotion by stealing. Based on the appraisal model, although we expect that unfair pay will elicit all three emotions, only envy will predict theft because individuals will steal to regain their threatened outcomes and reduce the gap with their envied other.

### 1.2. The moderating role of emotionality

Even though individuals may vary in how they respond to unfairness (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001), there is still a lot of uncertainty as to what accounts for these variations. One personality trait in particular, emotionality, may be especially relevant to understand why individuals may be more or less inclined to engage in theft. Individuals high on emotionality tend to be oversensitive, emotional, anxious, and fearful, as opposed to those low on this trait that are tough, self-assured, and stable (Ashton & Lee, 2005; Ashton, Lee, & Goldberg, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2005). This dimension is somewhat reminiscent but not fully captured in other personality models (e.g., Big Five) that have

generally shown to have negligible effects on theft (Lee, Ashton, & de Vries, 2005). Emotionality is hypothesized to be an important individual characteristic based on conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which suggests that individuals seek to acquire and protect resources (e.g., material, social, personal) to avoid strain (i.e., adverse employee reactions). Personality traits may help aid in stress resistance because individuals see the world as occurring in their best interest and it reduces the impact that stressors have on their well-being. In this case, we predict that emotionality will help individuals cope with unfair pay whereby individuals with low emotionality scores will experience less envy as distributive justice decreases and engage in less theft as envy increases.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The total sample size was 160 undergraduate students from a medium-sized university. The average age of participants was 22 years old; 43% were male and 57% were female. A between-subjects experimental design was used in which the amount of pay was manipulated. An experimental design that tests the appraisal model and COR theory is used to respond to calls for more laboratory experiments on this topic (e.g., Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007). Most of the existing literature uses questionnaires, cross-sectional data, and single source measures (Cohen-Charash & Byrne, 2008; Spector & Fox, 2002). An experimental design addresses these issues and is furthermore useful because it allows us to measure actual behavior rather than theft intentions (Colquitt, 2008; Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007).

The amount of compensation was manipulated by informing participants that there was a typo in the study's advertisement and even though other participants had been paid \$20, the mistake was not realized until then, and that they would be paid \$2. The participants then completed a questionnaire that included the remaining measures and task-related questions. The assistant then compensated participants by handing each participant an envelope containing change and informing participants to take their compensation and leave the rest in the envelope. The research assistant went out of the room while participants took their compensation; this was their opportunity to engage in theft. A unique number was written imperceptibly in pencil on the inside flap of the envelopes to link the amount of change left in the envelope with a unique identification number. After participants left the room, they were debriefed about the true purpose of the study. All participants relinquished the change that they had initially taken for themselves without divulging how much change had been taken, and were then fully compensated. Care was taken to emphasize the need to use deception to preserve the potential contributions of the research. Participants were informed that their responses were confidential because we used unique numeric identifiers. Contact information for the lead author and a counseling service were provided in case participants were distressed.

### 2.2. Measures

Distributive justice was measured with three items (Greenberg, 1993). Participants rated each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*extremely*). This measure was chosen because it is most relevant to this particular study.

We measured all twenty-six of the discrete emotions identified in the emotions scale developed by Weiss, Suckow, and Cropanzano (1999) in order to disguise the particular emotions being studied. Participants were given a list of discrete emotions

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