



## Seeing the “forest” or the “trees” of organizational justice: Effects of temporal perspective on employee concerns about unfair treatment at work

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### ABSTRACT

What events do employees recall or anticipate when they think of past or future unfair treatment at work? We propose that an employee's temporal perspective can change the salience of different types of injustice through its effect on cognitions about employment. Study 1 used a survey in which employee temporal focus was measured as an individual difference. Whereas greater levels of future focus related positively to concerns about distributive injustice, greater levels of present focus related positively to concerns about interactional injustice. In Study 2, an experimental design focused employee attention on timeframes that differed in temporal orientation and temporal distance. Whereas distributive injustice was more salient when future (versus past) orientation was induced, interactional injustice was more salient when past orientation was induced and at less temporal distance. Study 3 showed that the mechanism underlying the effect of employee temporal perspective is abstract versus concrete cognitions about employment.

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### Introduction

An important source of motivation at work is whether employees feel they are fairly treated. However, the nature and target of reactions to workplace unfairness can depend on whether the unfairness experienced primarily relates to outcomes (distributive justice), processes and procedures (procedural justice), or explanations and the quality of interpersonal treatment (interactional justice) (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, 2001; Colquitt, Wesson, Porter, Conlon, & Ng, 2001; Conlon, Meyer, & Nowakowski, 2005; Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000). Although a single event can involve multiple justice dimensions, due to limited attentional resources employees often focus on and react to specific types of injustice at the expense of others (Lind, 2001; Skitka, 2003). Thus, an important question becomes: what type of (in)justice gets the attention of employees and when?

We propose that the unjust events employees bring to mind can depend on the temporal perspective taken: whether an individual focuses on the past or the future (*temporal orientation*), and on events that are near or distant in time (*temporal distance*). Consider the situation of an employee who experiences an unfair outcome (such as unpaid overtime hours) as well as unfair interpersonal treatment (such as being yelled at in front of co-workers). Which

event will he or she be more likely to remember, and which event will be of concern in the future?

We explore in three studies the effect of temporal perspective on the salience of different types of unjust events. In Study 1, we relate individual differences in temporal focus to concerns about workplace injustice using a survey methodology. In Study 2, we relate experimentally manipulated temporal perspective to the types of unfair events recalled and anticipated at work. Finally, in Study 3, we explore the mechanism behind the effects of temporal perspective by experimentally manipulating cognitions about employment.

### Temporal perspectives

The temporal perspective taken by individuals can be influenced by context and by individual differences. Some situations can direct employee attention to specific timeframes, such as when employees are asked to evaluate the past year at work, while in other situations a temporal perspective is implicit. For example, if an employee evaluates his or her organization or supervisor, the entire history of the relationship may be examined (Hollensbe, Khazanchi, & Masterson, 2008). Conversely, fairness evaluations relating to a specific project, teamwork experience, or temporary appointment are likely to focus on a specific, bounded period of time. Temporal perspective can also result from an individual's predisposition to, for example, focus on the future more than on the present or the past (Hofstede, 2001; McGrath & Tschann,

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2004; Shipp, Edwards, & Schurer Lambert, 2009; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). In this research we consider the effects of temporal perspective both as a measurable trait difference and as a contextual factor that can be manipulated.

Little is known about the effects of temporal perspectives on work-related phenomena. However, research in other areas comparing how individuals recall the past versus anticipate the future has led to interesting findings. For example, aspects of experiences that are important in anticipation may no longer matter as much when experiences are considered in retrospect (Kahneman, 2000; Reyna & Brainerd, 1995). Events recalled are also different from events anticipated in terms of the sensorial, contextual and emotional detail (Anderson & Dewhurst, 2009; D'Argembeau and Van der Linden, 2004). Features of experiences that determine intertemporal choices over a short time span are not the same features that are important over larger time spans (Frederick, Loewenstein, & O'Donoghue, 2002). Finally gains and losses are valued differently in retrospect versus in anticipation, and moral judgment is harsher for future as opposed to past transgressions (Caruso, 2010; Caruso, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2008; Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008). Thus, temporal perspectives can affect how experiences are perceived and evaluated.

Although the effects of temporal perspective on organizational justice perceptions have not been examined, several streams of research propose important justice phenomena that relate to the objective passage of time. For example, the temporal order in which justice facets, such as procedural or distributive justice, are experienced can influence their relative potency (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos, 2001). Similarly, procedural (versus distributive) justice becomes less important long after an event, when the outcome can be better understood and evaluated, than directly preceding or directly following an event, when the fairness of the outcome might still be uncertain (Ambrose & Cropanzano, 2003). Also, negative work-related attitudes and behaviors can result from employees anticipating future injustice (Shapiro & Kirkman, 2001). Though important, the above temporal effects differ in several respects from our focus on the effects of temporal perspective.

First, most studies that elicit perceptions of an unfair event do not examine whether the organizational actor would have thought of the event had he/she not been prompted to do so. It is thus important to also consider how time affects the salience of events, in terms of whether they are spontaneously brought to mind. Second, when justice events at time 1 are shown to lead to fairness perceptions and outcomes at time 2, little attention is generally paid to the duration of the intervening time, i.e., smaller versus greater temporal distance. Third, while the effect of temporal orientation is implicit in some areas of research such as anticipatory injustice (Kirkman, Shapiro, Novelli, & Brett, 1996), factors affecting retrospective versus anticipatory judgments of organizational justice remain largely unexplored.

#### *Temporal perspective and employee concerns about injustice*

Examining the experience of work at a temporal distance makes that experience *psychologically distant*. Psychological distance occurs when an experience is in some way not part of one's direct and immediate perception and feelings (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). For example, experiences become more psychologically distant when they occur farther away geographically, when they happen to somebody else versus oneself, and when they are less versus more likely to occur (Liberman & Trope, 2008). Construal level theory (CLT) (Trope & Liberman, 2003) suggests that *psychological distance* affects how an experience is mentally represented. In general, more psychologically distant experiences are represented at a higher (versus lower) level of construal, defined as:

"High-level construals are relatively simple, decontextualized representations that extract the gist from the available information. These construals consist of general, superordinate, and essential features of actions. ... Low-level construals tend to be more concrete and include subordinate, contextual, incidental, "how" features of events. Changes in these features produce relatively minor changes in the meaning of the event. Low-level construals are thus richer and more detailed but less structured and parsimonious than high-level construals." (Trope & Liberman, 2003, p. 405)

Thus, when the experience of work is examined at a temporal distance it should be represented at a higher level of construal. The greater the temporal distance, the more schematic is that representation, involving definitional aspects of work primarily, and little, if any, idiosyncratic detail. Although construal level theory has tended to focus on the effects of temporal distance, temporal orientation can similarly affect the representation of an experience. Future experiences that are hypothetical and uncertain are more psychologically distant and therefore will be represented at a higher level of construal than experiences in the past or present (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Todorov, Goren, & Trope, 2007; Wakslak, Trope, Liberman, & Aloni, 2006). In this research, we propose that psychological distance resulting from both temporal distance and temporal orientation will have important effects on justice reasoning.

We use construal level theory (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2003) to argue that temporal perspective can affect whether employees focus on *the forest* (general, definitional features) or *the trees* (specific, contextualized events) of their employment relationship. This, in turn, can affect whether employees are more likely to "see" unfair events that violate general and definitional aspects of the employment relationship versus other types of unfair events.

Day-to-day experiences at work can fulfil a variety of material, social, and esteem goals. Therefore, when employees construe their employment relationship at a low or contextualized level, they pay attention not only to general features of employment but also to specific details, peripheral goals, contextual peculiarities, and social relationships. In contrast, when employees construe their employment relationship at a high level, their cognitions become more simplistic, and hold the minimum content necessary (that people typically agree on) to distinguish employment from other social situations.

A distinctive aspect of the employment relationship is that employees perform work as directed by the organization and in return receive recognition, material rewards, and career opportunities. This aspect of work is therefore likely to feature prominently in high level construals of employment. Such an "economic" focus is present in both transactional and relational psychological contracts, although relational contracts have an additional socioemotional aspect (Rousseau, 1990). Indeed the association between employment and monetary gain is learned in early childhood before individuals develop richer representations of work, and adults often define work as a means of earning a living (Chaves et al., 2004). Rousseau (2001) argues that at higher levels of abstraction, employment is often conceived of in terms of the clauses of labor contracts, which generally focus on material rather than socioemotional outcomes. In contrast, because respectful treatment is expected both at work and in other social situations, it is less definitional of work and less likely to feature in high level construals of employment. This is not to say that socioemotional aspects of work are not important, only that they do not figure as prominently when work is represented at a higher level of construal.

For the above reasons, we expect distributive and interactional dimensions of justice to be differentially salient when employment

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