



# Why does organizational justice matter? Uncertainty management among law enforcement officers<sup>☆</sup>



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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

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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 revolving around their occupation threatens officers' identification with their profession and may help explain why organizational justice matters 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 enforcement officers' work orientations, (2) advance the broader organizational 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 outcomes.

## 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, Kaminski, & Rojek, 2016). Procedural fairness is attained when people are provided a voice during procedures, the ability to influence outcomes, and neutral decision 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 literature typically focuses on three key components to organizational justice—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 intentions (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; Bechtoldt, Welk, Zapf, & Hartig, 2007; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Lim, 2002). Importantly, organizational justice is a key predictor of overall employee job satisfaction (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, Ghumman, & Scott, 2013; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Koys, 2001; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990).

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 community-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 satisfaction (Donner, Maskaly, Fridell, & Jennings, 2015; Rosenbaum & McCarty, 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 research has demonstrated that the experience of justice appears to cultivate greater organizational identification, internalization of organizational 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 organizational justice is important to police employees—*why do officers care about being treated fairly?* Fairness heuristic and uncertainty management theories offer insight concerning this question.

## 3. Fairness heuristic and uncertainty management

Fairness heuristic theory helps explain why justice matters in organizational contexts (Lind, 2001; Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & de Vera Park, 1993; Lind & Tyler, 1988; 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 capital 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 subculture 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 inherently 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 between their own self-interests and the interest of the larger organization. According to the theory, people use a mental shortcut—a heuristic—to resolve the dilemma. Perceived fairness from superiors becomes a heuristic that allows employees to decide whether the authority figure can be trusted not to exploit or exclude them from their relationship with the organization (Van den Bos, Wilke, & Lind, 1998).

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