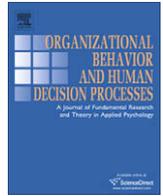




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp

Procedural justice, interactional justice, and task performance: The mediating role of intrinsic motivation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 December 2006

Accepted 7 August 2008

Available online 17 September 2008

Accepted by Dave Harrison

Keywords:

Procedural justice
Interpersonal justice
Performance

ABSTRACT

This manuscript reports the results of two studies, one in the laboratory and one in the field, both of which examined intrinsic motivation as a mediator of the relationship between justice and task performance. Using fairness theory, we argued that procedural justice and interpersonal justice would have significant, independent effects on intrinsic motivation. In general, the results showed that procedural justice predicted both self-reported and free-choice based measures of intrinsic motivation. Procedural justice also predicted task performance, a relationship that was partially mediated by intrinsic motivation. In contrast, interpersonal justice was not significantly related to either intrinsic motivation or task performance. We discuss the implications of these results for the continued integration of the justice and motivation literatures.

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Research in organizational justice, a literature focused on the experience of fairness in organizations and other task-focused environments (Greenberg, 1987), has increased significantly over the past decade (see Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2005, for a narrative review). One reason for that increase is that perceptions of fair treatment have been linked to a number of beneficial employee behaviors (Conlon, Meyer, & Nowakowski, 2005). For example, meta-analytic reviews have yielded a moderately strong positive relationship between procedural justice, the perceived fairness of decision-making processes (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), and task performance (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). That relationship suggests that taking steps to make decision-making more fair may actually improve individuals' fulfillment of task duties.

Despite the practical importance of the procedural justice–task performance relationship, justice scholars have devoted surprisingly little attention to the theoretical mechanisms that could explain such results (Colquitt, Greenberg, & Scott, 2005). Indeed, scholars have spent much more time providing a conceptual rationale for the relationships between justice and other beneficial

behaviors, such as organizational citizenship behaviors, rule compliance, cooperation, and deference to authority (Lind, 2001; Moorman & Byrne, 2005; Tyler & Blader, 2000; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Part of that disparity in theoretical attention might be explained by the fact that earlier reviews of the justice literature were somewhat pessimistic about the ability of justice to influence task performance (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Nevertheless, without understanding the mediators that underlie the justice–task performance relationship, it is impossible to understand why fair treatment can have positive task-related consequences.

One potential mediator of the justice–task performance relationship is motivation. Latham and Pinder (2005) defined motivation as a set of energetic forces that initiates task-related behavior and determines its form, direction, intensity, and duration. One might expect that the motivational consequences of justice would be well-understood given that justice concepts are often discussed in narrative reviews of the motivation literature (Kanfer, 1991; Latham & Pinder, 2005). However, that association with the motivation literature is largely due to distributive justice, the perceived fairness of decision outcomes (Adams, 1965; Homans, 1961; Leventhal, 1976), as equity theory is viewed as one of the more venerable motivation theories. With few exceptions (e.g., Bell, Wiechmann, & Ryan, 2006; Colquitt & Chertkoff, 2002), scholars have failed to examine the motivational consequences of other justice dimensions. Indeed, in a recent review, Colquitt and Greenberg (2003) asked “Why is it that job satisfaction and organizational commitment are popular dependent variables in justice research, but motivation is virtually ignored?” (p. 99). Similarly, Cropanzano

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and Rupp (2003) asked “Wherefore organizational justice amidst theories of work motivation?” (p. 91).

The purpose of the present research was to examine a motivation-based explanation for the relationship between justice and task performance. We focused on procedural justice given that it has the strongest zero-order and independent relationships with task performance in meta-analytic reviews (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001). However, we also included interpersonal justice, which reflects the perceived fairness of the interpersonal treatment received during an authority’s enactment of procedures (Bies & Moag, 1986). In contrast to procedural justice, the task performance benefits of interpersonal justice remain unclear. Meta-analytic estimates revealed near-zero correlations with task performance but were based on very few studies (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001). Studies that have been published subsequent to those meta-analyses have sometimes yielded non-significant relationships between interpersonal justice and task performance (Colquitt, Scott, Judge, & Shaw, 2006; Kickul, Lester, & Finkl, 2002; Weaver & Conlon, 2003) and other times yielded significant relationships (Cropanzano, Prehar, & Chen, 2002; Ramaswami & Singh, 2003; Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002). Including interpersonal justice in our study therefore helps to extend our understanding of the potential performance effects of fair interpersonal treatment.

More specifically, the present research examined whether high levels of procedural and interpersonal justice could foster a sense of *intrinsic motivation* that would be positively associated with task performance. Intrinsic motivation exists when performing a task serves as its own reward, due to a sense of enjoyment and pleasure (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Intrinsic motivation therefore involves the experience of positive affect while tasks are being completed (Izard, 1977; Pretty & Seligman, 1984; Reeve, Cole, & Olson, 1986; Vallerand, 1997). We focused our investigation on intrinsic motivation for two reasons. First, intrinsic motivation offers a complement to the more extrinsic focus of equity theory and distributive justice, thereby broadening our understanding of justice and motivation. Second, past research has shown that procedural and interpersonal justice have significant effects on affect and emotions (Cropanzano, Weiss, Suckow, & Grandey, 2000; Krehbiel & Cropanzano, 2000; Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999), which gives those justice dimensions a potential relevance to intrinsic motivation. Below, we offer conceptual support for intrinsic motivation as a mediator of the justice–task performance relationship and describe two studies—one in the lab and one in the field—that test that prediction.

Theory and hypotheses

The topic of intrinsic motivation has been researched by a number of scholars in a number of different literatures. Deci and colleagues examined the topic in their tests of self-determination theory, which focuses on how the fulfillment of specific human needs impacts the regulation of behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Deci et al., 1999). Hackman and Oldham (1980) examined the topic in their tests of job characteristics theory, which focuses on qualities of jobs that can inspire a cycle of motivation powered by self-generating (rather than external) rewards for good work. Intrinsic motivation concepts can also be found in Csikszentmihalyi’s (1997) work on “flow”—a state in which individuals become so involved and immersed in task activities that they lose track of time. Finally, intrinsic motivation concepts have been incorporated into the literature on psychological empowerment, described as an active motivational orientation in which an individual wishes to (and is able to) shape his or her work role (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Although there are some differences in these perspectives, most acknowledge that positive affect is a core element of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Izard, 1977; Pretty & Seligman, 1984; Reeve et al., 1986; Vallerand, 1997). For example, Deci and Ryan (1985, p. 34) stated, “emotions are integrally related to intrinsic motivation”. Their statement is reflected in self-report measures of intrinsic motivation (for examples, see Guay et al., 2000; Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2003), which assess interest and enjoyment as key components (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Interest and enjoyment are very similar to two facets of positive affect—enthusiasm and excitement (Watson & Tellegen, 1985). Similarly, flow is described as having two components—elation and excitement—that are also found in conceptualizations of positive affect (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997). Empirical research also illustrates that positive affect is a core element of intrinsic motivation. For instance, Reeve et al. (1986) asked participants to list several of their favorite activities, along with the emotions associated with the activities. Their results demonstrated that excitement, an emotion commonly used to depict intense positive affect (Watson & Tellegen, 1985), was the primary emotion associated with intrinsically motivating tasks. Thus, both previous theorizing and subsequent research demonstrate that affect is a central component to intrinsic motivation and flow-like experiences (Pretty & Seligman, 1984; Seo, Barrett, & Bartunek, 2004).

Of course, the question remains, are procedural and interpersonal justice likely to impact intrinsic motivation? We suggest that they are, because justice has a significant impact on felt emotions. Theoretical grounding for the effects of justice on emotions can be taken from fairness theory, a theory that subsumes an earlier model called referent cognitions theory (Folger, 1986a, 1986b, 1993; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998, 2001). Both fairness theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998, 2001) and referent cognitions theory (Folger, 1986a, 1986b, 1993) focus on the cognitions that lead one to appraise an event as either fair or unfair, and the affective reactions that result from these perceptions (see also Cropanzano et al., 2000). Specifically, fairness theory states that individuals evaluate the fairness of an event by working through a series of three counterfactuals (i.e., possible events contrary to the facts), determining whether the outcome “could” have been different, “should” have been different, or “would” have been different (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998, 2001). For example, an event is typically deemed fair if the decision-maker should not have acted any differently, presumably because his or her actions are morally correct, and if a more favorable outcome would not have resulted if events had played out differently. According to fairness theory, positive emotions, such as joy and happiness, should result from this type of positive counterfactual thinking (Cropanzano et al., 2000). Fairness theory also predicts that negative emotional consequences, such as blame, anger, and resentment, will occur when individuals feel an authority should have—and could have—acted differently, and if their well being would have improved under those alternative circumstances (Cropanzano et al., 2000). Thus, according to fairness theory, any event can trigger counterfactual thinking and subsequent emotions, including both positive and negative emotions (Cropanzano et al., 2000). Using fairness theory’s predictions about justice and emotions, we propose that procedural and interpersonal justice could have a significant impact on intrinsic motivation.

Justice and intrinsic motivation

Procedural justice is fostered when decision-making processes adhere to a number of specific rules. For example, procedures should utilize accurate information, be consistent across persons and time, be unbiased, offer mechanisms for correction, represent key groups’ concerns, and adhere to prevailing ethical standards

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