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# Disagreeing about What's Fair: Exploring the Relationship between Perceptions of Justice and Employee Dissent

Jeffrey W. Kassing & Zachary J. McDowell

*This study examined the relationship between employees' perceptions of justice within their organizations and their tendencies for expressing dissent. A sample of full-time working adults (N = 141) completed a survey instrument. Results indicated that managers' perceptions of justice related positively to their use of upward dissent and negatively to their use of displaced dissent, and that non-managers' perceptions of justice related negatively to their use of latent and displaced dissent. Overall, the findings suggest that although managers and non-managers respond differently to perceptions of justice, how fair employees perceive organizational decision-making practices to be relates to their dissent expression.*

*Keywords: Employee Dissent; Employee Voice; Fairness Perceptions; Interactional Justice; Perceptions of Justice; Procedural Justice*

## Disagreeing about What's Fair

A major factor that contributes to the expression of employee dissent is the way in which employees perceive and understand their respective organizational climates to be more or less tolerant of employee dissent (Graham, 1986; Hegstrom, 1990; Kassing, 1998, 2000a). Management fosters climates that are more or less tolerant of employee dissent by manipulating the rhetorical environment (Hegstrom, 1990)

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and responding strategically to the dissent issue, to the individual dissenting, or to both (Graham, 1986). Organizational responses provide feedback to subsequent dissenters, informing them about whether or not they should expect to be rewarded, ignored, or punished (Graham, 1986; Redding, 1985), whether or not they will be perceived as constructive or adversarial (Kassing, 2001), and whether or not they will experience retaliation (Kassing, 1997). Thus, employees monitor their respective organizational cultures and climates to ascertain how, when, and to whom to express their dissent (Kassing, 2000a).

The decisions organizations make as well as the way in which those decisions are made represent a particular organizational practice that can precipitate dissent (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002; Redding, 1985). Redding (1985) recognized poor decision making as one particularly potent predictor of employee dissent. In their investigation of dissent-triggering events, Kassing and Armstrong (2002) found that employees dissented to management and coworkers about decision making. Organizational justice is a concept that concerns the degree to which people find decision-making processes and outcomes to be fair (Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005; Tata, 2000). Recognizing that decision making can trigger dissent, the purpose of this study is to explore how perceptions of justice relate to employee dissent.

### Organizational Justice

Scholars have investigated three dimensions of organizational justice: *distributive justice*, or the perceptions of fairness regarding outcomes; *procedural justice*, or the perceived fairness of formal processes leading to decisions; and *interactional justice*, or the perceived fairness derived from how supervisors communicate to subordinates about organizational decisions (Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005; Moorman, 1991). Perceptions of justice, then, can be examined by focusing on the effect of decision outcomes (distributive justice), formal procedures used to make decisions (procedural justice), or management's efforts to communicate about decisions and decision-making processes (interactional justice). Mounting evidence suggests that perceptions of justice are subjective, determined by the process by which decisions are made, and independent of the actual outcomes received (Molm, Peterson, & Takahashi, 2003). Thus, how people subjectively perceive that decisions are made is as or more relevant to perceptions of justice than outcomes received (Krehbiel & Cropanzano, 2000). Hence, this work attends particularly to perceptions of justice that result from procedural and interactional justice.

Within the organizational context, perceived fairness (i.e., favorable perceptions of justice) serves to improve employees' relations with and sensibilities about their respective organizations by predicting job satisfaction (Clay-Warner, Reynolds, & Roman, 2005; Schappe, 1998), organizational citizenship behavior (Moorman, 1991), employee pride (Sousa & Vala, 2002), and organizational trust (Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005). Additionally, perceived fairness affects the way people communicate within organizations as it produces greater cooperation among teams

(Sinclair, 2003) and leads employees to favor more cooperative conflict management styles (Rahim, Magner, & Shapiro, 2000). Perceived fairness plays an important role in mediating potentially negative organizational outcomes like employee burnout (Moliner, Martinez-Tur, Peiró, & Ramos, 2005), certain types of political behavior (Byrne, 2005), and turnover (Van Yperen, Hagedoorn, Zweers, & Postma, 2000).

Clearly, increases in perceived fairness result in positive organizational outcomes. Thus, we suspect that favorable perceptions of procedural and interactional justice will have a positive effect on employee dissent. Because employees engage in more prosocial action and communication behavior when they perceive greater degrees of fairness, we expect that they also would choose to express their dissent in more proactive ways that allow management to hear and respond to employee dissent (i.e., express more upward dissent and less lateral and displaced dissent). Perceptions of justice relate to how employees handle conflict with supervisors (Rahim et al., 2000); thus, we anticipate that perceptions of justice will relate to employee dissent expression.

### **Employee Dissent**

Early research in the area of employee dissent focused primarily on the expression of dissent to the media or industry governing bodies with regard to issues of principle by way of whistleblowing (Graham, 1986; Near & Jensen, 1983; Stewart, 1980; Westin, 1986). However, dissent research has evolved to consider additional audiences to whom employees dissent (Kassing, 1997, 1998), additional issues about which they dissent (Hegstrom, 1999; Kassing & Armstrong, 2002), and different ways in which they dissent (Kassing, 2002, 2005; Sprague & Ruud, 1988). Kassing (1997), for example, introduced a model of employee dissent that recognized the potential for employees to dissent to managers (upward dissent), coworkers (lateral dissent), and friends and family outside of work (displaced dissent) in response to individual, relational, and organizational influences.

With regard to individual influences affecting dissent, findings indicate that argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and locus of control relate to dissent expression (Kassing & Avtgis, 1999, 2001). Research also demonstrates that employee dissent relates to employee commitment, employee satisfaction, and organizational identification (Kassing, 1998, 2000a). Moreover, work experience and organizational position affect dissent expression (Kassing & Armstrong, 2001; Kassing & Avtgis, 1999; Kassing & DiCioccio, 2004). Concerning relational issues, Kassing (2000b) found that employees who perceived that they had higher quality relationships with their supervisors expressed comparatively more upward dissent, whereas employees who perceived that they possessed lower quality relationships with their supervisors expressed more lateral dissent. Additionally, research indicated that employees regularly dissented to management in response to other-focused dissent triggering events that concerned their coworkers (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002).

Dissent research repeatedly demonstrates that organizational cultures and climates foster or impede dissent (Graham, 1986; Hegstrom, 1990; Kassing, 1998, 2000a).

For example, Kassing (2000a) found that employees expressed more upward dissent and less lateral dissent when they perceived that comparatively more workplace freedom of speech existed in their respective organizations. Organizational tolerance for dissent also has an impact on the topics about which employees choose to dissent. When organizational climates suppressed dissent, employees remained silent and only dissented about clearly unethical issues (Hegstrom, 1999). In contrast, Perry, Hegstrom, and Stull (1994) found that management efforts to encourage dissent promoted dialogue between management and employees.

One particular finding has garnered considerable support across studies: an individual's organizational status as either a manager or non-manager determines, to a large extent, the audience to whom employees choose to dissent. Non-managers appear to favor dissenting to coworkers and family and friends outside of work, whereas managers more readily express upward dissent to management (Kassing & Armstrong, 2001; Kassing & Avtgis, 1999; Kassing & DiCioccio, 2004). Thus, organizational status informs employees' dissent choices. Group status is also a strong predictor of how fair people perceive decision making to be and how much voice they believe they possess with regard to decision making (Van Prooijen, Van den Bos, & Wilke, 2004, 2005). It is plausible to suggest then that managers and non-managers, who hold different status positions in their respective organizations, may respond differently to procedural and interactional justice. Knowing that employees who perceive higher status levels traditionally exercise more voice in decision making and that people provided with opportunities to voice their opinions perceive decision making procedures and outcomes to be more fair, we suspect the following to be true:

H1: Upward dissent will correlate positively and significantly with managers' perceptions of justice.

Although people who perceive lower status levels exercise less voice in decision making, they may still perceive decision-making procedures and outcomes to be fair. As non-managers favor dissenting to coworkers and friends and family outside of work, we suspect that the effects of perceived fairness in decision making would be apparent in reductions of lateral and displaced dissent. To test this idea, the following hypothesis is offered:

H2: Lateral and displaced dissent will correlate negatively and significantly with non-managers' perceptions of justice.

## Methodology

### *Sample*

A sample of 141 ( $N = 141$ ) full-time (i.e., 40 hours or more/week) employees participated in this study. Respondents worked for a variety of organizations in a major metropolitan area of the southwestern United States. Fifty-six percent of the sample was male and 44% female. The age of employees participating in this study ranged

from 18 to 83 years ( $M = 36.67$ ,  $SD = 13.87$ ), job tenure ranged from less than a year to 33 years ( $M = 5.09$ ,  $SD = 5.87$ ), total years work experience ranged from 1 year to 65 years ( $M = 16.18$ ,  $SD = 12.72$ ), and the number of full-time employers for whom participants reported working ranged from 1 to 40 ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 3.99$ ). Approximately 6% of the respondents reported holding top management positions, 33% management positions, 55% non-management positions, and 6% other organizational positions. Approximately 68% of respondents reported their ethnicity as Caucasian, 19% as Hispanic, 8% as African-American, 1% as Asian, and 4% as something other than the choices provided.

### *Data Collection Procedure*

A survey questionnaire was used to collect data. Graduate students who were enrolled in an organizational communication seminar at a mid-sized southwestern university and the researchers contacted participants as part of a class research project. The convenience sampling method involved soliciting participation from friends, family members, coworkers, and neighbors who qualified as full-time working adults. Participants received a survey instrument that was accompanied by a cover letter describing the purpose of the research. They returned questionnaires directly to students, who in turn delivered them directly to the researchers. Students received course credit for their assistance. Questionnaires were returned directly to the researchers by the participants they solicited.

### *Instrumentation*

The survey questionnaire contained scales designed to measure employee dissent and perceptions of justice. To assess employee dissent, the 20-item Organizational Dissent Scale (Kassing, 1998) was administered. The scale measures how employees express their dissent about workplace concerns using a five-point Likert scale that ranges from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). The instrument contains three subscales: upward, lateral, and displaced dissent. For the Upward Dissent subscale, reliability analysis indicated that eight of the original nine items (e.g., "I speak with my supervisor or someone in management when I question workplace decisions") should be retained ( $\alpha = .78$ ,  $M = 28.65$ ,  $SD = 4.83$ ). Similarly, reliability analysis indicated that one of the five items comprising the Lateral Dissent subscale should be discarded. The four-item subscale (e.g., "I join in when other employees complain about workplace changes") produced a coefficient alpha of .63 ( $M = 10.98$ ,  $SD = 2.82$ ). The Displaced Dissent dimension was comprised of six items (e.g., "I talk about my job concerns to people outside of work") and produced a coefficient alpha of .77 ( $M = 20.04$ ,  $SD = 4.48$ ).

To ascertain employees' perceptions of justice, a two-dimensional measure developed by Moorman (1991) was used. The measure was administered using a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). The first

dimension, which taps procedural justice, assesses the degree to which employees' perceive that fair decision-making procedures exist in their respective organizations (e.g., "Procedures designed to provide opportunities to appeal or challenge decisions"). This dimension is comprised of seven items and produced a coefficient alpha of .89 ( $M = 23.38, SD = 5.53$ ). The second dimension, which taps interactional justice, assesses employees' perceptions of justice with regard to interactions that accompany organizational procedures, specifically the way in which supervisors enact and explain organizational procedures (e.g., "Your supervisor provides you with timely feedback about the decision and its implications"). The six-item dimension produced a coefficient alpha of .87 ( $M = 22.40, SD = 4.58$ ).

A single item designed to ascertain one's organizational role ("In your present job, would you classify yourself primarily as . . .") asked respondents to choose either top management, management, non-management, or other. The dichotomous management-non-management distinction was created by combining respondents who designated themselves as top management or management ( $n = 55$ ) and respondents who designated themselves as non-management or other ( $n = 86$ ).

**Results**

Because there was a significant and sizeable correlation between procedural justice and interactional justice ( $r = .43, p < .001$ ), first-order partial correlations were employed to remove the shared variance between the two (see Table 1). Accordingly, first-order partial correlations were computed for both managers and non-managers to determine if the different types of dissent (upward, lateral, and displaced) related to employees' perceptions of justice (procedural justice, interactional justice).

The first hypothesis predicted that upward dissent would correlate positively and significantly with managers' perceptions of justice. Managers' upward dissent and procedural justice ( $r = .24, p < .05$  when controlling for interactional

**Table 1** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Dissent, Formal Procedures, and Interactional Justice

|                       | Upward<br>dissent | Lateral<br>dissent | Displaced<br>dissent | Formal<br>procedures | Interactional<br>justice |
|-----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| Upward                | —                 |                    |                      |                      |                          |
| Lateral               | -.11              | —                  |                      |                      |                          |
| Displaced             | .06               | .24 <sup>†</sup>   | —                    |                      |                          |
| Formal procedures     | .13 <sup>†</sup>  | -.03               | -.22 <sup>†</sup>    | —                    |                          |
| Interactional justice | .09               | -.15 <sup>†</sup>  | -.23 <sup>†</sup>    | .43*                 | —                        |
| <i>M</i>              | 28.65             | 10.98              | 20.04                | 23.38                | 22.40                    |
| <i>SD</i>             | 4.83              | 2.82               | 4.48                 | 5.53                 | 4.58                     |

\* $p < .01, †p < .05$ , one-tailed.

justice;  $r = .35$  when corrected for attenuation) correlated significantly and positively. There was not, however, a significant relationship between upward dissent and interactional justice ( $r = .11$ ,  $p = .23$  when controlling for procedural justice). Additionally, although not hypothesized, managers' displaced dissent and procedural justice ( $r = -.24$ ,  $p < .05$  when controlling for interactional justice;  $r = -.35$  when corrected for attenuation), as well as manager's displaced dissent and interactional justice ( $r = -.26$ ,  $p < .05$  when controlling for procedural justice;  $r = -.39$  when corrected for attenuation), correlated significantly and positively. Thus, the first hypothesis received partial support.

The second hypothesis predicted that lateral and displaced dissent would relate negatively to non-managers' perceptions of justice. Non-managers' reports of interactional justice and their self-reported levels of both lateral dissent ( $r = -.23$ ,  $p < .05$  when controlling for procedural justice;  $r = -.42$  when corrected for attenuation) and displaced dissent ( $r = -.20$ ,  $p < .05$  when controlling for procedural justice;  $r = -.30$  when corrected for attenuation) correlated significantly and negatively. There were no significant relationships indicated, though, between non-managers' reports of procedural justice and their self-reported use of lateral dissent ( $r = -.09$ ,  $p = .22$  when controlling for interactional justice) or displaced dissent ( $r = -.02$ ,  $p = .44$  when controlling for interactional justice). The findings suggest that employees dissented less to coworkers and to friends and family outside of work when they perceived greater levels of interactional justice. Hence, the second hypothesis received partial support.

## Discussion

Two conclusions can be drawn from the current research. First, the findings provide clear evidence of a relationship between employees' perceptions of justice in their workplaces and the way in which they communicate their dissent. Second, this relationship manifests differently for managers and non-managers. As such, the current findings support previous work that establishes a link between employee voice, status, and perceptions of justice (Van Prooijen et al., 2004, 2005). Status serves as the vehicle that provides opportunities to express voice. Thus, it is not surprising that managers (who possess higher levels of organizational status and the membership privileges that managerial status invokes) would express more upward dissent and less displaced dissent when they perceive greater levels of fairness. This pattern of dissent expression is prosocial in nature, whereby dissent is voiced to audiences that can effectively accommodate employee concerns and aligns with previous research that demonstrates the connection between perceptions of justice and favorable organizational outcomes (Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005; Moorman, 1991; Sousa & Vala, 2002).

For non-managers who inherently possess fewer opportunities for upward dissent as a result of their organizational status, we see a different voice effect. Here, perceptions of justice derived specifically from communication about decision-making

processes related to reductions in non-managers' use of lateral and displaced dissent. In the case of non-managers, perceptions of justice do not increase upward dissent as with managers, but rather serve to ebb dissent expressed to coworkers and family and friends outside of work. The tempering effect of interactional justice does not produce the same prosocial responses as with managers, but rather mollifies forms of dissent expression that may be construed as negligent (Kassing, 1997). As such, this effect resembles previous research, which suggests that perceptions of justice curb covert, self-serving political behavior (Byrne, 2005). Collinson (1994) found that laborers enacted resistance through communicating and behaving in ways that served to clearly delineate them from management as a form of identity enactment. Clearly, lateral and displaced dissent are part and parcel of the communicative efforts employees use to differentiate themselves from management. However, when favorable perceptions of organizational decisions occur as a result of how management communicates about decision-making processes, the need to display resistance by expressing lateral and displaced dissent diminishes. The motive to differentiate oneself from management may not be as active or as strong in systems that are perceived as fair. Thus, perceptions of justice result in reductions of lateral and displaced dissent expression, as we see in the current results.

The current work suffers from the low reliability produced by the lateral dissent subscale. On occasion, the measure has produced low reliabilities (Kassing, 1998; Kassing & Avtgis, 1999), and in fact a revised measure designed to strengthen the lateral dissent subscale by increasing it from five to nine items has produced considerably stronger reliabilities (Kassing, 2000a, 2000b). Although this version appears to perform more reliably, we chose to administer the original version of the scale because, unlike the revised version, it contains the displaced dissent subscale, and because we wanted to keep the survey questionnaire as reasonable in length as possible. Thus, we opted for the more comprehensive version of the Organizational Dissent Scale. Clearly, the low reliability may have prevented us from uncovering other hypothesized relationships that were not evident in the current data and likely suppressed the size of those relationships identified. Replication using the expanded lateral dissent subscale would help to determine if this is the case.

Finally, it is important to note that interactional justice only (i.e., the communicative dimension of organizational justice) related to how non-managers reported dissenting. One implication of this finding is that management should not only attend to how decisions are made, but also (and perhaps more importantly) to how supervisors communicate about those decision processes with their respective subordinates. The current work only begins to address this concern and is limited because it fails to capture the complexity of relational factors that contribute to—and the effects derived from—interactional justice. Future research should consider how perceptions of justice evolve communicatively over time and within the context of relational constraints. Expanding this line of work to consider other communication constructs such as superior-subordinate relationship maintenance (Krone, 1992), relational turning points (Bullis & Bach, 1989), and memorable messages (Stohl, 1986) could prove beneficial. That being said, the current findings further

accentuate communicative facets of organizational justice (Rahim et al., 2000; Sinclair, 2003) and signal the need for communication scholars to continue exploring the link between perceptions of justice and communication.

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