

COMMENTARIES

More Application Than Acknowledged

STEPHEN W. GILLILAND
University of Arizona

Application research in organizational justice is rare. However, there is far more application research that addresses organizational justice constructs than is acknowledged by Greenberg (2009). Similarly, there are case studies and managerial “how to” books that address organizational justice without ever labeling the phenomena as such. In this commentary, I briefly outline three such bodies of research and managerial writing.

As Greenberg (2009) summarized, the organizational justice term is used to summarize three constructs: distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. One of the important advances of organizational justice research has been to shed light on the interplay among these justice constructs. A three-way interaction documented in multiple studies suggests that managers have three chances to get it right: If only one of outcome distributions, procedures, or interactional justice is fair, reactions will be less negative (Cropanzano, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007). This finding suggests that, practically, individual justice interventions can be sufficient in isolation to ensure positive reactions. I will consider three such interventions to illustrate this point: Participation, information sharing, and respectful treatment.

One of the foundational principles of procedural justice is providing recipients the opportunity to offer voice in decisions. Research has demonstrated that both instrumental and non-instrumental voices are effective at increasing satisfaction and perceptions of fairness (Cawley, Keeping, & Levy, 1998). Although this has become a central principle of organizational justice, research and practice have long addressed the value of participation. Fifty years before the term *organizational justice* was coined, Mayo’s research on the Hawthorne effect identified the importance of participation in increasing satisfaction and productivity. Since that initial research, there have been many intervention studies and case analyses that have examined the positive effects of participation (e.g., Lawler & Hackman, 1969). And, the popular management literature has no shortage of books on participative management. This application research on participation has not been labeled organizational justice research, but from an intervention perspective, it can be viewed as procedural justice research.

Another example of a popular intervention is information sharing. Informational justice reflects providing detailed and timely information and explanations. Justice research has demonstrated that recipients and observers are more likely to accept and perceive fairness in negative decisions when they are accompanied by adequate explanations. Although intervention-based organizational justice studies that demonstrate these phenomena are relatively rare, there is no shortage of case-based research

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Stephen W. Gilliland.

E-mail: sgill@eller.arizona.edu

Address: Department of Management and Organizations, 405 McClelland Hall, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721

and popular writing on the concept of information sharing. In 1995, John Case published a popular management book entitled *Open-Book Management* (Case, 1995). He never mentioned the term *organizational justice*, but he provides numerous case examples demonstrating the power of information sharing. In his writing, he acknowledges that these “unoriginal” concepts date back to Peter Drucker’s classic *The Practice of Management* (Drucker, 1954). Information justice (or the broader term interactions justice) was coined by Bies (1987), but the management concept of information sharing has been studied far longer than that. When the focus is on intervention rather than theory development, application research on information sharing can be viewed as organizational justice research even when it is not labeled as such.

Finally, consider the notion of interpersonal justice, which is the practice of ensuring dignity and respectful treatment. As with participation and information sharing, these concepts can be found in the writings of Mayo and Drucker. There may be less application research in the area of interpersonal justice, but there is no shortage of case studies demonstrating the power of managing via respectful, interpersonally sensitive treatment. For example, in a classic *Harvard Business Review* article by William Peace (1991) entitled, “The Hard Work of Being a Soft Manager,” the author describes a case example of interpersonal justice without ever using the word *justice*. Instead, he used terms such as *respect*, *sensitivity*, and *candor*. Interactional justice is more than these concepts, but from an intervention perspective, this is a case study of interactional justice.

With these three examples, I have tried to highlight the fact that there is more

application and intervention research on organizational justice than is acknowledged by Greenberg (2009). Because this research does not mention justice and does not assess perceived fairness, it does little to address our theories of organizational justice. But, when we move from theory development to intervention, the absence of a justice label may not matter. This is particularly true given the theoretical evidence that managing fairly does not require getting all elements of organizational justice right. Isolated procedural and interactional justice interventions can be effective. From an intervention perspective, Mayo and Drucker were both pioneers of organizational justice.

References

- Bies, R. J. (1987). The predicament of injustice: The management of moral outrage. In L. L. Cummings & B. Staw (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (Vol. 9, pp. 289–319). Greenwich: JAI Press.
- Case, J. (1995). *Open-book management: The coming business revolution*. New York: HarperBusiness.
- Cawley, B. D., Keeping, L. M., & Levy, P. E. (1998). Participation in the performance appraisal process and employee reactions: A meta-analytic review of field investigations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 83, 615–633.
- Cropanzano, R., Bowen, D. E., & Gilliland, S. W. (2007). The management of organizational justice. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 21, 34–48.
- Drucker, P. F. (1954). *The practice of management*. New York: Harper.
- Greenberg, J. (2009). Everybody talks about organizational justice but nobody does anything about it. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 2, 181–195.
- Lawler, E. E., III, & Hackman, R. J. (1969). Impact of participation in the development of pay incentive plans: A field experiment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 53, 467–471.
- Peace, W. H. (1991). The hard work of being a soft manager. *Harvard Business Review*, 79, 99–105.