

# Commentary

on the Special Section  
“Dealing with Strain at the Workplace: A Just World Perspective”

## Justice Motive Theory and the Study of Justice in Work Organizations: A Conceptual Integration

D. Ramona Bobocel<sup>1</sup> and Carolyn L. Hafer<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Waterloo, <sup>2</sup>Brock University, both Ontario, Canada

**Abstract.** Stimulated by the articles in this special issue, we integrate justice motive theory into the study of organizational justice more broadly. We begin by considering a variety of ways that just-world beliefs could relate to perceptions of organizational fairness. Then, we discuss several implications that arise from incorporating the concept of deservingness (central to justice motive theory) more explicitly into the study of organizational justice. Next, we consider, from a justice motive perspective, how organizational fairness might have *adverse* effects on employees and organizations. Finally, we outline what justice motive theory implies for understanding how employees might react to experiences of organizational unfairness. Along the way, we identify novel directions for research on organizational justice that are suggested by the articles in the special issue and by justice motive theory in general.

**Keywords:** justice motive theory, organizational fairness, organizational justice, deservingness

Social scientists have long been interested in the study of justice in the workplace. Investigators have learned a great deal about the effects of perceived fairness for important work attitudes and behaviors. For instance, research has shown that people who feel fairly treated are more satisfied with their pay and jobs, more committed to their work organization, more trusting of leaders, and more likely to engage in citizenship behaviors that go above and beyond their job description. In contrast, those who feel unfairly treated have more negative attitudes, and they are more likely to engage in dysfunctional behaviors, such as workplace aggression and theft (for meta-analytic reviews see Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Moreover, evidence indicates that employees' perceptions of fairness are influenced by their considerations of a number of key aspects of organizational life, such as how resources are distributed, how decisions are made, and how people are treated interpersonally. In addition, justice researchers have, over the years, developed a number of theoretical frameworks to illuminate why feelings of fair and unfair treatment are so crucial in employees' working lives. For example, according to distributive justice theories, such as equity theory (Adams, 1965) and control models of procedural justice (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), people want to be treated fairly for instrumental reasons. Group-value (Lind

& Tyler, 1988) and relational models of procedural justice (Tyler & Lind, 1992) argue that fairness conveys positive information about people's social identity. Fairness heuristic theory (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos, 2001), and the uncertainty management model (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) suggest that fairness helps people cope with uncertainty about whether they can trust authorities, or uncertainty that arises from other sources. Each of these approaches has received empirical support.

The articles in the current special section are based on justice motive theory or just-world theory (Lerner 1980; Lerner, Miller, & Holmes, 1976), which offers another view of the importance of experiences of workplace fairness and unfairness in employees' lives. According to justice motive theory, people have a fundamental need to believe in a just world in which individuals get what they deserve. A belief in a just world is important to develop and maintain for several reasons, many of which are summarized in this special section. For example, a belief in a just world allows people to trust that they *will* be treated fairly (Dalbert, 2001), which in turn encourages investment in long-term goals by giving people confidence that their current efforts toward future rewards will, ultimately, pay off as deserved (Hafer, 2000; Hafer, Bègue, Choma, & Dempsey, 2005; Zuckerman, 1975). Given these

propositions, Dzuka and Dalbert (2007, this issue) suggest that experiences of fairness in the workplace matter to employees because these experiences fulfill the fundamental need to believe in a just world by reinforcing an employee's belief that at least his or her own personal world is, indeed, just. Conversely, experiences with unfairness could threaten employees' need to believe in a just world by providing evidence that their world is not just (see Cubela Adoric & Kvartuc, 2007, this issue); thus, as Cubela Adoric and Kvartuc conclude from their results, experiences of unfairness in the workplace matter because they can undermine employees' belief that their personal world is just, and, therefore, the important functions that a belief in a just world serves.

Although justice motive theory posits that intrinsic developmental forces will push the vast majority of individuals to develop a need to believe in a just world as well as some form of actual belief in a just world (Lerner et al., 1976), it recognizes the existence of individual differences in the strength with which people hold such a belief (for reviews of the individual difference literature, see Furnham, 2003; Furnham & Proctor, 1989). These individual differences may be influenced by a number of different factors, such as ideology, personal experience, and socialization (for examples, see Dalbert & Sallay, 2004; Schmitt, 1998), but also presumably reflect individual differences in the strength of one's fundamental need to believe in a just world. The papers in the present issue all focus on individual differences in the belief in a just world (especially in one's personal world), proposing that a strong belief in a just world should be related to greater mental health and well-being because of its association with cognitions that help one function in daily life, like trust that one will be treated fairly by others and perceived meaningfulness of life events (associations that are presumably indicative of the functions of a belief in a just world). From this perspective, a belief in a just world can be seen as a positive illusion—such as, for example, inflated beliefs in one's own control over events and overly positive self-evaluations, which have similarly positive implications for mental health and well-being (see Taylor & Brown, 1988). The current papers present some of the first evidence that the relation between individual differences in belief in a just world and mental health and well-being found in past research (for reviews, see Dalbert, 2001; Furnham, 2003) transfers to the workplace and also to workplace outcomes aside from mental health indices (e.g., affective commitment, sick presence; Otto & Schmidt, 2007, this issue; but for a few earlier examples of relevant research see Lerner & Somers, 1992; Skarlicki, Ellard, & Kelln, 1998). Specifically, a strong belief in a just world (at least a strong personal belief in a just world) appears to predict employees' mental health and well-being, both overall and, although perhaps less often, in interaction with stressful workplace events, thus, serving as a buffer against negative effects of these experiences.

In the remainder of this article, we go beyond the specific applications of justice motive theory in the current special issue. In so doing, we suggest a number of additional novel directions for organizational justice research, which are implied by the present investigations or by justice motive theory more broadly.

## Justice Motive Theory and Experiences of Fairness in the Workplace

### What Role Does Belief in a Just World Play?

As noted earlier, Dzuka and Dalbert reason from the perspective of justice motive theory that organizational justice matters because it reinforces employees' personal belief in a just world, a belief that people are motivated to maintain. This statement implies that a belief in a just world mediates the positive effect of perceived fairness on workplace outcomes that is found repeatedly in the organizational justice literature (including the relation between perceived fairness and mental health and well-being; for a review see Vermunt & Steensma, 2005).

Clearly, it will be necessary to examine the above possibility in future research. To do so, researchers will require state-sensitive measures of just-world beliefs (rather than the existing trait-based scales). In addition, researchers might assess indicators of several of the functions of a belief in a just world, such as, for example, confidence in long-term goal investment and trust in being treated fairly by others, both of which justice motive theory implies should be strengthened (or at the very least maintained) in the face of perceived fairness. One of the challenges for research in this vein will be to identify indications of process that are predicted by just-world theory but not by other justice theories, and vice versa. For example, the tenets of both justice motive theory and fairness heuristic (or uncertainty management) theory (e.g., Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) allow for the prediction that experiences of fairness in the workplace might lead to a greater trust in being treated fairly by others; however, the theories feature different mechanisms underlying this association. Thus, the task of designing research intended to shed light on process will not be straightforward. Moreover, given evidence to support each of the major theoretical approaches, including justice motive theory, it is probable that multiple mechanisms underlie the relation between perceived fairness and employee reactions.

Dzuka and Dalbert's claim also implies that just-world beliefs could mediate the interaction between procedural fairness and outcome favorability in predicting employee attitudes that is commonly found in the organizational justice literature (for reviews, see Brockner & Weisen-

feld, 1996; Brockner & Weisenfeld, 2005). One possibility is that procedural fairness strengthens a belief in a just world. As a result, employees become more likely to interpret other events through a just-world lens (e.g., unfavorable and perhaps even unfair outcomes) as relatively fair, therefore, leading to less negative attitudes and behaviors. As noted above for the overall effects of perceived fairness, future research is needed to examine whether just-world beliefs and relevant mechanisms indeed mediate the interaction between procedural fairness and outcome favorability on employee attitudes, given that different theoretical approaches (e.g., Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) allow for the prediction of similar effects.

Alternatively, and possibly in addition, employees' belief in a just world, and their need to hold this belief, could influence their perceptions of fairness in the workplace. Along these lines, Hagedoorn, Buunk, and Van de Vliert's (2002) suggest that a need to believe in a just world leads one to look for fair elements of a given situation and then to use such fair elements to justify other aspects of the event. For example, seemingly fair procedures might serve to define the entire situation as fair and legitimate, even in the face of negative and unfair outcomes; thus, fair procedures in this case would ameliorate the negative effect of unfair outcomes on employee attitudes. We will say more about the possibility that the need to believe in a just world could influence perceptions of workplace fairness later in this article.

Finally, it is conceivable that the strength of employees' belief in a just world adds incremental variance in the prediction of important organizational outcomes including employee mental health and well-being beyond that predicted by, for example, perceptions of distributive or procedural justice. Each of the above possibilities should be considered in future research.

### What Boundary Conditions Are Suggested by Justice Motive Theory?

According to many social justice theorists, including those who take the perspective of justice motive theory, assessments of justice and injustice are linked closely to people's evaluations of deservingness (e.g., Feather, 1999; Lerner, 1980, 1987; Major, 1994). Feather, for example, has found that outcomes are seen as more deserved when the perceived valence of the outcome and the preceding behavior or the character of the actor match (i.e., both are positive or both are negative), and less deserved in the case of mismatches: These attributions of deservingness strongly predict feelings of justice and injustice, as well as justice-relevant emotions such as anger and resentment (for reviews, see Feather, 1999, 2006). Furthermore, according to justice motive theory, people not only view deservingness in terms of laws such as those outlined by Feather, but also basic

developmental processes are thought to lead to an implicit belief that the world *should* work according to these rules, as well as an automatic and largely preconscious assumption that such rules are in play (Lerner, 1980, 2003).

Although some organizational justice theories may implicitly assume a link between deservingness and justice, there are possible implications for defining justice explicitly and, in large part, in terms of deservingness. One is that the criteria by which employees are said to evaluate fairness (e.g., respectful treatment, receiving voice) in the workplace will not always have the expected (desirable) effect. As has been suggested by Heuer (Heuer, Blumenthal, Douglas, & Weinblatt, 1999; Sunshine & Heuer, 2002), so-called fair treatment will have positive effects only to the extent that employees perceive the treatment as deserved. Similarly, so-called unfair treatment can have positive effects to the extent that it is perceived as deserved.

A more explicit consideration of deservingness may also shed light on third-party observer (e.g., customers, co-workers, the public) reactions to the fate of employees, and why, for example, observer reactions may differ from the reactions of those directly affected (for a review, see Ellard & Skarlicki, 2002). As argued by Ellard and Skarlicki, the factors that influence observers' and victims' assessments of deservingness – and, in turn, judgments of fairness – may differ. For instance, victims' assessments of deservingness will be influenced by the degree to which mistreatment threatens victims' self-esteem, but threats to self-esteem will be less influential for observers.

In a related vein, we suggest that an explicit consideration of deservingness could lead to a better understanding of why organizational leaders often fail to act in ways that current research suggests employees would consider fair (for general discussions of this issue, see Bobocel & Zdaniuk, 2005; Folger & Skarlicki, 2001). For example, there may be a mismatch between what employees perceive as deserved (e.g., input into decisions) and what managers perceive that employees deserve. The factors that affect employees' and managers' assessments of deservingness can be expected to differ.

Finally, as Ellard and Skarlicki (2002) point out, a focus on deservingness may provide a framework to integrate the concepts of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. People's perceptions of the fairness of outcomes, procedures, and interactions may hinge on their assessment of the extent to which the consequences are deserved. The present analysis, thus, supports a call made by some organizational justice researchers to question the practice of necessarily making distinctions between distributive, procedural, and interactional justice (see Ambrose & Arnaud, 2005; Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2001, for a discussion of the procedural-distributive distinction; see Bobocel & Holmvall, 2001, for a discussion of the procedural-interactional distinction).

## What Does Justice Motive Theory Imply About the Possible Negative Effects of Perceived Organizational Fairness?

The present articles argue that a strong belief in a just world relates to mental health and well-being, and helps employees to cope with negative or unfair events. This positive psychology perspective (see Snyder & Lopez, 2002) on justice motive theory is important given that much classic work in the area focuses on negative consequences of a need to believe in a just world; most notably, blaming or derogating the character of innocent victims (for reviews, see Furnham, 2003; Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner & Miller, 1978). However, the focus of the present papers does not mean that researchers should abandon the investigation of more negative implications of a belief in a just world and justice motive theory. This is particularly true in the study of fairness in work organizations, which has traditionally focused on the positive effects of perceived fairness. One exception is the body of research on the adverse effects of procedural fairness, in the context of receiving unfavorable outcomes, on self-evaluations (e.g., Brockner et al., 2003; Brockner & Weisenfeld, 2005), as well as other reactions (Holmvall & Bobocel, in press; Van den Bos, Bruins, Wilke, & Dronkert, 1999). We will build on this literature by elaborating on two negative effects of perceived organizational fairness that are suggested by justice motive theory.

First, the papers in this special section all state that a belief in a just world presumably has its positive effects on mental health and well-being through a number of assimilation mechanisms, such as downplaying experienced injustice, avoiding self-rumination, downplaying the intentionality of the perpetrators' actions, and justifying experienced injustice as being partly self-inflicted. These processes are said to help individuals with a strong belief in a just world defend this belief in the face of potentially contrary evidence. These processes, though perhaps strengthening employees' perceptions of workplace fairness as proposed above, could at the same time be psychologically costly. For example, Dzuka and Dalbert suggest that engaging in unrealistic self-blame in response to potential unfairness can be problematic; although a belief in a just world may be maintained by such a process, employees' self-esteem, and, therefore, mental health, may suffer in the long run. Otto and Schmidt also suggest that mental health may suffer in the long run if employees' belief in a just world leads them to remain in, rather than leave, a job in which they are treated unfairly (but which they presumably rationalize as relatively fair).

Second, at the level of the organization, such processes as those noted above may allow injustice to go unchecked, because they are legitimized by the perception of fairness (see Jost & Hunyady, 2002). A system that maintains unfairness unwittingly risks establishing systemic bias, ultimately creating a social institution that maintains a variety of forms of societal injustice.

The negative implications of perceived justice discussed in this section arise from two aspects of justice motive theory that are not prominent in the organizational justice literature (though see Blader & Bobocel, 2005, for a broader discussion of motivated reasoning in the perception of workplace fairness). First, justice motive theory emphasizes a *need* to believe in a just world that motivates people to perceive situations as just (at least eventually), often through defensive processes. For example, an employee might defensively justify treatment from a supervisor that initially seemed at some level of awareness as unfair by convincing herself that the harm done was, after all, rather minimal. Second, perceived fairness can result from the automatic application of a belief in a just world schema (e.g., bad people get bad outcomes), even in the absence of information that suggests either justice or injustice (see Callan, Powell, & Ellard, in press; Dion & Dion, 1987). In both cases, however, there is the potential for people to experience perceptions of fairness that do not accord with more objective indices or even with their own initial reaction to an event (in the case of defensive reinterpretations of injustice), thus leading to some of the potential negative consequences of perceived organizational fairness mentioned here.

## Justice Motive Theory and Experiences of Unfairness in the Workplace

The articles in this issue suggest that just-world beliefs play a role in the experience of fairness in work organizations. As we mentioned earlier, there are also implications of justice motive theory for reactions to experiences of organizational unfairness. In this section, we will consider several of these implications.

As noted in the articles in this issue, there is both theoretical and empirical reason to conceptualize the belief in a just world as a relatively stable or core belief. Yet as Cubela Adoric and Kvartuc argue, it is also conceivable that it could be undermined in certain conditions. Exposure to repeated injustices over an extended period of time could under some circumstances erode the effectiveness of strategies for coping with threats to the belief in a just world (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). As well as repeated injustice, exposure to an event that is unexpected and perceived as extremely unfair could weaken the belief because coping resources may suddenly appear inadequate for the task at hand, namely maintaining the belief in a just world.

Each of the studies reported in this issue provide data that is consistent with this idea, although causality cannot be interpreted unambiguously. Otto and Schmidt and Dzuka and Dalbert report cross-sectional correlations between negative experiences and the belief that one's personal world is just. Cubela Adoric and Kvartuc tested the idea

that exposure to injustice can lead to a decline in employees' just-world beliefs by comparing a group of victims of workplace abuse to a matched control group on measures of justice beliefs and adjustment. Interestingly, their data suggest that mere exposure to negative acts does not in itself diminish just-world beliefs. Rather, perceived victimization was associated with a reduced belief that one's personal world is just. The frequency of negative acts was, however, associated with increases in employees' beliefs in an *unjust* world.

What are some possible consequences of failing to preserve employees' just-world beliefs, especially among those who were previously able to preserve it? The outcome could depend on what belief (if any) replaces the belief in a just world. Furnham and Proctor (1989) suggest two possibilities: that the world is *random* or that the world is *unjust*. The former belief might arise when justice is capricious, and individuals experience a series of just and unjust events in which there is little correspondence between one's characteristics or behavior and one's treatment. In this case, employees might give up striving toward long-term goals and focus on meeting more immediate needs and desires. A more extreme response might be to forgo even short-term goals, ultimately descending into a state of learned helplessness and depression (see Seligman, 1975). Thus, if experiences of injustice in the workplace lead to a belief that one's personal world is random, then this may lead to a number of adverse reactions as a result of either a focus on short-term goals (at the expense of long-term goals) or as a result of giving up altogether. For example, in the latter case, there may be adverse effects on employees' sense of self-efficacy and work motivation. Moreover, employees may identify less with the organization and its long-term goals, hence diminishing their affective commitment and willingness to engage in discretionary work behaviors.

Alternatively, consistent with the findings of Cubela Adoric and Kvartuc, experience with injustice could lead to a belief in an unjust world. In contrast to a just world, an *unjust* world is one in which "good" people or behaviors lead to negative outcomes and "bad" people or behaviors reap good outcomes. In other words, in an unjust world, people consistently do not get what they deserve. Rather than causing people to give up on long-term goals, a strong belief in an unjust world might lead to a breakdown of the commitment to pursue rewards such that they are deserved. As a result, the person may engage in antisocial striving. Put differently, like people with a strong belief in a just world, those who believe in an unjust world may agree to hold off gratifying immediate impulses for the promise of greater long-term benefits; however, the latter group may commit to working toward long-term benefits in ways that would make their outcomes be seen as undeserved by society. For example, the person may use fraud or illegitimate exploitation to achieve desired outcomes. Another possibility is that the individual who believes in an unjust world might continue to strive for long-term goals and may even maintain an interest in deserving his or her

outcomes, but he or she might develop an antisocial definition of what is deserved (see Hafer et al., 2005). Consistent with the general idea that we are advancing here, there is some evidence of an association between belief in an unjust world and negative responses (Crandall & Cohen, 1994; Otto, Boos, Dalbert, Schöps, & Hoyer, 2006). Thus, if experiences of injustice in the workplace give rise to a belief in an unjust world, then employees may be more likely to engage in destructive behaviors such as sabotage and theft. In fact, in this case, injustice in the workplace could foster a host of unethical behaviors from fraud to white collar crime to the exploitation of the weak.

Whereas past research on justice in work settings has already demonstrated associations between perceived fairness and many of the employee reactions noted above such as affective commitment (for reviews, see Colquitt et al. 2001; Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005), the present analysis suggests others—such as corruption—that have not yet received systematic attention. Of course, as noted earlier, our analysis also suggests the operation of mechanisms that have been largely unexamined in the workplace context. Finally, the approach suggested here could lead to novel predictions about the kind of response that is more likely—that is, whether employees respond to perceived injustice by withdrawing their efforts or by intentionally engaging in negative or unethical behaviors. For instance, the effects of organizational injustice might be different depending on whether the organizational culture is one in which justice is erratic or one in which employees consistently fail to receive what is deserved.

## Summary

The workplace provides a rich and interesting context within which to study justice processes. Not surprisingly, therefore, research in this domain has proliferated over the past 35 years. Our goal in this article is to build on this thriving area of study and move it in new directions. More specifically, we have attempted to delineate a number of novel directions for research on organizational justice that are implied either by the approach adopted in the articles in this special section or by justice motive theory more broadly. We first considered some of the possible roles that just-world beliefs may play in the workplace, namely, as a mediator of the positive effects of fairness in the workplace, as a determinant of perceived fairness in the workplace, or as an independent predictor of important employee attitudes and behaviors. We then examined some complexities that arise from explicitly incorporating the concept of deservingness, which is proximal to judgments of fairness in justice motive theory. Next, we highlighted some possible adverse effects of fairness in the workplace for the individual employee, as well as for the organization and society at large, to the extent that perceived fairness is motivated by defensive processing or by automatic application of a

just-world schema. Finally, we examined the effect that organizational injustice might have insofar as it undermines employees' just-world beliefs, leading them to believe in a world where justice is random or to believe in an unjust world.

After decades of research, much is known about justice and injustice in work organizations. Yet there is more to be uncovered. We hope that our analysis proves to be helpful in this journey.

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Ramona Bobocel

Department of Psychology  
University of Waterloo  
200 University Avenue West  
Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1  
Canada  
Tel. +1 519 888-4567 ext. 33622  
E-mail rbobocel@uwaterloo.ca