Why does organizational justice matter? Uncertainty management among law enforcement officers

Scott E. Wolfe⁎, Jeff Rojekb, Victor M. Manjarrez Jr.b, Allison Rojekc

⁎ Michigan State University, School of Criminal Justice, 655 Auditorium Dr., Baker Hall, Room 510, East Lansing, MI 48824, United States
b University of Texas at El Paso, Center for Law and Human Behavior, Prospect Hall, Room 208, 500 W. University Avenue, El Paso, TX 79968, United States
c University of Texas at El Paso, Department of Criminal Justice, Education Building, Suite 500, 500 W. University Avenue, El Paso, TX 79968, United States

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Law enforcement officers who believe their supervisors are organizationally fair are more satisfied with their jobs, more confident in their authority, and more likely to use procedural justice. The problem, however, is that we have little understanding concerning why officers care about being treated fairly. We address this issue by drawing on fairness heuristic and uncertainty management theories.

Methods: We used survey data from a sample of Border Patrol agents (N = 868) to help advance our understanding of the association between organizational justice and job satisfaction. Regression analyses and Stata’s margins command were used to visualize the interaction effects.

Results: We found that agents facing uncertainty focused more attention on fair supervisor treatment than their counterparts when considering how satisfied they were with their jobs. Both general workplace uncertainty and uncertainty stemming from recent negative publicity moderated the relationship between organizational justice and job satisfaction.

Conclusions: Organizational justice appears to be more salient to agents facing uncertainty because supervisor fairness provides cues that the agency has their best interests in mind and will support them in the future.

1. Introduction

Policing is a profession characterized by uncertainty. Police managers, in particular, face the difficult task of trying to get their line-level officers to have favorable evaluations of their work environment in the face of issues such as frequent organizational change and increasing public criticism. Research reveals that organizational justice—how fairly supervisors treat subordinates—produces numerous beneficial work-related outcomes among officers including greater job satisfaction, trust in their agency, less misconduct, and support for the use of procedural fairness (Myhill & Bradford, 2013; Tankebe, 2014b; Wolfe & Nix, 2017; Wolfe & Piquero, 2011). Accordingly, understanding why organizational justice matters to officers has important implications for contemporary police agencies.

Fairness heuristic theory offers insight into the causal mechanisms underlying the organizational justice effect (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Van den Bos, 2001). Fair supervisor treatment is important because it signals to employees that their identity with an organization is not at risk of rejection or exploitation. Uncertainty management theory builds on this idea by suggesting that uncertainty about the future (e.g., upcoming organizational changes) threatens employees’ identification with their organization. To counterbalance uncertainty, employees focus more attention on evaluations of organizational fairness (Van den Bos, 2001; Van den Bos & Miedema, 2000).

Uncertainty management theory has yet to be tested in a law enforcement organizational context. This is an important gap because uncertainty characterizes many aspects of police subculture (Paoline, 2004; Terrill, Paoline, & Manning, 2003). For example, law enforcement chief executives have high turnover rates which causes frequent organizational changes within agencies, and larger paradigm shifts are common in the profession (see, e.g., Reisig, 2010). Such organizational issues create general workplace uncertainty for some officers regarding their role and job security in the future. Consistent with uncertainty management theory, officers that feel uncertainty of this type will likely place more emphasis on how fairly they are treated by supervisors than their counterparts.

Policing is also a unique organizational context because it receives high levels of public criticism. Negative publicity surrounding policing
may introduce psychological uncertainty concerning whether public
antagonism has made the job more dangerous or less enjoyable (Nix &
Wolfe, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2017). Further, the viral video and
social media era of policing has increased the probability of officer
actions being captured on video. This may increase officers’ uncertainty
about whether their behavior—whether legal or not—will result in
criticism and possibly result in them losing their job. Uncertainty re-
volving around their occupation threatens officers’ identification with
their profession and may help explain why organizational justice mat-
ters to law enforcement officers. Fair treatment likely provides comfort
to officers that their superiors will support them in the face of potential
public criticism or increased safety threats.

Based on these theoretical possibilities, the present study analyzed
survey data from a sample of Border Patrol agents to determine whether
organizational justice was associated with job satisfaction to a greater
degree among agents with higher levels of uncertainty. We explored
this question using two measures of uncertainty—general workplace
uncertainty and negative publicity as a form of uncertainty specific to
law enforcement. The purpose of this study was three-fold: (1) increase
our understanding of why organizational justice impacts law enforce-
ment officers’ work orientations, (2) advance the broader organiza-
tional justice and uncertainty management literatures by bringing data
to bear from a police organizational context, and (3) provide practical
implications for police managers hoping to improve employee out-
comes.

2. Organizational justice

Justice scholars have long observed that employees are more likely
to engage in beneficial work-related behaviors when they believe they
have been treated fairly by their supervisors (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson,
Porter, & Ng, 2001). The social psychology of justice can be traced to
Adams’ (1965) work on equity theory. He argued that distributive
justice is based on individuals’ assessments of the equity of outcome
allocation. Seminal work by scholars such as Thibaut and Walker
(1975) and Leventhal (1980) suggest that individuals’ evaluations of
fairness are grounded also in procedural concerns (see also, Reisig,
Bratton, & Gertz, 2007; Tyler, 1990; Wolfe, Nix, Kaminiski, & Rojek,
2016). Procedural fairness is attained when people are provided a voice
during procedures, the ability to influence outcomes, and neutral de-
cision making (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Bies and Moag (1986) introduced a
third justice concept, interactional justice, which represents the extent
to which authority figures treat people with dignity and respect and
clearly explain the reasons for their decisions. Accordingly, the litera-
ture typically focuses on three key components to organizational jus-
tice—procedural, distributive, and interactional fairness (Colquitt,
2001; Greenberg, 1990, 1993; Lind, 2001; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Matta,
Scott, Colquitt, Koopman, & Passantino, 2016).

Fair supervisor treatment is positively associated with a wide range
of beneficial employee outcomes such as greater productivity, a
stronger commitment to organizational goals, and lower turnover in-
tentions (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001;
Colquitt et al., 2001; McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992). Organizational
justice also appears to protect against counterproductive work behaviors
(e.g., cyber-loafing while one should be working; Bechtold, Welk, Zapf,
& Hartig, 2007; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Lim, 2002). Importantly,
organizational justice is a key predictor of overall employee job sa-
fisfaction (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Sweeney & McFarlin, 1993).
This is a desirable situation for managers because satisfied employees
are more likely to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g.,
going beyond the minimum requirements of one’s job; Barnes,
Ghunman, & Scott, 2013; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Koes, 2001;

Organizational justice research has recently appeared in criminal
justice-related scholarship with most attention focusing on the police.
Officers that feel they are treated fairly by supervisors are more likely to
identify with their agency, have less cynicism, and are more committed
to organizational goals (Bradford & Quinton, 2014; Bradford, Quinton,
Myhill, & Porter, 2014). Organizationally-fair treatment also appears to
translate into better relationships with the public. Officers who believe
their supervisors are fair have more favorable attitudes toward the
public (Myhill & Bradford, 2013) and are more likely to support com-
munity-oriented policing and the use of procedurally-fair treatment of
citizens (Myhill & Bradford, 2013; Tankebe, 2014b; Trinkner, Tyler, &
Goff, 2016). Criminal justice research also shows that organizational
fairness promotes officer rule compliance (Bradford et al., 2014; Tyler,
Callahan, & Frost, 2007; Wolfe & Piquero, 2011) and overall job sa-
fisfaction (Donner, Maskaly, Fридell, & Jennings, 2015; Rosenbaum &
McCart, 2017). On the other hand, the experience of organizational
injustice appears to cultivate anger and leads to production deviance
and self-protective behaviors (Reynolds, Fitzgerald, & Hicks, 2017).

The organizational justice model has advanced our understanding of
employee behaviors and attitudes in police organizations. Recent re-
search has demonstrated that the experience of justice appears to cul-
tivate greater organizational identification, internalization of organiza-
tional goals, supervisor trust, citizen trust, and self-legitimacy which,
in turn, are associated with beneficial work-related outcomes among
line-level officers (Bradford et al., 2014; Bradford & Quinton, 2014;
Carr & Maxwell, 2017; Haas, Van Craen, Skogan, & Fleitas, 2015; Nix &
Wolfe, 2016; Van Craen & Skogan, 2016; Wolfe & Nix, 2017). At the
same time, however, the literature is less clear on exactly why organi-
nizational justice is important to police employees—why do officers care
about being treated fairly? Fairness heuristic and uncertainty manage-
tory theories offer insight concerning this question.

3. Fairness heuristic and uncertainty management

Fairness heuristic theory helps explain why justice matters in or-
ganizational contexts (Lind, 2001; Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & de Vera
Park, 1993; Lind & Tyler, 1986; Tyler & Lind, 1992). At the foundation
of the theory lies the assumption that all social relationships, such as
those in police organizations, involve repeated encounters with what
Lind (2001, p. 61) terms the “fundamental social dilemma.” On one side
of the dilemma, employees who contribute time, effort, and social ca-
pital to an organization stand to benefit from this investment in the
form of goal attainment and work efficiency. Most importantly,
working within a team in this manner allows an employee to secure a
self-identity with the broader purpose of the organization—a sense of
worth that is greater than what may be attained if working alone. Law
enforcement officers willingly endure long hours, dangerous conditions,
and low pay because many see it as contributing to a purpose greater
than themselves—public safety and the pursuit of justice. Police sub-
culture research shows that the camaraderie officers feel among each
other creates a self- and group-identity as police that extends beyond
the walls of their own agency (Bahn, 1984; Bradford, 2014; Muir, 1979;
Reiner, 2010).

On the other side of the dilemma, however, rests the reality that
sacrifice for the organization and identification with its purpose inher-
ently places an employee at risk of rejection or loss of this self-
identity. When we place our interests (e.g., job security or promotional
potential) partially in the hands of others in an organization, we risk
being exploited or rejected. In other words, “...if one links one’s identity
and sense of self to some larger social or organizational identity, there is
always the risk that one will experience rejection by the group and an
attendant loss of identity” (Lind, 2001, p. 61).

The fundamental social dilemma forces employees to choose be-
tween their own self-interests and the interest of the larger organiza-
tion. According to the theory, people use a mental shortcut—a heur-
istic—to resolve the dilemma. Perceived fairness from superiors
becomes a heuristic that allows employees to decide whether the au-
thority figure can be trusted not to exploit or exclude them from their
relationship with the organization (Van den Bos, Wille, & Lind, 1998).
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