The relationship among distributive and procedural justice and correctional life satisfaction, burnout, and turnover intent: An exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

Distributive and procedural justice, two dimensions of organizational justice, have been found to be salient antecedents of many correctional staff attitudes, such as job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment; however, little correctional research has examined their relationships with the life satisfaction, burnout, and turnover intent. Multivariate regression equations were estimated to determine the association of personal characteristics, distributive justice, and procedural justice with the life satisfaction, burnout, and turnover intent of correctional employees based on a survey of 160 staff at a private midwestern maximum security institution. Both distributive and procedural justice had a statistically significant inverse association with burnout and turnover intent, while procedural justice had a significant positive relationship with life satisfaction. Additionally, the results indicated that the association of procedural justice was larger than the association for distributive justice. Similar results were obtained using only responses from correctional officers.

Introduction

Except for the most cynical, people generally expect to be treated fairly. The issues of fairness and justice permeate society; they are themes that cut across many aspects of life, including movies, television shows, literature, magazine articles, business transactions, and personal relationships. Simply put, fairness is an integral part of human interactions and is necessary for modern society to function (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Modern day democratic governments are built upon the ideas of fairness and justice. These concepts are manifested in the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which were passed in order to provide checks and balances against an overly powerful, unjust, and unfair government.

Fairness and justice are salient principles of the criminal justice system and have roots in criminological theories. For example, the general strain theory argues that unjust situations and outcomes lead to frustration and strain, which can ultimately cause crime and delinquency (Agnew, 1992; Akers, 2000; Akers & Sellers, 2009). Most

citizens expect the police to treat those they come into contact fairly and justly (Tyler, 1990, 2004). Many courthouses are adorned with statues of Lady Justice, who is blindfolded and holding a sword in one hand and a scales in the other. Her image is meant to symbolize that people will be treated impartially by the courts. According to Johnson (2004), "people care as much (or more) about the fairness of government processes as they do about the outcomes of those processes. As a result, citizens are equally concerned with how they are treated by the criminal justice system as they are with the outcomes of the criminal justice process" (p. 496).

"At least in theory, justice and fairness are cornerstones to the U.S. criminal justice system, where agencies are expected to be fair, unbiased, and just in their actions" (Lambert, 2003, p. 155). Public distrust and apprehension would likely develop if criminal justice agencies were operated in an arbitrary and capricious manner. There have been public outcries over what has been seen as unfair and unjust actions of criminal justice organizations, such as racial profiling and the conviction of innocent persons (Huff, 2002; Kennedy, 2001). Finally, correctional agencies are expected to house offenders in secure, humane, and fair institutions (Clear, Cole, & Reisig, 2006; Schmallager, 2006). In sum, perceptions of justice and fairness are important cornerstones for most criminal justice organizations in how

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they interact with clients and the public. Moreover, they are critical elements for workers of criminal justice agencies.

The concepts of justice and fairness are also found within organizations and are important aspects for most employees (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1987a). The issues of justice and fairness in organizations are generally referred to as organizational justice in the literature. The theory of organizational justice contends that the concepts of fairness and justice are powerful forces in the work place. Without a perception of fairness, organizations generally have problems in guiding and motivating workers. A perception of fairness in the employing organization is "a basic requirement for the effective functioning of organizations and the personal satisfaction of the individuals they employ" (Greenberg, 1990b, p. 399). Lincoln and Kalleberg (1990) contended that a perception of legitimacy by employees is needed for an organization to be successful, and legitimacy arises from employees' perceptions of fairness in the work place. Organizational justice can have significant outcomes in the work place. It can create feelings of goodwill in the work place and cause positive outcomes for both the organization and the workers (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1990b). Conversely, a perception of unfairness in the work place can have negative outcomes as well (Greenberg, 1997). Folger and Cropanzano (1998) theorized that when workers feel that they have been treated unfairly, their morale suffers and there is an increased likelihood that they will either retaliate against the organization or quit. Thus, organizational justice is an important aspect for employees and their employers, including correctional employees. Correctional staff are often told to treat inmates in a fair manner, but there is an unspoken expectation that they should also be treated fairly by the correctional organization.

Corrections is a major aspect of the criminal justice system with incredible sums of money being spent each year. In the U.S. alone, almost forty billion dollars is spent annually to house approximately one and one-half million prisoners in more than 1,200 correctional facilities, which collectively employ more than 400,000 people (Pastore & Maguire, 2007). Approximately 70 to 80 percent of most correctional budgets are for personnel and related expenditures (Camp & Gaes, 2002). Correctional staff are a critical element in the success (or failure) of most correctional organizations as they are responsible for a myriad of tasks and responsibilities in order to operate a safe, secure, and humane correctional institution. According to Poole and Pogrebin (1991), "We should be asking what the organization means to the worker instead of what the worker means to the organization" (p. 170). While it is true that correctional staff have significant effects on correctional institutions, it is also true that correctional organizations have meaningful effects on staff. Correctional organizations rely so heavily on employees, thus positive employee outcomes can be beneficial, while negative staff work behaviors can be highly problematic; therefore, exploring, confirming, and understanding how the work environment is related to the perceptions, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors of correctional staff is important. While a considerable body of research on the impact of the work environment on correctional staff exists, not all areas have been fully studied. One area lacking such investigation has been organizational justice.

Since correctional employees are the driving force of most correctional organizations, identifying and understanding how organizational justice is related to various correctional staff outcomes is important. This information is significant for all parties involved, including employees, administrators, and scholars. Distributive justice and procedural justice are two salient dimensions of organizational justice (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Yet, there has been very limited research on these two concepts among correctional staff, even though corrections is a major social institution; therefore, this study explored the relationship of these two dimensions of organizational justice with correctional staff life satisfaction, burnout, and turnover intent, important outcomes for both correctional staff and correctional organizations.

Literature review

Importance of the work environment for correctional staff

A growing body of literature over the past thirty years has examined the relationship between various dimensions of the work environment and correctional staff outcomes. Research has found that various dimensions of the work environment, such as role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, poor supervision, a lack of instrumental communication, and lack of input into decision-making, are related to job stress among correctional staff (Armstrong & Griffin, 2004; Dowden & Tellier, 2004; Griffin, 2006; Lambert, Paoline, & Hogan, 2006; Triplett, Mullings, & Scarborough, 1996, 1999). Similarly, various dimensions of the work environment have been observed to be linked with correctional staff job satisfaction. For example, input into decision-making, job autonomy, integration, job variety, quality of supervision, and formalization have all been reported to be positively associated with job satisfaction among correctional staff (Griffin, 2001; Lambert, 2004; Lambert, Barton, Hogan, & Clarke, 2002; Lambert & Paoline, 2005; Stohr, Lovrich, Monke, & Zupan, 1994; K. Wright, Saylor, Gilman, & Camp, 1997). Correctional research has also shown the work environment dimensions of role conflict, role ambiguity, organizational support, integration, input into decision-making, integration, instrumental communication, and formalization are associated with organizational commitment (Griffin & Hepburn, 2005; Lambert, 2004; Lambert, Barton, et al., 2002; Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, & Clarke, 2005; Stohr et al., 1994; K. Wright et al., 1997). Furthermore, various dimensions of the work environment have been found to be associated with life satisfaction, burnout, and turnover intent among correctional employees (Byrd, Cochran, Silverman, & Blount, 2000; Dennis, 1998; Garland, 2004; Gerstein, Topp, & Correll, 1987; Jurik & Winn, 1987; Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, & Baker, 2005; Mitchell, MacKenzie, Styve, & Gover, 2000; Neveu, 2007; Slate & Vogel, 1997). Thus, the research to date has supported the contention that staff not only have significant effects on correctional institutions, but correctional organizations have significant positive and negative effects on staff.

Distributive and procedural justice

Organizational justice is not an objective factor, but rather, an employee's perception of the organization (Beugre, 1998; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). While there are different dimensions to organizational justice, distributive and procedural justice are the two most salient dimensions of organizational justice (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Distributive justice focuses on the perceptions of fairness of outcomes for employees within an organization (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1990b) and is based upon the idea of equity (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1982). Workers evaluate organizational outputs based upon their own inputs and then compare them to what others in similar situations have received. If they feel that the output is fair, then they are more likely to form positive views of distributive justice within the organization. "In a sense, distributive justice is based upon the exchange principle. People look at what they have done in exchange for what they receive" (Lambert, 2003, p. 157). Organizational outputs include a wide array of organizational decisions, such as evaluations, pay, amount of work assigned, job assignments, and shift assignments. Distributive justice is concerned not only with rewards, but also with punishments. Organizational punishments must also be fair in comparison to the negative behavior of the employee (Lambert, 2003). Thus, distributive justice is basically employees' perceptions of whether the organization's decisions regarding workers is fair and based upon what employees have added and done for the organization (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998).

On the other hand, not only do the outcomes matter, but the processes used to arrive at outcomes are also important. Procedural