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Justice at Work
Adrian Furnham

Summary

The concept of fairness and justice at work in organizations can be traced back to the 1960s, predominantly with the work of US-based researchers Homans (1961) and Adams (1965). Early research was dominated by testing equity theory and seeing some of its implications. However, the new sub-discipline of organizational justice really took off in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly with the work of Greenberg (1987, 1996, 2001, 2003) as well as the establishment of the journal Social Justice Research in 1987, which often contains articles about justice at work (van der Toorn, Berkics & Jost, 2010).

The idea of justice at work is also central to the humanitarian work psychology movement, which is the application of organizational psychology to the humanitarian arena (Lefkowitz, 2010). In a recent international project called ADD-UP (Are Development Discrepancies Undermining Performance?), humanitarian work psychologists examined perceived justice at work among aid workers, who are often remunerated differently for doing similar work based purely on their country of origin (Carr et al., 2010). It has been argued that best practice in aid work means pay should be aligned and harmonized across all worker groups. Although pay is usually not a central motive for many development workers, small as well as larger discrepancies in pay have the potential to influence perceptions of organizational justice, which can easily affect work performance over long periods of time (Saner, 2010). Indeed, because injustice is a motivation for much aid itself, perceptions of unfairness in aid work may inherently undermine its necessary constituents, like cooperation and capacity building. Certainly what this work illustrates is that organizational justice issues apply to all work places, and in all countries and at all times.

There are now various academic societies and journals dedicated to social justice and much of this work is concerned with the perception of justice in the workplace, as well as attitudinal and behavioural reactions to injustice. The field has even expanded to include papers on neuro-organizational
justice (Beugré, 2009). The work has attempted to distinguish between different types of justice (i.e., procedural, distributive) as well as develop theories of organizational justice (Blader & Tyler, 2003). There has been a concerted effort to look at individual and group differences in the perception of, and reactions to, justice and injustice. More recently there has been a great interest in how people with a strong sense of injustice at work either attempt to take revenge or else restore justice in other more subtle ways (i.e., retributive, restorative justice) (Furnham & Taylor, 2011).

Justice is not only relevant to workers in a company but also their customers (Hui & Au, 2001). Dayan, Al-Tamimi and Elhadji (2008) found that interactional justice (i.e., courtesy) and distributive justice (i.e., refund) were clearly linked to customer loyalty. This stresses the consequences of the perceptions of justice in an organization, for example, civil service and society organizations like government departments, NGOs, micro-credit lenders and international development banks.

Organizational justice is usually thought of as people’s (manager and employee) perceptions of fairness in an organization’s policies, pay systems and practices. The concept of justice and how justice is meted out in any organization is, nearly always, fundamental to that organization’s corporate culture and mission. The psychological literature tends to be descriptive (focusing on perceptions and reactions), whereas moral philosophy writings are more prescriptive (specifying what should be done). References to questions of justice and fairness occur whenever decisions have to be made about the allocation of resources, whatever they are in a particular business. Most, but by no means all, fairness-at-work issues focus on pay, but also include selection, promotion and the granting of particular privileges and career promotions (Furnham & Petrides, 2006).

Different disciplines have become interested in organizational justice. Thus cross-cultural psychologists have noted how the concept of fairness at work differs between cultures (Shiraev & Levy, 2004) and religions (Singh et al., 2009) and how justice perceptions and reasoning are culturally determined (Miller, 2007). Cultural dimensions like individualism-collectivism and power-distance have been used to try to explain cultural differences in perceptions of fairness at work (Kim & Leung, 2007). The new field of cross-cultural organizational behaviour has, in part, tried to examine pan-cultural but also cross-cultural differences in justice perceptions, beliefs and practices (Gelfand, Erez & Aycan, 2007). Such differences and similarities are in principle highly relevant to international aid and business assignments, in which people from diverse backgrounds ipso facto work alongside each other.

There is also an extensive differential psychology literature on individual differences in fairness perceptions. Thus there are well-known measures like just-world beliefs that have been related to perceptions of fairness (Furnham, 2003, 2005; Hagedoorn, Buunk & Van de Vliert, 2002).