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Organizational Dissent as a Function of Organizational Justice

Alan K. Goodboy, Rebecca M. Chory, & Katie Neary Dunleavy

This study examined the relationships between perceptions of organizational justice and enacting organizational dissent. Participants were 107 full-time employees working in various organizations. Results indicated that employee perceptions of distributive and interpersonal justice negatively predicted latent dissent, while perceptions of informational justice positively predicted latent dissent. Perceptions of interpersonal justice were the strongest predictor of latent dissent. Perceptions of justice were not related to articulated or displaced dissent. Future research should continue to explore triggering agents of dissent in organizations.

Keywords: Disagreement; Fairness; Organizational Dissent; Organizational Justice

Frequently as the result of an unfavorable incident at work, organizational members communicate their disagreement and dissatisfaction to superiors, coworkers, and family members and friends in the form of organizational dissent (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002). Examining the reasons regarding why and to whom employees communicate dissent has been an area of recent interest for communication scholars (Kassing,

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2005, 2007). The present study adds to this growing body of research by examining organizational dissent resulting from perceptions of injustice in the organization.

Organizational Dissent

Organizational dissent refers to the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions concerning organizational policies and practices (Kassing, 1997). Kassing (1997, 1998) proposed three types of dissent in the organization: articulated, latent, and displaced. *Articulated* dissent refers to open and direct communication to influential organizational members. *Latent* dissent involves communicating opinions to ineffective audiences (i.e., coworkers) rather than superiors with organizational power. *Displaced* dissent involves expressing criticism to external audiences (i.e., friends, family, significant others).

The expression of organizational dissent has been related to the quality of employees' relationships with supervisors (Kassing, 2000b), the degree of freedom of speech fostered by the organizational environment (Kassing, 2000a), organizational burnout syndrome (Avtgis, Thomas-Maddox, Taylor, & Patterson, 2007), and various employee individual differences. For example, organizational members' locus of control, argumentativeness, and verbal aggressiveness account for the expression of dissent (Kassing & Avtgis, 1999, 2001), as does employee organizational tenure (Kassing & Dicioccio, 2004). Finally, communicating dissent is dictated by certain issues that arise in the organization, such as organizational change (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002).

Organizational Justice

Organizational justice refers to perceptions of fairness and evaluations regarding the appropriateness of workplace outcomes or processes (Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997). There are three main types of organizational justice: distributive, procedural, and interactional (interpersonal and informational) justice.

According to Homans (1961), *distributive* justice refers to the individual's perception of the fairness of outcomes he/she receives. Such outcomes may be instrumental (i.e., salary, benefits) or socio-emotional (Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997). Scholars maintain that distributive justice is assessed according to the tenets of equity theory (Adams, 1965). Equitable resource allocation occurs when an individual's rewards match his/her contributions to the organization. Equal resource allocation occurs when rewards are distributed equally to all organizational members. Findings suggest that equity is the expected norm in American organizations regarding distribution of instrumental rewards, and that equality is the expected norm regarding distribution of socio-emotional rewards. Equity theory further implies that for an individual to form a perception of distributive justice, he/she must compare his/her allocations to those of some referential entity (e.g., peers' rewards, needs, expectancies, etc.) (Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997).

Distributive justice has been shown to be positively related to employee satisfaction (Colquitt, 2001; Pillai, Williams, & Tan, 2001), employee instrumentality (Colquitt, 2001), organizational commitment (Pillai et al., 2001; Schwarzwald,

Koslowsky, & Shalit, 1992), and managerial trust (Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005; Pillai et al., 2001). Consistent with equity theory, organizational members have been found to respond to distributive unfairness versus fairness in feedback situations with higher levels of deception, indirect aggression, hostility, and obstructionism (Chory & Hubbell, in press). Similarly, distributive injustice has been shown to relate to absenteeism following non-promotion (Schwarzwald et al., 1992).

Procedural justice refers to organizational members' perceptions of the fairness of organizational rules and procedures and is often based on global perceptions of the organization (Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997; Folger & Konovsky, 1989). Procedural justice is an individual's perception of the fairness of the process components of the social system that regulate the distribution of resources. Leventhal (1980) proposed that the fairness of procedures is judged based on their consistency of application, prevailing ethical standards, the degree of their bias, accuracy, correctability, and the extent to which they represent all people concerned. Procedural justice has been shown to be positively associated with organizational commitment (Folger & Konovsky, 1989), supervisory trust (Folger & Konovsky, 1989; Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005), organizational trust (Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005), satisfaction with raises (Folger & Konovsky, 1989), and employees' willingness to adhere to organizational decisions (Price, Lavelle, Henley, Cocchiara, & Buchanan, 2006).

Interactional justice is comprised of two components: interpersonal justice and informational justice. *Interpersonal* justice refers to the degree to which individuals perceive themselves to be treated with politeness, dignity, and respect by the superior or third party that executes a procedure or determines an outcome, whereas *informational* justice refers to the perceived adequacy of the information and the explanation provided to individuals regarding the procedure or outcome (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Interactional justice is related positively to employee performance, supervisor-director citizenship behaviors, and job satisfaction (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000). In addition, individuals whose superiors communicate feedback in an interpersonally fair versus unfair manner have been shown to be less likely to engage in obstructionism and indirect aggression toward the superior (Chory & Hubbell, in press). Regarding informational fairness, justifying a negative outcome with information has been shown to enhance the acceptance and perceived fairness of the outcome, thus maintaining employee satisfaction and commitment (Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997).

Empirical Rationale

In addition to striking back at superiors and the organization, as equity theory and related research (e.g., Chory & Hubbell, in press; Schwarzwald et al., 1992) suggest, employees may respond to organizational injustice by communicating dissent. Employees may voice their concerns to organizational superiors to effect change and to co-workers and/or persons outside the organization (e.g., family members) to vent frustration and gain emotional support, and because they may be afraid to confront their superiors for fear of termination.

Although organizational justice and dissent have not been directly studied until this point, existing research provides evidence that the two may be related. Chia, Foo, and Fang (2006) found that when employees suspect procedural or informational injustice, they withhold judgment until they consult with other organizational members. Chia et al. noted that organizational members search for information to confirm or reject their suspicion of injustice, and that they are willing to provide this information and to accept it from others. These results suggest that organizational members may be testing their organizational social networks to determine to whom they can complain about injustice. However, Chia and colleagues studied Chinese workers in one organization (an electricity plant) and only focused on the role of work-related social networks and two types of justice. The present study examines individuals working in the United States in a variety of organizational types, and their tendency to dissent to their superiors, co-workers, and to their social network contacts outside of work about distributive, procedural, and interactional unfairness. Based on the aforementioned research and rationale, the following hypothesis and research question were advanced:

H: Perceptions of organizational justice will be inversely associated with the tendency to engage in organizational dissent.

RQ: Which type of organizational justice will be the strongest predictor of each type of organizational dissent?

Method

Participants

One hundred and seven individuals (58% male, 92% Caucasian) who worked at least 30 hours a week for pay were recruited for participation by undergraduates at a large mid-Atlantic university during the spring 2006 semester. Participants' mean age was 28.08 years ($SD = 11.28$). Their mean organizational tenure was 53.37 months ($SD = 75.28$), their mean annual salary was \$26,509 ($SD = \$2,604$), and, on average, they worked 38.41 hours per week ($SD = 11.72$). Approximately 26% had managerial and professional jobs; 24% worked in technical, sales, and administrative support; 35.6% had service occupations; 7.7% worked in precision production, craft, and repair; and 6.7% were considered operators, fabricators, and laborers.

Procedures and Measurement

Participants completed a questionnaire containing measures of organizational justice and organizational dissent, along with items assessing demographic and occupational/job characteristics. Organizational dissent was measured using Kassing's (1998) 20-item Organizational Dissent Scale, which consists of three subscales that measure articulated (nine items), latent (five items), and displaced (six items) employee dissent. Sample items include, "I do not question management" (articulated), "I criticize the inefficiency in this organization in front of everyone" (latent), and

“I discuss my concerns about workplace decisions with family and friends outside of work” (displaced). Responses were solicited using five-point Likert scales ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*, with higher scores indicating more reported dissent.

Perceptions of organizational justice were assessed by Colquitt’s (2001) 20-item Measure of Organizational Justice, which consists of four subscales that assess distributive (four items), procedural (seven items), interpersonal (five items), and informational (four items) justice. Participants were instructed that the items concerned their “perceptions about work.” Although participants were not instructed to refer to any specific justice-related incident, the items pertained to their salary/pay and the authority figure who determined it. Consequently, the phrase: “The following items refer to your current salary/pay. To what extent . . .” preceded each distributive justice item, and the phrase: “The following items refer to the procedures used to arrive at your current salary/pay. To what extent . . .” preceded the procedural justice items. The phrase: “The following items refer to the authority figure who enacted the procedures used to arrive at your salary/pay. To what extent . . .” preceded the interpersonal and informational justice items. Sample items include, “Does your salary/pay reflect the effort you have put into work?” (distributive), “Have you been able to appeal your salary/pay arrived at by these procedures” (procedural), “Has he/she treated you with respect” (interpersonal), and “Has (he/she) communicated details in a timely manner?” (informational). Responses were solicited using five-point Likert scales ranging from (1) *to a small extent* to (5) *to a large extent*, with higher scores indicating greater perceptions of fairness.

Results

The reliabilities and descriptive statistics for all scales, along with the correlations among the variables, appear in Table 1.

The hypothesis predicted that perceptions of organizational justice would be inversely associated with the tendency to engage in organizational dissent, and the

Table 1 Reliabilities, Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Organizational Justice and Organizational Dissent

	α	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Distributive justice	.91	12.51	4.53	—					
2. Procedural justice	.83	21.96	6.07	.45*					
3. Interpersonal justice	.88	19.25	4.69	.30*	.58*				
4. Informational justice	.89	14.32	3.94	.38*	.58*	.77*			
5. Articulated dissent	.81	29.93	5.72	.03	.14	.02	.05		
6. Latent dissent	.75	14.40	3.74	-.30*	-.16	-.26*	-.05	.15	
7. Displaced dissent	.77	19.08	4.30	-.05	-.07	-.04	-.01	-.04	.29*

* $p < .01$, α refers to scale reliabilities assessed via Cronbach’s alpha.

Table 2 Multiple Regression Analyses Results

	Articulated dissent β	Latent dissent β	Displaced dissent β
Participant sex	-.10	-.12	.19
Hours worked	.14	-.07	-.10
Organizational tenure	.02	-.19*	-.01
Distributive justice	-.06	-.39*	.00
Procedural justice	.18	-.01	.01
Interpersonal justice	-.15	-.51*	-.11
Informational justice	.07	.44*	.11
	$F(7, 93) = .84$ $R^2 = .06$	$F(7, 93) = 5.58^*$ $R^2 = .30^*$	$F(7, 93) = .85$ $R^2 = .06$

* $p < .003$.

Note. Participant sex was coded as 1 = Male, 2 = Female. The statistics are for the model containing all the predictor variables.

research question asked which type of justice would be the strongest predictor of each type of dissent. Three multiple regression analyses, one for each type of dissent, were conducted to simultaneously test the hypothesis and answer the research question. Preliminary analyses indicated that participant sex, hours worked per week, and tenure at the organization were related to the predictor and/or criterion variables. Thus, these three variables were entered as a block into the regression models in the first step, followed by a block containing the four justice variables in the second step.

Results indicated that the addition of the justice variables improved the ability of the regression model to predict latent dissent, $\Delta R^2 = .24$, $\Delta F(4, 93) = 8.06$, $p < .001$, but not articulated dissent, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\Delta F(4, 93) = .55$, $p > .05$, or displaced dissent, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $\Delta F(4, 93) = .14$, $p > .05$. Thus, the hypothesis was partially supported. Regarding the research question, when all of the variables were entered into the latent dissent model, interpersonal justice was the strongest predictor, $\beta = -.51$, followed by informational justice, $\beta = .44$, then distributive justice, $\beta = -.39$. Procedural justice, $\beta = -.01$, did not predict latent dissent. Table 2 contains the results of the multiple regression analyses.

Discussion

Results suggested that employees were more likely to express disagreement and/or contradictory opinions to co-workers when they perceive their pay to be unfair (versus fair), and when the superior who enacted the procedures used to arrive at their pay to have provided them with sufficient (versus insufficient) information, but to have communicated that information in a disrespectful (versus respectful) manner. Perceptions of injustice were not related to articulated or displaced dissent.

The relationships that emerged between organizational justice and latent dissent may be explained by organizational members' tendency to compare their outcomes, such as salary, with coworkers, providing the opportunity for latent dissent to occur. In line with equity theory (Adams, 1965), organizational members form perceptions of organizational justice, in part, by comparing their allocations to a referent. In the organization, this referent is often a peer who holds a similar, if not identical, position within the organization. Considering that organizational members use co-workers as referents when forming perceptions of distributive justice, it is not surprising that they express their dissatisfaction with each other should they find inequity in their allocations. The results support this assumption. In addition, organizational justice and latent dissent may have been most strongly related because expressing disagreement to coworkers may be the most immediate and convenient means of communicating for emotional release. Organizational members may simply be venting their feelings about organizational unfairness to those who are available and present at the time the injustice occurs.

Although perceptions of distributive and interactional justice were associated with latent dissent, perceptions of procedural justice were not. These results are surprising given that procedural justice has often been a stronger and more consistent predictor than the other types of fairness (Colquitt et al., 2001). A closer examination of this research, however, indicates that procedural justice is often the strongest predictor of system-referenced variables, such as organizational commitment, versus communication-oriented variables. More recent research suggests that interactional justice, particularly interpersonal justice, tends to emerge as the most important justice type of communication-based outcomes. For example, Chory and Hubbell (in press) observed that although distributive, procedural, and interpersonal justice predicted various antisocial communication behaviors (e.g., deception, interpersonal aggression), interpersonal justice was the most consistent predictor. Likewise, in the present study, interpersonal justice was the strongest predictor of latent dissent.

Contrary to the hypothesis, perceptions of informational justice were positively (versus negatively) related to latent dissent. Informational justice involves perceptions of receiving sufficient information about an allocation decision. Although argued to be a subset of interactional justice (Colquitt, 2001), receiving an adequate *amount* of information may not necessarily elevate perceptions of fairness or be perceived as fair, especially if the information is negative. In the case of dissent, higher levels of informational justice (i.e., receiving more thorough information) may provide employees more information with which to disagree and about which to complain to their coworkers. Conversely, employees who do not receive sufficient information from superiors have less information with which to disagree.

The lack of findings regarding organizational justice and articulated and displaced dissent may be explained by several factors. First, the articulated dissent findings may be due to subordinates' anxiety about voicing their disagreement to superiors when they perceive injustice. Research suggests that employees respond to perceived injustice in covert (e.g., keeping important information from one's superior, showing up late for meetings run by the superior) versus overt ways because they fear the negative

consequences (e.g., termination) they may experience if they overtly address the injustice with organizational superiors (Chory & Hubbell, in press). Therefore, “wronged” subordinates may not deal with perceived organizational injustice via direct and candid communication with a superior (i.e., articulated dissent), but through more covert means.

In addition, research shows that employees’ use of articulated dissent is positively associated with employee satisfaction (Kassing, 1998), and employees who perceive that they have higher quality relationships with their superiors report engaging in more articulated dissent than do employees who perceive they have low quality relationships with their superiors (Kassing, 2000b). Employee satisfaction is also positively related to organizational justice (Colquitt et al., 2001). When subordinates feel they are treated unfairly, they also likely feel that their superiors do not appreciate or like them very much. The latter may be especially prone to occur when employees perceive their superiors as treating them in a disrespectful and impolite manner (i.e., interpersonal injustice). Thus, perceptions of injustice may not have predicted communicating articulated dissent because they negatively impacted employees’ job satisfaction and perceptions of their relationships with their superiors.

Finally, organizational justice and articulated dissent may not have been related due to the relatively short tenure of employment of participants in this study (i.e., less than five years). Kassing (2006) discovered that articulated dissent was not likely to transpire when employees had short work tenure.

The failure to observe a relationship between organizational fairness and displaced dissent may be explained, in part, by the present study’s assessment of distributive justice in reference to salary/pay versus other issues. Salary often serves as an indicator of status, competence, success, or organizational worth. Considering that many of the displaced dissent items concerned communicating with family and friends in general versus spouses or close friends specifically, it is possible that respondents were reluctant to bring up their unfair (and likely too low) salaries in front of such audiences. They may fear embarrassment about discussing the details of their salaries with family and friends.

In addition, organizational justice, in general, may not be related to displaced dissent because individuals may feel it is inappropriate to complain about work issues and personnel (e.g., superiors) to others in non-organizational contexts. Organizational members may wish to keep their organizational and home lives separate, as those with indifferent organizational orientations do (McCroskey, Richmond, Johnson, & Smith, 2004).

Another reason that organizational justice and displaced dissent may not be related is that organizational members may find that their friends and family outside of work are unable to relate to the intricacies of the organizational dynamics in the individuals’ workplaces. For example, in the case of procedural justice, friends and family would need to know not only the rule or policy, but also why the rule or policy is in place, how the rule or policy is generally enforced in the organizational culture, and then how the rule or procedure is being used or misused in the particular situation. Organizational members may prefer to talk to their

coworkers about such detailed and specific issues, hence the observed relationships with latent dissent.

The failure to observe a relationship between organizational justice and displaced dissent is consistent with research showing that this dissent dimension often fails to produce hypothesized relationships (e.g., Kassing & Avtgis, 1999). As a result of such research, Kassing (2000b) revised his organizational dissent scale, excluding the displaced dimension. Later, Kassing and Dicioccio (2004) provided evidence of a workplace experience explanation for displaced dissent (i.e., displaced dissent expression is negatively related to age and work experience, and is more common among non-management than management). Although participants in the present study tended to be younger than those in Kassing and Dicioccio's study, and therefore were expected to communicate displaced dissent, organizational justice and displaced dissent were not related here. The results of the current study provide further support for the contention that the displaced dissent dimension may not function according to theoretically based predictions. Continued study of this dimension is warranted.

Although this investigation provides insight into the relationships between fairness and dissent, it does have several limitations. First, perceptions of organizational justice were assessed regarding a rather specific issue—pay and its related procedures and communication—whereas organizational dissent was assessed regarding many organizational issues (e.g., organizational changes, inefficiency, policies, decisions). The fact that latent dissent and organizational justice were related in the present study using measures with these different levels of specificity attests to the strength of the link between these two constructs; however, if the specificity of the measures had been more closely matched, organizational justice may have related to all three types of dissent, rather than just one (i.e., latent).

Along the same lines, the present study assessed perceptions of justice in reference to salary/pay, when there are additional types of injustices that occur in organizations (e.g., favoritism, harassment) that may be more strongly related to dissent. Third, the relationship between informational justice and organizational dissent may be better understood by assessing the perceived valence of the information communicated by superiors, in addition to the perceived adequacy of it. Fourth, this study had participants simply complete scales, while other studies on organizational justice have utilized hypothetical scenarios and other stimulus materials. Future research employing such methods may yield results that are even more consistent with past studies of organizational justice. Future research should also continue to explore triggering agents of dissent.

Finally, scholars should examine the effects of expressing justice-related dissent on organizational climate, particularly the climate among coworkers. What impact does such dissent have on peer relationships, organizational change, and perceptions of the dissenter? How are other relational or social injustices in the organization related to dissent? What role does the emotion generated by organizational injustice play in motivating dissent? Furthermore, what function(s) does dissent serve for the dissenter? Answers to questions such as these would help scholars and practitioners

to further understand the relationships between the important organizational phenomena of justice and dissent.

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