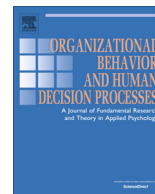




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# The utility of a multifoci approach to the study of organizational justice: A meta-analytic investigation into the consideration of normative rules, moral accountability, bandwidth-fidelity, and social exchange

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## ABSTRACT

Multifoci justice pulls from research on social exchange theory to argue that despite the proliferation of rule sets in the literature (often referred to as the “types” of justice), individuals seek to hold some party accountable for the violation/upholding of such rules, and it is these parties (e.g., supervisors, the organization as a whole) that are most likely to be the recipients of attitudes and behaviors (i.e., target similarity effects). To explore these issues, we meta-analytically ( $k = 647$ ,  $N = 235,682$ ) compared the predictive validities of source- vs. type-based justice perceptions and found that (a) multifoci justice perceptions more strongly predicted outcomes directed at matched sources than did type-based justice perceptions, (b) multifoci justice perceptions more strongly predicted target similar than dissimilar outcomes, and (c) the relationships between multifoci justice perceptions and target similar outcomes were mediated by source-specific social exchange.

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*“One’s sense of fairness is grounded in basic ethical assumptions of normative treatment. The sense of injustice, therefore, often involves holding someone accountable for a deliberate transgression of acceptable conduct”*

- Folger, Cropanzano, & Goldman, 2005, p. 216

*“Justice types, although distinct, may not in the final analysis be very different in either their dynamics or their consequences.”*

- Lind, 2001, p. 225

## Introduction

The fields of organizational justice and behavioral ethics are inextricably linked via their joint focus on ethics-related judgment

and decision making processes. Whereas behavioral ethics research often focuses on individuals’ conformity to rules and norms of morality and ethicality (e.g., Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006), or the extent to which moral judgment enters into decision processes (e.g., Loviscky, Treviño, & Jacobs, 2007; Thoma & Rest, 1999), organizational justice research largely focuses on how individuals judge the actions of others and how these judgments drive subsequent attitudes and behaviors, also focusing on individuals’ use of normative rules for what is considered ethical or just (Folger, 2001; Singer, 2000). A fundamental phenomenon shared by both of these fields is moral accountability (Ciulla, 2004; Folger & Cropanzano, 2001). That is, regardless of whether the focus is on actors or observers, or on victims or perpetrators, the judgments studied in both of these domains require actions for which there is a responsible party (Petrick & Quinn, 2001; Smiley, 2009).

In this paper, we explore two distinct but overlapping aspects of justice perception formation: normative rules and moral or ethical<sup>3</sup>

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accountability. The former operationalizes justice perceptions as individuals' assessment of the extent to which normative rules (i.e., distributive, procedural, and interactional justice rules) have been upheld or violated. The latter focuses on how specific parties (e.g., supervisors, coworkers, the organization as a whole) are seen as upholding or violating these normative rules, as well as the relational processes that follow such judgments. Although these differences may seem subtle at first glance, and although the perspectives often overlap, in this paper we seek to investigate just how important precision with regard to these two characteristics is for understanding how individuals react to workplace (in)justice.

In the following sections, we review the theoretical foundations of normative justice rules and accountability processes. Then, based on research on bandwidth-fidelity (i.e., the alignment of the specificity of predictor and criterion variables), moral accountability, and social exchange, we offer three hypotheses suggesting that approaches that incorporate *both* notions of normative rule sets and accountability processes will have the most utility for predicting variance in attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. To test these hypotheses, we coded the scales used to measure justice variables across studies spanning nearly 30 years (over 640 studies involving over 235,000 participants) according to these two characteristics. This allowed us to use meta-analysis combined with regression and path analysis to consider the relevance of justice rules and accountable parties in explaining variance in outcomes targeting such parties, as well as the mediating role of social exchange in such processes.

#### *Justice “types:” the application of normative rules*

Distributive, procedural, and interactional justice (DJ, PJ, and IJ, respectively) are often written about and described as “types” of justice perceptions (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt & Shaw, 2005). That is, the constructs are assumed to represent employees' perceptions of whether the outcomes they receive, the procedures used to determine outcomes, and both the information conveyed about procedures and the interpersonal treatment bestowed as information is shared, are all *fair*. In this sense, the perceptual targets of justice judgments are thought to be outcomes, procedures, and informational/interpersonal encounters, and as a result, for decades, justice has been treated as a multidimensional construct, with these justice types modeled as predictors of workplace outcomes (for reviews, see Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001).

Despite being commonly treated this way, outcomes, procedures, and interactions were not originally theorized as perceptual targets, but rather as labels for sets of rules or criteria used by perceivers to arrive at justice perceptions. Thus, DJ, PJ, and IJ, were not originally proposed to be fairness perceptions on their own. Rather, they have been theorized to be one piece of the perception formation process whereby a focal party is deemed to be fair or unfair (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Further, this tripartite model was not the product of a unitary theory focused on mapping the perceptual domain of justice. Rather, these three constructs (or four, if interactional justice is further subdivided into informational and interpersonal justice) represent three research traditions developed over a long period of time, which have spanned multiple theoretic disciplines (see Byrne & Cropanzano, 2001).

The lion's share of early justice research focused on the social psychology of *distributive justice*, and largely dealt with the rules applied by employees to determine the fairness of outcomes such as pay. This included rules of equity (Adams, 1965), equality, and need (Deutsch, 1975; Leventhal, 1976). The concept of *procedural justice* was introduced by Thibaut and Walker (1975), who proposed process control, and Leventhal (1980), who proposed consistency,

bias-suppression, accuracy, correctability, representativeness, and ethicality as the normative criteria for procedural justice. This work took a social psychological approach, but was often couched in the legal literature and focused on legal phenomena (Thibaut & Walker, 1978; Thibaut, Walker, La Tour, & Houlden, 1974). The intention here was to show that procedural justice can mitigate the backlash caused by delivering unfavorable outcomes. Much later, organizational scholars proposed that additional rules seemed to govern the acceptability of how procedures were implemented in organizations, and added politeness, dignity, respect, and the thoroughness of explanations (delivered by the party accountable for carrying out the procedure) as criteria for *interactional justice* (Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1993).

Thus, from multiple disciplines and across four decades emerged three sets of criteria used *as part of* the justice perception formation process. Each rule set was proposed in a sequential fashion, and was argued to moderate the effects of the dominant construct of the time. DJ effects were shown to be mitigated by PJ, PJ effects were shown to be mitigated by IJ, and so forth (see Brockner, 2010 for a review of the vast literature on DJ  $\times$  PJ  $\times$  IJ interactions; and Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2001 for discussions of the interchangeability of justice types; see also Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997). What we feel is important to note is that somewhere along the line, researchers took this largely contextual research (i.e., much of this research treated justice perceptions not as perceptions in the attitudinal sense, but as self-reports of whether management complied with normative standards surrounding outcome favorability, organizational policies, and interpersonal treatment) to represent the classes of judgments made by employees. This led to the development of well-validated measures of these three (four) facets, and meta-analyses which many saw as confirming this perceptual structure (Colquitt, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001). Yet Colquitt and colleagues, who are by far the most cited supporters of this structure, have made clear in their writing that the type-based justice measures are nothing more than employees' reports on whether or not the normative justice rules posed in past theories have been violated (with each item largely representing one of the rules or criteria).

Ambrose and Arnaud (2005) also pointed out that these rules are technically antecedents to the justice types, and thus not the elements of justice perceptions *per se*. Thus procedures, outcomes, and interpersonal treatment may not constitute perceptual targets, but rather theory-based sets of rules that employees can use to evaluate their working conditions, which are likely used in the process of holding a party accountable for their actions (see also Lind, 2001). Whereas these rules have formed the zeitgeist of justice scholarship, and whereas research has long argued that individuals are particularly sensitive to violations of normative rules surrounding the treatment of others (Mikula, Petri, & Tanzer, 1990; Treviño & Bies, 1997), the specification of differential parties, differentially held accountable for different types of justice violations, has received considerably less attention in comparison. We find this surprising given the universal agreement regarding the importance of accountability in how individuals come to perceive and react to injustice (Cropanzano, Chrobot-Mason, Rupp, & Prehar, 2004; Folger & Cropanzano, 2001).

#### *Holding parties morally accountable for normative rule violations*

The concept of moral accountability has been a prevailing theme throughout the history of justice scholarship, and remains a salient feature of behavioral ethics research (Weiner, 1995). For example, ethics research has uncovered the importance of blame attributions for predicting responses to unfair behavior (e.g., revenge, reconciliation, forgiveness; Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Much of this research pulls from

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