

COMMENTARIES

Organizational Justice Interventions: Practicalities, Concerns, and Potential

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We agree with Greenberg's (2009) assessment that there is a lack of research on organizational justice interventions and that such interventions could substantially help organizations and their members while advancing theory. Using our experiences with an organizational justice intervention of our own (Truxillo, Bauer, Campion, & Paronto, 2002), we expand on Greenberg's comments. Specifically, we note how justice interventions can advance both theory and practice. We also note some challenges inherent in organizational interventions and how to overcome them. Finally, we discuss the particular strengths of explanation-based interventions and note the potential for their unethical use in organiza-

The Intervention

Our organizational intervention (Truxillo et al., 2002) involved providing applicants

with an explanation for selection procedures. Legal and ethical constraints prohibited random assignment of applicants to conditions, so we used two cohorts of police applicants—a no-explanation condition versus an explanation condition—in a quasi-experimental design. The organization's HR department had noted questions among some applicants regarding the job-relatedness of the test and why the test results took so long to be communicated to applicants. In response, our intervention addressed these concerns using explanations. Just before the test, applicants viewed a video explaining the validity of the test procedures and the fact that test results would be delayed because applicant test responses were scored by trained subject matter experts (SMEs). The video concluded with bullet points summarizing these issues. In addition, applicants received a flyer of these bullet points that they could refer to at later points in the selection process, as they waited for their results and when they received their results. The explanation intervention focused on two key dimensions of selection process fairness described by Gilliland (1993): job-relatedness (that the test was valid) and feedback timeliness (that feedback would be delayed as they were scored by SMEs reviewing individual videotapes).

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How Did the Intervention Inform Organizational Justice Theory and Organizational Practice?

Although past research (e.g., Gilliland, 1994; Ployhart, Ryan, & Bennett, 1999) had found that explanations affect a number of applicant reactions, this had never been tested in a field setting using job applicants. Other factors besides fairness issues may affect applicant reactions and behavior, such as economic conditions and the degree to which applicants want the particular job. In fact, we found that although the intervention clearly affected the perceived fairness of the selection procedures, there were few lasting effects on organizational attractiveness or actual job acceptance and turnover rates. This was not surprising given that applicants for law enforcement jobs are highly motivated and are generally a “tough crowd” that is not easily persuaded by an explanation. Thus, the examination of these issues in a field setting qualified findings from past research by providing some boundary conditions for the effectiveness of providing explanations to job applicants. Moreover, our study showed that a simple and inexpensive intervention—providing applicants with an explanation—could improve fairness perceptions regarding the selection procedure over time. This is a key issue given that the *SIOPI Principles* note the importance of applicant reactions in selection systems. Moreover, it is important given the likely relationship between fairness and actual litigation (cf., Goldman, 2001). An explanation would be considerably more practical than overhauling the selection system itself to reflect the selection procedures preferred by applicants.

In short, this illustrates that justice interventions conducted in field settings can go far beyond lab simulations in understanding the boundary conditions of justice and whether or not justice interventions actually provide value to organizations. Such field interventions also help researchers further understand the

relative value of different justice dimensions (e.g., distributive, interactional) on different attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

Challenges Faced, or Why There Isn't More of This Type of Research

Greenberg describes some challenges associated with field-based justice research and that these likely limit research on justice interventions. We note three particular issues we faced with our intervention that are also key issues with justice interventions. First, organizational justice-related issues are, by their nature, threatening to organizational decision makers, and thus the idea of an intervention to affect fairness can be threatening; a fairness intervention of any kind suggests that there is a fairness problem in the first place. Not surprisingly, our organizational partner in our intervention was unwilling to let us ask about important variables such as litigation intentions and still prefers to remain anonymous. And the use of a control group—that is, a group that is implicitly being treated “less fairly”—is something that many organizations would rather avoid. Second, a challenging issue for researchers is maintaining the fidelity of any kind of intervention and avoiding possible threats to experimental validity. For example, how does one know that organizational decision makers will not provide some sort of compensatory equalization to control group members, thus wiping out any effects of the intervention? Relatedly, diffusion of the treatment is a serious concern in these sorts of explanation interventions. Third is the fear of investing in a well-developed, theory-based intervention, only to have it eliminated by organizational decision makers or other factors at play in the organization. In our study, one of the greatest concerns was that something would happen between the two police cohorts—for example, that the exam process would change or that there would be a hiring freeze. Although none of these issues can

be completely avoided, the key to success is to choose your organizational research partner carefully, scrupulously maintain the confidentiality of the organization, explain the importance of maintaining the fidelity of the intervention, and communicate the value to the organization.

The Potency of Explanation-Based Interventions

Although the effects of explanations have been demonstrated meta-analytically (e.g., Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003), their effects in field settings has received relatively little scrutiny. We believe that explanation-based interventions may have great potential in organizations because of their relatively low cost. For example, although organizations could increase the perceived fairness of selection systems by using procedures that are most attractive to applicants such as work samples (e.g., Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004; Steiner & Gilliland, 1996), many organizations cannot afford to switch selection procedures; they may in fact be using valid procedures, but ones that do not appear valid to job applicants. Thus, explaining the validity of selection procedures—assuming that they are valid—has the potential to increase perceived fairness at a relatively low cost. Such was the case in our study. In short, good faith explanations to applicants, employees, and the public have great potential for organizations, and studies regarding their field application could also increase scientific knowledge.

However, we also believe that because of their power and ease of use, explanation-based interventions should also be applied judiciously and ethically in organizations; most importantly, explanations should be statements of fact and not tools for manipulation. Most organizational justice research is, by its nature, focused on helping organizations and individuals. Nevertheless, there may be a potential for justice-based interventions to be used less ethically. As illustration, in presenting the results of our study, we have been unnerved a few times by such

questions as, “And was the explanation you gave to the applicants true?” and “Was the purpose to manipulate the applicants?” The explanation we used in our intervention certainly *was* true—the test was valid, and it *did* take a great deal of time for SMEs to score it—and the goal of our research team and our partner organization was to give applicants more complete and accurate information. Yet perhaps the intervention *would* have worked just as well had the explanation not been true. In other words, paradoxically, some justice-based interventions, particularly explanations, might be used to manipulate individuals in an unfair way. Indeed, the power of certain types of explanations, such as excuses that might be used to shift blame for organizational actions, has been amply demonstrated (e.g., Shaw et al., 2003). Of course, if organizations do not provide explanations and justice interventions in good faith, the long-term consequences are likely to be severe if their duplicity is revealed. However, we do think it is important to point out that justice interventions are potentially powerful tools in organizational settings. And because these powerful tools might be used unethically to manipulate employee attitudes and behavior, it is important for researchers to be vigilant against the possible misuse of justice-based interventions.

Although our organizational justice intervention was a serious investment of time and resources in terms of data collection—a total of five data collections for each of the two conditions—it was a highly satisfying research endeavor in terms of linking I–O research and theory with organizational practice. Clearly, organizational justice theory stands to solve a range of organizational problems, and organizational interventions based on justice can do a lot to close the science–practice gap and to further refine theory.

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